Proposing a Project for the JBS Ethnographic Research Program

The Ethnographic Research JBS differs from most of the others since it is organized your own particular proposed research project. This gives the student a large role in determining what shape the JBS will take, but it also means that some students might feel intimidated by the application project if they think they don’t have a good idea for a project, or have an idea but don’t know if it is workable.

Here are some steps you can take to develop or refine your research project:

Coming up with a question:
If you join the JBS, we will discuss this in much further detail. For the moment you just need to have a basic sense of something you want to find out about.

Examples (some adapted from previous senior theses and independent studies):

How do Mass Audubon programs teach urban children about nature?

Do first and second generation Chinese immigrants have different attitudes about childrearing?

Where do the different vegetables sold on Moody Street come from, and what can this tell us about labor and commodity production patterns in recent years?

How do businesses in the North End of Boston attract customers? What is the role of “authentic” Italian ethnicity in this process?

What are the economics of licensed clothing for Boston sports teams (an ethnography of Yawkey Way)?

How does a local museum present Boston history what is the role of gender, class, race, etc. in this process?

How do the ritual practices of a particular immigrant community compare with the same practices in the home country?

What medical resources do Dominican immigrants in Jamaica Plain use? Do they combine biomedical and so-called “traditional” medical resources, and if so, in what ways?

What do older Waltham residents (perhaps participants in the BOLLI program) think about intergenerational interaction in their communities?

And so on…
The project should be based in the Boston area. However, there will be funds available to all students for local transportation, as well as logistical support. So the project can be anywhere that is accessible by public transportation (including commuter rail) or by car (if you have access to a car). You needn’t limit yourself to Boston.

The project can be with an institution or with a “subject population” (the people you want to speak with) not directly linked to an institution. Each of these poses different opportunities and challenges:
Institution-based:

an institution or group-based project may require more preliminary work to establish access and clear any hurdles put in place by the organization itself. Professor Ferry can help with some of this logistical work, which should take place before the application deadline.

For instance, let’s say you’d like to study community-based agriculture in the Metrowest area. You would need to find out what organizations were involved in community-based agriculture, and contact them. You would explain that you hope to do a research project on CBA in the summer, and ask if they would be willing to let you participate and/or observe their activities. One thing you could do is offer to volunteer for one or more of these organizations as a way of giving back and also having an identifiable role during your fieldwork. If you receive some positive signs that one or more organizations would be willing to be involved, you should include this in your application.

If you can get access to one or more institutions, this can be a great help in your research, as it gives you a concrete place to go to everyday, and sometimes specific tasks or roles to fulfill, which can be extremely helpful.

Not institution-based:

If your project has a subject population in mind (older Waltham residents, Dominicans living in JP), you should still think about making contact with organizations that may help you meet the people you wish to meet. But it is less necessary to have explicit access for the application process. However, you should include in your application a few ideas of how you might get access (contact local senior centers, visit botánicas, interview doctors working in JP, etc).

This kind of project has the reverse benefits and challenges – it doesn’t depend on access from one or a few organizations, but it also doesn’t immediately provide a structure within which you can insert yourself.

Thus, the most successful projects probably combine some of both. But this is something that can be refined during the first part of the JBS.

***VERY IMPORTANT***

You may need to obtain permission to do your summer research from Brandeis’ Institutional Research Board, which is dedicated to the protection of human subjects. If needed, and if you are accepted into the program, Professor Ferry will work with you to get this permission before the end of the spring semester, so there will be no last-minute procedural obstacles. However, you should avoid proposing a project focused on obviously vulnerable populations, such as HIV+ patients, children, or prison inmates. If you propose a project that seems to pose an undue degree of risk to the participants (such as risks of legal, social, economic or psychological harm), we may ask you to tweak it before granting admission into the program.
Writing the proposal:

The proposal takes the form of a supplementary question on the general JBS application:

**Supplemental Application Piece [from online application]**

*Please describe in no more than 250 words your proposed research for the summer. The research should be in the Boston area, and should be something you could feasibly do in five weeks in July (eg. don't propose to study fans' responses to the Superbowl, since that takes place in February). If you have made any contacts with people or organizations related to your proposed research, please include that in your description.*

How do you get from your general idea and perhaps a couple of phone conversations with institutions or people to a “project proposal?” Your proposal should answer the following questions:

1. what do you I want to find out about?
2. why is this important (this can be general and/or preliminary, as we’ll spend a lot of time on this in the JBS coursework)?
3. what institutions, groups, people or events could help me find out about it?
4. have I contacted any of these institutions, groups or people? What did they say?
5. do I foresee any problems of access and how do I plan to address these?
6. What form will my 15-20 hours of fieldwork per week in the 2nd half of the JBS program take? What do I expect to do each day during that period?
7. what do I hope to use this research for (independent study, senior research, masters paper, etc)?

Since the proposal is only 250 words (about a page), you won’t have space to say a lot about each of these questions. Just a clear statement speaking to each will be sufficient.

You do not need to demonstrate knowledge of existing scholarly work on the questions you hope to pursue, although if there is something you have read that piqued your interest in the question, you may certainly include it. The proposal won’t be judged on your knowledge of the scholarly literature, but on the interest and feasibility of the project itself.