

Participant Observation 2 – City Plaza

Pick a plaza, park, or a central point in the neighborhood where there is a confluence of people and a variety of social and economic activity. Spend at least 30 minutes there, with nothing but your eyes, ears and notebook or electronic device (to be used only for recording your observations).

Take your time as you take it in. Your goals in this exercise are...

1. **Observe** and **describe** this public space without being judgmental or presumptuous.
2. Identify your own feelings and attitudes as you make your observations.

After you arrive, make yourself comfortable. Sit awhile, get up and walk around, sit somewhere else. Observe what is going on around you. But don't just "look" at it, absorb it, stare at it until the details sort themselves out. Since this is an observation project, you need not feel obligated to initiate conversations with strangers, but of course you want to be courteous.

Questions that may help to open your eyes.

Do not take these questions with you, but think about them before you set out to do your observation.

1. What is in the plaza itself? What surrounds the plaza? (Consider drawing a simple diagram of the area, showing streets, park, buildings, etc.)
2. What do you notice about the architecture? Do any of the buildings stand out from the others?
3. What kinds of art or decoration are on display?
4. Who is in the plaza? Who passes through it?
5. What are the people in the plaza doing?
6. What flora and fauna can you see?
7. How do the people use/guard/share space?
8. What different roles do you see people playing in the space?
9. How do people interact with each other? Is there a consistency in that? What kinds of behavior appear to be unacceptable?
10. How do they greet one another? When do they not greet each other?
11. What is considered proper attire? Who is in uniform? Does attire distinguish the people of specific occupations? Identify an individual's economic level?
10. How would you describe the pace of life?

Write it down.

It is important to write down notes of your observation, both to remember as well as to help prevent inadvertent interpretation. Your memory will interpret and remember what it deems as important. So writing down simple notes as you observe, or immediately after, is very important. But at this point don't analyze, don't sort. Just write!

You may want to consider drawing a simple map of the plaza. Your map does not have to be perfect to be helpful. In all likelihood the process of making a map will reveal helpful things about the cultural setting.