LARA

LEARNING AND RESIDENCE ABROAD

UNIT NINETEEN

The Butterfly Unit

CONTENTS

CONTENTS continued

1.   Introduction

We have called this 'The Butterfly Unit' because tutors will need to 'alight' on the material and ideas it contains on numerous occasions throughout the ethnography course. Because of its special status it is structured rather differently from the other units. It deals with key areas which are not included in the course sessions proper: project planning and supervision and self- and peer-assessment. These run like a thread throughout since they are the means by which the course and the fieldwork abroad are assessed. Tutors are encouraged to relate weekly activities to project work as often and as explicitly as they can so that students are made aware of how they will later be expected to use the methods and draw on the concepts to which they are being introduced. It is for this reason, that wherever possible, we have included within each unit a paragraph or two on how materials presented therein have been used in the project work of former students. Rather than shape any one classroom session around the material contained here, it is instead hoped that tutors will familiarise themselves with it from the outset and refer to aspects of it where relevant as the course progresses.

Tutors may wish to devise their own means of assessing the course by, for example, allocating a certain weighting to various of the weekly tasks students are required to produce. An alternative which has been tried out at Southampton University is to assess students, in part, through a written paper covering some of the concepts they have been introduced to during the course. The guidelines included here are therefore a record of *one* effective formula for assessment; they are not the only possibility. Students should, however, certainly be given the opportunity to produce a sustained piece of ethnographic writing which is a product of fairly intensive participant observation and interviewing undertaken in their own cultural environment. This is essential as a 'pilot' for the more ambitious project undertaken abroad, and as an introduction to some of the issues involved in writing ethnography as well as making them more aware of their own culturally constructed world.

The model previously used for assessment on the ethnography course is as follows:

-      Self- and peer- assessment   40%

-      The Home Ethnographic Project
  (2-3000 words)   60%

2. Project planning

As we have stated, the course ideally requires students to produce two projects: the 'pilot' home ethnographic project which is undertaken during a vacation and which involves making strange an aspect of their own cultural environment, and the project undertaken in the host country during the period abroad. The information in this section is intended to help students and tutors to prepare for both these exercises, and many of the comments and materials included (e.g. the assessment criteria and guidelines for project workshops) hold good for both. We have concentrated on three key areas: conducting project workshops and advising on project proposals, giving advice on the format and structure of projects, and problems that may arise in supervising student ethnographic projects.

2.1 The Home Ethnographic Project

This is the major piece of coursework assessment undertaken by students. It is the product of fieldwork carried out during a vacation (this will be either Christmas or Easter, and will normally fall about half way through the run of sessions). It will obviously not be as complete or sophisticated a piece of work as the period-abroad project since students will have fewer concepts to draw on and will have benefited from fewer sessions on techniques of data collection and analysis. It will also be much shorter – typically about 2-3000 words. Students should, however, have enough experience to conduct effective participant observation, to work meaningfully with informants and to start to piece together the concepts and methods they have already encountered as their fieldwork takes shape.

Prior to the vacation period, students should be given an opportunity to discuss the assessment criteria and they should be given the handout 'Vacation Assignment: Preparing a Home Ethnographic Project' (see Section 5 for both these documents). Depending on their level at this stage, they may also be given a copy of the main project handout 'Thoughts on Writing an Ethnographic Project' which is a summary of the most important considerations they must bear in mind when writing the project (again, Section 5). If this is distributed here it should also be discussed with students rather than just handed out since it may look rather daunting to them at first sight, but it will be invaluable both during fieldwork and also when they are trying to write the final piece. We leave this to the judgement of individual tutors.

2.2 Project workshops and project proposals

An informal meeting or workshop will be needed to enable students to discuss their project proposals. This kind of meeting is important in order to give students a feeling of confidence as well as an initial sense of focus.

Students should be given the Vacation Assignment sheet prior to the meeting and urged to prepare their ideas as thoroughly as possible. Ideally, spend about 10 minutes discussing each student's proposal. If the group is too large, they can be divided into small groups to focus on each other's projects before tutors select three or four proposals as case studies. Whatever the case, the whole group should be encouraged to participate in refining (and if necessary changing) proposals under discussion. Tutors should firstly familiarise themselves with the exercise on critiquing

research questions contained in a later session (Unit 12) and in particular of the main criteria for judgement which are intended to emerge from it. These are that the question must be:

♦ Simple, clear and concrete

♦ Something which focuses on human experience

♦ Something which is doable as an ethnographic study (with participant observation and ethnographic conversations and interviewing)

♦ A question that has key words which are precise, and which have concepts behind them.

Some recent examples of student proposals for home ethnographic projects presented during a similar workshop may be of help here. Most students tend to select an appropriate, broad area for study, and simply need confirmation that their preliminary ideas are sound and the research feasible. For example:

Student A

Over Easter I'll be spending two weeks in a caravan in Italy and I want to do a project on social space and how it's maintained in a campsite. I want to look at natural boundaries (like the terrain of the campsite) and man-made boundaries (like 'fences', washing lines, where cars are parked). I'd also like to look at how people socialise and interact within the campsite. I don't see that finding informants should be a problem – in my experience there is always a way to start conversations on a campsite – usually in the washing up area. Do you think this is doable as a project?

Clearly this is a potentially interesting topic with lots of valuable opportunities to make strange and do participant observation and interviews. Discussion of this proposal was therefore brief and limited to appreciative comments about the appropriate topic of boundaries in such an environment, and comments for further questions such as the relationship between 'ordinary' rules of behaviour and the rules of behaviour on a campsite, notions of privacy, etc.

There are generally a small number of proposals requiring more sustained discussion. For example:

Student B

Over the Easter break I am planning to spend four weeks working in a hospital for head-injured children. I have worked there before and I am familiar with seventy-five or so of the five hundred staff. I am on first-name terms with both cleaners and porters as well as board members and directors. I want to do something along the lines of: 'We

live in a classist society. Does our class have any influence over our thoughts and actions?' I would like to compare how these groups of people see life and how they see themselves. I was thinking of questions along these lines:

1) What sort of things irritate you?

2) Is money important to you?

3) Why do you think people need to feel wanted?

4) Is Tony Blair a good Prime Minister?

5) Should cannabis be legalised?

6) How do you think the world could be a better place?

Clearly, there is so much here that is ethnographically unsound that it is difficult to know where to begin. The questions appear unrelated to each other and suggest a 'clipboard' approach. They are not likely to lead to an ethnographic account of people's behaviour and practices, nor to enable the ethnographer to study interactions or the environments in which these take place. The group spent about fifteen minutes looking again at the criteria for a good research question and at what is required in terms of conducting ethnographic conversations. The student was steered towards seeking out other possible areas of interest arising directly from the potentially very interesting environment of the children's hospital rather than simply using this as an opportunity to conduct a rather inconclusive survey. It was finally agreed that a very broad focus of working practices and of daily routines on the ward would be adopted until a clearer topic could be found.

Other problems might involve students' preliminary ideas being too wide in scope or too narrow. For example, one student said 'I was thinking that, for my ethnographic study, I would do it on my village shop and how people react in a small community. Then as one of my friends is working in Tesco's, I might do a comparison'. The job of the class here was to help the student to narrow down her focus to either the shop or the supermarket. This was done firstly by thinking in very concrete terms of how much participant observation she would actually be able to do in each place, and relating to this the problem of diluted data and trying to find sets of questions that connect the two environments. The initial comparative focus was eventually abandoned in favour of a focus on the village shop and the role it plays within the community over and above that of selling essential goods.

An example of an over-narrow focus comes from a student who proposed the title 'What are people's aspirations in the office where I work?' Clearly this is likely to lead to a series of very limited, one-off interviews and more of a survey-type approach than anything involving participant observation of recurring practices and interactions. Her peers suggested not only that it might be difficult to get data on 'aspirations' through observing people, but also that in terms of interviewing techniques, her questions were likely to have to be too directive and their scope would be limited. Apart from one or two very direct questions, it was unclear how she might progress with her topic once these had been answered. Once the student was encouraged to think in very concrete terms about how she would go about collecting data for such a project, its limitations became clear and she agreed instead to work

within the broad, general idea of hierarchy and how it manifested itself in the office environment.

The above are telling examples of the kinds of problems students bring to the meeting and of the effectiveness of group discussion. Finally, the project meeting should also be used to allow students to ask any remaining questions. For example, they generally have a number of these about the format and structure of the project (see the relevant handout in Section 5).

2.3 Writing the home ethnographic project

Given students' relative lack of confidence at this stage, it is important that they be given time after the vacation to continue working on their project, which should be finalised and handed in towards the end of the course. This allows them to refine their ideas over time, perhaps to include new concepts which can illuminate their data as these are introduced in the sessions, and to reflect over a protracted period on the issues surrounding the writing of the project. This is far better than asking them to hand in what would doubtless be a rather rushed version at the end of the vacation period. Depending on the time teaching staff have available, a project tutorial for each student should be organised, and students may also wish to arrange more informal 'workshop' sessions in which they present their own developing ideas to each other and help each other out. Both these methods have been tried and tested with previous cohorts.

More specific comments on the issues faced by students writing the project, as well as by supervising tutors, are contained in the section within this unit entitled 'supervising the writing process'. It may be useful at this stage, however, to include a number of examples of tutors' written comments on home ethnographic projects:

1) Jane's home ethnographic project was entitled: 'Things you can't get at Safeways: the Portobello Road Market' (see Unit 3).
   Mark: 67%

   Well structured and well observed.
   You make good use of anthropological concepts and some of the general patterns and themes are well captured. The photos are very helpful and contribute to making this a reader-friendly project.
   Your remarks on how people move around remind me of Goffman's work on 'traffic rules' people use (see his Relations in Public *book).*
   Your comments on boundaries are suggestive – it would be good to take further the apparent contrast between the confusion and complexity of masses of people milling around and the boundary structuring you describe.
   It would have been useful to have more of the interview material from your informants and it's a pity you ran out of time at the end. There is plenty of evidence here that you are well-equipped for your project abroad.

2) Miriam's project was entitled: 'The Natural Law Party'.

Mark: 48%

It was really a shame that you were not able to use your data fully and effectively in your study. It starts well and you discuss some of your own learning from doing this study, but we are left with only a few tantalising titbits. It is clear from the data you collected that there is a lot which could have been said, but unfortunately we cannot grade you on your notes.

Part of the problem was that you did not develop a specific question to pursue so the study was not focused enough. A number of interesting questions emerge from your study but none of them is tackled, e.g. What makes this a political rather than a spiritual grouping? How far are the members united by more than a set of beliefs? And so on.

I'm sure doing this study has helped you to reassess the relative amount of time needed for analysis as opposed to data collection. The latter is only the start. Your experience of data collection should be very useful for your project abroad.

3)   Elisabeth's title was: 'No escape when you are 'court' by boredom' and was a study of people waiting to go into a magistrate's court.
Mark: 68%

This is a very readable and insightful piece of work and you have clearly applied many of the lessons learned in the Christmas assignment about focusing and linking observation to analysis.

You differentiate well between description, analysis and your own opinion and make good use of detailed observation, both verbal and non-verbal.

I think the sections dealing with boredom in the waiting room could have been even further developed with more time – although the section on fidgeting is particularly good. The rest is very thoughtful but sometimes not analysed enough.

Good on awareness of your own role.

With a little more attention to definition and structure, this would have been a really excellent study and it should make you feel confident about tackling the project abroad.

2.4   The Period Abroad Project

By the end of the course, students will have had numerous opportunities to reflect on the various stages of preparing and writing this final project. Through work conducted for the weekly sessions and through their own ongoing project work for the home ethnographic project, they will have reflected on what makes a good research question, and they will have had ample practice in participant observation, in locating good informants and in interviewing them. They will also have worked frequently on recording and analysing naturally occurring data, and in particular, they will have benefited from the sessions devoted to data recording techniques and their interrelation with analysis (Units 11 and 12). They will have read and critiqued ethnographic projects from former students and will have seen the very varied list of their project titles. They will also have read a number of extracts from published

ethnographic studies. The final unit of the course will have brought them to consider in more fine-grained detail some of the issues involved in writing ethnographically, and by this stage they will have received 'Thoughts on writing an ethnographic project', a document which should be very well thumbed indeed by the time they return from their period abroad.

As explained in the last course unit (Unit 18), an informal meeting or workshop will be needed to enable students to discuss their project proposals. This will be broadly similar to the earlier workshop where students discussed ideas for their home ethnographic project. In this instance, however, we recommend that students also be required to complete a project proposal form to submit for approval following the meeting (see Section 5).

Students should be given the sheet entitled 'Focusing on the Ethnographic Project' and urged to prepare their ideas as thoroughly as possible before the meeting. The meeting should broadly run along the same lines as the earlier one, although, clearly, there will be some differences. For example, when students were thinking about the home ethnographic project, they usually had prior knowledge of the cultural scene they proposed to study, whereas their proposals for the period abroad may be rather more on the vague side at first. However, the practice in thinking about feasible areas for research and putting together a sound proposal is still a useful one, even if the topic for the period abroad project ends up being quite different from the original proposal. For example, Chris had proposed doing a study of the relationship between the American naval personnel at Cadiz and the local inhabitants. Once he was in Spain, however, this proved too politically sensitive and instead he did his study on transvestite prostitutes!

The aim here is to ensure that students arrive in the host country with a focus and concrete, approved proposals for starting research rather than floundering.

2.5 Ethnographic projects abroad: some examples

The choice of topic for ethnographic projects conducted abroad is very wide. Often it arises from the student's immediate environment – understandably so, since one of the main purposes of the ethnography course as well as the project is to encourage students to analyse this environment and come to terms with the difference they experience. Many student projects focus on aspects of the university environment in which they are studying, or other groups belonging to the locality and with whom they come into frequent contact. The short list of titles below gives an indication of the types of topic students have chosen:

♦ **French**

   Le Club de pétanque à Aubervilliers

   La Socialisation au sein d'une famille française

   Le Carnaval de Nice: qui veut devenir Carnavalier?

♦ **German**

   Alltagsbewältigung der Blinden und ihre Interaktion mit Sehenden

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Die Kategorisierung ausländischer Studenten durch ihre deutschen Kommilitonen. Ein ethnographischer Bericht

'Ellbogengesellschaft': an ethnographic study of assertiveness in Germany

◆ **Spanish**

Prostitutes and Identity in Cadiz

Young People in Seville: Changing Concepts of Male and Femaleness

ONCE – An Organisation for the Blind

It may be useful for tutors if we provide a brief description of one or two such projects:

(i)   Studying with a child: an ethnographic study of single mothers.
Daniela G.

The study begins with the simple question 'who are single mothers?' and proceeds to describe the life of a group of single mothers studying at the Humboldt or Free Universities in Berlin. Daniela starts with some statistical data on single parents in Germany, then describes how she made contact with and gathered her own data from informants. This is approximately the first quarter of the project. Thereafter she analyses her interviews and observations in terms of three main headings: 'studying and bringing up children', 'daily routine' and 'social contacts'. She explains the ways in which students arrange for the care of their children, how they organise their time very carefully and how they are part of particular kinds of social network. She does this by quoting frequently from the interview transcripts, using the concepts proposed by the interviewees to describe their lives. For example, she identifies 'die Morgenfrühe' and 'die Schlafenzeiten' (early morning and sleeping times) as crucial concepts with which the students organise their and their children's lives. But she also examines the meanings of external concepts which might be used to describe single mothers and their children in order to challenge outsider perceptions. For example, she challenges the conclusion of a study by the Federal Ministry for Youth and Women that single mothers are 'isolated' and 'lonely' by demonstrating from interviews and observation that these women have many social contacts, do not feel lonely and have a network of support to replace the usual concept of 'family'.

(ii)   Female students in Marburg and their external appearance
Rakhee C.

The project begins with an autobiography of the project itself, how the topic arose from Rakhee's own experience of feeling inappropriately dressed during her first week at Marburg University. She mentions briefly that she investigated the topic by interviews and observation. She identifies the issues by describing two groups of female students and their dress, using both her own observations and the vocabulary used by

members of one group to describe the other. She explains how, in lectures and seminars, one group dominated by taking seats in the centre of the room, asking questions during the seminar and using an aggressive style of verbal interaction. The other group sat at the edges of the room and spoke to the lecturer quietly after the session had ended.

She then examines each group in turn, by quoting from interviews, to identify attitudes to clothing, using make-up and hair styles and their symbolic meanings. She interviewed members of each group for their accounts of themselves and of the other group, and she also interviewed male students. Since she had begun the project from her own experience, she also interviewed other foreign students, female and male, to explore their interpretations of the symbolism of appearance as well as their individual ways of responding to it in order to be accepted within one of the German groups.

She concludes by analysing her own observations of members of each group in public and in the privacy of their own rooms. She argues, drawing upon Goffman to support her analysis, that the question of appearance is symptomatic of projections of images of self, that the dominant group members conformed in public to one image, 'sloppiness' (schlampig), but in private had a self-image of neatness and care.

(iii)   Being a Carnavalier in Nice
          Sophie B.

Sophie's project began with an account of the development of her research question. This emerged from her initial enthusiasm about the Nice Carnival which she had attended and which had initially seemed to her to be a particularly vibrant expression of local identity. She describes the carnival spectacle, focusing in particular on aspects that led her to draw her initial conclusions about local pride and solidarity. She goes on to explain that, once she had located a number of informants involved with the carnival and had begun to interview them in their workshops, a new research question – to do with the exclusion of women from the carnival – emerged.

The early sections of the project contained detailed lists of informants, along with their respective tasks, roles and reputations within the world of the carnavaliers. There were also diagrams explaining the different committees, groups and sub-groups involved in the organisation of the carnival, and the hierarchical relationship between them.

The remainder of the project involved Sophie's exploration of family and gender relations as they affected the world of the carnavaliers. In particular, she was keen to explain the paradox that although there were a number of women who were extremely keen to become fully-fledged carnavalières in their own right rather than merely assisting their men-folk, the patriarchal rule of handing the title down from father to son

militated against this. She drew on concepts of local-level politics and gender relations to organise her material and included particularly important reflexive paragraphs on her difficulties in gaining access to female informants as well as her inability to draw-out much data on female exclusion from the male carnavaliers to whom she spoke.

(iv)   The role of the pétanque club in Aubervilliers
         Gillian R.

Gillian's project stemmed from the disruption of a stereotype: namely, her surprise that a pétanque club should exist at all outside the South of France. She explains in the opening section of her project how she began to inform herself about the origins and rules of the game and how this helped her to gain access to this rather male-dominated club. She outlines how she moved from observing to participating in pétanque games and gradually began to interview a carefully selected cross-section of informants, from the president of the club to a number of informants.

Through her observations and interview data, she developed to key issues around which her project is based. These included issues of local-level politics, of the hierarchies, privileges and reputations which structured social relations within the club, dictating who was likely to become a member of which faction, who played with whom, how social functions were organised, etc. A second issue was the function of the club in the local community. Through establishing the socio-economic categories of players as well as their playing routines, it became clear that the club had multiple functions which were also indicators of wider processes of social change (it was a particular focus for unemployed youngsters, for instance, as well as for those in the troisième âge category). So an important part of the findings involved the role the club played in the lives of its members.

A further section of the project involved the communicative practices which permeate the game, and which were seen to vary from group to group. The linguistic rituals of the players were carefully recorded, as were the nicknames habitually given to players and the meanings underpinning such names. Gillian concluded that these ways of talking were instrumental in defining and maintaining competing groups, and that, far from being incidental, they were felt by informants to be an integral part of the strategies surrounding and framing the sport, like a second set of rules.

(v)   Living Between Two Cultures: a case study
        Katja R

The study arose out of Katja's interest in British Asians at university. As a German student in Britain, and herself not part of mainstream university life, she was interested in how other students who were bi-lingual and bi-cultural managed their student lives. She started by

interviewing a number of first years of South Asian origin but quickly decided to write a case study of one female student. She focused down on the relationship between family obligations, and in particular pressure to get married young, and the values and assumptions of first-year student life.

She soon found that the stereotypes about arranged marriages were over-simplified. Both parents and children acknowledge the symbolic importance of marriage – for the parents as an indication that children have been properly brought up, for the children as an indication of loyalty to the family and the community. However, a close analysis of her informant's comments on marriage suggested that there was room for discussion and negotiation in deciding on her future. A pattern emerged from her informant's language in which 'want' statements and 'prefer' statements from her parents were contrasted. The 'want' statements by her parents were taken as obligatory, the 'prefer' statements as offering an element of negotiation. She concludes by presenting a nuanced view of arranged marriages, as perceived by one student, who was shifting successfully between university and family life.

3.   Project supervision

3.1   General supervision during the period abroad

Clearly, this will vary from institution to institution according to resources and other factors. Ideally, students should be visited by a tutor who has been teaching the ethnography course and their progress should be discussed.

Regular email communication is recommended, perhaps at a specified number of times during the period abroad, or limited to short queries on the part of students. In addition, initial drafts of parts of the project or more formal progress reports should be requested at least once during the year.

Finally, in the case of previous student cohorts, ethnography support groups have been known to spring up spontaneously. These have proved invaluable to former students 'living the ethnographic life' abroad and it should be suggested to students before departure so that they may remain in contact through email or other means, and support each other's endeavours.

3.2   Supervising the writing process

This section is based on our own experience of supervision from which we have drawn a number of typical issues for discussion. It is hoped that these will be of help particularly to tutors who are new to ethnography and who are themselves only beginning to come to grips with what the project entails. The comments below are intended to be a practical supplement to the material in Unit 18, most particularly to the background notes.

3.3   Experiences of writing

It has been suggested that students should be writing all through their period abroad, although the degree of integration of writing with fieldwork varies. In most cases, there will be a break between the lived experience of fieldwork and the final concerted effort to write. Students in general find this distancing and re-visiting of their data an important factor in organising the project.

Typical problems at this time are usually organisational ones. Many students have a feeling of being overwhelmed by the sheer mass of material. They need to be persuaded that it is not necessary to include every last piece of data in the project but rather to select what is most important. Sophie's complaint about being swamped with material (quoted in the Background notes of Unit 18) sprang from her failure to work hard enough on drawing out concepts from her data during fieldwork, whereas Toni's problem sprang from the dichotomy between the personal feelings and development she saw as an integral part of her project, and the more academic requirements of the final piece. She had to be encouraged to 'shed' some of this personal material and to channel the rest appropriately into her reflexive account of fieldwork. Still, her urge to put into her project the whole experience was strong and she was disappointed that 'there are lots of feelings that aren't there':

It's very difficult and more than anything else it's frustrating because you can't really, or I haven't been able to and I know other people are frustrated with theirs. There isn't any way that you can condense into a project of that size everything that you went through to get to the state where you can actually write about the project. You'd have to be having a sabbatical and writing novels to be able to do it and we're not, so it is frustrating because there's so much more that you want to say or so many more parts of the net that you want to explore but you really can't. And even having cut it down as much as we have, they're still too long.

So students usually need help in pruning their data. At the same time, they should not be sweeping under the carpet everything that offends their sense of order and neatness. Real life is messy with frayed edges, and to spring-clean the data to the extent that it becomes inaccurate as a record of fieldwork experience and as a representation of other people's complex lives is not a good idea either. For example, students sometimes overlook or attempt to ignore disconfirming evidence for a particular claim they want to make where it would be better to include such evidence, using it analytically to modify the observation they are making and reveal it as a partial truth.

It is easier for tutors to help students with blind spots if they have been involved throughout the period of fieldwork at least to some extent and have an idea as to the data already collected. If this is not the case, it is still possible either to look at some of the data for half an hour to see whether the student appears to be using it to its best advantage, or at the very least to prod the student by getting her or him to consider some of the issues presented here.

Practically all students are having to work hard at this stage on breaking their material up conceptually under headings and sub-headings. The experience of this varies between frustration ('I hated it' says Grace, 'I had the ideas but maybe the categories weren't clear') and a high degree of control (as Anna put it: 'I'd already worked it out in my head in which categories I wanted them all to go – I'd already worked it out. So when I worked it out, when I wrote it up it wasn't too difficult, just getting the data together I think, and working out what a tradition is and which parts belong to an institution maybe, and just working out what the actual, like, the headings would be. How this information had to be sorted'). This involves students refining and questioning their preliminary conclusions, and often some of the most impressive conceptual thinking is conducted during the writing phase. Sandra, for example, writing on the *Sevillanas* dance, had come to some conclusions while in Spain, but began to question them and refine them to produce a much more subtle, thoughtful and conceptually rich project later:

Because I mean, I went to Spain (again) this summer but I went to the north and I remember I was talking to people about my conclusions then, but I mean, I started to question them. And I was thinking well, you know, wait a

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minute, it [the dance] can't be as empty. But I didn't pursue it any further until afterwards. I came back and I started reading over it and I handed it in here and they [the tutors] were saying, you know, I was always talking about this empty performance and that's when you know I took it home and in a week I mean I just basically lived it, like maybe two weeks ago, completely got into it. And you know I started to see these things and I also started to see different aspects. Religion came into it as well. Image came into it.'

The period of writing, then, is often a period of revelation and renewed excitement.

3.4   Reflexivity

Students are already familiar with the idea that a piece of ethnographic writing is not just a presentation of their discoveries but also an account of the processes through which these discoveries were made and a critique of their limitations. Ethnographers need to be sensitive to the ways in which their modes of eliciting accounts of cultural practices, and the accounts themselves, may be influenced by their own impact on the situation, by the ways in which they are perceived by those they observe or interview and with whom they interact. It is hoped that this in turn will lead them to reflect critically on their own culturally determined presuppositions, on what they had taken for granted as natural rather than culturally relative.

Students are therefore encouraged to include in their projects accounts and analyses of the fieldwork process, and to weave into their texts a reflexive analysis of the process of doing ethnographic research. It has already been demonstrated through the descriptions of projects that students explain the gradual emergence and formulation of a topic as well as its significance for them both as researchers and as actors in the social environment within which they are living. These two are not separable and students include in their reflections the descriptions of the methods they use to gather data. Sometimes this account of methods and their own anxieties or enjoyment of observation and interviewing become a recurring leitmotif running throughout the project. In other cases, the project begins with the analysis of the process and then moves to presentation and analysis of data, perhaps returning to a reflexive dimension as part of the conclusion.

In some cases, students' analysis of their interaction with others in the field – including their informants – involves the identification of significant effects of their presence on the data collection. They recount their 'mistakes' when people around them notice that fieldwork notes are being written about them, and discuss the, sometimes painful, ethical problems which arise in the relationships they establish with informants. Thus, in the best cases, students begin to understand the ways in which their reconstruction of the other's world may differ from the other's experience of that world.

3.5   Data collection and analysis

Students often draw attention in their projects to the ways in which they conducted interviews or carried out observations. They document their fieldwork by listing dates of interviews and periods of observation and use these as references in their study. They also discuss the problems of interview transcription and anonymity of informants. In describing their methods of observation, students discuss the degrees and kinds of participation they became involved in. For example, when travelling on public transport in Berlin, Maria not only observes the behaviour of others but conforms herself to the 'unwritten rules' she is in the process of discovering. Rakhee, having discovered her topic as a result of a feeling of unease about her appearance among students in Marburg, changes her own appearance to conform to one of the groups she analyses and becomes part of their social network. Daniela, on the other hand, remains an observer of single mothers and had some difficulties in gaining access to them in their specific networks.

Thus, in their different ways, students live the dilemma of distance and proximity which is fundamental to ethnography, and which is nonetheless an opportunity to see that which those in the situation cannot. As with the issue of reflexivity and relativisation, however, students do not always problematise the experience by analysing it in their project work with the help of appropriate literature. The question remains whether they should be introduced more explicitly to recent debates in anthropology, or whether, as linguist ethnographers, it is sufficient they are aware of different degrees of proximity and of their potential as mediators.

Students often also undertake document analysis. A project on German perceptions of foreigners, for example, includes an analysis of legal documents defining different kinds of immigration and degrees of German nationality, as well as analysing the categorisations used. This type of data is triangulated with their ethnographic data to provide a wider context within which the detailed cultural interpretations can be judged.

Data presentation takes various forms, some students quoting directly from interviews or observation notes, others describing and paraphrasing. Analysis often includes discussion of specific terms used by informants: for example, Rakhee analyses 'schlampig' (sloppy) versus 'gepflegt' (neat, careful), and another student bases her project on the significance of the word 'Leistung' (achievement) in German schools. These are good examples of how the analysis is grounded in the data and concepts evolve as students become more familiar with it, refining their research question as a consequence.

Students also draw upon the conceptual literature, either in detail by taking over one person's analytical concepts (e.g. Goffman in the examples above) or by using the concepts they have encountered in the ethnography course. For example, Daniela discusses the 'networks' and 'boundaries' which underpin the social contacts of single mothers.

3.6   Questions of style

One of the issues about which students generally feel insecure, in both the home and the period abroad project, is the style in which they should write their projects. This will probably be the first piece of writing they have done within an educational

environment where they are encouraged to be reflexive and descriptive as well as analytical. Most of their academic writing up to this point will have required an impersonal style and will certainly not have involved an expression of their own perceptions, responses and feelings arising from their interactions with people in the field. They need encouragement that writing themselves into the project is not only legitimate but academically sound. On the other hand, they must also avoid the temptation to become too colloquial or 'chatty' in style, or to be overly subjective by focusing on the personal development that took place during their research experience as if this were the project's principal point of interest.

It is useful to suggest to students that there may be a 'storytelling' style in part of their account, but this will be balanced by an academic style in the analysis of their data.

A further problem lies in the way findings are presented in the more academic sections of the project, and here students may be swayed by the persuasive and authoritative discursive strategies of many other types of academic writing. Ethnographic writing instead requires that students be modest in their claims and tentative in their conclusions. Still clinging to the idea that an essay involves clinching an argument, students are sometimes tempted to make grand claims (particularly in the concluding section of the project) and may need to be steered away from any suggestion that something has been 'proved'. Not only must any claims be grounded in the data and backed up with evidence, they must also be framed with an awareness that they do not hold good for an entire group. This means acquiring the habit of presenting them tentatively as limited perceptions, and is linked to the problem of generalisations and getting the right balance between the general and the particular (see Unit 18).

3.7   Writing in the foreign language

The projects are written in the target language and this in itself gives them a particular character.   Although marks are not explicitly given for language competence, the use of appropriate register, proof reading, presentation and so on contribute to the overall standard of the project and the general assessment of it.

Writing an ethnographic project in the foreign language raises particular issues. First, when struggling to express their understanding of social phenomena, their refinements of methods for data collection, their personal responses to the demands of fieldwork or their reflexive re-assessment of their own culturally determined pre-conceptions, students might already find themselves pushing at the limits of their command of their first language. As Toni points out:

> ...it is hard because my Spanish isn't that brilliant, even though as I say it did get better when I was in Spain, I think. But it's hard enough to express some concepts of ethnography in English let alone do it in a language that's not even my second language because I was *ab-initio*, like Christiane. So I don't know. A lot of the time I couldn't express exactly how I wanted to or put in any depth or any subtleties, nothing. And it's all very repetitive probably for

that reason. That's the only way that I could do it and get across everything that I want as best I can, so it wasn't all bad.

Some of the issues that arise are not peculiar to ethnography, since there is much debate about requiring language students always to write in the foreign language whether about literature or area studies. It is, however, the case that students are used to writing most of their coursework in a foreign language and the overriding purpose of requiring them to do all projects during the period abroad in a foreign language, whether ethnography or not, is to impose greater demands on their language skills and give opportunity for improving linguistic competence. Those issues that are particular to ethnography include the fact, that during the course, students are socialised into an Anglo-American discourse as the material and theory is largely from that tradition. This means that, if they attend courses on anthropology or 'ethnologie' at a university in the foreign country, the methods, approaches or terminology rarely have much in common with their previous experience. They have therefore to transfer the concepts and theory from the ethnography course taught in English into the foreign language. They have to find ways of expressing not only what they say but how they say it, and what concepts and frameworks they can use to discuss their analysis. As they are involved in this process of writing, the connections between language and culture become particularly clear for many students. Writing in a foreign language gives a greater sense of conceptual 'faithfulness' to the informants and their cultural contexts, and some students feel there is less danger of imposing alien concepts.

Writing in the foreign language also has the advantage of corresponding and interacting with the experience of students themselves, living the demands of their research in the foreign language, with respect to local terms and classifications for example. Yet there are doubtless moments when they would have a feeling of clarity in their first language whilst in their foreign language they are seeking to express themselves through a medium they can manipulate with less facility. This sometimes appears in the text as repetition and re-formulation of a single point. It is also no doubt a factor in the search for 'fluent' formulation of difficult analytical concepts or methodological terms, which sometimes leads to inaccuracies of syntax or morphology. Problems of orthography, on the other hand, can be overcome by using a spell-checker from a word-processing package for the language in question.

The specific problem of translating terms used during the course can worry students a lot, but most deal with this quite effectively with their tutor's help, either with a glossary at the end, or by using the terms in English (e.g. 'going native', 'local-level politics') with a brief explanation in the foreign language within the text. For example, in the introduction to one project there is the following statement:

> Ich fand es schwer 'to make strange'. Mein Instinkt zwang mich, deutsches Verhalten anzunehmen, weil ich angenommen werden und mich in Deutschland wohl fühlen wollte. Es gab einen Konflikt zwischen meinem Wunsch mich darin zu vertiefen und meiner Rolle als teilnehmende Beobachterin.

(I found it difficult 'to make strange'. My instinct forced me to take on German behaviour because I wanted to be accepted and feel at ease in Germany. There was a conflict between my wish to plunge into it and my role as participant observer).

Here the student has found the phrase to translate 'participant observer' but not 'to make strange'. Sometimes, as in the case of Goffman cited above, translations of work in English exist in the foreign language and a student can 'read into' the discourse and quote from the translation.

The problem of register is less easily resolved. As we have already suggested, reporting on doing ethnography can lend itself to an anecdotal style, particularly when there is strong overlap of subject and object, as when a student, in trying to be more reflexive, constantly brings herself into her observation and interpretation of the other. Because students have become acquainted with academic texts largely through extracts, and since those texts tend to be in English, they have no obvious model on which to draw, unlike students of anthropology who will have read many ethnographic monographs before they write their own.

Students themselves are clearly aware of many of the issues explained above. Grace, for example, complained that accuracy was not her main problem, but rather her awareness of semantic fields and connotations. Students often make a particular effort to study the semantics of their topic and this doubtless heightens their feelings of inadequacy, and yet also increases their sensitivity to the language. Grace speaks for herself and for others when comparing with English:

I think the main problem is being able to express, you know, in the correct way. You're never sure when you're writing it in German if you're actually saying what you wanted to say in English. Because obviously they're so, like, something in English may mean something different in German and not in a huge way but in a small way. You know, different connotations or words or something, you know, or things like that.

3.8   A first class ethnographic project

Assessing ethnographic projects brings its own distinctive problems, particularly difficult for tutors who are doing it for the first time. This may be compounded by the need to familiarise external examiners with the rationale behind the course, with its aims in terms of experiential learning, and with the considerable challenge represented by fieldwork as well as by the concrete outcome of this fieldwork, the project. External examiners see only the final text, whereas tutors will have charted the often considerable process of intellectual and personal maturation behind the text and will know a lot more about the student's efforts to accomplish various parts of their fieldwork and writing. Particularly in terms of the amount of effort put in to overcome difficulties and collect data systematically, etc. (which is one of the explicitly stated assessment criteria) an amount of liaison is often needed. Problems

raised by examiners in the past have included what can be considered evidence and how generalisable the findings may be.

In order to explain what can be achieved in practice, it may be useful if we describe one successful ethnographic project which was awarded a first class mark.

> Grace's study was entitled 'Die Kategorisierung ausländischer Studenten durch ihre deutschen Kommilitonen. Ein ethnographischer Bericht'. She begins with an introductory explanation of the structure of the 'report', which has two initial chapters describing 'the development of the research problem and the report on the fieldwork methods and sources of data collection. The development of the research problem arose from her own initial response to the expectations of her German student peers with respect to what is appropriate behaviour, and secondly from her noticing how foreign students tended to meet with each other and have little contact with their German peers. She points out that, although at first glance the report appears to be about foreign students, it is in fact about German students and how they respond to foreign students.

After these two methodological chapters, there is a 'background' chapter to explain how and why foreign students come to Germany in general and to the University of Marburg in particular, where Grace herself was enrolled as a student. The next chapter is based on document analysis and interviews with those in charge of the office for foreign students. It analyses the categorisation of students to be found in the law and in the declarations of officials and politicians.

The next two chapters are introduced as an analysis of the categorisations used in student culture with respect to foreign students, for which the legal categorisations serve as a backdrop, but which do not coincide with the legal and official categories. Both chapters are focused on the ways in which foreign students can adapt and be accepted by their German peers, thus revealing the ways in which German students expect others to present themselves. The first of these chapters considers the factors that are unchangeable, such as physical appearance, country of origin and length of residence. The second analyses the factors where foreign students can change, such as development of linguistic competence and the adoption of German value-systems with regard to 'order' and 'proficiency', for example, or social skills and sexual behaviour.

The final chapter summarises the hypothesis which guided the work and the findings. It also includes a critique of the research reflecting on its limitations, on the effects the doing of the ethnography had on Grace's understanding of her own situation in Germany as a student, and on what she felt she learnt about German value-systems in general. The report finishes with endnotes which give the sources of statements in the text, including the dates when interviews took place, and an appendix which lists all the sources of data: interviews with German and foreign students, observations in the refectory, cafeteria, lectures, student parties and so on, again with dates, and a bibliography of work on foreign students in Germany.

One of the major strengths of Grace's work is in her understanding of methodological issues. For example, she explains the ways in which she found and interviewed

informants, making distinctions between those who were already known to her and those who were new. She describes the advantages and disadvantages of each, and how the move from acquaintance or friend to interviewer could affect the subsequent relationship. She also analyses her own expectations of what would happen in interviews, which topics might be sensitive and difficult to discuss, and then explains how these expectations were not always fulfilled and the effects on the course taken by the interview. She concludes her discussion of the interview process with the foreign students as follows:

> Durch die Interviews mit den ausländischen Studenten lernte ich vor allem, wie entscheidend meine Rolle als Interviewerin war. Meine Erwartungen, Vorurteile und Ängste konnten die Interviews beeinflussen, und meine Interpretation von ihnen. Obwohl ich die Meinungen der Interviewpartner erforschte, erforschte ich gleicherweise meine eigene Rolle und mit jedem Interview verbesserte ich meine Methoden und entwickelte meine Rolle.

> (Through the interviews with the foreign students I learnt above all how decisive my role as interviewer was. My expectations, prejudices and anxieties could influence the interviews and my interpretations of them. Although I was researching the opinions of my interview partners, I was simultaneously researching my own role, and I improved my methods and developed my role with each interview.)

It is clear from this and similar passages in the report that the ethnography meets the criteria concerned with ethical issues and reflexivity. The careful documentation of data collection and citation from interviews and documents, together with the discussion of the difficulties of interviewing and observing are further strengths in respect of methodology criteria.

The data analysis chapters can be divided into those that are based on 'public' data – the statistics on foreign students, the legal documents and interviews with representatives of the office of foreign students – and 'private' data from interviews and observations in the university. The former are presented in a way which draws upon anthropological concepts of boundaries and social groups. The latter are analysed in terms of over-arching categories which Grace has extracted from the descriptive and narrative language of the interviews. She uses quotations to support the categories grounded in the data. For example, she argues that one crucial mode of adaptation is in 'alltägliche Sitten' (daily customs) and refers to an extract from an interview:

> Um gesellschaftlichen Kontakt zu haben, muß der Ausländer bestimmte soziale Fähigkeiten lernen, z.B. Rino aus Indonesien sagte: "Am Anfang fühlte ich mich nicht wohl dabei, in Kneipen zu gehen, weil ich nicht wußte, wie man sich verhalten mußte. Es gibt überall kulturelle Regeln, die man lernen muß. Aber jetzt weiß ich genau,

was ich machen muß, wenn ich in Kneipen gehe, auf Feten, zum Tanzen oder mit Frauen umgehen soll."

(In order to have social contact, the foreigner must learn certain social skills, for example, Rino from Indonesia said: "At the beginning I didn't feel at ease going to pubs because I did not know how to behave. There are cultural rules you have to learn everywhere. But now I know exactly what I have to do when I go to pubs, to parties, to dances or how to behave with women.")

She also uses appropriate literature, for example, to support her identification of the significance of sexual behaviour as a crucial factor in adaptation, as also appears in the quotation from Rino.

The sub-headings for these chapters give an indication that Grace has ordered her material according to the analytical categories she has identified, not yielding to the temptation of letting descriptive material dominate. From her initial questions about why foreign and German students seem to remain separate, she has developed an analysis which demonstrates nuances in the particular situation she was observing and links with general social issues of how Germany is responding to an influx of foreigners in recent years. Thus, criteria such as 'ability to draw interesting, analytical conclusions from (research material) which demonstrate underlying patterns and cause' are well met by Grace's account. As was pointed out by one of the assessors, 'Grace raises many interesting questions and is looking for new ways of understanding what everyone is conscious of.' Bearing in mind that this was a project written in the foreign language, the external examiner also commented on her fluency and accuracy, saying that 'the project itself is positively stylish in its narrative confidence.'

4.   Self- and peer-assessment

4.1   Rationale

Much of the learning that gets done on the ethnography course is experiential, and a student who does not actively participate cannot hope to 'catch up' later by borrowing the notes somebody else has made on *their* experience of fieldwork assignments or *their* ideas on a class reading or discussion. There is no substitute for the *doing*. Furthermore, given the organisation of classroom sessions around students' assignment findings rather than around a lecture led from the front, if these are to be successful they require a high degree of commitment and participation from all class members. It was consequently decided that, along with the home ethnographic project, we would devise a process-oriented (as opposed to product-oriented) form of assessment.

Our aim was to devise an assessment method which would involve students taking responsibility for their own weekly contributions both outside the class (in data collection tasks) and within it (participation in small-group and plenary discussion, presenting group feedback to the class and so on). It was felt that some form of self- and peer-assessment was appropriate, that we could demonstrate to students how it was closely related to learning methods and that it would reinforce the stated aims and objectives of the ethnography course – not least fostering the ability to turn a reflexive eye on the self!

Being an effective class member also means demonstrating the skills that will be needed for doing fieldwork, such as being a good observer and a good listener, conducting non-directive interviews, being receptive and helping others to clarify their ideas, being flexible, showing initiative, demonstrating empathy and so on. These are all nebulous, slippery skills that are essential within ethnography but not quantifiable or assessable in percentage terms.

Naturally, then, the problems we anticipated included the fact that there is little here the students can judge quantitatively. As opposed to their experience as language learners, they find that, in ethnography, where they are negotiating cultural interpretations, there are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers; nor is there any single correct way to carry out fieldwork assignments. Everyone comes to the class with different data which is not handed in or marked by lecturers. It *is* compared with that of other students but not in order to establish which data is 'best'. In addition, being an effective member of the class does not necessarily mean demonstrating a refined understanding of what is under discussion; it can mean asking useful questions, being, as one student put it, 'up-front' about not having understood something, or discussing problems encountered when fieldwork did not run smoothly. Students are often reluctant to engage with such issues in class at first since they persist in identifying them with weakness.

4.2   Implementation

Our first step was to negotiate with the class an appropriate set of criteria and an acceptable procedure rather than simply impose these. In this way students were led to consider what it would take from each of them to make the weekly sessions useful

and we could clearly demonstrate that they were to judge each other on criteria they themselves had negotiated. The self-assessment form (see Section 5) therefore functioned a little like a learner contract. Criteria chosen by students ranged from the basic quantitative elements, such as frequency of attendance or completion of assignments and readings, to the qualitative (e.g. effective group work).

In the first class, a ten-minute slot was devoted to initiating group work. Students discussed in small groups what contributions might be required from each individual to make group work effective, breaking down the component skills, abilities and contributions which might make for a successful session. Their ideas were then fed back to the class and a decision was made as to which of these should be included as criteria. In terms of the procedure adopted, students also had their say and, perhaps unsurprisingly, chose to have staff involved as a 'control' to validate marks in assessment tutorials. The self- and peer-assessment form that emerged from this session was divided into sections covering attendance and preparation, assignments, readings, group work and class discussion, and finally an overall assessment of student contribution.

Given the inevitable teething problems which arise when students are first called upon to assess themselves or their peers, we decided to conduct two assessment exercises, each worth 20% of the module marks, in the hope that any problems might be ironed out by the second round. The first took place half way through the course and the second at the end. They involved a three-part process:

1. Each group member assesses his/her performance against a set of criteria and completes a self-assessment form, giving him/herself an overall mark. This is done individually.

2. The peer-assessment group (of four students) then meets with the following aims: to compare marks and discuss how they were arrived at, and to modify or endorse overall marks. Forms are then handed in to the tutors.

3. Finally there is an assessment tutorial with the tutors and peer group. Tutors further discuss and ratify marks or encourage moderation of any grossly misjudged marks. Students (and of course tutors) must be prepared to justify their suggested marks at these meetings.

The latter two stages involved the move from private to public assessment. These were by far the most interesting stages and also the stages in which conflict was most likely to arise. Many students had an unrealistic (usually inflated) perception of the value of their own contribution and also found it very difficult to judge their peers objectively. We encountered an obvious lack of appreciation of what a mark such as 80% (or in one case 95%) signifies. Also common was an inability to distinguish between effort and quality of output. Some students felt that the effort needed to do all the readings and overcome shyness to carry out some of the fieldwork assignments should be enough to guarantee a very high mark indeed. Comments recorded from the first assessment tutorial illustrate this difficulty:

> I feel I have put so much effort into this course, so my contribution is definitely above average.

> I have at times sat up to the early hours of the morning reading texts over and over to help me understand the contents.

> When I was in class and not sick I would contribute 100 per cent, sometimes a bit less.

A further problem was that peer groups sometimes avoided engaging in debate and found it easier simply to endorse marks without question. When marks were modified, they tended to be raised and not lowered, the rather unsurprising result being that assessment groups awarded each other marks in the same class (usually Upper Second) rather than attempting to differentiate between performances. For example, one group of students with very mixed ability and levels of commitment and contribution came out of the exercise with 60%, 60%, 60% and 62%.

The assessment tutorials, although informal in atmosphere, were difficult at first. They required careful preparation on the part of tutors with discussion of problem cases beforehand. They were the control mechanism which prevented students awarding each other unrealistic marks, but it was also considered important that students did not come away with the idea that tutors were in any case going to impose their own marks, which would have invalidated the entire exercise. It helped to remind students that the self-assessment exercise was a valuable ethnographic exercise in self-observation, that they were not being asked to be personally critical of anybody but to be objective, and that, in terms of transferable skills, the process of justifying marks and judging others was a useful one (e.g. going for promotion and proving they are worth it, doing jobs which involve evaluation of others, organising team work and so on).

The second round of assessments ran far more smoothly. Students were more confident about how to approach it. They felt more comfortable about engaging in open discussion of each other's performance and commented usefully on the difficulties of being made responsible for their own assessment in this way. Tutors seldom needed to intervene since students took more control and were less passive. We found it unnecessary to modify any of the suggested marks, peer groups having determined at least individual's classifications with what we felt was a high degree of accuracy. They were able to explain how these marks were arrived at through negotiation and demonstrated considerable maturity in analysing the differences in performance of individuals between this and the previous exercise. They also made some illuminating statements about the value of self-assessment in general:

> You've got to know how to judge yourself: it's a skill everyone has to learn.

> It's good for everyone to think about their strengths and weaknesses.

> If people had peers judge them more, there wouldn't be such a stigma about being personal.

It makes you work harder during the term because you know you've got to judge yourself. You're not accountable in the same way on other courses.

It is definitely worthwhile. It makes you think about what you've done in the course. It makes people like X realise how important things like attendance are.

It's to do with taking responsibility for yourself.

4.3   Concluding remarks

Although students clearly find this type of assessment more personally challenging than conventional types, it can be successful from their point of view provided that the rationale for implementing it is clear and that the criteria and process are at least in part student generated.

From the staff perspective, the advantages are that students share the responsibility of assessment and remain aware throughout of precisely what is required of them. Since the peer-assessment groups are established in the early stages of the course, there is more of a team effort throughout. Students are more aware of each other's contributions to group work and are more democratic about sharing the opportunity to present the findings of the group in plenary sessions. In other words, the exercise helps to bring out the more reticent students and tones down those who might otherwise tend to dominate.

The only disadvantage concerns the practicalities of organising such an exercise outside class time, although this certainly takes no more time for tutors than marking a batch of essays. It is also a refreshing alternative, more challenging than the comparatively impersonal norm of taking in a piece of work and handing it back with a few comments. Tutors may find they get to know their ethnography students better than any other group owing to the methods of teaching and assessment adopted.

5. Assignments and handouts

5.1   Project Assessment Criteria

- The ability to pose interesting and innovative questions that lead to an illumination of the material

- Evidence of theoretical understanding of reading to underpin the particular study

- The ability to use appropriate data collection methods both systematically and creatively

- A proper recognition of some of the methodological problems involved in the collection of ethnographic data

- A proper recognition of ethical issues related to informants

- The ability to select, order and describe research material in a coherent and persuasive way

- An ability to draw interesting, analytical conclusions from it which demonstrate underlying patterns and causes

- Sensitivity to language use in its social and cultural contexts and an understanding of the construction of concepts and meanings out of the language used by participants in social settings

- Initiative, commitment and reflexivity in developing an ethnographic project

- The amount of effort that you have put in to overcome difficulties, collect data systematically, etc. will also be evaluated.

5.2 Vacation Assignment: Preparing a Home Ethnographic Project

This assignment gives you an opportunity to put into practice the skills you have learned so far and to apply the concepts you have acquired. We suggest you follow the steps set out below and hope you are going to enjoy doing it.

1. **First choose a broad area of interest, e.g.:**
   Family
   Education and socialisation
   Gender relations
   Social space and non-verbal communication
   etc.

2. **Identify possible informants in general terms, i.e. who will it be possible to work with fairly easily?**

3. **Think about a general research problem which interests you, e.g.:**

   (If you are in a job) what has motivated people to go and do this kind of work and how far did school experience lead them into this?

   To what extent does the workplace you are studying create / construct different roles for men and women?

   What is it like being a… (profession / job) and… (add a specific, relevant problem)

   How does a local event (e.g. a market) get done, and what does it mean to people who sell / shop there?

   N.B. We don't expect anyone to actually pick one of these titles. They are just to give you an idea of the kind of question you may want to ask.
   Former students have done fieldwork in areas as various as a parish church, an animal shelter and senior citizens' social clubs.

4. **Participant observation is a key method of obtaining data, but remember that the focus of the assignment is also on interviewing.**

5. **Interview two or three informants and / or the same informant several times**

   By 'interview' we mean any kind of 'eliciting conversation' in which you have an opportunity not just to participate but to be a researcher and take things further, i.e. test your understanding. This may mean an 'interview' which is specially set up, or it may mean focusing on a particular aspect your informant is talking about, and by showing interest, questioning or prompting to encourage them to talk more about it. If it is a formal ethnographic interview you may be able to tape it. Do remember though how long it takes to do transcriptions.

6. **You should start taking notes from the very beginning.**

5.3   Focusing on the Ethnographic Project

Before you leave for your period abroad, you are expected to complete a project proposal form and there will be a meeting to help you do this. You may of course end up doing something entirely different after consultation with your tutors, but it is nevertheless important at this stage to begin to focus on a possible project.

Try to come up with a cultural scene / group of people / phenomenon, etc. that you may be able to study during this period. Use the following questions to guide your thinking about a feasible and interesting area for a project and bring your thoughts to the meeting.

1.   **Practicalities**

Where will you be?

Who will you be with? Who might be possible informants? Are there any particular groups to which you will have access?

Will you have to negotiate access? How do you think you might go about this?

2.   **Theme / topic**

What cultural scene / group / event / phenomenon / issue / aspect of activity do you think you might want to look at?

What might be an interesting foreshadowed problem?

What might be interesting about this theme or this group of people?

Is there a particular theme or aspect you would like to explore (e.g. gender relations, boundaries, identities, social space)?

3.   **And finally...**

How are you going to make a start?

5.4   Project Proposal Form

We appreciate that the topic of your project may be modified or may change completely once you are abroad. Nevertheless, it is important that you arrive with a plan of action. We therefore require you to complete this form as fully as possible and submit it after the project workshop for approval by your tutor.

Name

Place of residence abroad

Proposed theme / topic

Relevant places for Participant observation

Possible informants

Methodological implications (how do you intend to go about collecting data? Do you foresee any problems or particular issues you may have to deal with?)

Relevant concepts

5.5 Structure and Presentation of the Project

Language: The project must be written in the foreign language.

Length: 5-7000 words
Remember that this EXCLUDES bibliographical details, quotations and appendices.

STRUCTURE

There is no recipe for structuring your project, but there are guidelines within a range of possibilities. You should include:

A title page, including your name.

A contents page, giving titles and page numbers of the parts into which the project is divided.

An initial section on methods and how you set up and conducted the research and any problems encountered. This can include reflexive analysis of your relationship with your informants, of how your presence may have affected the data gathered, etc. At this stage, you may also wish to briefly introduce the conceptual scope of your research as well as your findings and conclusions (if preferred these could be put in as an abstract after the contents page). You may also wish to include a list of informants and some details about them and about how often you met / had interviews with them.

The main body of your project will be divided into subsections according to your findings and the organisation that seems most logical and revealing to you. An idea of how to use headings and sub-headings can be found in the extract from the student project on Despatch riders you saw in the last session of the course. Within this part of your project, present the data in the way you think the reader will find most helpful. For example, along with the text you can include diagrams, charts, lists and short extracts from a variety of documents wherever necessary (provided these are analysed and form part of your argument).

A bibliography at the end of the project. This should give a list of the books and articles you have consulted or quoted. List these in alphabetical order.

Appendices may be included. If you have material such as interview transcriptions or photographs or any other short documents which you have not incorporated into the main body of the text but which you feel are important to an understanding of your project, these may be added here. Beware of over-long appendices, though, and make sure to refer to them at some stage during the main body of your study (i.e. they should be useful and organically related to the rest, not just tagged on for no particular reason). The material in the appendices does not count towards the overall word limit.

PRESENTATION

The project must be word-processed using double spacing and leaving a margin.

The pages must be numbered.

References within the bibliography should appear as follows:

For Books

♦ Agar, M. (1980) *The Professional Stranger*. New York: Academic Press.

♦ Thorne, Kramarae and Henley (eds.) (1983) *Language, Gender and Society*. London: Newbury House.

For articles or chapters in books

♦ Fishman, P. (1980) 'Interaction: The Work Women Do', in Thorne, Kramarae and Henley (eds.) *Language, Gender and Society*. London: Newbury House, 89-101.

Referencing within the text should be as follows:

♦ According to Fishman's study, 'Conversation is more problematic for women, who work harder to make it happen' (1980: 91).

♦ It has been suggested by some writers that women work harder to keep conversation going (e.g. Fishman: 1980).

♦ Fishman (1980) has suggested that women work harder to keep conversations going.

5.6   Thoughts on Writing an Ethnographic Project

(Based on Spradley, Werner and Schoepfle, Clifford and Marcus, Hammersley and Atkinson, Ellen).

"Transforming what you know into what you communicate" (Ellen)

You the writer: being reflexive

1. Think about your immersion in another cultural group – how far do you become like them? Do you ever stop being yourself?

2. Make a distinction all the time between what your informants say and what you say. Ultimately what you write is **your** construction of a particular mode of life. You are the narrator and it is your voice which will be the strongest.

3. So you need to be self-aware and self-critical – both of your presence when doing the ethnography and of your "representation" of others. Perhaps you are creating and not representing?

4. Remember that you can never get the 'final version' on the particular aspect of social life you are studying. All that you've obtained, heard and experienced gets reduced to a text. Also, remember that sounds, smells, music etc. are all worth recording.

5. Ethnographers are expected to be culturally relative – i.e. to understand and accept differences in other cultural practices without being judgmental. This is fine – but whether you are charitable or critical, it is important to remember that it is your version of reality which will be read and remembered – and perhaps fed back to your informants! In other words, as an ethnographer with 'inside knowledge', you also have power.

6. More generally, cultural description and interpretation is always within power relations. It is easy to interpret behaviour as simply 'cultural' when, in fact, there are good historical and political reasons for it.

7. And just as everything you observe and hear arises out of historical processes, power relations and language, so your own interpretations and writing are constrained by them – e.g. in the 19th century, 'niggers' and 'savages' were OK terms, and in the 1950s and '60s, 'man' meant men and women. It was not that people were intrinsically less humane and understanding.

8. So you need to be reflexive about:

    ◆ the contexts and data you collect (i.e. who, what, when, where, etc)

    ◆ you the narrator and your presence in those contexts

    ◆ how you move from data to description, interpretation and explanation.

9. In a way, all ethnography is translation. It involves making sense of one set of cultural meanings to another group. In doing this 'translation' it is important to think about the limits of your own language and cultural meaning. Not just how can I convey the concept so that people in my community can understand it – but

what does the difficulty of translating tell me about my own language and cultural practice?

10. As an ethnographer, you are looking for social patterns and underlying meanings. What Geertz calls 'symbolic action'. But you need to be reflexive about this process as well. There is a danger of presenting a set of integrated implicit meanings as 'the knowledge of X culture' – which you have access to but the informants do not – rather like a psychoanalyst telling her patient about herself. In other words, there is a danger of an overly coherent account. Perhaps the article you have read by Mary Douglas entitled 'Taking the Biscuit' goes too far in this direction...

11. Finally, perhaps writing an ethnography says as much about you and your cultural world as about the one you are bringing to life in your writing.

Steps in writing an ethnography

1. Data analysis

♦ Remember that analysis should be carried out as you collect data and not only afterwards.

♦ Look back at the handout and your notes on how to index your data. Another technique is to use file cards of different colours and make a distinction between:

- different informants
- notes on individuals and summary notes on a theme drawn from several informants

♦ Remember you have different kinds of data and you need to be explicit about this:

e.g. systematic and exhaustive
systematic and not exhaustive
intuitive knowledge

e.g. data you have observed
data you have elicited (i.e. you have pushed people into talking / behaving in a certain way)

2. Beginning to write

Start writing as early as you can and don't let the data go cold on you.

Select your audience. Writing is much easier when you write for one target reader (i.e. one of your lecturers)

Use your reading to give references and establish your argument.

3. Select a thesis

You have probably already got a good idea what your main argument is going to be. It may not be the 'foreshadowed problem' you started with. Some typical theses are:

- What is it like to be a ... ? This has been called the 'moral career' approach. It is a tracing through of the socialisation process. E.g. What is it like to be a debt collector?'

- Taking a cultural meaning system and seeing that it is much more complex than you think. E.g. membership of a friendship group in a Yorkshire village.

- Communicative competence – what are the tacit 'rules' underlying the particular activity of a group? E.g. kissing as greeting in an Italian community.

- Illustration of a broad theme. E.g. notion of boundary (but remember that broad cultural themes are always embedded in political realities).

4. Rough out your topics and an outline

There are many different ways of organising your material.
Your outline should at least include:

- History of the project, i.e. how you came to choose it and how you set about becoming a participant observer.

- Geographic location – where it happened

- Actors – who were your informants (as much detail as is necessary to contextualise the data without breaking confidentiality)

- Activities – the behaviour / activities and the patterns underlying them

- A justification for the project and any benefit you can see for your informants.

5. Drafts and re-drafts

Do a rough draft. You will probably find you want to structure your material in the way that fits best with your thesis (see 3 above).

For example:

- Moral career – take a sequential approach – describing a day, a week etc.

- Zoom lens approach (general to specific and vice-versa) useful for describing the complexity of cultural meaning systems

- Zoom lens, detailed transcripts and analysis, for the communicative competence approach

- Thematic Organisation and using anthropological or social categories or informant tenons.
  e.g. Agar's 'Coping', 'The Bust', etc.
  e.g. Spradley's 'Hassling', useful for illustrating broad themes.

These are examples only. The important thing is to find a clear structure that fits your argument. Rearrange the outline if things now seem in the wrong order.

6. As you are writing, ask yourself the following questions:

♦ Have I got a good balance between **description** and **analysis?**

Analysis should have been taking place from the start of the research and guiding the process of data collection (we have spoken already during the course of a 'constant and cumulative dialogue with your data'). You should be anchoring your data to concepts continuously. Students who have not done this may leave the field with no more than a descriptive record of unfocused and anecdotal detail. This will make the final write-up very difficult, it is the result of what we might call the 'trolley dash' approach, which involves rushing in, grabbing what you can, then unpacking it afterwards. Afterwards is too late.

♦ Is my description **'thick'** or **'thin'** (e.g. superficial)?

Remember that one of the hallmarks of ethnographic accounts is that they are grounded in detail. The context is always given as a basis for interpretation (remember the example given from Geertz earlier in the course involving the different possible interpretations of a wink, which could be read in a variety of ways according to the context, or which could simply be a twitch).

♦ Have I looked closely enough at my data to **'unpack' it sufficiently?**

Are there any further questions you could ask? Are you still making assumptions and not peeling off enough layers? Remember how the Singer reading 'Money on the Table' unpacked the apparently simple act of tipping in a restaurant. Because you will have acquired a lot of knowledge about the cultural scene you are studying, you might assume certain features are 'too obvious' to be mentioned, that 'everybody knows this'. In other words, you might forget just how much you have found out. IN fact, much of what is now familiar to you will not be to the reader. Early field notes can help you remember the freshness of discovery.

♦ Am I being **too anecdotal** and not exploring the underlying patterns and causes of what I am describing?

Remember to tie your descriptions to analysis. For example, the student who studied the world of the Carnavaliers in Nice and who came to the conclusion that it was a 'male domain' was making a large statement that required cultural interpretation and analysis, not just description. She could have asked, for example, what are the processes that bring about and sustain this state of affairs?

♦ Have I shown how my data is **related to some of the concepts** (anthropological / sociolinguistic) we have studied in the course?

Through drawing in some of these concepts and engaging with the secondary reading in which they are developed by other researchers, you will be giving a solid academic underpinning to your work and making the organisation of your data more convincing. The concepts should help to provide the framework of your project (this may involve, for example, aspects of group identity, styles of talking, gender roles, aspects to do with social space or boundaries, etc.)

Your analysis of relevant concepts also allows you to contribute to wider debates. For example, in the unit on Gender Relations we looked at a piece of research by Pamela Fishman about differing conversational styles between men and women. Through the related assignment, students have often come up with disconfirming evidence which they can pit against Fishman's findings. Whether your evidence confirm existing theories or seems to point in other directions, it is important to show that you are considering its value within this wider academic context.

♦ Do I concentrate enough on **describing the activities of my informants?**

Some ethnographic accounts written by former students have 'missed out the people' so that there is no longer a vivid impression made on the reader of the texture of their lives and of what they do and say.

♦ Have I used **verbatim data:**

a) Enough?

Remember the importance of repeating the actual words used by your informants. This is an essential part of your attempt to give an emic (insider) perspective. It is also essential evidence to back up many of the claims you will make in your project.

b) Analytically

Try to adopt a questioning, sensitive approach to statements from your informants. Ideally you should know enough about your informants to see what they say reflexively. Above all, demonstrate that you have analysed and interpreted their statements. Do not assume that a quote inserted in the project 'speaks for itself'; it usually doesn't. The key words, names, categories, etc. that people use to describe their world often require elucidation and 'translation'. For example, one student studying a group of firemen quoted an informant as saying, à propos of his watch, 'we're not typical firemen'. Clearly, this needs exploring and an obvious next step would be to take the idea of 'typical firemen' as a lead and unpack it (what does the idea consist of? where does it come from?) as well as attempting to ascertain in what ways his watch was considered to differ.

Make sure you recognise the distinction between an informant speaking about what life is like for her/himself, and an informant generalising about what it's like for everyone. The second type of statement needs further verification.

♦ What about **my voice?**

Writing ethnography is challenging because it requires you to combine an academic, analytical and objective approach with a first-person narrative account of your own research experiences. Some students have written up their data in a way that makes them sound like informants rather than researchers (e.g. chatty, informal, un-analytical). Make sure the 'storytelling' tone of parts of your account does not take over, but is balanced with a more scholarly resister. Whatever the register, make sure you consider whether you have presented your material articulately and clearly.

- **Is my evidence adequate** to back up my assertions and claims?

Projects often suffer from sweeping generalisations and judgements that appear to be grounded in very little except personal opinion. During the course of research you are bound to form a wide range of judgements as you go along, but you are expected to check these against the data you are gathering to see to what extent they are founded and to get as complete a picture as possible. When presenting your analyses and judgements in the written project it is essential to show that they are the product of a thorough process of research. For example, a student writing an ethnography of a French market who claimed of a stall holder that 'The old man on the stall is proud of his work' is not doing enough. She should be asking herself 'How do I know?' and telling the reader what had led her to draw this conclusion. In other words, the points you make need to be proved, not just stated.

- **Have I been reflexive** about my role in the research process / in my analysis of data?

This involves showing appropriate awareness of the things that influenced you as you collected your data. Your personal experience, cultural background, gender, etc. act as a filter. Show you are aware of this interactive aspect of ethnographic research (see the opening part of this handout).

- Am I **using the data to best effect** or letting some of it go to waste?

E.g., am I slipping in a point incidentally when I should really be framing it as important, developing it more thoroughly and highlighting its significance? Have I ignored disconfirming evidence because it doesn't fit my interpretation? Wouldn't it be better to include it and modify my claims?

On this last point, dealing with 'failures' is an interesting issue. It can be fruitful to include these in the project and analyse why they occurred. For example, the student studying the Camavaliers in Nice originally regarded her inability to collect data about or from the wives of Carnavaliers as a 'failure' – something that would certainly be omitted from her final account. It turned out that this 'failure' was a key to the gender issues that were, in the end, the main focus of her study of the Camavaliers' world.

- Would some of my information be more appropriately presented in **list, chart or diagram** form?

This sometimes works better than a verbal description in order, for example:

- to show the organisation of groups (family groups, work hierarchies, etc)
- to show the main informants and say who they were
- to show the tasks that need to be undertaken in preparation for a given event (e.g. the things that needed doing in preparation for the Camaval in Nice were represented by the student ethnographer by a chart, showing clearly who does what according to gender and to their place in the carnival hierarchy)

- to unpack concepts by which informants organise and understand their world (e.g. the hundred or so ways High School girls know of to 'fool around', including 'doodling', 'playing with food', 'bugging other kids', etc.)

- to recreate the physical aspect of a scene where this is judged to be important for analysis. 'Maps' of whole areas might be helpful, or drawings of premises, houses, clubs, shops, etc. In Unit 7 the Classroom Observation assignment showed how a teacher used a diagram of the layout of her class to help analyse patterns of interaction. In Unit 16 the diagram of the layout in a supermarket was an important part of the piece of research on 'Supermarket Semiology'.

Photographs can also help to convey the texture of a cultural scene you are studying, particularly if it involves a one-off, unrepeatable event such as a wedding or a performance of some sort. This should not replace verbal description of course; photographs should be used judiciously and not result in an 'album' effect.

♦ Do I have an **appropriate conclusion?**

The conclusion is where you 'wrap up' your main theme or argument. Be wary of claiming too much for your study (e.g. do not try to 'clinch' an argument with phrases such as 'I believe I have proved that...') Above all, avoid the common pitfall of ending on a personal note. The process of research may well have been a voyage of discovery but statements such as 'I've really enjoyed doing this', or 'Now I know that X is more complex than I thought' are inappropriate conclusions to projects whose main purpose is to give an account of aspects of others' lives.

♦ Do I have an **appropriate title?**

This should be related to your main theme. You can play with it at the end and be inventive.

7. Final draft

Write the final draft.

Put in references and a bibliography. These should include references to informants' data as you have indexed it.

8. Treat yourself to a drink or a cream cake or...

Parts of this section are based on excerpts from chapter 9 of Roberts, C., Byram, M., Barro, A., Jordan, S., and Street, B., (2000) *Language Learners as Ethnographers* Multilingual Matters. This chapter was largely written by Michael Byram.

5.7 Self-Assessment Guidelines

To be handed in by [date] ....

Name: ....

Please complete this form and comment in detail in all the spaces provided.

CONTRIBUTION TO THE COURSE: WHY SELF-ASSESSMENT?

The Ethnography course relies on the commitment and active participation of every member of the class for its success. We value all your ideas and perceptions; they are at the heart of the course. The self-assessment exercise described below reflects the nature of the course, which encourages you to examine critically some 'familiar' aspects of everyday life - including, in this case, your own behaviour as an ethnography student, a member of and contributor to an interdependent group.

You will be asked to complete two self-assessment forms during the course, an will be expected to discuss your own assessment with three other members of the class and have it validated by them.

40 per cent of the total course mark is an assessment of your own preparation and contribution to the effectiveness of the course. Consider how you have contributed to the course sessions. For each of the criteria listed below, comment on how you think you have performed. Note that what we are looking for is self-critical awareness, so do not exaggerate your strengths or your limitations.

When you have written-up your report, arrange to meet with the other three members of your assessment group and discuss in detail your own assessment of your contribution. Then, if necessary, modify your own assessment in the light of the discussion and get it endorsed by the other members of the group.

1. Attendance and preparation

1.1 Attendance record
     It is difficult to contribute if you are not actually there. So you need to think about your attendance record. Did you attend always/usually/rarely?

....

....

....

....

1.2 Assignments: fieldwork
     Did you (always/usually/rarely) do the assignments? Assess the quality of your work on the assignments. Did you take notes as suggested? Did you

analyse your observations sufficiently and write them up coherently before the class? How much effort did you put into them?

....

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....

1.3 Assignments: readings
Did you always read the texts in advance of the class? Did you prepare them in such a way that you could comment on them and react to questions in class quickly and meaningfully?

....

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....

....

2 Group work and discussions in class
What contribution did you make to the discussions in groups/pairs?

2.1 Contribution to group discussion
Consider the quality of your contribution to the groups and class. To what extent did you contribute information and ideas?

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....

2.2 Receptiveness to others
How receptive were you to the ideas of others? To what extent did you allow others to contribute and listen to what they had to say?

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....

2.3   Effort and initiative
How much effort did you make? Were you just sitting there letting yourself be entertained by the others, or worse, encouraging others to go off at a tangent? Did you take the initiative when you felt the discussion was going off course? Did you volunteer to report back from groups in the plenary sessions?

....

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3   Class diaries
How often did you volunteer to do a class diary? How much effort did you make to provide us with useful feedback to improve the course?

....

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....

4   Overall assessment of your contribution
How much effort have you put into it? How often did you ask questions if something wasn't clear to you? How much did you contribute to effective use of class time by responding quickly rather than waiting for someone else to do/say something? To what extent did you encourage others to contribute? Do you think the course was a better one for the contribution you made?
We are aware that many students invest a great deal of time on the readings and carry out assignments which they find personally challenging. Remember, however, that your overall mark does not only reflect the efforts you have made, but also the quality of your output.

....

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....

....

5   Any other comments you would like to add?

....

....

....

....

6   Now give yourself an overall mark according to the following classification:

        70-80%   *excellent in every way (effort made and quality of output)*
        60-69%   *very good, well above average*
        50-59%   *reasonably good, average*
        40-49%   *poor, but a pass*
        30-39%   *not good enough, a fail*

7   Assessment group meeting
Allow about one hour for your meeting. Start with everybody reading everybody else's form. You might find it helpful initially to consider which class (e.g. 60s/50s) is appropriate for each individual. You can then refine this in your subsequent discussion. Both your own and the group's agreed mark should be on the form. Remember, we are not asking you to be personally critical, but to give careful and objective assessments of each other's contribution. Consider this an ethnographic exercise in personal and group reflexivity.

8   Your own suggested mark: ....%

        Mark agreed by assessment group: ....%

        Signed (1) ....

        Signed (2) ....

        Signed (3) ....

        Signed (4) ....

        Final mark agreed with tutors: ....%

9   Tutor comment:

....

....

....

....