Aims of the course

The workings of anthropological fieldwork have changed radically over the course of the 20th century. The changes reflect and constitute changes on a variety of fronts: in the focus and priorities of the discipline; in the increased socio-political sensibility of the ethnographic enterprise; in the nature of our stakeholders and constituents, and in the conditions of the world in which we live. For example, no longer can we assume that anthropologists, the people whose lives they research, and their audiences live in compartmentalized worlds; nor can we assume unproblematically that our research is grounded in a specific place and time. These changes, at times adaptive, other times self-motivated, make fieldwork at the dawn of the 21st century a very different enterprise from the way in which the founding fathers of ethnographically informed anthropology (Haddon, Rivers, Boas, Malinowski) envisaged it a century ago. Yet it remains as fascinating an enterprise as it has ever been.

This course explores ways in which anthropologists have adapted and innovated ethnographic approaches, methods and questions to the challenges of the modern world at the dawn of the third millennium. Focused on specific instances of ethnographic fieldwork, the course explores such topics as the dialectics of self and other, the multi-sited nature of fieldwork, changing conceptions of ethics, and the challenges of modernity, globalization, and transnationalism in their many guises for anthropological field research. While it is not focused on anthropological theory, the course nevertheless seeks to explore ways in which the practice of anthropological research has reshaped anthropological questions and the way in which we address them.

Upon successful completion of this course, students will have an understanding of the ways in which ethnography has developed in the course of the last few decades, and of the motivations, correlates, and implications of these changes. They will have an appreciation for new forms of fieldwork research and will be able to critically assess their advantages and limitations. Students will have been exposed to the efflorescence of social roles that ethnographers may be called to fulfill in contemporary research contexts, and will have gained an understanding of the social, political, ethical, and historical forces that inform contemporary field research in anthropology.
Assessment

Your performance in this course will be assessed on the basis of the quality of a term paper. For this exercise, you have three options. You are strongly encouraged to begin researching this paper early in the term.

1. Choose one of the areas of enquiry that this course focuses on (e.g., Self and Other, transnationalism, advocacy) and identify three article-length ethnographic works that address problems relating directly to this area of interest. Write a critical essay comparing the way in which the three authors have tackled these problems. Your comparison should focus on similarities, differences, generalizations, and explanations for them. You should pay particular attention to the way in which required readings relevant to the area of enquiry of your choice articulate the problems associated with it. You may use other works of theoretical or ethnographic relevance to the problem you have chosen, but your essay must focus primarily on the three ethnographies you have chosen. You must seek the course coordinator’s approval for the three articles you have chosen by the sixth week of the term.

2. Choose a recently published, book-length ethnographic work that reflects some of the innovations that we have discussed in the course of the term. After carefully reading the book, write a critical essay that evaluates how the work is innovative in its approach to ethnographical fieldwork (e.g., methods, research questions, positions); what motivates these innovations; and whether the methodological innovations give rise to theoretical breakthroughs. You may find it useful to compare the ethnography to other strategically chosen works, such as older ethnographies on the same context or contemporary ethnographies that adopt comparable approaches. You are also encouraged to relate your discussion to the required and suggested readings for the course. You must seek the course coordinator’s approval for the book you have chosen by the sixth week of the term.

3. Write a research (grant) proposal for an ethnographic project that showcases one or more of the problematic issues that this course addresses. Your proposal must outline a feasible project, and must do so convincingly. It must show evidence of your familiarity with the relevant topics overviewed in this course, as well as evidence of some acquaintance with the field site(s) and research questions it addresses, although this acquaintance may be from a distance (e.g., through other researchers’ works). For your proposal, you should follow the format of the Wenner Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research (substantive sections only), which funds anthropological research conducted by New Zealand-based researchers. This format is available from the Foundation’s web site. You must clear the topic of your proposal with the course coordinator by the sixth week of the term.

Schedule of Topics and Readings

Introduction: Changing conceptions of anthropological field research.


Recommended reading

Anthropology and hegemony: From colonialist anthropology to the anthropology of colonialism.

Recommended reading

Who is the anthropologist? Self and Other, observer and observed, “insider” vs. “outsider”, and the categories in-between.

Problematizing the mainstream.
Studying mainstreams chapter on colonial Williamsburg

Recommended reading

Where is the field in “fieldwork”? Homeless people, bureaucracies, scientific labs, courtrooms.

Recommended reading

The global and the local.

Recommended reading

Migrants, diasporas, refugees, elite enclaves.

Transnational movements and the elusiveness of meaning.

Recommended reading

The politicization of culture: Indigenous struggles, ethnic revival, and the dilemma of authenticity.

Anthropological ethics in a changing world.
• American Anthropological Association Statement on Ethics, available online at the following web site: http://www.aaanet.org/stmts/ethstmt.htm

Ethnography, the public sphere, and politics.

Conclusion: Genuine innovation or more of the same?