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## Teaching Im/migration through an Ethnographic Portrait Project

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## COMMENTARY

### Teaching Im/migration through an Ethnographic Portrait Project

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#### Abstract

*The Im/migrant Ethnographic Portrait Project was designed for introductory cultural anthropology courses and has a threefold aim: 1) to familiarize students with research methods, 2) to facilitate students' deeper understanding of migration by connecting course readings with a hands-on project, and 3) to humanize im/migrants by bringing students into one-on-one conversations where they will hear a person's story in their own words. To support students' success with this semester-long project and to ensure (as far as is possible) that no harm is done, we provide instruction and feedback through a series of progressive assignments. In this essay we explain each of these steps before concluding with remarks about the challenges and benefits of teaching this project.*

**Keywords:** *im/migration; ethnographic project; interview; assignment*

#### Introduction

In this essay we share an assignment we use in our respective *Introduction to Cultural Anthropology* courses. The institution where we work is a selective public liberal arts college that is located in a small town in rural Western New York. Most of our students are recent high school graduates and New York state residents. Many of them, though certainly not all, come from communities where they have had little social interaction with im/migrants. Their knowledge of im/migration is often informed by social media and locally circulating discourses about newcomers in the cities and towns where they grew up. Our aims with the Im/migrant Ethnographic Portrait Project are: 1) to familiarize students with research methods, 2) to facilitate students' deeper understanding of migration by connecting course readings with a hands-on project, and 3) to humanize im/migrants by bringing students into one-on-one conversations where they will hear a person's story in their own words.

Each of us has conducted ethnographic research with Latin American immigrants in the United States, JRG and MAM with Mexican and Guatemalan dairy farmworkers in the Northeast, and GF with Guatemalan refugees in the Midwest. As scholars working in a

primarily undergraduate institution, we consider teaching about the human experience of im/migration to be among our most important responsibilities as anthropologists. Most of the students in our introductory courses are fulfilling a general education requirement. Our goals include helping them gain a nuanced understanding of the globalized environmental and economic phenomena that compel mass migrations in the modern era and providing an opportunity for them to learn about the life-altering consequences people face when they migrate or stay behind in a sending community.

To support students' success with this semester-long project and to ensure (as far as is possible) that no harm is done, we provide instruction and feedback through a series of progressive assignments. In the following sections, we explain each of these steps before concluding with remarks about the challenges and advantages of teaching this project (see Appendix 1 for the full assignment information distributed to students).

## **Organization of the Project**

Early in the semester, we (JRG and MAM) like to introduce the Ethnographic Portrait Project by showing StoryCorps founder Dave Isay's 2015 TED Prize talk, "Everyone around You Has a Story the World Needs to Hear" (Isay 2015). Isay makes a compelling argument for sharing a conversation with someone and asking them candid questions about their life. Using excerpted recordings from StoryCorps interviews, he illustrates how these conversations can be deeply meaningful for both interviewer and interviewee. We encourage students to think about their own interviews in such a frame and invite them to be courageous as they do the sometimes uncomfortable work of finding a suitable individual and asking permission to interview them. In order to ensure that students interview someone who can speak at length about their own im/migration experiences, we require that they find someone who migrated no earlier than late childhood, and we insist that international students do not fit the assignment criteria.

To equip students with strategies and guidelines for conducting research with human participants, we teach a lesson on the tenets of ethical anthropological research, focusing on professional commitments to do no harm, be open and honest regarding our work, and obtain informed consent. We provide students with a sample script for obtaining consent, and we field a lot of questions. Students sometimes voice trepidation about finding an interviewee, and we are cognizant that this assignment could create a disproportionate burden on immigrant students, faculty, and staff. In light of these concerns, we encourage students to look for potential interviewees among their extended family and friendship networks and ask family or friends for assistance with an introduction if necessary. Using these strategies, most students recruit and successfully interview an immediate or extended family member, a college roommate, teammate, fellow club member, the parent of a friend, the co-worker of a parent, a former teacher, or a hometown neighbor. A few students interview campus faculty or staff. Only rarely has an individual student been interviewed more than once. In our discussion of ethical

practice, we remind students to keep in mind the “ask” they are making of interviewees, and we suggest acknowledging interviewees’ volunteered time and educational labor with a thank you note or small gift.

Once students have confirmed their interviewees, we teach a lesson on interview design. Students learn effective language for crafting open-ended questions that will elicit stories, opinions, and explanations. They learn to recognize and revise leading questions and to tailor questions to the circumstances of their interviewee’s life. We present best practices for asking about potentially sensitive topics, and we remind students that the principle to do no harm applies to the drafting of interview questions. We caution against soliciting information (e.g., immigration status) that could pose a risk to the interviewee if confidentiality was breached, for example through unauthorized circulation of an interview recording. Students draft a set of questions for homework, and they pilot their questions with a peer in a subsequent class session.

The next lesson focuses on skills for conducting successful interviews. Students learn strategies for putting interviewees at ease and setting the tone. We emphasize the importance of a strong interview guide, including a script for confirming consent at the outset and another for effectively bringing the interview to a close. We arm students with a set of versatile probes (e.g., “Can you tell me more about that?”; “Why is that the case?”; “Can you give me an example?”) to draw out more detail from a reticent interviewee’s responses.

After students have completed their interviews, we begin the last lesson with an opportunity for debriefing. Students are often eager to share successes and surprises from their interviews, and a few bravely disclose gaffes and how they recovered from them. The remainder of the lesson provides instructions for listening to and logging the content from their interview recording, identifying the themes they wish to emphasize in their ethnographic portrait essay, and transcription. We urge students to interpret what they learned from one individual’s experiences in light of anthropological theory on im/migration, including the push and pull factors that led the person or their family to migrate, ways their identity shaped their migration experience, the bridges and barriers that eased or complicated their transition, and characteristics of the receiving community that impacted their ability to build a stable life. Students are required to cite anthropological literature to contextualize and frame the biographical story they tell about their interviewee.

We (JRG and GF) also have students ask their interviewees to share mementos, which provide a lever for conversation and a means of studying the traces of migration in physical objects. Students elicit accounts from interviewees about their mementos and what makes them meaningful. Commonly selected mementos include family heirlooms and photos of family events. Students report that conversations about mementos can be moving and instructive.

## **Lessons Learned**

In order for this project to be effective, it is important that students view their interviewee's experiences as exemplar cases of complex phenomena. This is the hardest intellectual task, and one that requires scaffolding to help students move beyond a simple biographical narrative to an anthropological interpretation of how a person's life chances have been shaped by a host of sociocultural, political, and economic processes. By the time students are conducting their interviews, we have covered thematic course units on race/racism, ethnicity, and class, as well as an im/migration unit that focuses on inequities in the global political economy. Two key readings, Karen Brodtkin Sacks's (2018 [1994]) "How did Jews Become White Folks?" and Ruth Gomberg-Muñoz's (2017) "Grounds for Exclusion: The U.S. Immigration System," are critical resources for disabusing students of bootstrap explanations about White/European immigrant success and familiarizing students with the exclusionary racial logic of U.S. immigration policies. We encourage students to consider interviewees' experiences in light of what they have learned from these and other ethnographic sources.

To help students engage in analysis that accounts for structures of power, we encourage them to identify factors that afforded certain possibilities and precluded others in their interviewees' lives. We ask them to consider how a person's race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and religion impacted their im/migration experience. And we invite them to consider how other structural factors such as education, employment, age, and ability, shaped their interviewee's experiences of stratification both in their home country and in the United States. An alternative could be to have students write a more conventional essay about the anthropology of migration and use quotes from their interview to illustrate points they make in the essay.

Another challenge of teaching this project emerges from students' inexperience with crafting interview questions. In a domino effect, inexpertly written questions lead to off-topic responses that later compromise students' ability to write a good ethnographic portrait essay. One solution is to provide students with feedback and corrections on drafted interview questions. This is labor intensive, however, and perhaps a non-optimal use of faculty time for a lower-division course. The alternative that one of us (MAM) employs is to provide students with a core set of interview questions (see Appendix 2) on which students are required to build. This approach supports consistently successful interviews.

The feedback we have received from students about this assignment has been overwhelmingly positive. In course evaluations and ethnographic portrait essays, many students identify the project as the highlight of the course and sometimes of their year. Some report that interviewees challenged them to reassess preconceived ideas, explaining that, "Going into the interview I had a few unsupported assumptions." Other students express awe at human resilience—"When I try to comprehend this reality, it boggles my mind the amount of people who do this migration across the globe"—or

admit, "I'd never talked to someone about their own migration so this gave me the opportunity to hear about immigration from a new, more personal perspective." And many students attest that the project deepened their understanding about people they care about: "[This] allowed me to learn more about my friend and the historical contexts of the country [Pakistan] that he came from." Perhaps most moving are the reflections of students who choose to interview a parent. As one Salvadoran-American student concluded, "During this interview I saw a side of my father I never imagined he would show me." These student responses have motivated us to continue using this project, even as we revise other aspects of our *Introduction to Cultural Anthropology* courses.

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## Appendix 1: The Im/migrant Ethnographic Portrait Assignment

Your project for the semester is to design, conduct, and report on a semi-structured interview with a person who immigrated to the United States. This interview will be the basis for an ethnographic portrait essay that will report on the person's recollection of experiences, thoughts, and feelings related to their immigration experience and on the structural and cultural factors that shaped this experience.

To complete this assignment you will need to find an interviewee, do some background reading, prepare for your interview, conduct and record the interview, analyze your interviewee's responses, and present the results of your project in an essay that interprets individual experience from an anthropological perspective.

### *Step 1 – Find an interviewee*

- Following a lesson on the ethical principles of anthropological research, identify an interviewee and confirm their participation.
- Set an interview date and work out logistic details. An in-person interview is preferable, but you may conduct your interview over Skype, FaceTime, or phone.
- Ask your interviewee to choose 2-3 personal mementos they are willing to bring to the interview and discuss with you.

### *Step 2 – Prepare for your interview*

- Following a lesson on interview design, draft interview questions and create an interview guide. A sample interview guide is available for your reference.
- We will have an in-class workshop to pilot your questions and finalize your guide.
- Find at least two anthropological articles that will help you understand something about your interviewee's background. When you write your ethnographic portrait essay, this literature will help you to frame the interviewee's personal experiences in a broader sociohistorical context.

### *Step 3 – Conduct your interview*

- After a lesson on strategies for conducting successful interviews, you will conduct and record your interview. Interviews should last at least 30 minutes.
- Be sure to take a picture together with your interviewee in the setting of your interview. Selfies are fine, and if you are on Skype/FaceTime, take a screen-shot!
- Remember to take photographs of your interviewee's mementos.

### *Step 4 – Analyze your interview and write an ethnographic portrait*

- As soon as possible after your interview, listen through your entire interview recording at least once, taking notes and time codes. This is your *interview log*.



Note important themes that emerged during the interview and anecdotes that illustrate points the interviewee made. Transcribe the excerpts you want to quote in your essay.

### *Step 5 – Write an ethnographic portrait essay*

The final step of the project is to write an ethnographic portrait, interpreting your interviewee's responses as well as reporting on the methods of data collection you used and contextualizing your findings with discussion of anthropological concepts and theory that you have learned throughout the semester and in the articles you found in Step 2.

Organize your essay as follows:

- Introduction
  - Introduce your interviewee and the main assertions of your essay.
- Methods
  - Describe your research methods, noting the ethical principles you observed and the focus of your interview design.
  - Disclose how you know your interviewee.
  - Explain where and how you conducted the interview.
- Findings
  - Use concepts and terms you have learned about im/migration. Address the circumstances of the interviewee's immigration.
  - Discuss how aspects of your interviewee's identity have shaped their experiences. Recall how intersectionality and oppression work.
  - Provide specific details and quoted excerpts from the interview.
  - Make a clear connection between evidence and each point you make.
  - Discuss your findings in light of concepts and theories from at least two course readings and at least two additional anthropology articles.
  - Cite your sources.
- Conclusion
  - Recap your main points and provide concluding remarks.
  - This is an appropriate place to comment on how this project impacted you personally.
- List of references cited
  - Follow Chicago author-date style guidelines.
- Appendices
  - Captioned photo of you with your interviewee.
  - Captioned photos of your interviewee's mementos.
  - Your finalized interview guide.
  - Signed consent form.

## Appendix 2: Immigration-Related Interview Questions

Developed by Melanie A. Medeiros

### Instructions:

In preparation for your interview, write twelve original questions about your interviewee's life and combine them with the following questions about their immigration experience. Your questions can be based on your interests and on the specifics of your interviewee's life. Consider asking questions that elicit your interviewee's experiences or perspectives on topics we have addressed in class. In preparing your questions, you may want to consult the life history interview guide from the Legacy Project, available at <https://legacyproject.org/guides/lifeintquestions.pdf>.

### Immigration Questions:

1. What were the factors that led you or your family to leave your country of birth?
2. What were the factors that drew you or your family to the United States specifically?
3. Did you have family or friends already in the United States?
  - Who were they?
  - Where were they?
  - What were their relationships to you?
4. Did you have a guaranteed employment or educational opportunity waiting for you in the United States?
  - If so, what was it?
5. Tell me about your process of immigrating to the United States.
  - What steps did you take to be able to immigrate?
  - What were the challenges you faced as you prepared to immigrate?
  - How did you travel to the United States?
  - Describe your experience of travelling to the United States.
  - Describe what you remember from the day you arrived in the United States.
  - Where in the United States did you first live? Why this place?
6. Tell me more about what it was like during your first days, months, and years in the United States.
  - What was difficult about the transition?
  - What was easy about the transition?
  - How did your reason for immigrating affect your transition?
  - *Potential follow-up probes:* If you started working, what was that like? If you started studying, what was that like? [*Note to interviewer:* with this question you are trying to learn about factors that make the transition smoother. For example, someone who immigrated with employment

already arranged versus someone who fled violence or poverty in their country of birth.]

7. Who helped you with your transition?
  - *Potential follow-up probes:* Who did you live with? Who helped you get around? Who helped you find work or start school? Who helped you to learn English (if you were not already an English speaker)? How did you meet new people? What religious or other community organizations or resources were important to you?
8. In what ways did your various social identities (race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, religion, etc.) affect your transition to life in the United States?
9. How do you believe your immigration experience compares to that of other immigrants?
  - If they are not similar, why do you believe they are dissimilar?
10. What else would you like to share with me about your immigration experience?
11. What else would you like to tell me about your experience being an immigrant in the United States?