

Guideline for Sociological Fieldwork

Your third essay set asks you to make observations of a real social setting. For the purposes of this assignment, you are not required to carry out proper sociological fieldwork, but it might be helpful to review what that entails before do your own informal fieldwork. There are different perspectives on what proper fieldwork entails, but most generally involve two activities: doing the fieldwork and then recording your observations in the form of field notes. This first part is especially relevant to your observation paper.

Part 1: Fieldwork (1 hour)

Find a setting where you can comfortably stay for an hour, look around, and write occasional notes without obstructing others or calling undue attention to yourself. Try a mall, a public park, a coffeeshop, a building lobby, a Vassar dormitory, or any other place where people go in and out regularly. Arrive in a clear and undistracted state (that is, *not* while tired, hung-over, upset, wildly in love, etc.). Do not use a tape-recorder or camera.

For one hour, observe as many aspects of the setting and its activities as possible. Do not take extensive notes here; instead write only the occasional note (of a description, quote, etc.) to jar your memory when you take field notes later. Whereas people rarely pay attention to things they take for granted—such as a setting they regularly inhabit, or the race of someone of their own race—here you will have to expand your sensitivity to take notice of as much as possible (it may be useful to imagine yourself as a foreigner to the setting). Although you will instinctively try to “understand what’s going on,” at this stage try to limit yourself to absorbing the setting and events without analyzing them. Items you should pay attention to include...

1. *The location*: its function(s), its place in the surrounding environment, the kinds of people it attracts (and others it does not), neighboring establishments.
2. *The setting*: time of day and week, physical layout, distinguishing characteristics, sites for social interaction across roles and groups, areas of heavy and light traffic.
3. *Activities*: description of what people are doing (time, place, duration, number of participants, nature of interaction: visual, verbal, physical), specific objects and environments that are used, the number and diversity of activities in the setting, the relation of the activity to the setting (is it required, encouraged, informal and/or prohibited?), whether the activity is oriented toward an object and/or another person.
4. *Individuals*: appearance (age, race, gender, clothing, etc.), other qualities that individuals demonstrate (roles, status, authority, sexuality, etc.), the degree to which individuals *consciously* demonstrate these qualities.
5. *Social interactions*: types and roles of participants, how interaction is contextually specific to setting, outcomes of interactions, regularity, whether interaction is isolated or shared by others in the setting, important or typical expressions and dialogue.

Part 2: Field notes

Immediately (at least no more than 12 hours) after your fieldwork, find a word-processor and type out in a stream of consciousness as much thick description as you can recall from your field observations. The goal here is not to produce an exciting narrative or even write well, but to create a detailed written record (i.e., data) of your observations so that an outside reader could get an accurate sense what the setting was “really like.”

Most of your field notes will consist of pure descriptions. Do not mix these with your running hypotheses and analyses about what is sociologically interesting; distinguish those from your pure descriptions by bracketing them off. Do not worry about starting at a level of great detail; you can go back and fill in additional detail that you recall later. Likewise, do not worry about getting the chronological sequence of events correct immediately; you can rearrange the order of your descriptions later. Where you cannot recall important details, just say so and move on. If you are describing conversations, use quotation marks only if you are very certain that you recall exactly what was said. Otherwise, just paraphrase as faithfully as possible without quotation marks; you may be only able to describe interactions with nonverbal data (gestures, turn-taking by participants, etc.).

Sociologists who become well practiced in fieldwork can generally spend 2-3 hours writing field notes for every hour they spend in the field making observations. To give you an example of what this looks like, the next section contains an example of field notes taken after one hour of fieldwork.

Leonard Nevarez, fieldnotes example
Fieldwork length: 1 hour.
Time spent writing up field notes: 4 hours.

Descriptions

Location: southern end of Union Square, Manhattan. Time: March 19, 2003, 11:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Weather: high 40s, partly cloudy.

Union Square is a New York City park bordered by 14th Street (on its southern side), 5th Avenue (its western side), 17th Street (its northern side) and Park Avenue (its eastern side). From about 14th to 15th Street, the park blends imperceptibly into what would normally be the sidewalk on the edge, with 3-4 gradual steps of about 10 yards each and a sheltered subway kiosk about 15 yards in from the southwestern corner that make for a large open paved space with no cover. If you stand in the middle of the 14th Street block and take those 3-4 gradual steps up from in a northern direction, you encounter a ~15 foot statue of George Washington on a horse, circled by pavement and bordered by a marble edge/surface that is wide enough (~2 feet) to let people sit or lie on it. Behind this marble border, there are fenced green spaces that include a dog run on the western side and a lawn on the eastern side, all of which are substantially shaded from the sun by very tall trees. Walkways intersect these fenced areas at 15th and 16th Streets. From about 16th Avenue to the park's northern edge on 17th Avenue, there is a large flat asphalt surface where I have seen farmers and other vendors regularly set up for a farmer's market several times a week. There are also subway kiosks at 15th/Park and 16th/5th.

Union Square is found at the intersection of heavily trafficked streets. Across the park on 14th Street is located a Circuit city, a Virgin Megastore and (on the other side of the diagonally intersecting Broadway Avenue) a several story building whose large storefront property is currently vacant and displays a "coming soon" sign for its next commercial tenant. Across the park's southeastern corner are a hospital, Starbucks, HSBC bank, Au Bon Pain restaurant, and another subway entrance. Across the park's southwestern corner is a Diesel Jeans store and restaurants with sidewalk cafes. 14th Street is also one of major cross-streets of Manhattans that allows auto traffic to flow in both directions and has a bus line that stops in front of the southwestern corner of Union Square.

At 11:30 a.m., I approach Union Square from the 14th Street side. There are police barricades separating the large open paved space from about 10-15 feet of sidewalk on the street's edge. The barricades seal off the open space except for two openings: the wheelchair-accessible ramp on the southeastern side and the subway kiosk on the southwestern side. There are approximately 18 police in uniform inside the barricade and 5 outside the barricade. They tend to alternate between huddling in groups to converse or breaking off into pairs or by themselves to monitor the area. They are almost all facing south toward 14th Street and not north into the park.

Across 14th Street, I see an "Eyewitness News 7 ABC" van parked with other cars in front of the vacant storefront. The van has a transmitter antenna that extends upwards of about 3 stories. The pedestrian traffic appears heavier across the street on the storefront side than here on the park side, although that may be an optical illusion (since

there is more space on the park side even with the barricades, thus allowing for less pedestrian density). Across the street, a street musician is drumming on plastic paint buckets; the sounds carry easily across the heavily trafficked streets and into Union Square.

I first sit down along the marble edge bordering the George Washington statue and face south across the police barricades and 14th Street. There are five other people here in this paved circle behind the statue. Proceeding clockwise, the first person is a white woman in what looks to be her 50s with a bag and a coffee in a paper cup; she has short white hair and wears sunglasses, a coat, jeans, and sneakers. She is looking off into the open space; as soon as I make note of her appearance, she gets up and leaves. Sitting within a couple of feet from her, the second person is a white man in what looks to be his 20s, sitting crosslegged on the edge and reading the Village Voice; he has short brown hair and a beard and wears a blue jacket over a hooded sweater and green cargo pants. About 10 feet away from him, the third person is a white woman in what looks to be her late 20s or early 30s with a duffel bag on her right and a black plastic case with microphone equipment (I notice this when she takes it out once) on her left; she has a blond bob haircut and wears a tan knit coat, a scarf, green pants, and boots. She is talking to and seated about 5 feet away from the fourth person, a man of European or possibly Native American descent in what looks to be his 30s; he has long black hair, and olive canvas coat over a hooded sweater, jeans, rainproof brown leather shoes, and a black duffel bag. Finally, on my other side, a fifth person is lying down and napping on the edge. At first glance, I can only tell that he is wearing a black windbreaker with the hood covering a baseball cap, camoflauged pants, and leather shoes; by walking by him, I notice he appears to be a Latino man of around college age. Several minutes later, he is woken up by and talks to a young woman of around the same age.

11:40 a.m. There are approximately 20 people sitting on the long steps of Union Square's southern entrance, facing south across the police barricades. In front of the George Washington statue, someone who appears to be a Latino man in his late teens or early 20s is wearing a white t-shirt, grey sweats, and a white bicycle helmet over a baseball cap; he practices assorted breakdance moves, using the helmet to spin on his head, then waits about 5-20 seconds between each move to look south through the open space. [In these intervals, is he looking for someone and/or expecting onlookers?] Now and throughout my field observations, pedestrians regularly walk across the open space.

11:47 a.m. 10-20 people enter through the barricade entrance near the subway kiosk; many of them hold printed placards that read "No War For Empire," "A.N.S.W.E.R. — Sign Up to Get Involved," etc. A couple of them have brought three large loudspeakers. This group seems to have a split age distribution. Most of them look to be in their 20s; mostly male, they include whites, Asians, and at least one black man (with what look to be dreadlocks bundled under a tam) and tend to have close cropped hair, backpacks, hooded coats, and somewhat dirty baggy/cargo jeans. The other smaller group appears to be in their 40s to 60s; black and white, their clothes tend toward cotton sweatshirts, cleaner jeans, generic caps. The 10-20 people huddle in the center of the open space near the top step, apparently setting up the loudspeakers and distributing the placards. Soon, a bald white man in his 20s or 30s, wearing a red cap, a brown sweater and brown pants stands on the bottom step overlooking 14th Street rather motionlessly;

he holds a placard saying “No Blood for Oil!” in his right hand and makes a peace gesture in his left hand.

By 11:53 a.m., I get up to get a better look at the protesters. Their numbers appear to have doubled. I see more signs being held: “VoteToImpeach.org,” “If the war starts, WALK OUT,” etc. Across 14th street, a cameraman is on top of the news van setting up and/or shooting a camera in the direction of the protesters. I move to position myself against the wheelchair ramp on the southeastern corner. About 15 feet away from me towards Park Avenue, I see an Asian woman in her 20s in a tan coat with a bag and a clipboard talking to a white man in glasses and a hat, who carries around a video camera bag; between them, there is a camera tripod on the ground. About 30 feet away towards 14th Avenue, I see a woman walking by with a video camera and tripod. About 20 feet in front of her, I see a black woman in her 20s or 30s with a scarf around her head and wearing a dress join two other people with placards. [Is she wearing traditional Muslim dress?]

Amidst the growing action, unrelated pedestrian traffic continues within and across the barricaded open space. For example, about 20 feet away from the growing huddle of protesters, a black man in his late 30s or early 40s carries paces around as he carries on a cell phone conversation; he is wearing baggy jeans, suede boots, a white and olive down vest over a grey sweatshirt, and sunglasses perched atop his bald head. Back behind me near the ramp entrance, a white man in his 50s with a leather coat, jean jackets, leather boots, sunglasses, grey hair and stubbly beard, and gold chains hanging from his buttoned down jean shirt watches the building crowd before leaving. Next to him, a white man in his 60s in a camouflage jacket, cap, eyeglasses is smoking a cigar and apparently sketching something on a pad of paper.

12:00 p.m. There are now about 40-50 people in the protester huddle. I hear “Check, check, check... testing, testing...” come from the loudspeakers. Not far from the still motionless peace-sign gesturer, two white men in their 20s or 30s are now holding a 10-15 foot orange banner right behind the barricade that faces 14th Street and says “Stop The War On Iraq.” A jeep drives by them and honks in support. Across the barricade, an apparently Latino/Filipino man in his 50s or 60s wearing a leather jacket, jeans, sneakers, and a stocking cap that covers hair down to his shoulder positions himself about 5 feet away the banner holders and begins to loudly harangue them. He will continue to harangue them for the next 30 minutes, looking at the banner-holders or the passers-by and at one point taking his stocking cap off for emphasis; shortly before I leave, I notice that one of the banner-holders appears to be showing signs of exasperation from the older man’s constant yelling. More individuals with still photo and video cameras circulate around and through the growing protester huddle. Meanwhile, other people of various ages and races walk by, either alone or in pairs, to glance slowly at the crowd.

12:07 p.m. I’ve moved roughly behind the growing huddle, which now contains about 70-100 people. A booth has set up on the side of the subway kiosk opposite the underground staircase; it has brochures and documents for people to sign, while behind it rest placards against the kiosk rail. I hear a loud argument at the back of the protester huddle, apparently between two older white men, one of whom carries a placard. Their

argument shatters what was up to this point a rather tranquil (i.e., drowned out by the regular auto traffic and street noise) huddling of protesters.

The loudspeakers transmit a woman's voice, the first speaker of the protest. Paraphrased, she declares: *Okay, brothers and sisters, we're gathering on the day that George W. Bush has declared the ultimatum to Saddam Hussein to get out of town! It's easy to dismiss him as a cowboy, but right now they're gathering bombs outside Iraq! We're meeting here to build on marches, build resistance, and reclaim Union Square as a center for New York City!* "Oh Jesus," mutters a white man in his 50s with brown hair [a toupee?], a coat, light blue jeans, and eyeglasses who walks from behind the crowd toward the subway kiosk. I move around to the front of the crowd to get a better look at the speaker. She is white, in her apparent 40s or 50s, with short brown hair and wearing a dark business blazer/coat with a turtleneck underneath. [Her appearance brings to my mind what a businesswoman or civil servant of her age would look like, and it contrasts jarringly with the colloquialisms ("ain't," "bullshit") and anger which her voice conveys.] She continues speaking for about 3-5 minutes to a crowd that is watching her intently yet, with the exception of a few shouts and intermittent applause, does not get active response.

The crowd is growing, and I take 2-3 visual convenience samples of 10 people each. Roughly 8-9 of every 10 persons is white. While watching the speaker, I notice some hand-made placards in the crowd. About 10 people away from the speaker, a white man in his apparent 40s with brown hair is hoisting a white poster board with the hand-written statement, "War is not Vedio Game means killing human beings" [sic]. Closer to me, I see a white man of apparent college age holding a white poster board with a xerox photo of former President Jimmy Carter surrounded by the hand-written statement, "Vote Carter 2004"; an older woman says something to him, and he smiles and shakes his sign in acknowledgment. With emphatic pauses between words, the speaker shouts, *This War is not in our name and we will do everything to resist it!* The crowd cheers collectively for the first time.

"Thank you, Mary," the next speaker begins. He is an African American man in his apparent 50s, wearing a black wool coat, a black sweater, and sunglasses. For the next 5 minutes, his speech gets much more frequently enthusiastic response than the first speaker did. *If there was justice in the world, a team would be going to Washington to arrest George Bush!* Cheering. A white woman in her 20s with glasses gives me a brochure: "This is the plan for next week." While looking at it, another white woman of probably college age walks by handing out stickers and announces, "Vote to impeach Bush!" Next to me, a white woman in her 50s or 60s and a white man in his 20s are carrying copies of the "Workers Vanguard" newspaper and talking to each other while looking at the crowd. [Are they discussing how to distribute these newspapers?] Meanwhile, the speaker is working the crowd: *This is racist war propaganda!*

Behind me, a white man in his early 30s with short brown hair and a navy blue down jacket is talking loudly on a cell phone: "...war protest at Union Square." [For a minute, I swear he is Eric from the first season of MTV's "Real World."] Next to me, I see a heavy-set white man in his 40s with brown hair also talking on his cell phone about the protest; at one point, he says, "Can you hear this?" and then holds the phone up to the crowd. Meanwhile, I see more people taking photos of the growing protest. A black

college-age woman with short dreadlocks under a bandana and wearing cargo pants and bag with slogan buttons on it hands me a brochure: “You get one? This shows you who’s profiting from the war.”

12:22 p.m. The crowd is now at least 200 people strong. My visual convenience samples suggest it has also become less white (now, only around 70%). The speaker is congratulating the crowd for their resistance, which has been growing nationally: *We’re getting stronger, while the government is getting weaker!* He begins leading the crowd in chanting “Drop Bush Not Bombs!” for about 30 seconds. *Wave those signs! You’re shaking the government up!*

“We have some students who left high school today to join the protests,” the speaker announces to enthusiastic applause. “Hi, I’m Joseph from” someword that sounds like ‘ICE,’ as a white teenager, speaks for about 20 seconds about the coming war. He is followed by three other teenagers of white or Asian descent, both male and female, all of whom get applause for statements of similar length. I realize that I’m getting really cold, and so I end my fieldwork to go back inside.

Running hypotheses

It’s hard to say just how much the police expected the barricades to regulate pedestrian traffic, but it seems that many people are still walking through Union Square’s open space with little relation to the protest. Some of these people may be coming out of the subway kiosk from within the barricades, but no doubt others are probably entering on the street level from the southwestern opening (near the kiosk), crossing through the open space past the protesters, and exiting out the southeastern opening (near the wheelchair ramp).

A lot of the people brought video and still photo cameras to document the protest. Some of their equipment (big microphones, tripods) suggest this equipment is beyond the affordability of mere hobbyists, but with the exception of the Eyewitness News cameraman across the street, I suspect the media there was no more “formal” than a college newspaper or TV station. As for all the regular cameras I saw, I hypothesize that many people took photos as tactics of grassroots reporting and protest. First, I know that I’ve received many weblinks to photos of international protests against the War on Iraq, which have been very inspiring and encouraging to me and, I imagine, others as well. Perhaps today’s amateur photographers and reporters will contribute to this swell of grassroots documentation. Second, since the 1999 WTO protests in Seattle (or even earlier, with the Los Angeles beating of Rodney King), many protesters have used photos and videos to hold police accountable for their behavior by documenting any abuses of authority; the numbers of people taking pictures are too great for even abusive police to completely control the official spin on protests and demonstrations.

The build-up of the crowd and its responses indicate to me that this gathering was very loosely organized by different groups around different concerns and for different purposes. There was quite a variety of groups present, from ad hoc groups like the A.N.S.W.E.R. [Act Now to Stop War & End Racism] Coalition to traditional groups like the socialist Workers Vanguard newspaper. Another indicator: the brochure I got (“This is the plan for next week”) lists “initial endorsers” for today’s and next Saturday’s march: “A.N.S.W.E.R. Coalition • the Greens/Green Party USA • Not In Our Name Project •

NYC Forum of Concerned Religions Leaders • New York City Labor Against the War.” It also says at the bottom, “All other organizations and coalitions are invited to join this call.”

Certain demographics appeared to be underrepresented in the protest; among these, I noticed the relative lack of (1) older white Italians, Irish, and Eastern Europeans, (2) Middle Eastern and Asian immigrants, and (3) younger working-class African-Americans and Latinos. This is not necessarily inconsistent with the make-up of Union Square’s surrounding residents; with its high property values and college campuses, the area is especially populated by middle-aged and older white Anglos and Jews and middle-class college students.

Questions for further study

Is the conservative media right—are today’s protesters comprised of the usual “rabble-rousers”? Although it might seem suspicious, a survey of past affiliations and current attitudes among today’s protesters and attendees could begin to answer this question. However, the respondents’ patterns would have to be compared to the larger populations they hail from (i.e., similar class, education, ethnicity) and the underrepresented populations (i.e., different class, education, ethnicity); otherwise, this survey would incorrectly control for certain characteristics.

Is opposition to the War on Iraq not widespread among (1) older white Italians, Irish, and Eastern Europeans, (2) Middle Eastern and Asian immigrants, and (3) younger working-class African-Americans and Latinos? Somewhat separately, is this kind of protest activity not favored by these groups, who might otherwise be opposed to the war? And/or to what extent did these groups’ underrepresentation reflect the residential demographics of the neighborhood surrounding Union Square? To answer these questions, one should begin by seeing whether comparable protests are happening in neighborhoods where underrepresented groups are more prevalent, e.g., the outer boroughs, Harlem.

To what extent are the goals of the coalition of organizations that sponsored today’s protests *supported* and/or *impaired* by its location at Union Square? There is a possible argument for both. (1) Supported: Union Square is a traditional gathering place for protest in New York City. Many potential protesters who are motivated yet unconnected to organizations might reasonably expect to just show up around noon on the final day of Bush’s ultimatum and find a protest to join. Union Square’s heavy pedestrian traffic may circulate other potential protesters through the demonstrations; especially since it was the lunch hour, people might have some spare time to add their voices and bodies to the protest. (2) Impaired: The very public nature of Union Square means that a diverse population with diverse political sentiments circulates through the protest and possibly diffuses the enthusiasm and solidarity of the protesters. Does having so many silent or apparently uninvolved bystanders weaken the sense of unity? [Or does silence or apparent uninvolved bystanders instead reflect the political ambiguity felt by many about this War on Iraq?] Would the resolve of the protesters be strengthened in a more “single-purpose” location, like a university campus?