

21A.00
Introduction to Anthropology
Spring 2013

2nd Research Paper Topics

For the second ethnographic research paper, you have two very broad options. In either case, you will collect qualitative data using one or more ethnographic methods illustrated in the class. This may involve a participant observation approach of taking part in an activity or event (or visiting a place where an activity routinely occurs) and documenting it with field notes and recordings (if permissible). It could also involve “virtual ethnography” of cultural practices online. Then write a paper of approximately four pages analyzing your data. Analyze your particular case comparatively by employing middle range concepts drawn from at least one of the course readings. You must explicitly cite at least one relevant reading. Presenting your findings in the space of four pages may require you to synthesize some of primary data for the sake of brevity.

You may do this project with a partner (no more than 2 people per group) for a shared grade, however the resulting paper should be at least 6 pages long, and both partners must contribute equally.

- (1) Chose a form of expressive culture to study anthropologically. You will recall that we defined expressive culture as specialized activities of manipulating symbolic forms to produce absorption, create meaning, and enact identity (not necessarily in that order), and identified it in a variety of arenas: performance, ritual (secular and sacred), art, verbal art, music, body adornment (including fashion), material culture (like architecture and the built environment), food... Thus you have an almost limitless array of possibilities. You may want to pick a form of expressive culture you know well, or something you don't know anything about (yet). The challenge is to identify how it creates meaning and enacts identity for people who produce and consume it. How does this form of expressive culture promote social cohesion or create social difference? Are there conflicting understandings or interpretations surrounding it?

I have a suggestion that might be particularly timely and potentially beneficial to people outside our class: In the wake of the Boston Marathon bombings, there has been an outpouring of emotion, sympathy, and support conveyed through the medium of expressive culture (ritual, art, music, memorials...). Using what we know about expressive culture, examine how the role it plays in confronting and addressing the aftermath of this violent, traumatic event. If there is sufficient interest, I suggest we make this a group (or even class) project in the form of a website that will live on once the semester is over. If you are interested in this topic, please email me so I can coordinate the group project. Also, it will be imperative to begin conducting research immediately since these events are unfolding rapidly.

(2) Observe an instance of knowledge transmission, either formal (a class or lesson) or informal (such as a club). How is the instruction organized? How do experts and novices interact? What is the relationship between the transmission of knowledge and skill and social/cultural reproduction? What are people learning (or gaining) besides the explicit object of instruction? Does the organization of instruction/pedagogy reflect specific cultural priorities, themes, or ideas about personhood, subjectivity, or authority? You might consider a class in Brazilian music, dance, or capoeira—which are available at MIT and throughout the area (e.g., <http://www.boston-capoeira.com>). In this case, does the experience reflect Downey's discussion?

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