PRINCETON UNIVERSITY
Department of Anthropology

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THE ETHNOGRAPHER’S CRAFT
This course provides an introduction to “doing” anthropology through the study and practice of fieldwork, and is meant to complement other Anthropology Department courses and independent work projects. Emphasizing seminar-style discussions and a “workshop” format, the course considers a variety of anthropological research approaches and types of writing. Throughout, it aims to develop an understanding of key ideas like objectivism, interpretation, reflexivity, participant-observation, and the interview.

READINGS
At the U-Store (and also on reserve at Firestone):
C. Briggs  *Learning How to Ask*
R. Sanjek, ed.  *Fieldnotes: The Making of Anthropology*
B. Sunstein and E. Chiseri-Strater  *FieldWorking: Reading and Writing Research*

On Blackboard:
The other readings are on the ANT 301 Blackboard site. There you will also find copies of the syllabus and the course handouts (all of which will also be distributed in class). As you have no doubt noticed, the syllabus and handouts are long and detailed: please treat them as part of your assigned readings. The syllabus headnotes aim to provide you with tips for focusing your reading. The syllabus workshop instructions need to be followed carefully. The handouts will answer many of your questions about the written assignments and field projects.

FORMAT AND EXPECTATIONS
1. Informed, cooperative participation in classes, workshops, and Blackboard discussions (30 points: 20 for which minimally means attendance):
   a. “Classes”: Class meetings are organized as discussions of the assigned readings. To prepare for class meetings, identify the main points of each of the assigned readings and think about how they relate to one another. Bring to class your questions, criticisms, and enthusiasms. If you must miss a class, then you must compensate by posting a reading response on the ANT301 Blackboard “discussion board”.
   b. “Workshops”: Workshop meetings aim to integrate the issues raised in readings with research exercises you undertake outside of class. Because they are interactive, workshops are hard
to make up—see me if you anticipate a problem. **If you must** miss a workshop, **then you must** post a substantial report on Blackboard concerning your out-of-class workshop assignment (including responses/comments on other students’ workshop postings).

c. **Regular Blackboard discussion contributions:** Contributions to the 301 Blackboard discussion board is strongly encouraged especially if you were not able to participate actively in class or workshop meetings. You may start a new discussion thread concerning past or up-coming readings and workshop exercises, or you may add to an existing thread. During the last couple of weeks of classes, **you are required** 1) to post your presentation and 2) to comment helpfully on several of your classmates’ presentations.

2. **Papers and other writing assignments (70 points), submitted as hard copies (NEVER as email attachments!):**
   
a. **A 5 pp. research proposal** (15 points — full credit earned when proposal is approved) is due on or before Wednesday, October 17 (**no extensions whatsoever**). You will receive feedback on your proposal before the midterm break and may need to revise before the project is approved. See “Assignments” and “Special Proposal Advice” handouts for detailed advice.

   b. **Workshop “write-ups”** (15 points — full credit earned for on-time submission) are due during the semester in conjunction with several of the workshop meetings.

   c. A tightly focused 1½ – 2 page presentation (10 points) will be due during the last two weeks of classes. You are required to submit this assignment by posting it on Blackboard **no later than your presentation day**.

   d. **A Field Report** (30 points) is due on “Dean's Date”: Tuesday, January 15 by 4 p.m. Detailed advice concerning format and content is in the “Final Field Report” handout. Samples of your fieldnotes and the final draft of your research proposal are **required as “appendices”** to your Field Report.

**TOPICS, READINGS, AND WORKSHOP ASSIGNMENTS**

**CAPITALIZED readings are in the texts; everything else is on Blackboard.**

1. **Orientation (Sept 18).** Review of course requirements, etc. We’ll begin discussion of some basic questions: what is anthropology? What is anthropological fieldwork and what skills does it involve? Please read ahead in the syllabus so that you can prepare adequately for upcoming Workshops. And please also familiarize yourself with the course handouts!

2. **Historical background (Sept 20).** Anthropological methods have a history. Over the past century, anthropologists have reflecting critically on the relationship between disciplinary means and ends in the context of perceived alternatives. Here, we will pay attention to the emergence of modern 20th century ethnographic “fieldwork”, which has roots in the “field sciences” (like ecology), the social sciences, and the humanities. The classic situation involved anthropologists studying radically unfamiliar cultures: Malinowski’s is the foundational statement of fieldwork as a method. Murray Wax puts Malinowski’s work in perspective. Rosalie Wax widens the historical focus to include the relationship between sociological and anthropological fieldworking traditions, which will also help us begin thinking about what it might take to apply the approach “at home” (as you will be doing).
READING (due Thu, Sept 20):

3. Ethical presuppositions (Sept 25, 27). Conventional expectations concerning research ethics in neighboring disciplines are not identical. “Scandals” and controversies over ethical standards—such as the one Murray Wax discussed (last week) concerning the publication of Malinowski’s diary—can reveal distinctive disciplinary assumptions about research methods and results: about what counts as “real” (authoritative) knowledge in this or that field. Consider: what are the methodological values in sociology and social psychology (first two readings) that sometimes lead practitioners to use “deception” as a research strategy (which may get out of hand)? Then, reflecting on Wax’s discussion last week along with readings #4 and 5 below, what do anthropology’s methodological values and danger zones appear to be?

READING (due Tue, Sept 25):
1. C. Allen (1997) “Spies Like Us” (Lingua Franca 11/97)
4. American Anthropological Association Code of Ethics: go to the AAA Ethics page: http://www.aaanet.org/committees/ethics/ethics.htm and click on the “AAA Code of Ethics” link (you are also welcome to explore this site!)

WORKSHOP #1 (Thu, Sept 27) Ethical Compliance and Ethical Competence.
Take the free training course required by Princeton University’s Institutional Review Board for all folks (that’s you!) doing in “human subjects research”: http://cme.cancer.gov/clinicaltrials/learning/humanparticipant-protections.asp
The course will take you about 2 hours to complete (it can be done in several sessions if necessary). Even though each section ends with a quiz, please don’t stress: the course is designed to be easy to pass. You will earn a “Certificate” when you’re done: PRINT OUT TWO COPIES, SAVE ONE, AND TURN THE OTHER IN TO ME (WRITE-UP #1) during this workshop. Along the way: notice for whom the training course is designed and think about which aspects may, or may not, be useful for “ethnographers” (reconsidering Wax 1977 above). Using the experience to pursue Tuesday’s discussion, think about the distinction between ethical compliance and competence.

4. What goes without saying: culture in everyday life (Oct 2, 4). By emphasizing the method of “participant observation,” anthropological fieldwork directs attention to the local cultural (that is, socially meaningful) shape of human experience: the cultural “insider’s” understandings of his/her
experience. While much of this experience is tacit—implicit or taken for granted and unstated—and may not even be noticed by insiders, “outsiders” may notice right away. These readings discuss approaches to the interpretation of cultures and cultural meaning; they suggest what is entailed in the study of “tacit conventions” and discuss “objectivity,” “subjectivity” and other ways of construing the relationship between the researcher and his/her subject matter. (Think back to Malinowski’s advice about, for example, the “imponderabilia of everyday life”.)

READING (due Tue, Oct 2):
3. C. Geertz (1973) “Thick description.” In C. Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures, pp. 3-30

WORKSHOP #2 (Thu, Oct 4) Participant observation (I): making sense of everyday life. Prior to the workshop meeting, observe and, if possible, take part in one relatively unfamiliar social situation or event, on or off campus. (It is often helpful to select a situation with which someone you know—even a 301 classmate—is familiar, who can invite or accompany you.) During or soon afterwards, take notes (see Sunstein, pp. 93-4 for ideas). BRING A COPY OF YOUR NOTES TO THE WORKSHOP (WRITE-UP #2).

You may find Sunstein’s key questions (pp. 95-6) useful in focusing your attention. No matter what you observe, there will be both explicit and tacit elements giving the situation or event its socially meaningful character: that is, giving participants the sense that it’s a (good or bad) instance of something. During your observation, see what you can learn about both the explicit, formal conventions and the tacit, informal “rules of thumb”. (Some situations may seem relatively formal or organized to you, with more explicit rules or conventions: for example, a sports event, religious ritual, or certain kinds of classroom situations like exams. Other situations may seem relatively informal to you, in the sense of having a less obvious “structure”: for example, dinner with friends, gym locker rooms, or classrooms before the professor gets there.)

Come to class prepared to discuss examples of explicit and implicit (tacit, unstated) “rules” you have gleaned. Connecting with the readings, think about the strengths and limits of this contrast between tacit and explicit, and of our emphasis on “rules”. (This workshop will also give us an opportunity to initiate discussion of memory, note-taking, and a range of related issues to be taken up in more detail over the next weeks. They include the movement from observing and inscribing events, the selectivity of observation, the interpretive character of description, and the way note-taking “positions” you in social situations.) We will make match-ups for workshops #3 and #5 at the end of this one.

Your research proposal is due on or before Thursday, October 18: see assignment handout!
5. Interviews and conversations (Oct 9, 11, 16). Participant observation includes both passive observation and active social interaction (talking and doing things with people). But the bottom line in participant observation is that *ones informants control the social situation*. The interaction is on their terms (rather than the researcher's) and the fieldworker's job is to figure out what those terms are. There are times, however, when fieldworkers need to take control so that they can pursue a topic systematically. In fact, when most people imagine what "social research" is like, their most common image is of systematic formal interviews and questionnaire surveys. While anthropologists use these methods too, other social scientists (e.g., sociologists, demographers) rely overwhelmingly on those methods. Anthropological linguist Charles Briggs asks what kind of social interaction an "interview" is. He analyzes the form of communication it entails and the kinds of knowledge it produces, paying special attention to its limitations. A famous example of conversation analysis, Harvey Sacks's discussion (a transcript of an informal lecture) will provide us with examples of what 'asking questions' looks like in real-life conversations. Our class discussion will work to clarify the crucial differences between "conversations" and even the most informal "interviews". Our workshops will enable us to compare the two.

**READINGS (due Tue, Oct 9):**

1. BRIGGS (1986) *LEARNING HOW TO ASK*: please read especially Chapters 1-3 (pp. 1-60); you are welcome to read more.

**WORKSHOP #3 (Thu, Oct 11) Interviewing (I): the interview inside out.** Prior to class, interview your partner about something with which they are familiar but you aren't. Come to class ready to discuss your interview experience (specifics: preparations, settings, blunders, and successes) from the perspective of being both the interviewer and the interviewee. NO WRITE-UP TO TURN IN TODAY.

**WORKSHOP #4 (Tue, Oct 16) Anatomy of a conversation.** For this workshop, you will need to ask for help from several of your friends so that you can record 10 minutes of everyday conversation. The idea here is to capture a sample of conversation that you can study, to better understand the differences between "interviews" and "how people talk with each other in real life". (We may organize ourselves into 301 “teams” for this one.)

Your conversational group may feel a bit awkward, at first, but will loosen up after a few minutes. The situation can be one in which: people are working on something together or solving a problem (cooking or assembling or fixing something? Working on an assignment? Trying to find something?); someone is ‘telling a story’ about something or catching the others up on something that s/he experienced or heard about—in a class, at home, on TV, at a party—about which the others don’t already know; etc.
Even if the conversation goes on for hours, you only need to record 10-15 minutes of it.¹ Then you need to: **listen** to your recording once or twice, **select** a brief segment (60 seconds, more or less, will be enough), **transcribe** it. Select not so much for conversational content but for form—that is, for answers to the question, “what is a conversation and how does it work?” How is your conversational selection “structured” (socially, temporally, etc.): what are its parts and how do they fit together? What made your conversation “work”—or—how and why did it not work? **WRITE-UP #3** should outline your key discoveries, with specific illustrations (the write-up can be in list form).

**NOTE:** Your research proposal is due **on or before** Thursday, October 18

**ABSOLUTELY NO EXTENSIONS!**

6. **Position, comparison, and the challenges of interpretation (Oct 18, 23, 25).** The readings develop the point that thinking anthropologically means thinking across culturally-defined contexts: comparison helps bring contextual backgrounds into focus. They also consider the researcher’s social position in the field, which is at least partially a function of his/r observing, recording, interpreting activities. Think about these readings in relation to your field project: what are their implications for field research “at home” rather than in a distant place? The last reading continues Week 4’s introduction to field note-taking (or “fieldwriting”). It is meant to suggest one way that the concept of “translation” (and of being an “outsider”) applies even at home. (Recall Geertz “Thick description” here.)

**READINGS (due Thu, Oct 18):**
4. SUNSTEIN/CHISERI-STRATER (2007) *FIELDWORKING*, Chapter 2: review pp. 76-90 (Didion and Scudder essays), focus on pp. 117-128; Chapter 6 (browse around).

**WORKSHOP #5 (Tue, Oct 23) Participant observation (2): positioning observers.** Observe another social situation. **Follow up** your previous participant observation experience, either substantively or methodologically. That is, develop some aspect of your previous topic or improve/experiment with some aspect of your previous approach. As before, note taking needs to be part of this experience, whether occurring during or soon after your focal situation. **BRING A COPY OF YOUR NOTES TO WORKSHOP TO TURN IN (WRITE-UP #4).**

Whatever else you do, this time pay special attention to the difference it makes that you are taking notes or otherwise “doing research”: that is, pay attention to your own distinctive

¹ If you are using non-301 friends as your conversation group, then assure them that you won’t play your recording in our class, that you’ll erase the tape after you complete this exercise, but that you’ll need to transcribe about one minute’s worth to analyze with attention to form, not content.
position in the scene of research. During this workshop we will discuss the ways in which note taking and other research-motivated activities “positions” you in social situations.

**WORKSHOP #6 (Thu, Oct 25): Thick description is ethnographic interpretation.** Expand your field notes from a previous workshop assignment so that someone other than you will be able to read and understand them (as Sunstein/Chiseri-Strater, above, suggest). That is, type them (or otherwise make them legible), adding remembered details, context, “and so on” (what?) as you go. Give your partner your write-up no later than Wednesday, October 24; make another copy to BRING TO CLASS TO TURN IN (WRITE-UP #5). During this workshop we will discuss the movement from observing to inscribing events, the selectivity of observation, and the interpretive nature of description. Everyone is both a writer and a reader, so:

1. **As writer:** be prepared to discuss your rationale for elaborating your scratch notes into proper (that is, usable) fieldnotes. How did the experience affect your understanding of the distinction between description and interpretation? Did writing up your notes provoke you to think about follow-up research? If so, then how did you keep track of your new ideas?
2. **As reader:** be prepared to comment on what was and wasn't clear, and what additional information or alterations in format, voice, etc., might have improved the notes.

**MID-SEMESTER BREAK (October 27–November 4)**

After the break, workshop assignments will be based on your on-going research.

**7. The field (Nov 6, 8).** Where is “the field” and how do anthropologists get there? What sorts of relationships do they establish with the people they aim to study? We will revisit “positionality”: the politics of identity, and ethical and political dilemmas in the “space of research”. We will develop questions raised in previous readings about objectivity, situatedness, relativism, engagement, and the rest. We will also discuss the changing “place” of fieldwork (both geographical and epistemological) in anthropology. And, finally, we’ll be prompted to be more aware of “place” in its most literal sense.

**READING (due Tue, Nov 6):**

**WORKSHOP #7 (Thu, Nov 8): Participant observation (3).** Come prepared to discuss your fieldwork-in-progress: especially, the problem of articulating your identity and goals, and initiating a research relationship with your interlocutors. Returning to ethical questions,
what kinds of differences do you see now between unjustifiable or harmful “deception” and your ordinary strategies for socially “fitting in” and “acting appropriately”? Think also about the potential relevance of questions about “place” and social “space” to your project, whether substantively or methodologically. NO WRITE-UP TO TURN IN TODAY.

8. Taking Note(s) (Nov 13, 15, 20). Building on your practical experience with note taking, consider how anthropologists keep track of what they are learning. We will revisit the distinction between “description” and “interpretation”, this time also considering visual media as well as writing. Consider how “what goes without saying” is embedded in our multi-sensory experience of material things. How can one cultivate one’s awareness of this kind of understanding and write about it? This is also an excellently Proustian context for reconsidering questions about memory.

READING (due Tue, Nov 13):
1. SANJEK, ed. (1990) FIELDNOTES, particularly the chapters by Jackson, Lederman, Ottenberg, Plath, and Wolf. (You are welcome to read the whole book.)

WORKSHOP #8 (Thu, Nov 15): Ethnographic records. Many anthropologists engaged in long-term fieldwork take a mid-term break to review their notes and rethink their research strategies. Even though you haven’t been at it for long, look over your fieldnotes. Come prepared (with examples) to discuss your note taking and data collecting strategies and to reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of different media vis-à-vis specific research goals. TURN IN YOUR REVIEW IN THE FORM OF A LIST OF POINTS TOGETHER WITH ILLUSTRATIVE SAMPLES OF YOUR FIELDNOTES (WRITE UP #6).

WORKSHOP #8 (Tue, Nov 20): Noteworthy things. Bring to class (1) some “thing” that you consider noteworthy—ethnographically informative—about life at Princeton: e.g., an object, photo, whatever (be creative) and (2) an “item” relevant to your own field project (ditto). BRINGING IN YOUR *THINGS* WILL COUNT AS WRITE-UP #7.

NO CLASS Thursday, November 22: HAPPY THANKSGIVING!

9. Ethno-graphy (Nov 27). We’ve been exploring the role of writing in anthropology all semester. These readings extend the exploration using several media: one exemplary ethnographic account, one anthropological “reading” of ethnographic exemplars, and a quilting of usefully relevant and general-purpose writing advice.

READING (due Tue, Nov 27):
3. SUNSTEIN/CHISERI-STRATER (2007) Chapter 8 (all)
NO CLASS Thursday, Nov 29: Prof. Lederman is at the annual American Anthropological Association meeting.

10. Research and writing are social relationships (Dec 4, 6, 11, 13). Each of you will present a 1 ½-2 double-spaced page (2-4 minute) report on your fieldwork-in-progress. Underlining the social dimensions of scholarship, these class meetings are occasions for getting and giving feedback, advice, and constructive criticism. They are also opportunities for developing comparisons between the different field projects, and for reinforcing connections between fieldwork and the semester’s reading. You may use part or all of your presentation in your final Field Report.

PRESENTATIONS #1 (Tue, Dec 4): Preliminary Reports
PRESENTATIONS #2 (Thu, Dec 6): Preliminary Reports
PRESENTATIONS #3 (Tue, Dec 11): Preliminary Reports
PRESENTATIONS #4 (Thu, Dec 13): Preliminary Reports

Instead of the usual write-up due in class, post your report on the 301 Blackboard “Discussion Board” NO LATER THAN the day you present it. Everyone else is required to comment on several classmates’ reports (please treat each posted report as the opening of a separate discussion “thread”).

11. Final class meeting: wrap up (Mon, Dec 17). We will return to our opening themes and Professor Lederman, with your assistance, will magically draw course threads together. This will be an opportunity to discuss the special challenges of writing a methodologically focused final paper. Towards that end, think about a favorite ethnographic reading you did in any of your anthro courses: to what extent was the “how” of fieldwork explicitly described and, insofar as it was more indirectly implied, what could be inferred about field process between the lines? We will discuss the forms of anthropological writing in which methodological explicitness is conventional and, in forms in which it is not, why that might be so.

YOUR FIELD REPORT IS DUE ON “DEAN’S DATE” (Tuesday, Jan 15) at 4 pm. Consult the “Field Report” handout for details.