

**ENG U694 TOPICS IN EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION:
READING/WRITING ABOUT GROUP IDENTITIES***
NORTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY • FALL 2008 • MW 2:50 – 4:30 P.M.

Prof. Beth Britt

Office: 433 Holmes Hall (Mail: 406 Holmes Hall)

Phone: (617) 373-5170

Office Hours: Mon. 10:30-11:30, Wed. 11-12 and 1:30-2:30, Thurs. 1:30-2:30, and by appointment

E-mail: e.britt@neu.edu

Website: <http://www.atsweb.neu.edu/english/e.britt/>

Course Description

Researchers who study how people live and understand their everyday lives typically write up their explanations in reports called ethnographies. Usually based on observations and interviews, ethnographies might attempt to explain what groups of people believe, how they think, and how they understand themselves and their actions. Long considered the objective reporting of distanced observers, ethnographies are now widely considered a kind of fiction. Ethnographies are thought of as stories, told by authors who make choices about point of view, characterization, setting, and plot. The story that ends up being told about a group is thus only one among many possibilities, a version that invites questions about its narrator and the context of the storytelling as well as its subject. This course is an exploration into the practice of writing about group identities. Through reading ethnographies and conducting your own interviews, you will grapple with both theoretical and practical concerns in ways that help you to see how they are intertwined. We'll examine such as questions as: What constitutes a culture or community? What common sense binds members of a culture or community? How can we investigate that common sense? To what extent does an observer affect what is observed? What role does writing play in how we understand cultural accounts? What ethical issues are involved in writing about others?

By the end of this course, you should:

- Understand interviewing as a method of inquiry
- Feel comfortable conducting and writing from semistructured interviews
- Be able to discuss issues of representation in research
- Be able to discuss the complexities of the relationship between language and culture
- Be able to articulate ethical issues in qualitative research and to make ethical research choices

Note: This course is a work in progress. If you have issues or concerns about the course, please do not wait until the end of the semester to voice them, as I may be able to address them immediately. Please talk with me, send me e-mail, or leave a note (signed or anonymous) for me in the English department office.

Required Texts and Materials

Weiss, Robert S. *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. New York: Free P, 1994. Available for purchase at the Northeastern University bookstore and on reserve at Snell Library.

A selection of readings. Available for downloading from our Blackboard site.

A tape recorder and tapes.

An account on myNEU for accessing Blackboard and for sending/receiving email. Note: I will use Blackboard to communicate with you, so be sure your email address is up to date.

* This syllabus is subject to change. You will be informed during class of any changes to the syllabus. If you miss a class, it is your responsibility to find out what you missed, including any changes to the syllabus.

Assignments and Grading

The criteria I use to evaluate written assignments include focus, thoroughness, insight, sophistication, creativity, use of supporting evidence, and professionalism. I will calculate your final grade as follows:

Participation	5 %
Project proposal	5 %
Interview guide	5 %
Interview skills analysis	10 %
Coded interviews	15 %
Memos	20 %
Final project	40 %

Description of Assignments

1. **Final project** — The final project is the end product of the semester’s work; all other assignments help you to achieve it. This 12-15 page (double-spaced) paper is both an analysis of your topic and a report/reflection on your methods.

You will do some of the research and analysis as part of a group (the size and composition to be determined the first day of class). Your group will interview members of a population who share some characteristic (examples below). *No member of your group can be a member of the population you are studying.* Your task will be to investigate the worldviews, or cultural logics, of members of that population. Each person in the group will conduct three (successful) interviews and share those interviews with the other members of the group. (Conduct one additional successful interview for extra credit.) Each member of the group will write her or his own final paper, drawing on all the interviews conducted by the entire group.

Past projects have studied first-generation immigrants from Latin America, women who married between 18 and 22, children of divorced parents, cancer survivors, Dungeons and Dragons aficionados, participants in extreme sports, single fathers, family caregivers, recent college graduates, people over 60 who have re-entered the dating scene, lesbian parents, and people who use the Internet for dating. Other possibilities include parents who homeschool their children, recent divorcees, recent widows or widowers, recently retired people, parents who have recently sent children to college, divorced mothers who have returned to the workplace, people who returned to college after age forty, or people who have just moved out on their own. The richest interview material often comes from people who have recently experienced change.

A **proposal is due on 9/24**. In this two-page (double-spaced) individually written proposal, describe the population you plan to study, what interests you about them, and how you plan to locate participants. Describe how you plan to adhere to the guidelines for human subjects research, as described below. Include a *detailed schedule* for your project that includes (but is not limited to) the deadlines on the syllabus. The schedule must include the dates you intend to conduct each of your interviews, code each of your interviews, begin writing each of your memos, revise each of your memos, and work on each draft of the final project.

A **first draft is due on 12/1** and a **second draft is due on 12/3**. Failure to complete either of these drafts will result in a third of a letter grade penalty for the final project (that is, an A– will become a B+). I expect these drafts to be rough, but they should be more or less complete (that is, without any major gaps that you intend to fill in later). The **final draft is due on 12/15**. More specific guidelines for the paper will be discussed in class.

NOTE: The research you are conducting in this course falls under the jurisdiction of Northeastern's Division of Research Integrity, which has specified certain restrictions on your research. You are required to follow these guidelines:

- You cannot interview anyone under eighteen years old, prisoners, pregnant women, or members of other vulnerable populations (such as those who are cognitively impaired; those who are or have been engaged in illegal activity, such as illegal drug use; or those who are institutionalized).
 - You must describe to your interviewees that their participation is entirely voluntary and that they can withdraw at any time.
 - You must get the informed written consent of each of your participants. Use the consent form distributed in class as a model. (A Microsoft Word template is available under the Course Documents section of the course Blackboard site.) You must turn in a copy of your signed consent forms to me.
 - You must protect the anonymity of your participants. When you tape record your interviews, your informants must not identify themselves by name on the recording. In addition, do not write names on the tapes or cases, or include names in your transcriptions. Instead, create a code, use that code to identify your participants, and store your own notes about the identity of each of the participants (as well as the consent forms) in a secure place.
 - You must solicit participants by word-of-mouth only. You cannot post flyers or do any other recruitment in writing.
 - You must not publish the results of your study in any form, including on the web.
2. **Interview Guide** — Using Chapter 3 of Weiss, construct an interview guide for your study. Include a cover memo (two pages, double-spaced) that describes and defends the choices you made using ideas from Weiss. Your grade will depend partly on how well you have engaged with Weiss's ideas. Due on 9/29.
 3. **Interview skills analysis** — During class on 9/29, each of you will conduct and record a short interview with another class member. For 10/6, transcribe this short interview and make comments in the margins (as Weiss does in Chapter 4) about the progress of the interview. (A Microsoft Word template is available under the Course Documents section of the course Blackboard site.) Write a two-page (double-spaced) memo describing what went well, what could have gone better, and what you would do differently in a similar situation. Attach the transcribed interview (with comments) to your memo. If you miss class on 9/29, it is your responsibility to contact me before 10/6 to discuss how you can complete the assignment.
 4. **Coded interviews** — Bring one of your transcribed interviews to class on 10/15 and 10/20, one on 10/27, and one on 10/29, when we will discuss coding methods. Turn in copies (not originals) of all of your transcribed and coded interviews on 11/3. Give one copy to me and one copy to each member of your group.

A word of warning: do not leave transcribing and coding until the last minute, as these tasks take much longer than interviewing. Transcribing alone can take up to eight hours per hour of recorded material. You will not receive credit for your interviews until you have turned in a copy to me and to each of your group members. Late penalties will apply. **Students who have not turned in three transcribed and coded interviews to me and to their group members by 11/10 will be asked to withdraw from the course rather than receive a failing grade. The last day to withdraw with a W grade is 11/21.**

5. **Memos** (each about three pages, double-spaced):
 - Theme memo (Draft due 11/5; final due 11/17) — In this memo, explore one concept or theme that appears in more than one of the interviews conducted by your group. You might notice a common way of understanding or phrasing, a common metaphor, or a common explanation. We'll discuss examples of common themes in class.

- Coherence memo (Draft due 11/19; final due 11/26 by email) — In this memo, develop a larger story from some of the themes you have identified. How are these themes related? What sort of story might they tell? We'll discuss how to connect themes in class.

Daily Schedule

Week	Date	Topic	Required Reading	Due
1	9/10	Introduction to the course		
2	9/15	What is ethnography?	Fetterman ch. 1 & 2 (Blackboard)	Bring in ideas for project
	9/17	Reading ethnography	Scheper-Hughes (packet); Becker (packet)	
3	9/22	Planning an interview study	Weiss, ch. 1 & 2	
	9/24	Developing an interview guide	Weiss, ch. 3	Proposal
4	9/29	Conducting interviews	Weiss, ch. 4	Interview guide; bring your tape recorder and one tape
	10/1	Refining interview skills	Weiss, ch. 5; Fetterman ch. 7 (Blackboard); History of Research Ethics; Belmont Report (Blackboard)	
5	10/6	Refining interview skills (cont'd)		Interview skills analysis
	10/8	NO CLASS. Conduct/transcribe one interview for your project.		
6	10/13	COLUMBUS DAY. NU CLOSED.		
	10/15	Refining interview skills (continued)		One transcribed interview (two copies). Important: Do not conduct your 2 nd interview until you receive feedback from me.
7	10/20	Coding interviews (workshop)	Weiss, ch. 6	One transcribed interview (same interview as 10/15)
	10/22	Reading culture	Geertz (Blackboard)	
8	10/27	Coding interviews (workshop)		Second transcribed interview
	10/29	Coding interviews (workshop)		Third transcribed interview
9	11/3	Identifying themes		Coded interviews (all); copies for group members; copies of signed consent forms
	11/5	Workshop on theme memos		Theme memo (draft)
10	11/10	Workshop (continued)		Bring in tapes of interviews (to destroy in class)
	11/12	Workshop (continued)		
11	11/17	Ethnography as rhetorical construction	Weiss, ch. 7; Van Maanen (Blackboard)	Theme memo (final)
	11/19	Workshop on coherence memos		Coherence memo (draft)
12	11/24	Workshop (continued)		
	11/26	THANKSGIVING BREAK. NU CLOSED.		
13	12/1	Workshop		First draft of final project (posted on Blackboard)
	12/3	Workshop		Second draft of final project (posted on Blackboard)
14	12/8	Workshop		
	12/10	Workshop; wrap-up		
15	12/12-12/19	FINAL EXAM WEEK. NO CLASSES.		
				Final project due 12/15 (by 1 p.m. in 406 Holmes)

Required Readings
(Downloadable from Blackboard)

Becker, Gay. "Metaphors in Disrupted Lives: Infertility and Cultural Constructions of Continuity." *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 8 (1994): 383-410.

Fetterman, David M. *Ethnography: Step by Step*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1998. 1-30, 129-146.

Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973. 3-30.

"History of Research Ethics." *University of Nevada, Las Vegas*. Division of Research and Graduate Studies. Office for the Protection of Research Subjects. U of Nevada, Las Vegas. 30 December 2007. <<http://research.unlv.edu/OPRS/history-ethic.htm>>

National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research. "The Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research." 1979. U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. 30 December 2007. <<http://ohsr.od.nih.gov/guidelines/belmont.html>>

Scheper-Hughes, Nancy. "Mother's Love: Death Without Weeping." *Conformity and Conflict: Readings in Cultural Anthropology*. 9th ed. Ed. James Spradley. New York: Longman, 1997. 195-204.

Van Maanen, John. "An End to Innocence: The Ethnography of Ethnography." *Representation in Ethnography*. Ed. John Van Maanen. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1995. 1-35.

Note: Excerpts from Emily Martin's ethnography *Flexible Bodies* are also available on Blackboard for you to read at your leisure.

Policies

Attendance, Deadlines, and Classroom Etiquette

This course uses an interactive learning model. Its success—and your success in it—depend on attendance and active participation. Attendance is therefore required. You are allowed two absences (for any reason) without a grade penalty. For each absence after the second, your final grade will be lowered by a full letter (e.g., an A will become a B). If you experience extraordinary circumstances (e.g., religious holidays, illness, a death in the family, required participation in athletic events, or other equally serious and unavoidable life events) that cause you to miss additional classes, please see me.

I expect you to have read all assigned materials before coming to class. Please bring assigned readings to class, as we frequently refer to specific passages. If I call on you and it becomes clear that you have not read the assignment or brought the readings to class, you will be counted as absent.

A missed class does not exempt you from the assigned work for that day. Late assignments will be penalized by one letter grade for each weekday that they are late (for example, an A will become a B).

A note on coming to class late: Please make every effort to arrive in class on time, as late arrivals disrupt class. I take attendance at the beginning of class by reading aloud from my roster. If you are not present when I take attendance, you are considered absent. If you arrive late, it is your responsibility to see me after class to change your "absent" to a "late." Sometimes being late is unavoidable; chronic lateness, however, indicates either a time management problem or a lack of respect for the class. Being late two times equals one absence.

Format of Work

All work must be printed with a readable printer. Papers should have 1" margins on all sides and text between 10 and 12 point type. Papers should adhere to commonly accepted standards of grammatical and typographical correctness and should use MLA-style documentation. Include your name on all work.

Incompletes

I will assign the grade of incomplete only under extraordinary circumstances. In order to receive this grade, you must have completed most of the work for the course and have encountered an emergency (for example, serious illness or a death in the family) that prevents you from finishing one or two assignments. If you find yourself in this situation toward the end of the semester, talk to me as soon as possible before the last assignments are due.

Please do not ask for an incomplete if you are having trouble completing work because of time commitments at work or in other classes.

Plagiarism

I encourage you to bounce ideas off each other, offer each other suggestions, and seek other opinions about your work. When you use the citable work of someone else, though, document your source. If you use someone else's words or ideas without acknowledging the source, if you do not place quotation marks around (or set off from the body of the text) the directly quoted words of someone else, or if you submit work that you have completed in another context, then you have committed plagiarism, a serious breach of academic and professional conduct. Plagiarism is not only illegal; it is professional suicide. If you have questions about crediting the work of others as you complete your assignments, ask me.

I have a zero tolerance policy for plagiarism: if I find convincing evidence that you have used someone else's work without proper attribution, you will receive an F in the course and will be reported to the Office of Student Conduct and Conflict Resolution for possible further academic sanctions, which range from suspension to expulsion from the university.