

Reading and Doing Ethnography

Social Anthropology 314

1.3 Research Project Workshop

Class research projects

Submit a 1-paragraph statement of your project. Explain briefly:

- >> What site you want to work on;
- >> Why you are interested in the site;
- >> Whether you have any existing relationship to the site, and if so what; and
- >> An anthropological research question about your site.

What makes a good class project

- >> You can get access to the site.
- >> Low risks to you and to the research participants.
- >> You are truly interested in your site.

What is a risk?

- >> There are risks to you as well as risks to your research participants.
- >> Exposing private information can pose a risk.
- >> Breaking confidentiality can pose a risk.
- >> Knowledge of illicit behavior, e.g. criminality, poses a risk.
- >> Confidential health information (e.g. psychiatric diagnoses) can pose risks.

What makes a **good** research
question?

Good research questions

- >> Address a puzzle.
- >> Clearly and precisely stated.
- >> Answerable with the tools and resources available.
- >> Relevant: other people care about the answer.
- >> Don't smuggle in gratuitous opinions of your own.

Are all research questions good?

Research questions that need work

- » Why are men different from women? *Impossibly broad, no clear site.*
- » Do Americans believe in destiny? *Too broad, factual, no clear puzzle.*
- » Why do poor Americans vote against their economic interests?
This implies that you know what their interests are, prior to doing research.
- » How can ethnography can illuminate gender dynamics? *Nebulous, no clear site.*

Research questions that need work

- » How are prices different at a farmers' market than in a supermarket?
- » What is the physical layout of a (particular) bookstore?
- » What attracts people to interfaith church services?

Good research questions

- » What does the word "oriental" mean to staff and visitors at an Oriental Institute?
- » In a tense rural environment, how do recreational rock climbers perceive those outside their group?
- » In a science museum, how are children taught to recognize what counts as "science"?

Good research questions often
begin with a site.

Then they ask a question about something *within that*
site.

You can self-generate a good question

- >> What is something that frustrates you?
- >> What is something that you can't make sense of?
- >> What is something that seems like it shouldn't happen?
- >> What is a social situation that seems mysterious to you?
- >> What's a social phenomenon that's hypocritical or contradictory?

These can lead you into a good research question.

Culture is about meaningful action

Thus, good research questions explore the *local meaning*
of some phenomenon.

Research questions are not
supposed to be finished or perfect.
They're just a moment in a
process.