

WRIT 17/1633

Qualitative Research and Writing: Ethnography

Précis : 2 pgs (single), 4-6 sources, APA Citation

Multimodal Translation: 3-4 pgs or equivalent

What is Ethnography?

Ethnography is a written study of a group or groups of people. As a method of study, ethnography comes from the social sciences, particularly from cultural anthropology. Like anthropology, which is specifically the study of cultural history and artifact analysis, ethnography also studies culture, or the relationships between humans. Most ethnographers go to far away places to study unknown or foreign cultures, taking years to complete specific studies. But almost any group of people can be studied to examine or explain human interactions, much like this web-based ethnography at: <http://www.csun.edu/~hcchs006/gang.html> or this one <http://www.csuchico.edu/anth/mithila>

While most ethnography is used to understand cultures exotic or at home, an ethnographic method of study can be also used to examine contemporary cultural issues. Patrick McQuillan, in "A Day in the Life of Rafael Jackson," narrates his observations of the daily life of a student in order to come to some conclusions about what is being taught in the "average" American school.

How does Ethnography work?

Ethnography works mainly through observation, a qualitative method of research, which is based on a form of the scientific method. First, the ethnographer identifies a problem or phenomenon by asking questions (or research questions) that guide the inquiry. From those questions, the ethnographer then *forms a hypothesis* about the problem. This hypothesis is the researcher's plausible explanation of the issue, and is often based on previous (secondary) research on the subject.

Then, the ethnographer tries to verify his or her hypothesis by making a series of careful observations (in the field, through interview, or both). An ethnographer visits the group of people they study in their environment, and listens to conversations, pays attention to language, terminologies, dress, body language, etc. The ethnographer is usually in a precarious situation, for they do not know what they will find or learn when they begin to study a group of people. Instead they record the observations they make using their eyes and ears, writing utensils, and insight. From there they offer their descriptions and observations in the form of a written narrative, and their observations are interpreted and compared with other research.

Using this collected data (in the form of field notes, surveys, interviews, etc.), the ethnographer then analyzes it, looking for patterns or unusual tendencies in the data. If the collected information verifies his or her pre-observational hypotheses, then they declare their study confirmed. If their hypotheses are proven incorrect, they might conjecture as to why they are not, calling on other research in the area to help them out, or they might suggest even more research be done.

How will I be doing Ethnography in this class?

Your assignment is to identify problem or social issue on our campus that you can: 1) create a hypothesis about, 2) research through observation AND interview, 3) test your hypotheses against

your data, 4) and analyze what you've discovered by presenting it in either an audio or video format of about 6-10 minutes long, or longer.

You might approach this in a number of ways: 1) Pick a group of people (a subculture) to observe in order to gather research about your hypotheses. For example, you might observe a random sampling of couples to determine how gender roles work in public versus in private spaces. 2) You might simply pick a place—like a workplace or public space or social gathering—that seems to be the location of a kind of sub-culture, and then present a video essay of what you found. (A quick word on this second option: Choose a setting that is safe—don't choose anything that will put you in harm's way.) 3) Consider writing a "netnography." It's just as it sounds; do an ethnography on the "net," observing online social groups.

However or wherever you choose to study, you should make sure to narrow your topic to be relevant to social or cultural issues relevant or discussed at DU, or something that holds cultural currency today (e.g. examine how groups interact when questions of politics comes up, examine how gender roles work in different settings, examine power structures in academic groups or workplaces, etc.) The research you gather first-hand will become the **Raw Data** for your project. Collect approximately 2 hour's worth of observational data, and conduct at least one direct interview with a minimum of 5 questions.

Précis (2pgs. Single-spaced, APA):

Your précis will act as the academic portion of the research you gather qualitatively, and we'll write this in sections during this assignment. Following the guidelines for writing the précis, there will be three primary sections.

1. Introduction: This is where you introduce the issue you're examining, and include a review of relevant literature, discussions, or studies that have already been made about the issue you've chosen. Here is where you also identify what your study contributes to other research or to an understanding of the problem you're analyzing.
2. Methodology: Here is where explain your research questions and how you went about compiling your data. This also where you identify your role as an observer: as a participant-observer, observing participant, or as neutral. Explain how this role influenced your observations.
3. Data or Compilation of Research: Here you provide your readers with a *narrative* of the things you observed and the data you compiled. What did you see? (Be detailed, and narrate chronologically) If you conducted interviews, how did the interviewee answer your questions? Be sure this is in paragraph form. Here you also might analyze some of the data, looking for patterns, themes, or important moments in your research that gives you some insight into your study.

Audio/Video Re-mediation (between 6 and 10 minutes worth of audio or video):

Once you have collected identified your hypothesis, planned a method for conducting your qualitative research, and collected your raw data, use either an audio or video format to "publish" the results and conclusions that your study revealed. In a written ethnography, the "Analysis" or "Conclusion" is where researchers often compare the research questions with the data that was compiled, and come up with some explanations as to why differences or similarities exist. This is

probably the most important section of the ethnography, since this is the place where you, as the researcher and author, come to some conclusions about your research project, and explain why the research is important, or what insights into human behavior the study reveals. For this component of the project, you can either imagine that you are targeting a DU audience directly, or that you are acting as a representative for the University, targeting an outside audience.

I used the word “publish” above on purpose because the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for DU has regulations to protect human subjects in academic study in a couple ways. Our limitations according to IRB include: 1) All subjects must be above 18 years of age, not in prison or a state institution, and cannot be mentally handicapped, 2) Researchers cannot ask about a subject’s sexual orientation, 3) Researchers cannot ask questions about or observe and sexual or illegal behavior, including drug use. Another limitation is that we cannot record subjects studied with the explicit purposes of publishing the research, whether that means we’re writing an academic article or publishing videos or podcasts online.

Here’s what this means for us: We’ll collect our data through interviews and observations with the signed permission of all participants (especially interviewees). And we’ll translate the *conclusions* you make from that data into audio or video format, keeping the names of participants anonymous. If there’s a statement you wish to include from a participant directly, then you need to be the one to narrate that statement, again, keeping the participant’s name or other identifying markers anonymous. Finally, you’ll be asked to submit your re-mediation in an appropriate file format: .mp3 for audio, and .mov, .mpeg, .avi for video. (In other words, we won’t publish these on Youtube.)

Helpful Documents for this Assignment:

- **IRB Introduction and Research Limitation”** (under Handouts)
- **Student Introduction to Podcast** (under Handouts)

You’ll be graded on how strongly you use qualitative research, including:

- The strength of your choice of topic and your ability to incorporate observation, interviews, and secondary material into your analysis,
- How you identify the importance of the investigation, both in written and non-written forms
- How you target your audience in audio/video format, and how your analysis of the issues studied is made important to your audience
- How strong your use of secondary research is to support your analysis of qualitative data,
- How you use credible evidence appropriately to support your main analysis
- How well you incorporate different rhetorical strategies to achieve your purpose in a different medium

DUE: April 29th in class