

## **The Myth of Meritocracy - Paper 1 Ethnographic Exploration**

**Suggested length:** 5-7 pages (not including Works Cited page or Appendix)

**Primary Data:** interview data

**Secondary/Theoretical Material:** Course readings, class discussions

**Assignment Goals:** The goals of the assignment are to:

- (1) Design a research question and methodology based on an issue related to our course themes of educational equity or meritocracy
- (2) Collect interview data to explore the issue
- (3) Analyze, interpret, and draw conclusions from your data to develop your thesis
- (4) Write an argument that critically engages with the ideology of meritocracy to advance class discussion and engage with course material
- (5) Address issues of bias in your study design and interpretations and think critically of the challenges of human subject research

**Assignment Description:** This assignment asks you to design and carry out an ethnographic exploration (through interviews) to examine a topic related to the course content. You will then craft an original argument based on your data analysis.

**Format:** In your time at Duke, you are being socialized into an academic and disciplinary way of communicating and writing. Disciplinary formats are arbitrary and may vary across professors.

Some aspects of academic expectations include:

- ~12 pt. in a clear font, Double line spacing, ~one-inch margins all around
- Titled
- Header with your name, section number, and date of submission
- Save with a file name including your last name and the assignment type
- Number any papers longer than 1 page
- Proofread your paper

### **Building your assignment**

**Step 1: Find a topic:** Your project should begin with a topic that interests you and that you can explore through an interview methodology. The topic should relate to personal experiences with a facet of the ideology of meritocracy or equity. It can be tied to education, or the implication of meritocracy in other venues. Be creative!

Some examples include:

- The intersection of the ideology of meritocracy or related concepts/practices (such as affirmative action, standardized testing, admissions practices, legacies, model minorities) and identity variables (race, class, gender, religion, etc)
- The implication of the ideology of meritocracy on perceptions of particular groups (immigrants, low/high income, those who achieve more/less on the merit scale, etc)
- Legitimacy of privileges by particular groups (how do people explain their success/accomplishments)
- The impact of meritocracy on other avenues (sports, hiring decisions, forming study groups/friendships/dating, impact at work/in an office)
- Systemic reproductions of privilege (spaces where privilege/prestige remains with certain groups over others – consider insular groups like Greek life, religious spaces, or elite educational spaces)

**Step 2:** Once you have an issue, narrow it to your topic and add a guiding research question and significance. See *The Craft of Research* ch. 3 (Sakai: Resources: Writing Resources). Focus on sections 3.2, 3.3 and 3.4. You should be able to complete this formula:

“I am studying/examining \_\_\_\_\_ (topic)  
because I want to find out \_\_\_\_\_ (research Q)  
in order to help my reader understand \_\_\_\_\_ (significance)

**Step 3: Develop an interview-based method** to investigate that research question. Make sure that you have interview access to those people (either in person, or via technology – preferably audio & video technology). Aspects of your project plan include who you plan to interview, where/when interviews will be conducted, what specific questions you will ask (and potential follow-up questions), how you will protect the identity of participants, asking permission to record the interview, etc. Be creative with your interview methods – design case studies to discuss, make-up hypothetical scenarios to examine, etc. We will discuss a sample project methodology in class.

**Peer Review Workshop of Project Plan:** Your project plan will be peer workshoped either Thursday Jan 23 or Friday Jan 24 (you only have to attend once – Friday attendees will be selected schedule permitting). Your group will review your materials before the workshop, and during the session you will each have 10 minutes to get feedback on your project. Your peers can help you brainstorm ideas of who to interview, draft/critique questions, re-order your questions, give feedback on your methods, etc. I will provide you with a handout to help you prepare.

**Ethics of interviews:** This assignment is grounded in a careful attention to the experience of any involved subjects. This means thinking about how your project may be harmful or upsetting to your participants. Your participants should not be compelled to participate, so how might you find willing people? You will need to consider both the privacy of anyone you talk to, as well as ways that you can protect the confidentiality of the data you do collect (using pseudonyms, avoiding any direct or indirect variables that may give away identity, etc). To be respectful of your interviewees (and their time), limit interviews to 45 minutes.

**Step 4: Data collection.** You may begin your interviews after your methodology workshop. You may need to revise your methodology as you collect data. If your interviews are lengthy and rich, you may need fewer. If they are short and don’t give you a lot to work with, you may need more or need to revise the project. (Feel free to discuss with me if you have concerns). Complete at least 1-2 interviews by Tuesday Jan 28 and bring that data to class (recordings or transcripts), and at least 2-3 by Thursday Jan 30.

**Step 5: Analysis:** After you have collected some data, begin your analysis.

- What do you notice about the data?
- What patterns or themes emerge (what similarities or differences occur across respondents)?
- Which responses intrigue or surprise you (maybe expected a different answer)? Why?
- Were there questions that were difficult for respondents to answer and what do you notice about their responses?

This analysis will help you develop your thesis. We will work through some ways to do your analysis on Jan 30.

**Step 6: Write!:** You can be writing throughout the process – especially interesting ideas, catchy anecdotes, intriguing responses or reactions (by you or your interviewees). Once you have done enough analysis to develop a working thesis, think about what claims you can make and how your interviews can serve as evidence to support those. The argument structure worksheet can help you see how it all fits together. See Sakai: Resources: Writing Resources for this

worksheet. This outline may make it easier to write. We will discuss the paper format in more detail during the writing process.

**Step 7: Writing in community:** Writing is better when we get feedback from readers about where the argument is strong, what is unclear, and where to re-write/revise. You will have multiple opportunities for feedback. This includes a one-on-one conference with Dr. Welji about your first draft; reading a paper/having your paper reviewed in a large group workshop; and a small group peer review. See the timeline below for those details.

**Audience:** For this assignment, imagine your reader is a typical Duke undergraduate. Keep in mind that this audience will not be familiar with course readings, theory, or the approach of our class. Thinking about your audience will help you as you write, especially what your audience needs to have explained (course theory), what they might object to/argue against, and how to help them understand your conclusions.

**Coversheet:** Your final paper should include a coversheet (or coversheets) that reflects on your writing and revision process. Your reflection should touch on the following questions:

- What were the most challenging aspects of writing this paper? How did you overcome them?
- What do you feel are the strongest parts of the paper?
- How did you negotiate the revision process (peer and instructor feedback)? How did it help you improve your paper? What feedback did you take and why? What feedback did you ignore and why?
- What do you think you gained/learned/developed as a writer through this assignment?

**Works Cited Page:** Even though you are only required to cite from amongst the course readings, you should include a works cited page for all cited readings.

### **Writing Objectives and Grading:**

We will discuss grading during the course of the semester.

The goal of the paper is to craft an argument that uses interview data to answer a research question about experiences with meritocracy and equity. The goal of the grading is to assess your ability to think critically about your data and to build an argument. Your paper will be graded on how successfully it:

- Poses a significant research question around the issues of meritocracy with a clear, strong, and arguable thesis (as an answer)
- Makes organized and structured claims that are tied to the thesis and are supported with evidence from interviews and analysis of interviews.
- Demonstrates analysis and critical thinking about interviews, course content, and ideologies of meritocracy (beyond class discussion).
- Explains the reason we should care about your findings (significance).
- Reflects on the challenges of the project and potential bias.
- Shows improvement and engages with feedback.
- Engages the reader.