

Research Project Instructions: Anthropology of Virtual Communication

ANTH 4701.018 ☞ University of North Texas
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Overview

Research Project Item	Due Date	% of Grade
1. Description of fieldsite	Feb 2	N/A (gateway assignment)
2. Participant observation fieldnotes	Feb 23	10
3. Fieldnotes for two interviews	Mar 24	10
4. Transcripts of communication patterns	Apr 7	10
5. Research report	May 10	20

Evaluation

This research project will count as 50% of your course grade. Four items will be graded, as listed above. You will be evaluated on timeliness and on following the instructions for each item.

Instructions for Each Research Project Item

1. Description of Fieldsite

You should try to identify a group you wish to study as soon as possible. Before you can start doing research, you must turn in a written description of this group to me, and receive my approval. This assignment is not graded, but you cannot proceed on the project until I have received this document and approved it. The description should be about 2 pages, typed, double-spaced.

You are looking for a group of people who regularly engage in technology-mediated communication. Members of the group may only interact online, or they may interact both face-to-face and online. Their interactions may be synchronous or asynchronous, text-based or audio or video. The group must include a minimum of five people.

For the purposes of this project, you must be able to access the group's interactions, and you must be able to record or download transcripts of their interactions. The group should be currently active, so you can find two members of the group to interview.

If the group's interactions are private, you must obtain permission from members to conduct your project. A private group is one that has created some kind of barrier that removes its interactions from public view, such as password protection or privacy settings.

You should choose a group that is not too big and not too small. If it is too big, you will have a hard time seeing patterns in their interactions. If it is too small, there may not be enough group discussion to study, and it may be hard to find members to interview. For a very large online community, you could select a subset of the overall community; for instance, you could select a particular guild within an online game.

Finally, the group must speak English because I need to be able to read the transcripts. You could translate everything, but that would be a lot of extra work, especially for the transcripts (item 4).

In your description, characterize the fieldsite as fully as possible. Be sure to address the following topics:

- Why do these people engage in virtual communication? What kinds of activities are they accomplishing? Socializing, political activism, work?
- About how many people participate in these interactions – how big is the community?
- What do you know about the people in terms of their demographics or other relevant characteristics, such as national culture or profession?
- Describe their virtual communication – is it synchronous or asynchronous? Text-based or audio or video?
- How will you record or download transcripts of their interactions?
- How will you locate two members of the group to interview?
- Is this a private group where you will need to obtain permission? If so, how will you go about obtaining permission? Have you done so already?

2. Participant Observation Fieldnotes

Your second task is to learn about the culture of the group you are studying by observing their interactions and examining any self-documentation they may have. For instance, some groups may have a website that describes who they are and what they do.

If members of your group only interact online, then your participant observation will be limited to technology-mediated interactions. If they also meet face-to-face, then you should observe some face-to-face interactions as well. If the group uses more than one form of technology-mediated communication (e.g. cellphone, Facebook and email), you only need to observe one of these, in order to keep the research project from becoming overwhelming.

You must conduct a minimum of 6 hours of participant observation. More is better. It is probably best to split up the time across multiple days.

The interactions you observe should NOT be arranged by you or be due to you in any way – they should be activities that these folks engage in regularly on their own.

Write comprehensive fieldnotes on your observations. With fieldnotes, more is better. Include the following information:

- Dates and times when you made your observations
- Dates and times when the interactions occurred
- Describe the forms of technology-mediated communication that the group uses. What appear to be the affordances and constraints of each?
- Which form of technology-mediated communication did you observe?
- Did you also observe face-to-face interaction?
- What kinds of activities did the group engage in?
- What did you learn about the culture of the group? What are members' goals, assumptions, beliefs, power relationships?
- What did you learn about the social structure of the group? Is it a hierarchy? A leaderless network? Are people loosely or tightly connected?
- Describe individual participants you observed (use pseudonyms)
- Describe what happened during your observations – what did people talk about? What did they do?
- In a separate section at the end of your fieldnotes, describe any possibly relevant feelings, intuitions, ideas, or analyses you had during your observations

Fieldnotes will be evaluated on completeness. This assignment must be typed, double-spaced and include page numbers.

3. Fieldnotes for Two Interviews

Your next task is to learn more about the culture of the group you are studying by conducting interviews with two members. You may not interview someone you asked to join the group.

The interviews should be at least half an hour. It is fine if they are virtual, but they may not be text-based, like email. They must be on the phone, on Skype or a similar service, or in person. This is because you need to build rapport during the interview in order to obtain good information, and it takes much, much longer to build rapport in a text-based medium. Students who try to do text-based interviews always run into problems and get poor data.

I recommend that you record the interviews. This will help you do a good job writing the fieldnotes. You must obtain permission from the interviewees to record them! Remember that in anthropology, we are ethically bound to protect our research participants from harm. This can generally be achieved by using pseudonyms.

Write comprehensive fieldnotes on each of the two interviews. With fieldnotes, more is better. Include the following information:

- Dates and times of the interviews
- Were the interviews face-to-face, or what form of technology-mediated communication was used?
- Description of interviewees (use pseudonyms)
- How did the interviewees describe the forms of technology-mediated communication that the group uses? What do they regard as the affordances and constraints of each? (They may not use those words)
- How did the interviewees describe the activities that the group engages in?
- What did you learn from the interviewees about the culture of the group? What are members' goals, assumptions, beliefs, power relationships?
- What did you learn from the interviewees about the social structure of the group? Is it a hierarchy? A leaderless network? Are people loosely or tightly connected?
- What is the history of the group and its activities?
- In a separate section at the end of your fieldnotes, describe any possibly relevant feelings, intuitions, ideas, or analyses you had during the interviews

Fieldnotes will be evaluated on completeness. This assignment must be typed, double-spaced and include page numbers.

4. Transcripts of Communication Patterns

Next, you will document the virtual communication patterns of your fieldsite that you discovered during participant observation by providing transcripts of interactions that you have strategically selected.

If you are studying text-based interactions, you can download records or take screen shots of discussions. If you are studying audio/video interactions, you will need to transcribe recordings of key interactions. Remember to use pseudonyms for research participants. You can do a "search and replace" on each person in the transcript.

By this time you should have a good idea of what kinds of patterns are typical of the group's virtual interactions. Choose records/transcripts that clearly illustrate these patterns. They could be from a single event or from multiple events. Label the patterns in the transcript, so I understand why you chose those particular segments.

You should turn in about 5-10 single-spaced pages of transcripts. You might turn in more pages if you are doing screen shots where the text is very spread out. Please include page numbers.

5. Research Report

The research report is your opportunity to use the insights you gained from your **participant observation** and **interviews** in order to develop an argument about the culture of the group you studied and how their virtual communication patterns reveal and enact the culture. You will use the **transcripts** you collected as evidence for your argument.

Here are the six overall topics you need to cover in your report. You can use these as section titles but you don't have to; you can organize the report any way you want so long as all of these topics are covered. For each topic, I have listed specific points that you might want to cover. You should customize these specific points to fit the parameters of your project.

1. *Research Project Overview*

- Introduce and summarize your project
- Present your argument about the group – what did you learn about their culture and how do their virtual communication patterns reveal and enact the culture

2. *Research Methods*

- Describe your participant observation and interview process
- Explain whether it was virtual ethnography or connective ethnography
- Describe how you got permission to study the group

3. *Description of Group Studied*

- Describe the group. Who are the members? What do you know about the people in terms of their demographics or other relevant characteristics, such as national culture or profession?
- Why do these people engage in virtual communication? What kinds of activities do the group engage in?
- About how many people participate in these interactions – how big is the community?
- What is the history of the group and its activities?

4. *Media Ecology of Group*

- What forms of virtual communication did members of the group use? Was it synchronous or asynchronous? Text-based or audio or video?
- What were the affordances and constraints of each?
- Did they engage in face-to-face interaction? If so, what was the relationship between online and offline interactions?

5. *Virtual Communication Patterns and Culture of Group*

- This is by far the biggest section – it is the heart of your paper. You might want to break it out into several subsections, because you will probably discuss several topics.
- Describe the culture of the group. What are members' activities, goals, assumptions, beliefs, power relationships?

- Describe the social structure of the group. Is it a hierarchy? A leaderless network? Are people loosely or tightly connected?
- Describe the virtual communication patterns
- Explain how the virtual communication patterns reflect and enact the culture and social structure of the group
- Illustrate your points with excerpts from the transcripts
- Where possible, relate your research findings to class readings, or to other library research on groups that are similar to your fieldsite

6. Conclusions

- Describe any high-level insights that your research generated for you
- Describe any ideas for future projects to answer remaining questions about your group
- Or other concluding thoughts... this is kind of an open section

Your report must be typed, double-spaced and include page numbers. It should be about 10 pages; it could be longer if you prefer. Include a list of references at the end.