

American Anthropological Method and Theory

Instructor: Dr. Jan English-Lueck
E-mail jenglish@email.sjsu.edu
Phone number 087115515651
Short course dates: June 6, 2004 to June 22, 2004

Class hours: MTF evenings, 7-10 p.m. as listed.

Office hours: Tutorials and office hours June 16, 10- 12, 2-4, Teachers' apartments, Building 7, Stairway 3, Room 301.

Course Description

This course covers the interaction of theory and research method in the American tradition of cultural anthropology as they fit into social science and applied social science. Students will learn about the basic theoretical constructs in social science, basic ethnographic data collection methods (participant observation; un-, semi- and structured interviewing; and structured observation). Students will explore how theory and methods are linked together. American theory and methods grew out of its unique historic circumstances, and is especially to be contrasted with European and Chinese forms of anthropological thought. Second, I would like to explore the major theoretical and methodological debates in contemporary American cultural anthropology, the study of human cultures as it has developed in the United States. With the advent of postmodern theory, traditional understandings of culture have been critiqued. Is a culture a unified whole? How does globalization influence the development and the internal experience of culture? Can any understanding of culture be valid if you do not take into account the place within a society of the people who are being studied and those who are studying them? Concerning methodology, there are interesting debates within anthropology today. What should be studied and how? Using traditional ethnographic techniques of interview and participant observation, should the focus be on language and narrative, what people say, or should it be on behavior, what they do, or even artifacts, what they make? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each approach? Finally, how should anthropology be used? There is clear consensus that anthropology should be used to improve the human experience, but what does that mean? Should the work be primarily theoretical, critiquing society, or should it be applied in areas such as medical anthropology, the development of economic policy, or even in companies to improve the match between production and the needs of consumers?

Course Objectives

The student who satisfactorily completes this course should:

1. Understand the place of ethnography as process and product within American cultural anthropology and the social sciences;
2. Comprehend the link between theoretical positions and methodological approaches
3. Enhance the ability to articulate research problems and design ethnographic studies to explore them;
4. Be conversant with the applications and debates within American anthropological research.

These objectives will be achieved largely through your active, meaningful, and participation, when possible thinking about ethnographic research in China. You will learn by reading assigned course materials, participating in class discussions, and discussing how research proposals must link method and theory. Theories and methods of existing American ethnographic projects will be discussed extensively in class.

Grading

The course is a non-credit class but students will be encouraged to use the opportunity to write short essays expressing what they have learned. The professor will give written and oral feedback on the essays.

Readings

(1) Excerpts: Richard Perry, Five Key Concepts in Anthropological Thinking

(2) Excerpts: World Wide Web:

a. http://www-rcf.usc.edu/~genzuek/Ethnographic_Research.html

b. The Muwekma Ohlone Tribe of the San Francisco Bay Area
<http://www.islascreek.org/ohlonehistcultfedrecog.html>

c. The NSF report on the Work, Identity and Community in Silicon Valley project
<http://www2.sjsu.edu/depts/anthropology/svcps/SVCPnsfr.html>

d. Families and Work: An Ethnography of Dual Career Families [Excerpt]
<http://www2.sjsu.edu/depts/anthropology/svcps/SVCPslnr.html> pp. 1-24.

e. CEEL Projects, The Meaning of Fatherhood: A Community-Based Ethnography of New Parents in St. Louis

<http://ceel.psc.isr.umich.edu/projects/fatherhood.html>

Class Calendar

WEEK/DATE, TOPICS, ASSIGNMENTS and READINGS DUE

Lecture 1 (June 7) Basic approaches in social science, anthropological thinking with American characteristics. Recommended Reading: Excerpt Perry Chapter 1, glossary, Updating the Anthropology of Native Americans, the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe of the San Francisco Bay Area.
<http://www.islascreek.org/ohlonehistcultfedrecog.html>

Optional writing prompt: How is Chinese anthropology different from American Anthropology?

Lecture 2 (June 10) Evolving ideas of evolution and culture, the historical basis. Recommended Reading: Excerpt Perry Chapter 3

Lecture 3 (June 14) Evolving ideas of structure, function and relativism. Extreme relativism, postmodern critique, French theory leads to questioning the assumptions of classic anthropology. Recommended Reading: Excerpt Perry Chapter 7

Lecture 4 (June 17) The link between theory and method in Anthropology. What kind of tools do you pack in the toolkit? Reviewing methods, and linking to theory Recommended Reading:
http://www-rcf.usc.edu/~genzuek/Ethnographic_Research.html

Optional writing prompt: What methods in anthropology are useful to you? Which ones would you use in your own research?

Lecture 5 (June 20) Research problem development. What makes a problem researchable? What should we research? Recommended Reading: The Anthropology of America by Americans:

The NSF report on the Work, Identity and Community in Silicon Valley project
<http://www2.sjsu.edu/depts/anthropology/svcp/SVCPnsfr.html>

Families and Work: An Ethnography of Dual Career Families [Excerpt]
<http://www2.sjsu.edu/depts/anthropology/svcp/SVCPslnr.html> pp. 1-24.

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Lecture 6 (June 21) What is the purpose of anthropology? American anthropologists experiment with their purpose and connection to society. Theoretical, public, advocacy, and applied anthropology.

Discussion prompt: In twenty years, how could anthropology best serve China?

Class discussion and dinner (June 30) hosted by the professor, Restaurant Kunming Science and Engineering University