

anthropology 605::fieldwork::missions

mission 3: observe.

Observe. Identify a phenomena/event of cultural significance that you do not (yet) understand, one which you can make repeated observations of, and which is not too difficult to gain access to (beware of ambition!). Observe it, write notes about, practice thinking about its *significance*.

An important aspect of fieldwork is repeated observation—not of the same thing over and over (that's the domain of experimental psychology or social survey) but of the “same” phenomena/event occurring differently each time—such as a practice, a routine, or a habit. Our goal is not to classify or taxonomize, but to observe and ultimately to understand the “cultural significance of concrete historically specific events and patterns” (Weber, p.111). Or to put it differently, your task is to fit your observations into a story—historical, theoretical, political, and to make your stories into tools for observation.

Issues for discussion: gaining access; establishing and maintaining trust; prestige and suspicion; understanding responsibility toward subjects; friendship; timing; questions you will have to answer (such as “why are you doing this?” “What will you learn?” “What will I (the subject) get out of it.” “Are you being objective?” etc.)
Skills: observation; note taking; question asking; managing time and contacts.

Technology: pencil and paper; email vs. phone; the research statement; use of recording in observation vs. participation; you are an instrument.

Tasks:

1. We assume you have already identified a project with a (or many) sites. Start by imagining what you can observe. Is it public? Is it a place or event you have or can get access to? Will it require asking permission? If so, do you know from whom? Make use of all existing contacts: great projects begin with serendipity.

2. Write a one-paragraph research statement that explains clearly what you wish to do. Imagine yourself on the receiving end of your request: what do you want to know? Would you let yourself do what you are requesting? Start making inquires or connections immediately.

3. Observe. Remember that fieldwork is an “epistemological encounter”—not just a tool for collecting data. When you find something to observe, figure out a way to hang out and watch in as unstructured a way as possible; note what is most unusual, surprising or inexplicable to you. Is there something that does not fit in with the way you expect things to go? How might you observe more in order to understand it?

4. Keep a detailed field notebook. Write as often as possible; collect materials related to your phenomenon (but see mission 3.5), start to think about what it means, what you understand and what you don't. Keep track also of what you would do if you had lots of time, or think you would like to do if it were a full-fledged year+ long project.

Due Date: Preliminary presentation of observations in class, Oct. 9. Observations may continue until November.

Example phenomena/events: (in order of difficulty of access)

- Ethics or genetics or surgical consultation in a hospital
- Negotiations/dealmaking in a corporation
- Executive meeting in a corporate HR department
- Trading on the floor of a stock exchange (or in a financial corporation)
- Making of/rehearsing a film or play
- Ride-along with a police officer/homeland security officer
- Preparing a meal in a restaurant.
- City council meeting or public hearing
- Running an experiment with a scientist
- Court cases
- Religious service in a church/ Ritual performance
- An academic conference in a particular discipline
- Parades, church picnics, community group celebrations etc.

An alternative: events that are scripted or induced by the anthropologist (not interviews):

- Watching TV with X
- Going shopping with X
- Organizing a meeting between X and Y
- Etc.

The Houston press, the Houston chronicle, and the local NPR station (KUHF 88.7) are good places to find inspiration.
