

**THE LIFE HISTORY METHOD in ANTHROPOLOGY**  
**Anthropology 315 -- Life History and Culture -- Spring 2016**

Monday 3:35 - 6:35

Candelaria 1190 (2220)

**Instructor:** Dr. Sally McBeth  
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**Office Hours:** Mon 10 - 11; 12:15 – 3  
Wed & Fri 10 - 11.  
(or by appointment)

**Texts:** *The Life Story Interview* (1998) Robert Atkinson (available in BB course materials)

*Essie's Story* (1998) Esther Burnett Horne (Shoshone) and Sally McBeth

**DSS Statement**

Any student requesting disability accommodation for this class must inform the instructor by giving appropriate notice. Students are encouraged to contact Disability Support Services at (970) 351-2289 to certify documentation of disability and to ensure appropriate accommodations are implemented in a timely manner.

**Catalogue Description:** A course in ethnographic writing focusing on methods of life history / life cycle research and analysis. Students will learn cultural interviewing techniques and will complete a written life history.

**Course Objectives/Learning Outcomes:**

- 1) To learn how life histories have been and continue to be used by anthropologists: to better understand individuals within specific cultures, as well as the impact of culture on individuals.
- 2) Students will demonstrate appropriate-level writing skills. A life history of between 75-100 pages will be the culminating project of this course.
- 3) Students will learn the skill of interviewing as it relates to cultural anthropological research methods. Ethnographic description, analysis, and interpretation are also components of the required life history manuscript.
- 4) Two class presentations, as well as student participation and discussion, will demonstrate student's oral communication skills.

**Learning Outcomes (Anthropology)**

- 1) Knowledge of the concept of culture and how cultural processes work in cultural adaptation.
- 2) Methods commonly used by cultural anthropologists including critical reading of ethnographic description, ability to create, analyze, and synthesize well-structured arguments, cultural awareness, critical thinking, empathy for others, and the ability to conceive and apply alternative interpretations to the contemporary problems of culturally diverse societies.

## **Course Description:**

This course is centered on the ethnographic field technique or methodology known as the life history. If ethnographies are descriptions of a culture, then the life history is a "person-centered" ethnography. What this method consists of is a rigorous yet compassionate effort to portray the lives of ordinary individuals in specific cultures and contexts.

In anthropology the life history, or personal narrative of one's life, has long been recognized as an important vehicle for learning about how "culture" is experienced and created by individuals. The life history, more than some other forms of anthropological writing, focuses on the expressive side of culture—how people experience the meaningful events and crises of their lives, how they feel about what they do (or at least what they say about how they feel). The life history is the flip side of the usual anthropological description of a way of life. Instead of how norms, values, and rules shape people's behaviors, the life history reveals how the individual copes with the stream of events, values, and rules his or her culture imposes. It gives voice to the ordinary person, as opposed to the famous.

Life histories have a special significance in our highly technological and fast-paced, complex world. As we have become more isolated from one another, the life history offers a means of putting us back in touch with others: How do people experience adolescence, the discovery of their sexuality, the breakup of a marriage, growing older, the death of a close friend or relative, and other of life's crises? What do people see as the significant events or turning points in their lives? How do younger people view their life experiences differently from older people? How do men and women see their lives differently?

For me, the value of the life history is the intimacy that results from listening to and telling stories. It is the understanding that individuals from diverse cultures share because of our commonalities. The value of this personal theme may be questioned by those who wish for detachment and distance from the objects of their study, and by those who question the subjective nature of fieldwork in the social sciences. It goes without saying that anthropologists must be acutely aware of the relations between "self" and "subject" (collaborator or partner are more accurate terms) and of the interactions between the inner life of the anthropologist and the lives she/he is studying.

This course is about lives—the expression of life stories, their collection and recording, and their presentation in written format. We will look at how the life history has evolved in anthropology and oral history; the structure and meaning of life history as a western genre; life stories in non-western form; the life history as a collaborative venture; gender and the expression of life accounts; the life history as an expression of self vs. the life history as a window on culture; and the limitations of life history research.

Equally important, this is a "how to" course. It is a learning by doing course. We will be discussing the selection of life history subjects, building rapport, life history interviewing, being a good listener, the processing of life history interviews, editing, presentation of narrative, and the organization and analysis of life history materials.

Ultimately we are asking the following questions: How does the life history allow us to know

and understand another person? What do we seek in life histories? What do we gain from them? How do life histories apply to your particular field of interest? What are the ethical principles? (*ahimsa*: do no harm; strive to do good).

- Each student will learn first-hand about life history by conducting a series of tape-recorded interviews with an individual, with the aim of writing that person's life history in a 75-100 (or so) page paper.
- You are encouraged to find an older person who is willing to disclose the details of his or her life and who has time for 8-12 + hours of interviews.
- There are digital recorders plus some old-school tape recorders and transcribers (which can also be used as tape recorders) available for check-out from the Geography - Anthropology Office in Candelaria 2200 (8:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.). You will not be given a grade for this class if you do not return equipment that you have checked out.

**Student life histories** are available for your review in the Anthropology/Geography Main Office: Candelaria 2200A (2190A in the back room behind Brooks' desk). Not required, but may give you some +/- pointers

**Class attendance is a requirement.** Your presence and participation in class are essential to your successful completion of the assignments and life history project for this course. See attendance policy below.

### Course Requirements and Evaluation

**200 Life History Manuscript;** 2 copies due no later than April 29 (Friday) at 5:00 p.m. [+ Fieldnotes/Personal Journal on interviewing process due at time of individual consultation]

**100 Attendance and Class Participation** (will be calculated on 10 classes; thus 10 pts./class). There are 11 classes; you may miss one with no penalty. No excuses will be accepted.

**100 Short Assignments** (late assignments turned into my box will not be accepted).

50     **3** Short written assignments on *Essie's Story* and **2** on *Life Story Interview*. 10 points @ (see syllabus for due dates)

Please put your name, the date, and Chapter # and Title at top of page

A. What is this Chapter or section about? Briefly (1/2 page single space) summarize the content.

B. Use a quote or two (give page number) to describe the one or two most important things you learned from this chapter or section. That is, what gave you pause: at what point did you stop reading and remark/think/question: that was important! that was interesting! (this can be on method or any component of content) (1/2 page: single space).

- 5 Edited transcription of Steppingstones Assignment II (for student exchange): Feb. 1
- 5 Steppingstones Assignment III (final): Feb. 8
- 10 Partially edited transcription of your first Interview: Feb. 8
- 20 Two Class Presentations. Each Presentation = 10 pts. Feb. 15/22 and April 18/25.
- 5 Polished Draft of Background/Introduction: March 7<sup>th</sup>
- 5 Polished Draft of Chapter One: March 21<sup>st</sup>

Grade	Points
A	400 - 360 (100-90%)
B	359 - 320 (89-80%)
C	319 - 280 (79-70%)
D	279 - 240 (69-60%)
F	239 - (below 60 %)

## Tentative Course Outline and Assignments

Assignments are listed on the day that they are due; Look ahead in syllabus

### Week #1

Jan. 11

#### **No class; professor out of country.**

- Read the syllabus carefully.
- Think about selecting a person whose life history you would like to write; you **MUST** make contact with prospective life history interviewee within the next week; explain nature of project. See "Student Fieldwork Approval Form" (in Miscellaneous folder)
- Read "The 50 Best Life Story Questions" (posted in Miscellaneous folder)
- Feel free to start reading (and writing assignments for) *Essie's Story* and *The Life Story Interview* (see syllabus below for details).

### Week #2

Jan. 18

#### **No class; Martin Luther King Day.**

- Must have met with professor no later than Jan 22 (Friday of this week). Email me for available times or stop in during office hours.

### Week #3

Jan. 25

#### **Introduction to Life History Method**

In-class: Steppingstone Exercise I (practice interviewing, transcribing, editing, etc.)

Assignment: *Essie's Story*: Introduction; pp. xi-xli. Write one page; single spaced; divided into two sections (see p. 3 of syllabus). 10 pts.

Assignment: *Life Story Interview*: Ch. 1-3; pp. 1-53. Write one page; single spaced; divided into two sections (see p. 3 of syllabus). 10 pts.

- Week #4**  
Feb. 1
- Life History Method: From Speech to Writing (Transcription to Text)**  
In-class: Steppingstone Exercise II – Exchange edited transcription with interview partner for additions, changes, etc. Incorporate suggestions into final draft due next week.
- Assignment: Transcribed AND EDITED draft of Steppingstone Interview (II) due, Write this as though it were a completed section of a life history. That is, delete ums/ands, add words and transitions for clarity, edit out your questions, make it flow while retaining the unique voice [style, flavor] of your interviewee. For example: My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and the steppingstone I want to share with you occurred during my senior year in high school in 20\_\_\_\_). 5 pts.
- Assignment: *Essie's Story*: Chapters 1-4; Appendix A (pp. 1-60; 159-162). Write one page; single spaced; divided into two sections (see p. 3 of syllabus). 10 pts.
- Week #5**  
Feb. 8
- Life History Method: From Speech to Writing (continued)**  
In-class: Steppingstone Exercise III – exchange final draft with your partner; “interviewee” will write a short comment on “interviewer’s” accuracy and wording. Hand in at end of class: (1) transcription with comment; (2) final draft with comments.
- Assignment: Final Draft of Steppingstone Assignment (III): 5 pts.
- Assignment: *Essie's Story*: Chapters 5-8; pp. 61-140. Write one page; single spaced; divided into two sections (see p. 4 of syllabus). 10 pts.
- Week #6**  
Feb. 15
- Life History Presentation #1**  
In-class: Presentation on First Interview (1/2 class; 10 pts.)
- Assignment: *Life Story Interview* Ch 4; pp. 54-76; (see p. 4 of syllabus). 10 pts; *Essie's Story*: Epilogue; pp. 141-157 (no written assignment on Epilogue).
- Week #7**  
Feb. 22
- Life History Presentation #1 (continued)**  
In-class: Presentation on First Interview (1/2 class; 10 pts.)  
Assignment: Partially edited transcript of your first hour +/- of interview; should be app. 10-20 double-spaced pages; 10 pts.
- Week #8**  
Feb. 29
- Life History: Unconventional Genre**  
In-class: *Persepolis* (film) and discussion of graphic novels and film.  
Assignment: Bring in one physical example (other than a published book) which exemplifies how people portray or remember a life or a segment of a life (yours or someone else's)
- Week #9**  
March 7
- Anthropological Importance of Your Introduction**  
In-class: Peer review of below.  
Assignment: Polished Draft of Introduction to your Life history (at least 4 pages); 5 pts.

**SPRING BREAK**

<b>Week #10</b> March 21	<b>Chapter One of Your Life History</b> <u>In-class:</u> Peer Review of below <u>Assignment:</u> Polished Draft of Chapter One of your life history; 5 pts.
<b>Week #11</b> March 28	<b>Progress Reports (shortened class meeting)</b> Individual Consultations (as per sign-up sheet)  You must bring fieldnotes/journal and Table of Contents with you to this individualized session.
<b>Week #12</b> April 4	<b>Progress Reports</b> Individual Consultations (as per sign-up sheet)  You must bring fieldnotes/journal and Table of Contents with you to this individualized session.
<b>Week #13</b> April 11	<b>Life History: Unconventional Genre</b> Documentary: <i>Jimda</i>
<b>Week #14</b> April 18	<b>Final Oral Presentation</b> (1/2 class; 10 pts.)
<b>Week #15</b> April 25	<b>Final Oral Presentation</b> (1/2 class; 10 pts.) <u>Assignment:</u> Completed Life History due by Friday, April 29 at 5:00 p.m.
<b>Week #16</b> May 3 <sup>rd</sup> at 10:45	<u>Tuesday of Finals Week</u> ; de-briefing; meet at my house [1315 Cranford Place] for brunch