

## EXPLORING CULTURE: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC PROJECT

This assignment is an ethnographic project/paper for CTSE 7520/26. During the first 5 weeks you will focus on an exploration of ethnographic techniques and apply them to a particular set of practices as they are exhibited in North American culture. During the second five weeks you will study the same set of practices employing the same techniques in your target language culture. Learning about a new culture involves seeking out information, asking questions and making observations. It also involves bringing the characteristics of the hidden cultural values and assumptions to a conscious level so that these patterns may be examined and understood in a nonjudgmental manner. However, we generally do not understand our own cultural values and assumptions very well; therefore, we look at our own culture first.

1. **Choose one set of practices** to examine in a specific setting here in your own state as well as in a French-speaking or Spanish-speaking country. If you go to the text page on my website for this course, you will find the text *Exploración Intercultural: Una guía para el estudiante*, there you will find eleven chapters on topics the author had her students investigate, such as greetings, gestures, courtesy, family structure, the concept of time, etc. This is not an exhaustive list, and some of her topics might be too ambitious for your study. Remember to keep it simple and to choose a topic that would be of interest to your students.

2. **Do library research** about the practices you have chosen as well as the setting. For example, if you were to choose, *Use of Household Space*, you would want to find information on how Americans use space in their homes as well as how Latin Americans use space in their homes. One book you would find in the library is *Living in Latin America: A case study in cross-cultural communication*, by Raymond Gordon. Some of this information will help you to look for some specific behaviors that may be similar or different in each culture. It will also help you to create better questions as to why these behaviors may be similar or different.

**Hint: The web/internet** is a wonderful thing; the web/internet has good and bad information. Just because you find something on the web doesn't mean it's true, correct, or accurate. Do not use ONLY web/internet sources because you will not get a complete picture of your topic. If you use web sources, consider the following:

- a. Is it a scholarly source? Is it trustworthy? How do you know?
- b. How was the information collected? When was the information last updated? Who wrote the information?
- c. Who funds the web site? Is it associated with an organization, university or foundation? What are the policies, platforms, or politics of the funding organization? Could there be bias?

Please provide a full website address in your reference list if you use web sources in your paper.

3. **Your purpose is to discover** the underlying meanings for the behaviors of people in your study both here and abroad. It is not to impose your own meanings or values on their behavior. It's about *them*-what they think and do and believe and why. Let's assume you are examining *courtesy*, and you notice that Hispanics always offer cigarettes/candy first to the other people with whom they are talking. If this seems different from what you have observed in your native-language environment, you will want to examine why. Do the answers reflect how much importance is given to the value of generosity in each culture? Maybe you will observe other instances of Hispanic interactions that are governed by a similar avoidance of the appearance of stinginess. Then you can begin to develop some hypotheses or themes.
4. **Identify a setting and participants** for your project. Remember you will need to use the same setting with your native informants. HINT: Choose a group that is as dissimilar as possible from your own experiences. For example, if you are looking at *Use of Household Space* you will not want to look at your own use of household space. You already know how you use space. Find some other families that will let you observe/interview them in terms of how they use household space.
5. **Gain access** to the setting and participants. Decide on when, where, and how often you will observe/interview. Get permission if that is necessary. Find out whether you can take notes, tape record, take pictures, or videotape. If your study relies heavily on **observations**, check to see if you can interview at least **five people** in your chosen group. If your study relies more heavily on interviews, you will still want to do some observations, but you will need at least **15 people** to interview.
6. **Get organized.** Create an organized system of folders on your computer for categorizing and storing the data you collect. Data will be in the form of field notes, digital interviews and their transcriptions, videos, pictures and documents if you decide to do a content analysis of documents such as real estate advertisements, classified ads, flyers etc.
7. **Begin observing/interviewing in L1 culture** as soon as possible, and observe/interview *a minimum* of once a week for three weeks. While observing/interviewing, **take field notes**. Field notes are a description or log that you write as you are observing. You can't get everything down in detail, but get as much detail as possible, and use your own "short-hand" to remind yourself of things you will want to elaborate on later. Your job as you observe is to "get the details", not to interpret (that comes later).
  - a) **Transcribe your field notes** immediately or as soon as possible after observing and interviewing. Transcribing means you get to a computer, and type everything that you remember, using your notes as a basis. Again your job is not to interpret, but to give the details of what you saw and heard in the setting in which you are observing and interviewing. Your transcription is a blow-by-blow description, as best as you can reconstruct it, of what went on. Use your field notes as a guide, and supplement by watching the videotape or listening to the audiotape (if you have one) to fill in the blanks. See (b) below:
  - b) **Make a video or audiotape** during at least one observation, if possible.

Watch and listen to the tape and compare what you wrote in your field notes to what you see and hear on the tape. **If you are doing a study heavily dependent on interviewing, you will make an audiotape of every interview.**

**c) Write yourself memos.** After you have transcribed your field notes each week, read over them. Then write yourself a memo about your thoughts, reactions, and questions. What were you thinking while you were observing? What was interesting? What do you want to know more about? What questions do you have? What did you not understand? What do you think you understand? For more on memos, see #8d below.

**d) Collect artifacts** from your setting and from the participants. An artifact, for this study, is any physical object that relates to your topic in some way. Documents and objects count as artifacts.

**8. Interviews in your L1 culture:** Prepare a list of questions for your interviews! Then interview at least five people if your study is primarily observational. If you are doing a study that is heavily dependent on interviews, you will need a total of 15 interviews, at least five different people a week over a 3 week period. Look for different kinds of people - different ages, genders, ethnic groups: if it is a specific group, make sure you have people with different relationships to each other. The idea is to get different points of view.

Gather general information about your informants, e.g. “their background, age, ethnicity, and gender. You might ask your English-speaking informants from the U.S., how long have they lived in the South or in your town. Then move on to the specifics of your interview.

**Take notes** (keep eye contact with the interviewee) **and record** your interviews. Interviews should be in English with L1 informants, but interviews with target language informants should be in L2. This would be reversed if you are a native speaker of the target language. Just as with field notes, **transcribe** your interviews as soon as possible after doing them, then write yourself a **memo** summarizing your thinking.

#### **Hints for interviewing:**

(a) **Let the participants do the talking.** It’s your job to understand THEIR perspective, so give them time to talk. A good interviewer knows how to get the interviewee to spill the beans, so to speak. Be prepared with some general questions, and then keep the conversation going by asking questions *based on what you hear*. In other words, be a good listener and respond to what is said. “No grilling.”

(b) **Avoid leading questions and yes/no questions!** Leading question: Do you always offer cigarettes/candy first to other people because it demonstrates that you are generous? Non-leading question: I have observed that you always offer cigarettes/candy first to other people. Can you tell me why you do that?

(c). **Confirm** what you think you are seeing and hearing by going back to your setting to observe and interview again in order to get multiple perspectives. In the *Use of Household Space* example, you may want to conduct a short interview with the father if you haven’t previously interviewed him. Another way to confirm is by conducting a follow-up interview with one of your original five people or five of

your original 15 if you are doing a study that is primarily based on interviews. Ask them questions based on your first conversation and tell them what you think you've observed and/or heard. You are seeking confirmation that your interpretation is indeed what is happening from *their* point of view.

(d) **Continue to write yourself memos** as you gather information. A memo is a message to yourself that summarizes what you've seen and heard so far. Ask yourself questions and give yourself reminders about what to look for or ask about during the next observation or interview. If you find you are having strong opinions or feelings, put those in a separate memo. **Remember, this project is about understanding someone else's views and meanings** so keep yours separate.

9. **Analyze your data.** Read over all your field notes, documentation, interview transcriptions, artifacts, and memos. Look for consistencies and inconsistencies, for things that are typical or not typical in this setting, for patterns of behavior or action. Watch or listen to portions of the videos and audiotapes if you have made them. Review the library research you've done. Your data will likely group into two or three large categories or themes -- ideas that seem particularly striking or interesting in this setting or among this group of participants. Categorize or code your data according to these themes. (We'll try to do an example in class). These will be the themes that you will want to look at in the target culture.

10. **Gain access to L2 setting/participants.** Follow the same procedures for your target-language informants. **Remember your settings and participants must be similar.** Then your procedures will be the same for numbers 5 through 9 above.

## **Write a report based on the following outline.**

### **A) Title**

Your title may be catchy, but make sure I can tell what your topic is by reading your title.

### **B) Introduction**

A brief explanation of what and why – Background information

### **C) Context**

- Explain the project as it relates to your topic. (For example, this is a cross-cultural project in which I plan to ...)
- Include a description of the topic, setting, and participants ...where, when, what, who.

### **D) Area of Focus**

What is your purpose for this project

### **E) Research Questions – Sample**

What will be the similarities and differences between homes in Cuernavaca, Mexico and suburban Atlanta, and how will people use the space within and outside the home?

- How is private and public space defined?
- How is outdoor space used?
- How is security provided?
- How much technology appears in the homes?
- What values can we infer from the structure of the homes both, C1 and C2 cultures?

#### **F) Literature Review**

A summary of the pertinent information you have gathered from your “library research” that directs the reader’s attention to the themes that will appear later in your paper.

#### **G) Data Collection**

Describe your research process. Tell us when, how frequently, and for how long you observed, and whom you interviewed. Tell us where you sat to take field notes, for example, and that you transcribed your field notes and interview notes and looked for themes. If your study involved more interviews than observations, then tell us how frequently, and for how long you observed, and how as well as why you selected these people for your interviews. Give us a picture of what you did as well as how you arrived at the interview questions that you asked.

#### **H) Themes and Meanings**

Organize this section of your report under three (or more) themes that are based on:

- Your perceptions and interpretations of “what’s going on” in both cultures.
- Talk about similarities first and then about differences.
- What are the values, beliefs, cultural assumptions or orientations that may be driving these behaviors? (Refer to Zanger’s values, Kluckhohn’s orientations, Hsu’s Postulates, and/or Kramer’s Postulates.)
- **Important:** Support each theme with examples (**vignette**) from your field notes, bits of “tales”, conversations, and/or quotes. Tell us **why** you think this is an important theme or meaning for the participants in your setting. Give us evidence. You must weave in supporting evidence from your library research and the artifacts that you have collected.

#### **What is a vignette?**

A “vignette” or “tale” summarizes the setting and participants, or gives the reader a picture of a “typical” setting. This may include a sample of a conversation with one of the participants. Quotes are good. You may choose either a series of short examples or one longer story for the “vignette” section.

#### **What is an artefact?**

An artefact may be a document or photos that you wish to analyze. A word count for “word frequencies” in a document might add valuable information when observations or interviews may be limited. “Frequency of occurrence” in photos may be another form of triangulating your data sources.

### **E) Conclusion**

- Summarize the findings or ideas that seem most important to you.
- Describe the limitations of your study and what you would do next if you could continue this project.
- Identify questions you have for future investigation.
- Include ideas for using this process and/or your findings in your classroom practices.

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### **Appendices**

These should include:

- Demographic information concerning interviewees
- Interview questions used in C1 and C2
- Photos you are using to support any of your themes.
- Documents you may have analyzed.

**Bibliography:** You must have a bibliography that includes the references for all citations within the body of your paper.

**Additional information in a separate file:** Include the transcripts from your L1 and L2 interviews.

### **GENERAL COMMENTS**

You will find that you have more than enough information from your observations, interviews, and artefacts to write this paper. The objective is to form a coherent and meaningful whole from all the pieces you have gathered and to provide the reader with insights about the perspectives you have chosen to investigate. You are giving the readers a picture that says, “This is what these people think, feel, and believe, and based on my literature review and the sources from our class readings and discussions, I postulate that these might be the reasons why they might think, feel, and believe this way.”