

Tracing Ancestry—The Ethnic Me

Developed by Carol C. Mukhopadhyay, Copyright 2006.

This activity was originally developed as a Term Paper for a lower division social science course on the cultural diversity of California but could easily be adapted to secondary school classes. Racial/ethnic are used as equivalent for purposes here.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR TERM PAPER, ‘THE ETHNIC ME’

Goals:

- To explore your own ethnic roots, including the ethnic background of your ancestors. EVERYONE has an ethnic group or groups.
- To examine the development of your own racial or ethnic identity as well as your attitudes towards other ethnic groups
- To identify key “turning points” in your development or “key incidents” that have affected your sense of identity (and of others’ identities)
- To place your own personal experiences within the broader context of what was occurring in the community or region where your or your ancestors lived

Format: The term paper will contain 3 substantive sections as well as a final section which discusses the sources you used to collect information in the paper.

Part I: Your Ethnic Roots

This should contain a brief (1-2 page) description of when your ancestors first came to the United States, where they came from, where they settled (when, where, why), and why they came (if you can get this information). Since you have several family members, you should note the order in which they came and what ties they already had in the U.S.

Part II: The Ethnic Identity and Experiences of 2 close relatives who are at least one generation older than you (e.g. parent, aunt, grandparent, great uncle)

In this section you are trying to find out about your relatives’ own sense of ethnic identity, how this ethnicity was expressed (e.g. in food habits, membership in clubs, language use, dress, etc.), key events in this person’s own ethnic awareness, including interactions with persons of other ethnic groups. To place this experience in perspective, you should also find out about the ethnic composition and role of ethnicity in the community in which your relative was raised. You can also explore attitudes and behavior regarding inter-ethnic or interracial friends, dating, and marriage, as well as any other significant events related to race/ethnicity. If there has been inter-ethnic or interracial dating and or marriage, what were the reactions of your informant, other family members, other people in the community?

Part III: The Development of Your Ethnic Awareness.

This will form the largest section of the paper. Try to organize it chronologically, around stages that reflect key “turning points” or “key incidents.” Be sure to discuss both your own sense of ethnicity (even if weakly developed) and your own relations/interactions/attitudes towards other groups throughout the course of your life.

You may want to include such things as:

- The degree to which your family resembled mainstream, Anglo, Protestant culture (e.g. food, clothing, language, recreation, religion, family relations, gender relations, other forms of expression) and, if not, how that made you feel
- The various places you lived, the ethnic composition of the communities, your direct interactions with people from other ethnic groups, your indirect awareness, through TV, videos, other mass media sources and institutions (school, religious groups), and the attitudes of others around you. Think again about key experiences that shaped your attitudes and views
- Comparison of your own sense of ethnic identity with that of others in your family (immediate and extended family).
- Comparison of your own attitudes about inter-ethnic dating and marriage with other family members; if there were conflicts, how they were handled
- Your feelings/fears/curiosity/stereotypes about other ethnic groups as well as your own
- Whether and how your own ethnic awareness has changed over time (how, why, when)
- What larger events were occurring in society (local, U.S., the world) during your life that might have affected your own experiences and attitudes

Sources of Data: [some examples]

1. Oral History (ethnohistory): talking with relatives, friends, etc.
 - Formulate a list of topics about which you want information
 - Use this as a general guide in your conversations with others
 - Take notes either during the conversation or as soon as possible afterwards. Also note any new areas which merit future conversations with this person.
2. Your Own Memories and Reflections.
 - Start trying to remember your past and key events or incidents
 - Write down as many things as you can—a retrospective diary!
 - Make a list of things you want to remember, by searching your own memory and by using other people close to you, or other sources of information (your old diaries, or memorabilia)
3. Family Records (including photo and other memorabilia; naturalization papers or military records; birth certificates, old letters, marriage records, newspaper clippings, family heirlooms, etc.
4. Historical Documents. [often available on the internet/websites as well as in libraries.

- Federal, state, local, governments are an incredibly rich sources of all kinds of documents on the general period you are concerned with, for the specific communities in which you or family members have resided. In addition, old magazines, newspapers, pamphlets, TV and radio guides, films provide information.
- Other records: religious, social, immigrant, labor groups; books on life in the community, particularly those published in years close to the period you are interested in; other regional histories
- Old phone directories; city directories; maps of the community/with street names, etc.
- Old textbooks and other school materials used in the historical period that is of interest to you.

Observation

Observing ethnic traces, clusters, and other evidences of ethnicity in your relatives and in the various communities you have resided in, when available.

- Look around and notice ethnic composition, residential patterns, ethnic shops, cemeteries, social clusters in school (cafeteria, playground, other social events),
- Economy: notice hiring practices, ethnic composition of recreational areas, of political arenas, of religious organization, of other activities
- Other Sources: use your imagination

Part IV. Sources Used.

Be specific and keep a field log of sources used. Specify each individual you spoke with (including their name and relationship to you), how much time you spent with them. Record other sources of data you used and how you got it (e.g. family records, ethnic newspaper from your home town, U.S. Govt Census records—be specific as to volume or web-source used).

The largest segment of your paper will be based upon oral history and personal recollections. You should, however use at least some other sources to substantiate your memories and the memories of those you interviewed.

For example, you should find some data on the ethnic composition of one of the communities you lived in (use government records or other reliable data sources). Superior papers will, of course, go beyond these minimum requirements.

Optional: You may want to construct a “kinship” or genealogical chart of your primary ancestors and key relatives. This would be a nice device for summarizing the information in Part I. It would also give you a nice graphic summary of your ethnic origins.

Length: 2000-2500 words (typed; double-spaced; edited; keep back-up file)

Grading: Based on effort and thought that went into the paper, organization of material into a coherent and meaningful document, the use of historical and other documentation to supplement personal experiences, and overall writing style and editing.

You should write at least 1-2 rough drafts that you edit to produce your final paper.

BE CREATIVE...within this general structure.