

ANTH 100
Fieldwork Exercise 1

Explanatory Context of Assignment:

Anthropological fieldwork takes place in every imaginable situation where there are people who are doing things and interacting with each, which naturally includes our home communities. Indeed many anthropologists have conducted research “at home.” Fieldwork settings at home can be as ambiguous and fluid as anywhere else, but the actual work may be episodic as we balance short bursts of fieldwork with our more normal duties and roles; the line between our identities as “natives” blurs with our role as fieldworkers. This can pose certain challenges, but the broader point here is that what defines anthropological fieldwork is not really the act of separating from our everyday lives to immerse ourselves continuously in intensive social life elsewhere. Rather, it is the deliberate work of identifying, creating, and cultivating interactions and relationships that yield meaningful insights into other people’s lives, without assuming that we as fieldworkers stand apart from them. These things can happen anywhere and in pretty much any social context, including in your own “backyard.”

One of the dilemmas of “backyard” anthropology is that, like the fish that doesn’t see the water it swims in, we don’t always recognize culturally important and meaningful dynamics because we often make the same unstated assumptions as the people whose lives we are investigating. Doing fieldwork then requires a strategy called **“critical estrangement”** –that is **taking the familiar and taken for granted and making it seem strange, ‘deconstructing its surfaces and...relativizing...its horizons,’ as one anthropologist put it.** In other words, critical estrangement involves **inquiring into the cultural conditions and unstated assumptions that give rise to and help sustain a particular way of thinking and acting,** and appreciating how “natives” perceive and experience those things.

Assignment:

Part I

Take an everyday social activity that you do and 1) write 250 words describing each step in the process from your personal perspective, and then 2) write 250 words about it in an intentionally-distancing ‘objective’ mode, as if you were observing yourself doing it from afar (applying the idea of critical estrangement). Type these accounts and print them up. Then, type your response to the following prompt:

Which of these accounts reads “better” to you? Why? Explain the advantages and disadvantages of each account (in a paragraph or so).

Part II

Take your two accounts and blend them into a one page ethnographic explanation of your everyday social activity. In other words, help your reader to better understand the familiar, more intimate language of first-hand experience by contextualizing it in the more distanced perspective of critical estrangement.