**Ethnographic Encounters project**

**Department of Modern Languages, University of Southampton**

## Participant Observation assignment

This exercise has been adapted from: Roberts, C. et al. (2001) *Language learners as ethnographers*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, p. 122-125.

Over the Easter break we would like you to carry out a participant observation activity. The main aim of this activity is to get experience doing participant observation, which should be a key element of the methodology for your ethnographic projects during your Year Abroad.

### Assignment: Hanging around a local bar or café

The purpose of this assignment is to get practice in making observations and taking notes in a setting with relatively easy access but which is complex enough to have different things going at the same time.

You will begin to learn:

* To analyse the raw material you have collected in terms of culture and social organisation;
* To collect and use adequate evidence for the inferences, hunches and assertions you make from your observations.

**Location**

You should go to a place:

* Where you can observe unobtrusively and where you will not feel odd or awkward;
* Where you can observe different types of patron groups, interactions between patrons and employees, division of labour among employees.

This can be done in a local pub, café, coffee shop, etc.

**Procedure**

1. Go to your chosen location. Spend about *half an hour to an hour* there, depending on how much is happening. You could stop when nothing new appears to be going on.
2. See what you can see, hear and learn just by hanging around as a patron. *Do not formally interview anyone*. In your notes, however, try to indicate questions that occur to you which you feel cannot be answered without interviewing people. What limitations did this cause?
3. If you can take notes unobtrusively while you are there, fine. If you think it is too difficult to do so, *write down everything you can remember as soon as possible*. This means within a couple of hours: if you leave it much later, or even until the next day, you will inevitably find that you have forgotten large chunks. It is essential that you note the time, date, etc. of your visit.
4. Look through your notes a few times. Make a note of any *further thoughts* you may have on your material.
5. Draw *a quick map* of your chosen location, clearly labelling the major objects and areas of activity.

**What to look for**

1. Social organization, including:
   1. The different categories of patrons who frequent the place while you are there;
   2. The division of labour among employees;
   3. Any patterns in the interactions between patrons, between patrons and employees, between employees.

**Other things to think about:**

1. Identifying typical routines of actvity (i.e. recurring sequences of behaviour).
2. Anything which strikes you as unusual, how do you make sense of it?
3. Do you see any inappropriate/unacceptable behaviour? How do other participants deal with it?

(Roberts et al. 2001, p. 123-4, with acknowledgement to D. Campbell of Michigan State University)

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## Participant Observation assignment: for discussion

The following prompts will be used to guide discussion of your participant observation assignment.

1. Your experience with participant observation:
   * Where did you go?
   * Did you find it easy to do?
   * Did it raise any questions for you about the process of participant observation?
2. Compare notes from your participant observation with another student, then report back on one aspect. Consider the following questions in your discussion:

* What different groups did you observe in your location?
* What patterns of interaction did you observe (e.g. gender relations, joining a group, ordering a drink)?
* What were some typical routines (method of entering/leaving, length of stay, interactions between different groups of people)?
* What was particularly interesting?
* Did anything odd happen? What made it unusual?
* Was there any inappropriate/unacceptable behaviour?

1. Thinking about how you came to your conclusions from the exercise, discuss in pairs and report back on one aspect again:

* What previous knowledge do you need to make sense of what you observed?
* How did you come to your conclusions, what is the evidence for them?
* How did you identify a pattern?
* How did your hunches change during the visit?