Independent Study Proposal

"The Study of Pain in Anthropology"

The objective of this 3 credit independent study is to better understand the anthropology of pain. This will be achieved in two ways. First, a literature review of research in the social sciences will be conducted. While the overall literature on pain and pain management is overwhelmingly produced by medical practitioners, there is a small but solid amount of materials originating from the social sciences and, especially since the 1990s, an increasing amount of work in the ethnography of pain. Second, ethnographic observations will be conducted by shadowing health care professionals—as part of volunteer engagement in pre-professional training in pain clinics—in order to gain an insider’s view of the clinical environment where pain is not just a symptom but the object at hand. The field portion of this study will focus on the communicative matrix of diagnosis (a dynamic, multi-sited process) as it relates to the narrative adopted by the clinicians, in terms of content analysis and delivery strategy.

The initial half of the semester will be dedicated to the literature review, culminating in a 10-20 page paper explicating the results. The reason that the literature review will be completed first, despite being the major assignment of the course, is to better set the ethnographic portion of the course in context. The latter half of the semester will comprise of bi-weekly submitted field reports (4 total) to emphasize the process of ethnography and its construction as it relates to the existing literature. Each journal entry, thus, will end in a short analysis of the field observations in the context of the reviewed literature. The culminating assignment will be a concise summative piece in which conclusions derived from the two projects are presented and discussed, and recommendation for further field research on the topic are offered.