

Participant Observation 3: Restaurant or Café

Find a restaurant or café to visit. After you arrive, make yourself comfortable and order yourself a nice treat. Plan not only to eat or enjoy your beverage, but to 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. Take 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. Spend at least 30 minutes observing. Your goals in this exercise are...

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

Using the questions below, observe and record as much as you can about the restaurant.

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 symbols are present (size, images, concepts, themes)?
2. What colors are present (intensity, variety, arrangement)?
3. What shapes are present (curves, straight lines, complexity)?
4. How is light used (as decoration, as illumination, intensity)?
5. Is music present and what kind (style, volume, variety, themes, vocal, instrumental)?
6. What kinds of art/decorations are on display?
7. What do you notice about the architecture? What are the themes?
8. What do you notice about the furniture (style, usage, quality)?
9. Describe the attire. Who is in uniform? Describe the uniforms.
10. How is the food served (who is served first, order of items served, attitudes)?
11. How are customers greeted (language, friendliness, interaction space)?
12. How are customers dismissed (language, attitude, interaction space)?
13. How do the people use/guard/share space?
14. What do you notice about the people?(gender, age, ethnicity)?
15. What kind of discussion and interaction takes place between customers?
16. What are people doing while they are there (besides eating)?

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 draw a simple map of the restaurant. 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.