

## **Comm 2525, Fall 2013**

### **Assignment #2: Ethnographic Exercise (Due 10/31)**

#### **15% of the grade**

This exercise is intended to give you a taste of the kind of work ethnographers do, both in observing in the field and writing up those observations.

You will:

- Carefully read the assignment sheet.
- Choose an event or activity to observe and, ideally, to participate in at some level. This must be an event taking place in “real-life”, not online. The event or activity may be quite simple, common, small, or frequent, or it may be elaborate, unusual, and different from your own cultural tradition.
- Take notes during the event, focusing on the questions below.
- Reflect on your notes. Make a copy of the notes and hand them in with the assignment.
- Revise your notes into a 5-6 page set of observations and reflections which include a commentary and analysis of the event or activity you observed.

#### **Goals for Assignment**

- Familiarize students with the practical work of ethnography.
- Practice observation in “real life” settings to prepare for “online” observation.
- Practice taking fieldnotes.
- Practice making a commentary on observations—in other words, analysis.

#### **Picking a Fieldsite**

You cannot do this assignment in groups. You must pick your own fieldsite. Don't pick a fieldsite you are intimately familiar with (such as your workplace), as you will already know things about the interpersonal dynamics and culture, which will affect your conclusions.

Also consider the following:

- Don't bite off more than you can chew. A multi-day folk festival with dozens of vendors and performers and hundreds or thousands of attendees is too much for one short exercise. If you plan to attend a large event, consider stationing yourself at one place (an information booth, a vendor, a kids' area, etc.) and observing interactions there for a period of time.
- Bite off enough for a good chew. An event where most people are quietly listening to a speaker or performer will have little interaction for you to observe; a meeting of a club or

religious group, where people have intimate and multi-layered relationships with one another, offers considerable depth.

- Be considerate and sensitive to the people you are observing. The intent of the exercise is to watch how people interact in real life. If you're intruding on personal moments or creeping people out, you'll not only be a poor ambassador for Fordham and for the social scientific enterprise – you'll likely not get very good data anyway.
- Consider whether the site you'd like to observe has special issues of access. Is it a closed session in which note-taking may be frowned upon? Is it a group of people who may be so suspicious of your alien presence that they will behave oddly? Since you don't have weeks or months to gain access to a fieldsite, pick one in which you can be relatively sure you'll be immediately welcomed, or at least tolerated.
- Think about your own distance – or lack thereof – from the event you're observing. If it's a sporting event in which you have a strong personal stake, you may not be able to concentrate on ethnographic observation at all. If it's an event and/or group with which you share almost no common frame of reference, you won't be able to decipher much in a short observation time. If it's something you're so familiar with that it's second nature (say, your home church), you may not be able to "see" it at all.

## **Preparing**

Once you've chosen a fieldsite, plan ahead so that your time observing is productive.

- Plan to take notes, lots of them. Take a good notebook (hardbound if you won't be sitting at a table or desk) and multiple pens or pencils. Seems obvious, but important.
- You may also want to take a tape recorder or digital recorder to help you catch anything you may miss with notes. Don't use this as a substitute for note-taking. Even if you're recording, keep observing. You're freed from writing down exact quotes, so you can spend your time noting gestures, expressions, and physical surroundings.
- Think about how much you'd like to participate while doing your observation, but leave some flexibility for decisions while you're there. Remember that you have to strike a balance with which you feel comfortable: total participation likely means you won't take sufficient notes to remember the fine-grained details of what happened, while staying completely in the shadows means you can observe only from a distance – and your own experience of the event is relatively remote from that of the participants.

## **Observing**

While observing, use the following questions as a guide:

1. **What is the space like?** Give a general picture of the site you're observing, including approximate dimensions, placement and appearance of structures, furniture, decor, climate, light, sound, aroma, etc. It's often very helpful to draw a map.

2. **Who is present?** Notice approximate numbers of people, what ages and sexes are represented, race/ethnicity, dress, hair, general appearance and manner.
3. **How is this event structured?** What time of day is it? What is the schedule or order of events? What happens when, and how do transitions take place? Is there special importance attached to some particular events, objects, or spaces? Note who is a participant versus who is a spectator, leaders versus followers, and happenings that seem out of place or disruptive.
4. **What interactions do you observe?** Do people tend to interact with a limited group of people – people their own age, sex, or race, for example – or with a wide variety of people? Do "insiders" interact with "outsiders"? Do they interact differently with some people than with others? Who stays in the shadows, and who is the center of attention? Record or take notes of spoken dialogue, when possible, in addition to body language and other non-verbal cues.
5. **Finally, how are you situated in this social setting?** Are you an "insider" to this group? To what extent do you choose to interact with participants, either those you already know or those you meet at the event? How do people react to you? How did you prepare for your observation, and what was it like entering your "fieldsite"? What surprises you, annoys you, makes you nervous, uncomfortable, or excited during your observation? How did you make your exit, and how did you feel about it as you left? Pay special attention to how your interaction with this event affects your observations, the participants' behavior, and your interpretations of what you see.

After the event – as soon after as possible, ideally on the way home or just after you arrive home – spend some time summing up your observations, filling in the gaps you'll inevitably have from moments when too much was happening to record thoroughly. One useful practice, if you're driving, is to leave your recorder on in the car and talk out your thoughts on the event and the little things you want to make sure to remember.

Then set aside some time very soon after the event to revisit your notes, fleshing out thin descriptions and filling in any incomplete parts.

## **Writing**

Now it's time to write up your observations and reflections.

The best practice, provided you've wrapped things up immediately after your observations (see above), is to wait a few days and take a fresh look at your notes. You'll be surprised at how your memory of the event differs from your recorded observations. It's up to you to decide how much of that difference is incomplete or inaccurate memory, and how much is a deepened perspective that you couldn't have had in the immediacy of observation. Don't wait too long, though; and if you neglected your post-event "wrap-up" (above), then move to the writing stage as soon as

possible, before gaps in your notes become mysterious, incomprehensible blanks (it will happen, believe me, and quickly!).

Then begin typing up your observations. Include:

- What you did. This may be a simple statement of where you went, how you set up to do your observation, and perhaps why you made those decisions.
- A general description of the scene. These are taken from your notes and should give me enough to understand what you were seeing.
- What you saw people doing. These are taken from your notes as well. This is the heart of your description and should provide me with the details of how the people you saw were involved in the scene you were observing.
- A general conclusion about what you saw. This conclusion might be as simple as a detailed comment on the activity, such as something you never realized about the scene you observed. **This requirement is key for a good grade, as this exercise is about observing a scene and commenting on it.** It is more than just description. Keep in mind, however, that your comment does not have to be earth shattering. It may be fairly straightforward and mundane, but will still moving your paper from observation and description towards analysis.

### **Grade Rubric**

You will be graded on the following:

- Correct spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Please proofread your essay.
- Strength of observation and how much effort was put into the exercise.
- Commentary on the activity that follows from the observations.
- Completion: including fieldnotes and the paper.

Please note that papers must be stapled and handed in during class. If they are not, a half-grade will be deducted.