

University of California, Irvine  
The Center for Ethnography

cordially invites you to

**EXPERIMENTAL SYSTEMS  
AS ETHNOGRAPHIC MODALITY  
CONFERENCE**

**MARCH 14-15, 2008**

**SOCIAL SCIENCE PLAZA B – ROOM 1208 – 9:00AM-5:00 PM**

The following is the developmental proposal for the workshop of this title to be held on March 14-15, 2008. This workshop extends concerns of the large conference that the Center co-sponsored in the spring of 2007 on the concept of experimental system in the work of Hans-Jorg Rheinberger and its applications.

This event brings together advanced and former graduate students who are completing or have recently completed dissertations and senior scholars who have found the idea of experiment useful in developing their ethnographic projects. Rheinberger's concept is merely the launching point of this conference in order to explore the potentials and limits of the uses of the idea of experiment in conceiving ethnographic research.

This workshop speculates upon particular ethnographic modalities that might be derived from Hans-Jorg Rheinberger's notion of experimental systems. It builds upon a conference co-sponsored by the Center in the spring of 2007, which took as its focal point Rheinberger's description of specific tools and methods that were developed in biology in the middle of the 20th century in order to study cellular and molecular phenomena for which existing methods of experimentation were found inadequate. Experiment in this case involves thinking of a research project in terms of a very controlled, almost simulated, research design; yet one that is paradoxically controlled to generate or be attentive to its own destabilization; to an acknowledgment of unprecedented events in the world that the research design lends itself to following; to what Kim Fortun would call an open-systems analysis. What makes such ethnography experimental is a carefully controlled open-endedness that already, in its design, exceeds the bounds of its own control. Such a conceptualization of ethnographic method is deeply in conversation with, for instance, Marilyn Strathern's description of ethnography as a practice that involves gathering more information that we know what to do with, as also an activity that is constituted by the constant generation of surprise.

An experimental ethnography mirrors an experimental biology, which, after Rheinberger, might be conceived as disciplined practices that set out to understand life, knowing all the while that it is an objective that will itself come under erasure during the course of the research. As with experimental biology, ethnography often progresses by presuming to raise more questions than it can answer. The appeal to experiment in ethnography recasts theoretical attention on the variety and kinds of data out of which ethnography fashions claims to knowledge nowadays. It is precisely this working through of material, as it gets developed in the course of ethnographic projects, that has lacked reflection and explicit discussion since the shifts, from the 1980s, in the topics and circumstances in terms of which ethnography is now undertaken and taught.

Experimental ethnography as we explore it in this workshop focuses on forms and practices of knowledge-making as the primary object of analysis, though it might be relevant across the spectrum of topics and emerging areas of interest of contemporary ethnographic research. The workshop will center around the work of graduate students and post-doctoral fellows (which will be pre-circulated). It is free and open to the public. It is, however, also required as part of the Fieldwork Methods course (Anthropology 208A) being taught this quarter by George Marcus and Kaushik Sunder Rajan, so discussion will center around themes and conversations generated within this course.

For people interested in having access to pre-circulated material, please contact: Sandy Cushman at 949-824-3344 or [scushman@uci.edu](mailto:scushman@uci.edu)