

Ethnographic Observation Reflection

In this assignment, you will practice some of the anthropological research and analysis methods we are learning about in class. You will conduct ethnographic observations of a specific cultural ritual for at least one hour, cumulatively. You will take detailed field notes on what you observe, and then analyze them in a short ethnographic reflection paper that works to “make the familiar strange,” much like Horace Miner’s account of the Nacirema. Finally, you will reflect on your own experience conducting anthropological observations, including any insights you had or methodological dilemmas you encountered.

You may choose from the following cultural rituals to observe:

- A sporting event.
- A family meal.
- A meal at a fast food restaurant.
- Shopping at a mall or similar space.
- Grocery shopping.
- Exercising at the gym.
- If you have a compelling reason to conduct an observation of another sort of ritual, come see me and I am likely to make an exception.

You will turn in two documents: fieldnotes and a short ethnographic essay:

1) Fieldnotes

You will take handwritten fieldnotes during your observation, using techniques outlined in the Emerson et al. reading. You will turn in your handwritten fieldnotes, which can be messy but need to be detailed enough to reflect the minimum hour of observation. Please take a photo of your fieldnotes and include it as an attachment to your assignment and bring a hard copy of your fieldnotes to class on Thursday. If that is inconvenient for whatever reason, just bring a hardcopy to class on Tuesday.

2) Ethnographic essay

In this essay, first you will describe the cultural ritual you observed, imagining that you are explaining this to someone from another culture who has never heard of the ritual and has never taken part. Consider this parody of preparing breakfast as an example of making the familiar unfamiliar:

Every morning, the reigning patriarch, as if in from the hunt, shouts from the kitchen, “How many people would like a poached egg?” Women and children take turns saying yes or no.

In the meantime, the women talk among themselves and designate one among them the toastmaker. As the eggs near readiness, the reigning patriarch calls out to the designated toast maker, “The eggs are about ready. Is there enough toast?”

“Yes,” comes the deferential reply. “The last two pieces are about to pop up.” The reigning patriarch then proudly enters, bearing a plate of poached eggs before him. Throughout the course of the meal, the women and children, including the designated

toastmaker, perform the obligatory ritual praise song, saying, "These sure are great eggs, Dad."¹

In this passage, the author makes the familiar unfamiliar and, in the process, uncovers power and gender relationships. The father is the leader while the women take on roles as helpers and praise singers. By employing parody, the author allows the reader to see it as an outsider might.

In your reflection, you should consider the following questions, but be creative if other questions come to the fore for you.

1. What are people doing?
2. Is there variation in how people carry out or engage in the ritual?
3. Is there a prescribed sequence to the actions?
4. What behavior appears normal in this ritual? What behaviors appear abnormal?
5. How are normal/abnormal behaviors policed?
6. Are rules about how to carry out this ritual enforced?
7. What are the different roles people play?
8. Are there key symbols in this ritual?
9. Are power relations evident? How so?

After describing the ritual and analyzing it, you will briefly reflect upon the process of conducting the observation and writing about it.

1. What did you learn by conducting these observations?
2. What surprised you about the process?

The ethnographic reflection and the fieldnotes will be due on Canvas on **Monday, September 9 at 9pm**. Hard copy of fieldnotes due in class on Thursday, September 12.

Post to the Discussion within your Learning Community. For full credit you need to write two thoughtful and respectful comments on the responses of other members of your group before class on Thursday.

500 word minimum.

10 possible points.

Due Monday September 9, 9pm.

References

Stone Sunstein, B. and C. Chiseri-Strater. 2002. *Fieldworking: Reading and Writing Research*, 2nd edition. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, p.8.

Miner, Horace. 1956. "Body Ritual Among the Nacirema." *American Anthropologist*, 58, no. 3: 503-507.

Emerson, Robert M., Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw. 2011. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.