

## Participant Observation Assignment: Sociology in Everyday Life (40 points)

This assignment requires you to go out into the field and do observations on which you will write your report. It is recommended that you conduct observations in the chosen space on two different days. Read this entire set of instructions before beginning this assignment.

### Objectives:

The objectives of this assignment are: (1) to provide students with an opportunity to conduct sociological research; (2) to enhance critical skills related to observation, analysis, and written presentation; (3) to encourage students to apply the sociological perspective to the social world in which they live.

### Description:

This assignment has two parts.

- **First**, you will conduct an observation of social interaction in a public setting (e.g., coffee shop, bus station, supermarket, shopping mall, library, hair salon, bar, food court) and this includes taking field notes while in the setting. You must choose a space that you do not frequently visit so that you are seeing things with a fresh perspective.
- **Secondly**, you will then write a report which presents a sociological analysis of the interactions which you have observed. This means your sociological task is to find meaning in what people in this particular space are doing. Use your imagination and your insight to interpret the behaviors you observe. Recall Peter Berger's article from Module One on "Invitation to Sociology" and remember: The world is your laboratory!

### Project Guidelines:

#### Participant Observation Example

Here is a sample research study for you to read FIRST so that you understand how observation studies are implemented into a final research product.

- [Doing Hair, Doing Class](https://www.chegg.com/homework-help/hair-class-research-question-sociologist-debra-gimlin-curiou-chapter-5-problem-3srq1-solution-9781285431321-exc) (URL: <https://www.chegg.com/homework-help/hair-class-research-question-sociologist-debra-gimlin-curiou-chapter-5-problem-3srq1-solution-9781285431321-exc>)

### Selecting Your Site:

Your observations should be made in a public setting to which you have open access. Do **NOT** choose your place of work, your child's school, or a setting that you are familiar with. Doing so will make your assignment biased from the beginning. You may make repeated observations of interactions in the same setting (e.g., at different times) or you may make comparative observations of two or more settings (either very different settings [e.g., a library and a residence hall lounge] or similar settings in different locations [e.g., two different types of restaurants]). For purposes of this assignment, you should plan to spend 2-4 hours total making your observations.

While conducting your observations, you should make detailed "field notes" (systematic descriptions of behavior, the social setting, etc.) which you can then analyze as you write your report (make notes either during your observations or as soon as possible after you leave your research setting). **You will be required to hand in your field notes (they do not have to be typed) when you submit your report.** You may attach them as a Word document to the assignment or scan any hand-written field notes into a PDF.

### Planning Your Observation:

A major problem for many students is deciding what to observe. Before you conduct your observation, you should try to develop an idea of what you want to look for (e.g., what are the "rules" governing interaction between strangers or customers and employees in a supermarket?). Read the participant observation example I have included for you called, **"Doing Hair, Doing Class"** above to get an idea of how a sociologist approaches observation in the field. For additional ideas on what to observe, see the section on "research findings" below. Careful thought before you make your observations can save you hours of agony when you are trying to write your report.

### Writing Your Report:

Your report must contain three sections: an introduction, a presentation of findings, and a conclusion. You do NOT need to submit your findings in paper/essay format; instead, you should address each question/point separately. Be sure that your report contains all of the following sections in **BOLD** (failure to do so will lower your grade):

#### 1. **Background:**

Describe the setting (the physical layout, the "actors") in which you conducted your observations (you might also want to mention your reasons for selecting this setting). Your description should be detailed enough to give your reader a good picture of the setting. Be sure to mention when and for how long you carried out your observations

Explain why you chose this setting. If you had a general idea of what you were looking for (or a specific hypothesis) you should include this in this section.

## 2. Research Findings:

Present your findings. List/discuss each finding separately (e.g., "non-verbal communication" or "customer-salesperson interaction"). The following questions may help you as you analyze your findings: What did you believe were the most important aspects of the interaction which you observed? How was the physical space of the place shaping behavior, interaction, volume? Use sociological concepts (e.g., from your textbook or any additional readings you have been assigned in class to explain what you observed. **Be sure to illustrate your analysis with examples from your observations.**

You might want to consider some of the following questions:

- What was the nature of the interaction?
- What patterns did you observe (for example, verbal, non-verbal communication, use of space, etc.)?
- You might find it useful to count types of interaction (e.g., acknowledgment of strangers).
- What "rules" or "implicit social theories" seemed to exist for the participants? What information (e.g., social categories [sex, age, race, class], setting) seemed to be important in determining the behavior of the persons involved?
- Can you develop categories or "types" of interaction?

## 3. Conclusion:

Summarize your main points. What was your most important finding (or findings)? Explain. Can you generalize from your observations to other settings or to social behavior in general (for example, what ideas from an analysis of behavior in a supermarket might be applicable to behavior in other settings)? What have you learned about human social behavior? Has your research given you any new insights into the social forces which shape your own behavior?

**Other Issues: The major mistake which most students make with this assignment is to neglect to analyze their observations. It is not sufficient to describe interaction, you must also attempt to explain the social behavior which you observed (see the above section on research findings). I am not interested in your personal opinion regarding the acceptability of the behavior which you observed, but rather your sociological interpretation of your data. You should also be sure to focus upon social aspects of behavior, not individual personality traits or private motives.**

As you write your report, keep asking yourself: What am I trying to say? Does this statement address the issue/question? **HOW** does this observation contribute to my

analysis of human social behavior? A few words of common sense. First, while I encourage you to be imaginative in your choice of settings, you should not choose a location that may be potentially dangerous!

Secondly, you should also take care to respect the dignity and privacy of those whom you are observing. In particular, you should make sure that you do not identify anyone in your report. Papers should be typed, double-spaced, and neat. You should consult a dictionary to ensure correct spelling and usage. Make sure you save a copy of your paper for yourself before submitting it to me. Be sure to submit your field notes (written) with your report.

### Grading Rubric for Observation:

Field notes are scanned or typed and include the dates and times of observation, location, at the top of the page. Notes should include details about the site/space, interactions, and general observations. **10 points**

**Background** - This section is detailed and includes a description of the space observed, why it was chosen, and allows the reader to picture the setting. **10 points**

**Research Findings** - A detailed report is written in essay format and includes answers to questions posed in this section of the assignment instructions. **10 points**

**Conclusion** - Student was able to generalize findings to a broader context. This section should include a brief discussion of how the social environment shaped interaction and patterns of interaction that were noted. **10 points**

**Total = 40 points**