

21A.801 PARTICIPANT-OBSERVATION ASSIGNMENT

This assignment asks you to collect and interpret information about an event, activity or social space through participant-observation. Do *not* use any interview techniques to learn about the occasion you have chosen, although supplementary knowledge you have from prior experience may be included in your discussion *if* you are careful to distinguish between information acquired from your observation and prior knowledge. *Please confirm your proposed venue with me before you begin!* (it may be necessary for you to receive permission from authorities to make your observations). Also review Spradley on “Doing Participant-Observation” before you begin.

Here are some suggestions for research sites:

1. A large, complex **event** that occurs only occasionally — e.g., a political rally or street festival. Or a special-occasion ritual event that takes place regularly such as a religious celebration, a wedding, a graduation, etc.
2. Behavior typical of certain **situations** — e.g., mornings in a convenience store, performing jury duty, riding public transportation, shopping in a grocery store, visiting a museum, touring typical tourist destinations, attending a theater performance, etc.

This assignment is weighted more to your analysis, your “read” of the situation. Show me that you’re acquiring the skills of “seeing” as an ethnographer! To be sure you gather enough data to generate significant opportunity for analysis, here are some things to keep in mind while taking **field notes**:

1. Describe the scene, paying attention all sensory perception. If it seems useful, draw a map of the setting, indicating the position and movement of persons. Who is present? Who is absent?
2. Look for the structure of the situation: are the participants differentiated from each other, as, e.g., leaders and followers, or those with more or less status? Is status differentiation or equality represented in dress, behavior, symbolic markers, differing prerogatives? How do people interact with each other?
3. Are there any elements of ritual, either formal or informal, in what you observe? How do you interpret the meaning and effect of these ritualized behaviors?
4. What appear to be the unspoken – or spoken -- rules that underlie this event or activity? Is there any mechanism for correcting a distortion or a mistake? Is there any formal authority? To what extent is it respected? Do people seem to follow the rules, explicit or tacit, or do they bend them?
5. Is the event characterized more by order and agreement or conflict and disorder?

6. Do all participants seem to be deriving the same benefits or satisfactions from participation? Do they have means of communicating positive or negative judgments about the situation?
7. Are there stylized actions or modes of self-presentation that seem characteristic of this event? Do the participants seem aware of them? What purpose do they serve?
8. What shared values or assumptions are reinforced (or contested) through this event?

PLEASE pick an **interesting** subject — something you're genuinely curious about — but also one that is *not* so familiar to you. I strongly recommend that you **venture off** the MIT campus. If you do remain on campus, observe something unfamiliar to yourself.

Turn in:

your **raw field notes** as well as your post-hoc **typed elaboration** of your handwritten notes
 your **summary, descriptive write-up** of the observation (scene-setting and highlights)
 your **analysis and interpretation of the scene** (using the above questions as a guide)
 your **self-critique** — be sure to touch on both **epistemological** and **ethical** issues of research

e.g., to what extent did you 'participate' and to what extent did you 'observe'? How did the two inform each other? Comment on the effect (hopefully minimal) of your presence and the degree to which you understood the activity without having directly questioned the participants. What do you think you might have misunderstood or missed?

4 or more typewritten pages **not** including field notes.

Due Session 13 in class.

Specific examples from previous years:

Boston Symphony concert
 Ice hockey as a spectator sport
 Ballroom dance competition
 Homeless persons around Central Square and pedestrians' interactions (and avoidance)
 Shopping at Filene's Basement
 Fraternity party
 Sunday services at the St. Paul's African Methodist Episcopal Church
 The waiting room at Massachusetts General Hospital
 Hotel lobby
 MIT Blood Drive
 Subway riding during peak and off-peak times
 Use of public space in a coffee shop/train station

other suggestions: food bank or soup kitchen; courthouse; walking around a very wealthy and/or impoverished neighborhood of Boston; a college tour of a school *other* than MIT

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

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