Overview Participant Observation Project

You will be doing a Participant Observation Project for class.

You will be observing humans and writing, **in great detail,** what you witness and then formulating questions and ideas for continued research based on these observations.  This is **NOT** an experiment.  You are **NOT** testing a hypothesis or trying to answer a question. Instead, you are trying to get an overall feeling and understanding for a particular event, activity, or ritual.

Participant Observation is one of the hallmark fieldwork methodologies used by anthropologists. When doing participant observation, the anthropologist joins those he or she is studying to experience and witness their lives.  For example, Bourgois and Schonberg, in their research on homeless heroin addicts, hung out with them on the streets. Colin Turnbull lived with a band of BaMbuti Pygmies in the Ituri Forest. Clair Sterk stood on the street corners with prostitutes. And in my own research on blindness in Malawi, I joined people during countless visits to medical clinics, sat in on eye surgeries, and hung out with people in their homes and villages. All of us took detailed notes, asked questions, sometimes photographed or filmed people, and sometimes participated in activities.

Participant observation is often the first fieldwork activity conducted by an anthropologist. The data we gain from our observations is used to construct logical interviews, surveys, questionnaires, and to develop unique research methodologies suitable to the specific research endeavor.

The purposes of this project are to:

* Improve your understanding of one of the most important fieldwork methodologies used by anthropologists.
* Develop and hone your critical observation and analytical skills.
* Enable you to delve into an issue of interest to you.
* Get you out of the books and off the computer, into the real world, utilizing skills and concepts you have learned in class.  For example, you will need to practice cultural relativism when doing your observation in order to see what people are doing, not what you think people are doing.

This module explains the project and its requirements and contains the two assignments for the project:

* Participant Observation Project Part 1: This assignment requires you to answer a few questions about your plan for your project.
* Participant Observation Project Part 2: This is your actual report on your observation.

Read the following information on the project so that you may plan your research.

Instructions: Participant Observation Project

Participant Observation Project, Part 1

You need to decide what you wish to observe.  You can literally observe anything that involves people. However, there are some guidelines that will make your participant observation experience easier:

* **Choose something that is fairly easy for an outsider to join.** For example, it is easy for an outsider to attend most religious services as a guest or to attend a large funeral service, even if you don’t know the deceased. However, it is probably inappropriate and awkward to crash a wedding. And it is very difficult, and will take more time than you have for this class, to gain the rapport and trust needed to observe drug dealers plying their trade (plus I don’t want you getting arrested or hurt).
* **Choose something that involves more than one person.**  While anthropologists certainly end up observing individuals, it is best, for your first observation, to observe two or more people interacting. Observations of people interacting or performing a ritual are usually more fun, interesting, and easier to observe. Observing and making sense of individual behavior requires a deeper understanding of the culture or activity and is best left for later in a fieldwork project.
* **Choose something that is guaranteed to occur or have the flexibility to keep trying until it does occur.** For example, you may wish to observe children playing at a park but find that there aren’t any children there when you scheduled time to observe. Make sure you have time to try again or choose something, like a scheduled sporting event, that will definitely occur at the specified time.
* **Choose something that interests you.**  It is hard to write in great detail about something that bores you.

Once you have decided what you want to observe, you need to submit Participant Observation Plan so that I can approve your plan. If I decide there need to be modifications to your plan, I will let you know in my comments and allow you to adjust your plan in order to earn full points for this portion of the project.

Participant Observation Project, Part 2

Once you have submitted Part 1 and received my feedback, you then need to conduct your observation.  You must conduct your observation for a minimum of 1 hour.  You may do multiple observations, but one of the observations must last at least 1 hour.

Recording Your Observation

You must record your observations in some way.  How you do this will depend on what you have chosen to observe. For some, it will be simple enough to take hand written notes. Others might find typing notes on a computer or cell phone less obtrusive. Others may need to record the observation. You may need to be creative in how you take notes. For example, when I observed an institutionalized elderly woman who would leave the facility to beg for cigarette money in downtown San Francisco, I couldn’t sit and take notes or record her. It would have been too disruptive to her panhandling. I bought a newspaper and pretended I was doing the crossword puzzle, sitting off to the side of her, while she begged. In this way, no one noticed me or even realized I was with her and I was able to witness and hear her interactions with passersby.

Writing Fieldnotes

Once you have finished your observation, you need to write up your field notes.  These notes will include all of the following information:

1. Date, time, and location of observation.
2. Short statement of what was being observed.
3. Detailed description of location/site of observation.
4. Chronological, detailed description of everything that happened during the observation.
5. What questions do you have about what you observed?  What additional research would you consider doing to answer these questions?  What else could you observe to further understand the people or activity you observed?
6. From this exercise, what have you learned about participant observation specifically and about anthropological field research in general?

Your detailed description of what is happening should allow the reader to feel and experience what was happening. By “detailed” description, I mean you need to describe everything you hear, see, smell, feel, and taste.  This level of detail is necessary because you, as a researcher, never know what will be relevant as the research unfolds. Everything is potentially relevant, so it must all be recorded. The level of detail you provide in your fieldnotes will account for the bulk of your grade.

In Bourgois and Schonberg’s ethnography, *The Righteous Dopefiend*, you will find several examples of excerpts from fieldnotes. Colin Turnbull’s ethnography is essentially the conversion of his fieldnotes into a ethnography. Whenever he describes something the BaMbuti are doing, he is taking this from his fieldnotes.  Refer to these ethnographies for examples, but also note that their published fieldnotes do not have the level of detail you will need in the notes you submit to me. They’ve edited their notes to remove detail that is not relevant to the point they are making in their publication.

Finally, the single greatest error that the majority of students make in writing up their fieldnotes is not writing detailed descriptions of the people being observed. Students often do a great job of writing about what the people are doing, but their descriptions of the people are often limited to the sex and approximate age of the person being observed.  Your notes should include a detailed description of the people including sex, age, ethnicity, clothing, hair style, body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, etc.  This level of detail is critically important because it gives us clues about the people and their place within a society.

# Participant Observation Plan Due 7/17 11:59 pm

1. What do you plan to observe?
2. Why have you chosen this particular observation?
3. When and where will the observation will occur?
4. How do you plan to take notes? (e.g., pen and paper, cell phone, computer) Will you be able to take notes during the observation or will you need to write them down immediately after the observation?
5. What do you need to do to prepare and gain permission, if necessary, to conduct the observation—do you need to ask someone if you can observe them?  Do you need permission to attend a ritual?