

## Participant Observation 2 – City Plaza

(adapted from J. Daniel Hess)

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 one hour 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.

Consider drawing a simple map of the plaza.

### Questions to open your eyes:

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. Is the architecture distinct? 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. Who takes care of the place?
9. Etc.

**Questions to stimulate your thinking:** Now you are invited to do some inductive thinking. Using the evidence you see, try to build some tentative generalizations about the people and their culture patterns.

1. Why do the people come to or pass through this area?
2. What is acceptable behavior and etiquette in the plaza? What kinds of behavior appear to be unacceptable?
3. How do people respond to authorities such as traffic officers?
4. Who are recognized as leaders in the setting? Why are they seen as leaders?
5. How do they greeting one another? When do they not greet each other?
6. What is considered proper attire? Who is in uniform? Does attire distinguish the people of specific occupations? Identify an individual's economic level?
7. How do they discipline their children?
8. What is their attitude toward littering?

9. How do they treat their pets?
10. Are the people deeply religious? Why do you say so?
11. How would you describe the pace of life?

**Toward a Hypothesis:**

1. Why does the town have a plaza?
2. What functions is it fulfilling now? What other functions does it serve at other times of the day or week?
3. What are some of the chief ways that the plaza tells about and reveals the cultural characteristics of the people who live near it and use it?