

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Overall grade boundaries

| | | | | | |
|--------------------|-------|--------|---------|---------|---------|
| Grade: | E | D | C | B | A |
| Mark range: | 0 - 7 | 8 - 15 | 16 - 22 | 23 - 28 | 29 - 36 |

The range and suitability of the work submitted

In reading over the comments of examiners and senior examiners for May 2012, it becomes evident that the submitted extended essays are varied. This variety accounts for a significant difference in degrees of success. As has been true in previous sessions, a large amount of essays submitted for the subject were not anthropologically grounded, nor did they present anthropological approaches or focus. This remains to be one of the main reasons for underperformance in a lot of essays.

Many candidates are not able to address a research question suitable for the subject, or frame their arguments by referring to anthropological theories, concepts, sources or methodology. Consequently, their chances to sustain a good essay are already limited. Too often an essay which shows evidence of hard work and sincere effort receives significantly lower marks than might have been expected by both the candidate and supervisor. The lack of a specific anthropological focus hinders an essay's possibility of attaining high levels of achievement.

Unfortunately, despite warnings, it remains clear that many schools continue to permit candidates who do not take the course as their group 3 choice, to write essays on the subject.

A significant proportion of essays should have been submitted under a different subject. Some essays appear to have been submitted with the assumption that the subject is a catch-all category for essays that would have a difficult time fitting anywhere else. Social and cultural anthropology is a discipline with its own goals, methods and ways of posing questions, and common sense is no substitute for background knowledge on the subject.

Some frequent choices which have often led to weaker essays include addressing a "social problem" and relying too strongly on subjective assertions, value judgments or common sense. In some cases, the issue presented could be suitable for a social and cultural anthropology essay with the proper analytical framework. Unfortunately, these essays frequently advance polemical arguments, offer opinions, and propose prescriptions. A few of these essays present unacceptable research questions which are based on moral judgments, irrelevant issues or even prejudice.

A large proportion of essays address topics in popular culture. These may include hip hop music; social networks; media, fashion and women; sports and life stories of popular figures. Again, some of these could have resulted in successful essays if dealt with appropriately. However because of the lack of anthropological background in how social and cultural

anthropologists approach these topics, essays that focus on popular culture tend to be unsuccessful.

In contrast to the above, it is worth noting that candidates producing suitable essays of an anthropological approach are very often successful. These essays allow candidates to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of the method and aims of the discipline.

Some examples of successful essays range from classic issues of anthropological concern such as Malinowski's theory on the utilization of magic and its contemporary application; or the analysis of the ritual of carnival from a symbolic approach; to more contemporary interests such as an examination of the Orientalist discourse present in the image of Islam in the media or an ethnographic account about the dialogue between third generation Turkish immigrants and the Flemish community in Ghent.

Globalization and modernity continue to produce interesting investigations strongly related to the candidates' personal concerns and experiences. Some examples include the negotiation of cultural identity in bi-cultural contexts, global and local interactions focused on a grounded analysis of Japanese hip hop, and an analysis of the ethnocentric bias in the views of western feminists on genital cutting.

Some essays approached their topics from a diachronic perspective: a study about the 19th century transition of the Maasai to agricultural based livelihoods; the influence of the United Fruit Company on a Caribbean community, or the memories of violence in Colombia through testimonies of a local community. Gender issues appear to be another area of interest to candidates: an ethnographic account of Roller Derby, drawing from post Feminist theories; the changing economic role of women in Nigerian markets.

These essays were successful not because they simply poured ethnographic content into established theoretical moulds, but because they showed initiative in demonstrating how topics of interest to candidates might be approached anthropologically. Also, these candidates were successful because they produced balanced, nuanced arguments, bringing in critical perspectives.

Candidate performance against each criterion

Criterion A: research question

As stated above, arriving at an appropriate, anthropologically grounded research question proves to be a challenge and bears consequences on the essay as a whole. A large proportion of candidates failed to present sufficiently focused research questions, although only a few proposed inappropriate topics. It was occasionally the case that the research question was stated in the abstract, but was not presented and addressed in the introduction as required by the criterion.

Criterion B: introduction

Most candidates did not adequately establish an anthropological context for their research questions. The most successful essays were able to frame the research question in an anthropological context, relating it to existing knowledge on the topic, and defining leading

concepts. Poorer essays tended to introduce personal opinions or irrelevant arguments in the introduction.

Criterion C: investigation

The general lack of explicitly anthropological approaches and the lack of resort to anthropological sources limit the marks which could be awarded under this criterion. The more successful essays showed evidence of satisfactory planning and drew from appropriate sources, whether focusing on ethnographic materials or analyzing a topic from a theoretical or comparative perspective. In less successful cases, poor organization with regard to research procedure commonly called the effectiveness of their planning into question. Many essays did not sufficiently place their data in context.

Criterion D: knowledge and understanding of the topic studied

Without an explicit anthropological approach and the demonstration of a “sufficient range of appropriate resources”, knowledge and understanding of the topic studied will be limited. A minority of candidates showed that they had done a great deal of academic research relevant to their topic, but in most cases, this research was not relevant to anthropology. In some cases, superficial academic knowledge was demonstrated. In a few cases, essays were based primarily on personal opinion, inappropriate sources, or very selective research that was not critical in nature.

Criterion E: reasoned argument

A number of essays demonstrated appropriate use of resources to construct well-organized, coherent arguments, while many presented straightforward or narrative accounts. Though only a few candidates supported their essays with anthropological concepts and theories (criterion D), many were able to present an argument, supported by some data. In very few cases was anthropology made relevant to the argument, meaning that the marks remained at the lower end.

Criterion F: application of analytical and evaluative skills

Only the most successful candidates managed to move beyond mere description, offering anthropologically sound generalizations, explanations of the data and discussion of underlying patterns of an anthropological nature. Along with criteria D and G, criterion F requires a sound anthropological approach. A significant number of essays received low grades in this criterion.

Criterion G: use of language

Very few candidates received marks on this criterion given that most essays were not made relevant to anthropology. The most successful candidates were able to effectively use terminology specific to the discipline. However, some candidates inserted anthropological terms, phrases, or authors in their introductions, usually in a superficial way, and then failed to use them to build an analytical framework. It is a problem when concepts are used as if they were self-evident or unproblematic and do not require definition. An enduring shortcoming of extended essays is the failure to define concepts, so that doubt remains as to the candidate’s understanding of the concepts.

Criterion H: conclusion

Most candidates attempted a conclusion that was relevant to their essay. Very few of these were solidly related to the evidence presented, nor did they lead to new unresolved questions. Many essays merely summarized the preceding argument. A few essays treated the conclusion as an extension of the analysis, inappropriately introducing new material. A number of essays concluded with value judgments, sometimes polemical in nature, and frequently with prescriptions, which is often the case with essays examining social problems. Successful essays showed how the analysis bore directly on the research question, or presented, in the words of the criterion, “a new synthesis in the light of the discussion.”

Criterion I: formal presentation

The majority of essays did fairly well against this criterion. A minority of essays were deficient in one or more elements, such as missing page numbers, or vague tables of contents. The most common shortcomings concerned inappropriate and/or inconsistent citation styles, and poorly organized bibliographies.

Criterion J: abstract

Almost all candidates provided an abstract. Many of these contained the three elements listed in the criterion. In less successful cases, the candidate presented concluding remarks and sometimes the research question, but did not outline the method of investigation.

Criterion K: holistic judgment

Many candidates demonstrated that they are potentially capable academics, showing a passion and depth of insight for the topics they studied. The extent to which this was well supported with academic research varied. Very few candidates were able to link their essay to anthropology. If their topics were not appropriate to anthropology or their approaches were marred by subjective judgments – as happened in some cases - credits for this criterion remained in the lower end.

Recommendations for the supervision of future candidates

Overall, the essays demonstrated that there are many IB candidates who are capable of writing quality research papers. It is therefore of paramount importance that supervisors make sure that candidates are able to link their essays to the subject, so their efforts may be rewarded.

Supervisors need to ensure that candidates are prepared to write an essay in the subject, selecting topics appropriate to the discipline, and using ethnography and anthropological concepts and theory as a part of the investigation and analysis. The most important task of the supervisor concerns guiding the candidate. Candidates should be guided with regards to the selection of appropriate, significant, and feasible topics, which help the candidate in turn develop a well-focused research question within the discipline. Finding the appropriate research question requires careful consideration. Sometimes, candidates are inclined to address personal concerns or interests in their essays. This could often lead to a strong commitment to the project on the candidate's part, but all too often it also leads to descriptive,

uncritical, and non-anthropological exposition. Also, choosing to focus on social problems is often an expression of sincere interest on the part of candidates, but usually this has resulted in loss of connection with anthropology. Supervisors need to ensure that very early on in their research process; candidates connect their substantive interests to appropriate analytical tools. As this session clearly shows, candidates whose choice of topic was appropriate to the subject, and are familiar with social and cultural anthropology as a discipline, tend to produce successful essays.

The supervisor has the responsibility to guide candidates through an understanding of the criteria which will be applied. Frequent reference to the assessment criteria by both the supervisor and the candidate will help keep a sharper focus on the project

The development of a proper anthropological argument in the extended essay requires the candidates to demonstrate understanding of the concepts they employ, hence, candidates should be frequently reminded that most anthropological terms and concepts are problematic in meaning, and require explicit definition.

Candidates should also be provided with guidance in terms of how to reference accurately and consistently and to recognize what constitutes proper academic sources; both in terms of printed and online sources. The internet is obviously a great convenience, but candidates too often lack the perspective to evaluate resources, which of course vary tremendously in quality.

Supervisors need to ensure that candidates understand the function of the abstract and include the three key required elements in order to receive the full two marks on this criterion.

Supervisor comments are usually very helpful in understanding the process by which the candidate has come to decide on the topic. These comments provide valuable insight into the process of study and development of a candidate through the course of the EE. This is particularly helpful when assessing criterion K.

It is important to ensure that candidates conducting fieldwork research are aware of the nature of ethical practice in the Diploma Programme.