

Conceptualizing and Conducting Ethnography
Ethnic Studies 210
Spring 2009

Roberto Alvarez
SSB223; 534-1739
oloberto@ucsd.edu

Office hours:
Wednesday 1- 3, Thursday 11-12

The purpose of this course is to understand the construction of “the ethnographic,” how and why it has changed since its inception, and to provide the basic tools to actual begin doing ethnography. We will review (albeit briefly) the conceptual and methodological foundations of ethnography, and critically assess fieldwork, participant observation, the ethnographic interview, and the writing of fieldnotes. The course readings provide both foundation for discussion and planning, as well as templates for practicing ethnography. We will assess the multiple venues in which ethnography is conducted, the variation in basic methods and the role/position of the ethnographer. In addition to considering the epistemological significance of insider/native researchers, a principle theme of the course is the conceptual and theoretical foundation of ethnography as an organizing framework in representing “community” perceptions, collaborative and activist research. This will help us consider the ethics of conducting ethnography.

Classes will consist of both assigned readings as well as practical tasks (such as defining and justifying a field site). Each of you will be required to build an inventory of ethnographic tools from readings that we will explore in class meeting that in addition to standard ethnographic tasks are especially pertinent to your own research. In addition to class readings, as the quarter progresses we will identify key concepts/methods that the class deems important for further discussion and exploration. The key here is flexibility.

The primary goals are to alert you to the value of conducting ethnography as both a conceptual and epistemological tool, how ethnography provides interpretive and explanatory power and how to construct a methodological framework for your own research.

In addition to class meetings three and possibly four community field visits will be scheduled:

- (1) Barrio Logan Development Plan Meeting (April 8/May 8)
- (2) Chicano Park Day (April 25)
- (3) City Heights Medical Center (May TBA)
- (4) TBA

Specific assignments for each of these field site visits are described below.

Assignments:

1. A field journal of class activities:

In addition to the readings listed below, each participant is required to begin and keep a daily “fieldnote” journal. The journal should be a record of your experience in class and a reflection of your readings, questions and identification of ethnographic tools and concepts. You will be expected to conduct and write-up class and research observations, as well as ongoing thoughts

about your own research. This should be an informal and personal record of your experience in this class.

(to be turned in at the end of class).

2. Assigned Readings and accompanying reports.

For each assigned readings you are required to write a two page review that queries methods, concepts, and questions. Utilize the readings to explore your own ideas and research plans.

3. Field Visit descriptions

For each "field" visit, you will be expected to write up your observations and impressions. Class discussions will follow each visit and will be based on your experience on site.

4. The final assignment is **a research outline of a possible ethnographic project** (about 5 pages). This will be an ongoing task throughout the quarter. The outline should focus on your ongoing research interest and include: a) a brief abstract of the work to be done b) an ethnographic site with justification of choice c) initial areas of participant observation d) an interview guide for open-ended interviews.

April 1- Introduction:

1. Overview of course structure and readings.
2. Why and what is Ethnography? Methodology, Query and Analysis.
3. Working Description of each participant's interest in Ethnography.
 - What is your specific project interest?
 - How do you think you will conduct the research
 - what time frame are you considering?
 - where will the research take place and why
 - how does your own role and person enter into the research?
 - how does this project advance knowledge and build on the literature
 - what is the practical significance of your project?

April 8: Collaboration, ethics, and social activism

Ethnography and Social Activism: a working ethic

Reading Assignment: Engaging Contradictions: 1-265.

Class response/review paper: write a two page paper outlining the basic tenets of conducting activist research. Why is it important to do systematic research? What principal concepts do you believe apply (or not) to your own possible ethnography and why? Which article(s) appeal to your own work? Why? What does this tell you about ethnography? What questions does this raise?

Community Meeting: Barrio Logan Development Plan

Method and Concept

April 15-- The History of Fieldwork and the "invention" of ethnography.

1. Reading assignment: Stocking: The Ethnographer's Magic pp. 1-60, skim pp. 212-276;
Class response/review paper: What are the principal conceptual frameworks addressed in this reading? How has ethnographic fieldwork and purpose changed since the time of the early

anthropologists? How has it remained the same? Why is it important to understand these beginnings?

2. the Barrio Logan Community Meeting

- individual reports and insights; collaborative report—what do we all agree on?
- how would you proceed to identify a research theme/problem?
- How would explore and investigate this theme/ problem?

3. How does this inform your own project? What aspects of the class discussion are especially relevant or irrelevant to your own project design? What is new that you have not thought of?

April 22 –

1. Where is “the Field”: doing ethnography in the global age.

Reading assignment: Gupta and Ferguson: Anthropological Locations (entire text except for Chapters 5, 6 and 7). Two to three page report on the readings

2. What is participant observation?

April 25- Chicano Park Day—Participant Observation

April 29 Participant Observation

Reading assignment: “Thick description”: Geertz

1. Chicano Park Day- Description of Event

Ethnographic Focus—one event, booth, individual,

Time, thick description, portrayal

Note: problem of representation, position, context

2. Reporting on Participant Observation- how would you proceed?

May 6 - Fieldnotes

1. Reading assignment: Sanjek pp. Xi-71; 139-290;371-418.

-2 -3 page reading report.

How does this help your own writing? Your own journal?

2. Rethinking your ethnographic site: a research focus

-Come prepared with notes on your own site and how to this point in the class you are rethinking the methodology and why.

(May 8? **Barrio Logan Development Meeting**)

May 13- the Ethnographic Interview

1. Reading Assignment: Learning how to Ask. Charles Briggs

2-3 page review with focus on how this affects your own work.

2. Constructing and conducting ethnographic interviews

ethnographic interviews—from generalities to focused questions.

May 20- City Heights Tour-

Context: What is the social context of this project?

Conversations with project personnel (find out what they do, what the project is about).

- record your information, profiles of individuals, what you saw.
- How would you construct an ethnographic project from this visit?

May 27 – The ethnographic text :

1. Reading assignment: Black Rhythms of Peru
Written assignment: two page review
2. Report on city Heights—
-How would you proceed? Which project/theme/ idea would you explore? What did you find out and what type of method would you plan to query the project?

June 3-The Ethnographic Text

1. Reading Assignment: HomeFront
written assignment: two page review.

June 10-

Report on final outlines.

Bibliography of Required Texts:

Briggs, Charles

1997[1986] Learning How to Ask. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge

*Feldman, Heidi

2006 Black Rhythms of Peru: Reviving African Musical Heritage in the Black Pacific. Wesleyan: Middletown.

Gupta, Akil and James Ferguson

1987 Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science. University of California Press: Berkeley.

Hale, Charles R..

2006 Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics and Methods of Activist Scholarship. University of California Press: Berkely

*Lutz, Catherine A.

2003 Homefront. An American Military City. Beacon Press: New York.

Sanjek, Roger

1990 Fieldnotes: The Making of Anthropology. Cornell University Press: Ithaca.

Stocking, George W. Jr.

1992 The Ethnographer's Magic and other Essays in the History of Anthropology. University of Wisconsin Press: Madison.

* purchase these through Amazon as used copies.

Recommended:

Ethnographies

Bobrow-Strain

2007 Intimate Enemies. Landowners, Power and Violence in Chiapas. Duke: Durham

Costa Vargas, Joao H.

2006 Catching Hell in the City of Angels. University of Minnesota: Minneapolis

Gregory, Steven

2007 The Devil Behind the Mirror. Globalization and Politics in the Dominican Republic

Speed, Shannon

2008 Rights in Rebellion. Indigenous Struggle and Human Rights in Chiapas. Stanford

University Press: Stanford

Zavella, Patricia

1987 Women's Work and Chicano Families. Cornell University Press: Ithaca.

Methodology Texts

Bernard, Russell H.

1998 Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology. Altimira Press: Walnut Creek

Robben, Antonius C.G.M. and Jeffrey A. Sluka

2007 Ethnographic Fieldwork: An Anthropological Reader. Blackwell: Malden.