

21A.00
Introduction to Anthropology
Spring 2013

1st Research Paper Topics

For the first ethnographic research paper, you have several options. In each case, you will collect qualitative data using one or more ethnographic methods (interviewing, participant observation, description of cultural artifacts...). Then write a paper of approximately four pages analyzing that data. Analyze your particular case comparatively in respect to at least one course reading, perhaps by employing a middle range concept (such as *gender* or *agency*) in the comparison. It is important that any interviews or responses remain anonymous, so do not use real names or identifying material (you can identify yourself, but you don't have to). You may find it difficult to present your findings in the space of four pages, thus requiring you to synthesize some details (and/or provide an appendix with additional data).

- (1) One of the key themes in *Invitations to Love* is the effect of communications technologies on social relationships—and the effect of social relationships on the way those technologies are used. To explore this issue, interview someone you know (parent, relative, friend, classmate, etc.) about the way they use different communications mediums (letters, phone, texting, IM, email, Facebook...) to establish or maintain social relationships. Are some forms of communication more appropriate than others for specific kinds of relationships (e.g., with parents, professors, friends, love interests...) or for specific kinds of activities? Elicit specific examples (e.g., a text message, wall post...) if possible. Alternately, you may explore this issue by addressing the role of a particular medium in fostering a specific kind of relationship or community—but again, make sure to employ primary data.
- (2) Love stories are at the center of Ahearn's study of social change in contemporary Nepal. Following her example, elicit a love story from someone you know (parent, relative, friend, classmate, etc.). How does this story compare to those elicited by Ahearn? What kinds of attitudes does your respondent convey towards particular cultural ideals or social expectations? What kinds of obstacles stood in the way? How does the way the narrative is structured claim or deny agency? A key to doing this kind of interview (and to ethnographic interviewing more generally) is asking open-ended questions so that respondents are able to structure the story according to their personal priorities or preferences.
- (3) Interview someone you know (parent, relative, friend, classmate, etc.) who is a non-native speaker of American English residing in the U.S. about his or her linguistic views, experiences, and practices. What are this person's views about the different languages s/he speaks, and when it is appropriate to use one language or the other? Are there things that can't be translated between the languages, or different views of the self associated with using one or another language? Is speaking English liberating or constraining? Does this person ever consciously (or unconsciously) switch between

languages when talking to other bilinguals? Do any “language ideologies” emerge from this interview? The interview need not be conducted in English.

- (4) Working with a parent or older relative if necessary, draw a kinship diagram of your own family that extends back *at least* to grandparents’ generation (it doesn’t have to be complete, but do your best). Identify relatives with kinship terms from EGO’s perspective (i.e., yours) in whatever languages are used within the family. You may have to develop conventions for representing phenomena we did not cover in class (for starters, put an X through a deceased figure; a dotted vertical line represents adoption; ≠ represents divorce...). Reflecting on your own experience, what categories of kin are most important and why? What functions do different kinds of kin play? How does your experience of kinship (in terms of things like descent, marriage, caregiving...) reflect your particular cultural background and/or historical circumstances (such as migration or diaspora)? You may wish to adapt your diagram to better illustrate the particularly issues you want to discuss, but provide a key to make it legible. Alternately you may perform this exercise with a friend, relative, or classmate, diagraming his or her family back to grandparents’ generation, and interviewing him/her about the relevant significance of different kin relationships.
- (5) Kulick argues (in his both his articles on Brazil and Gapun) that gender is not an innate personal attribute, but rather a set of learned qualities that are performed or displayed. Pick an arena or setting of gendered self-display to study through participant observation, interviewing, or the collection and analysis of cultural artifacts (a website, a magazine). Describe how people organize their activity in this arena to conform to gender ideals, to challenge those ideals, or both. More specifically, you might look at the way particularly styles of speech, communication or language use connect to gendered identity, for instance in an Internet forum devoted to stereotypically male or female interests, or within a community that challenges prevailing gender norms (like Bronies, for instance).

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