

## COMMENTARY

# Student Autobiographical Essays as Person-Centered Ethnography: Building Empathy with a New Approach to Anthropological Interviewing Assignments

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### Abstract

*Interviewing assignments are frequent components of cultural anthropology courses. In this exercise, students focus on the content of person-centered ethnographic interviews by providing the material themselves. Students write autobiographical narratives that are shared anonymously with the class. This allows them to explore the strengths and limitations of using personal narratives as data, while also considering the role of audience and the challenge of making respondents anonymous. The exercise's greatest impact, however, comes from giving students firsthand experience with the power of listening to people's stories, and the assignment has proven remarkably successful at building empathy among a diverse peer group.*

**Keywords:** *interviewing; empathy; autobiography; ethnographic methods; person-centered; teaching technique*

### Introduction

When I was a graduate student at the University of California, San Diego, I took a practicum on anthropological interviewing with psychological anthropologist Steven Parish. The emphasis was on person-centered approaches (Hollan 2001; LeVine 1982; Levy and Hollan 1998; Parish 1994), and the design was simple. We each chose someone to interview over a period of weeks and then presented our findings to the group. The outcome was revelatory: the course permanently heightened my empathy towards others as I was given privileged access to a set of strangers' inner worlds. As an anthropologist in the field, I also learned that no other class had better prepared me for the intellectual and interpersonal complexities that come with being entrusted with people's personal stories.

In my current role as a professor teaching an undergraduate course on Psychological Anthropology at the University of Connecticut, I aim to give my forty-five undergraduate students a similarly impactful experience. Over the years, I have experimented with

typical interviewing assignments. These generally consist of students finding an informant willing to conduct a one-hour interview using prepared questions. However, due to the large size of the group and students' lack of experience, I found these interviews frequently became mired in technical and logistical issues. The resulting interviews often remained superficial, and our class time for exploring actual content was abbreviated. While exploring the challenges of interviewing methods can be useful in its own right, the focus on methods over content did not meet my primary objectives.

In response, I developed an unconventional work-around: I now have students "interview" themselves. Instead of primarily focusing on the interviewing process, this unit allows students to dive directly into an exploration of "experience-near" narratives (Hollan 2001, 49). This assignment turns the class itself into a powerful person-centered ethnographic experience. Student feedback has been uniformly positive, with comments frequently citing increased empathy, appreciation, and understanding towards their diverse peer group.

## Person-Centered Ethnography

The following outline frames the writing of an autobiographical essay in the context of person-centered ethnographic methodologies. As Douglas Hollan writes, "A primary focus of person-centered ethnographies is on the individual and on how the individual's psychology and subjective experience both shapes, and is shaped by, social and cultural processes" (Hollan 2001, 48). Below, I detail seven steps to execute this assignment. However, the unit can be modified to accommodate a less psychological anthropological approach; instructors could focus on oral histories, for example, and begin with Step 2. I conclude by discussing adaptations that encompass additional course frameworks.

**Step 1.** Assigned reading: Hollan, Douglas. 2001. "Developments in Person-Centered Ethnography." In *The Psychology of Cultural Experience*, edited by C. Moore and H. Mathews, 48-67. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Students discuss:

- What are some advantages of person-centered ethnography?
- What are the advantages/disadvantages of the three emphases described by Hollan (say/do/embody)?
- Can you critique the ethnographies we've read based on these criteria? What did they emphasize or leave out?

**Step 2.** Assigned podcast (in-class or homework): Glass, Ira. 2013. "How I Got Into College." *This American Life*. Podcast audio, September 6. Acts 2 and 3 (48 minutes).

In Act Two of this podcast, students listen to the story of a man named Emir Kamenica, who flees war-torn Bosnia and enters a "bad" high school in the United States as a refugee. He impresses a teacher with an essay plagiarized from a book he'd stolen

back in Bosnia, prompting her to advocate on his behalf and secure a position for him in a much better school. He continues to Harvard and becomes very successful. Years later, he tracks down the teacher to thank her, only to discover that she has a very different recollection of this story. In Act Three, the podcast explores why Emir “insists on remembering, and telling, the story of his life the way he does – even when he finds out that some of the facts may be wrong” (Glass 2013).

Students discuss:

- Do you think it matters that Emir’s version is not historically accurate?
- What do the inconsistencies teach us?
- Why does Emir refuse to revise his version?
- What are the broader implications for interviews in general?

**Step 3.** Discussion of person-centered interviewing and essay assignment. The following information is provided in the syllabus:

**Autobiographical Essay:** One of the key methods used by psychological anthropologists is person-centered interviewing. By listening carefully to people’s stories, anthropologists can learn a great deal about personal experience, meaning-making, and personality in relation to culture, society, norms, and values. Although we will not conduct fieldwork for this course, this assignment is intended to convey a sense of the importance of attending to personal experience and the ways in which we construct meaning out of those experiences. For this assignment, you will interview yourself.

Each student will write an autobiographical essay in response to the question: *Tell me some of the major experiences in your life that have made you the kind of person you are.* There is no length requirement. You will submit two versions of this essay. The first is the original. The second will be an edited version in which you remove all identifying information and make yourself anonymous. You will submit both versions. If you consent to have your anonymous version read aloud in class, please write “I consent” and sign the second version. The essay will count for 5% of your grade. It is graded on a 10-point scale based on completion, not content. This assignment will be explained in detail in class during our section on person-centered ethnography.

I spend class time answering questions about the assignment. Students frequently require reassurance that there really is no length requirement. I explain that when an anthropologist interviews someone in the field, some respondents will be verbose while others will be brief. This is, essentially, an exercise in interviewing themselves, so I cannot dictate what the results will be. I also explain that they may opt out altogether and forfeit

5% of their grade. Students often wonder how much information they should redact or alter to make themselves anonymous. I emphasize that obscuring the identity of study participants is a necessary process for most anthropologists before publication, and they want to think about how changing minor details in their own stories may impact their narrative. They only need to change as much as they wish. Some students chafe at the vagueness of the question itself. I assure them that it is intentionally open-ended and they may go in any direction they wish. It is rare for students to be given this degree of freedom in a writing assignment. While it may make them initially apprehensive, I find the classroom discussion usually leaves them enthusiastic to write their essays.

**Step 4.** Students keep a journal throughout the course, and I use this step to encourage reflection on the interviewing process. After they submit their essay, they are assigned the following questions for an entry:

- What did you notice about what you decided to write? In retrospect, is it what you expected? Were you surprised by the direction of your essay, or by your deliberate omissions?
- What role did context/audience play?
- What might this process tell you about the interviewing process for person-centered ethnographic research?
- What did you notice as you tried to make yourself anonymous?

**Step 5.** After collecting the essays, I separate the ones that are clearly signed, “I consent,” and I mark the sections I will read aloud in class. The success of the classroom reading depends heavily on this step, and I implement certain safeguards built into the assignment structure. In my experience, student essays vary wildly in length (from 1 to 30 pages) and degrees of self-exposure. I assemble a representative range of essays and edit for brevity, while also scrutinizing the details to ensure that the students will truly remain anonymous.

I also consider whether an essay will cause vicarious trauma in the listeners. I do not give trigger warnings in class, but I do use my best judgment when choosing selections. Occasionally, a student chooses to reveal personal trauma in great detail; some material might be better processed in a therapeutic environment than read aloud in class. Instructors should also be familiar with their institution’s Title IX obligations for reporting sexual harassment and violence; for example, University of Connecticut employees are not required to report information disclosed as part of coursework submitted to an instructor in connection with a course assignment.

**Step 6.** In class, I read aloud selections from the essays for about forty-five minutes. I preface the reading by telling students that they are in no particular order and that I have edited most of them so there will be time to hear from more students. I apologize for any unintentional distortion of their work and for the fact that I may not get to all of them.

**Step 7.** After the reading, I give students time to reflect in their journals. I offer the following prompts. We wait until the next class to discuss their reflections:

- What did you notice about this collection?
- How does it affect how you think about:
  - Your peers? People in general?
  - The relationship between self and culture?
- What does it teach us about person-centered interviewing?

## Conclusion

At the end of the semester, I assess the assignment based on student evaluations. This is a short selection of past responses:

The autobiographical essay was amazing! Please continue that. We all got to release and find a new sense of hope and acceptance.

I really liked hearing everyone's stories in class. It reminds you that culture and people are so varied even in just the small space here at UConn.

If anything, PLEASE KEEP THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY ASSIGNMENT!!! This is the most interesting and thought provoking assignment I have ever been fortunate enough to do. . . . If possible I would want to redo this actually and have it read to the class. I would have opened up more and to hear how brave some were to write about what they did kind of gives me more confidence to share my experiences as well. Thank you.

I LOVED the autobiographical essay assignment. It probably changed my whole view of people.

Based on overwhelmingly positive feedback, I have subsequently modified this exercise for other courses. For example, I assign a personal essay prompt for a class on Race, Ethnicity, and Nationalism: "Tell me about a time you realized ethnic, racial, and/or national identity mattered." The assignment structure is similar. Although students only submit one version, they are asked for written consent and I read aloud anonymous selections. The reading is followed by a group reflection. This structure encourages greater participation than asking for volunteers, invites more voices into the room by allowing the instructor to edit for brevity, and creates an atmosphere conducive to future dialogue.

The impact of these essays is not limited to students: this assignment has made me a more compassionate and committed teacher, and I have become a stronger advocate for my students. Their stories stay with me, and I remember those who have written personal

essays long after the class ends. This exercise has reoriented my upper-division courses from a focus on the interviewing process to the content of person-centered interviews, making the class itself a memorable ethnographic experience.

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