

Observation Guide

A Guide for Sociological Observations of Religious Groups

ASSIGNMENT

1. Attend the worship service of two religious groups other than your own, one relatively denominational and the other relatively sectarian. *Do the denominational visit first.*
 - Choose a relatively unfamiliar religion, so that you can see it with an outsider's eyes.
 - If you wish, you may go with a friend familiar with that religion, who can help you know how to behave and what to expect. Remember, though, that observers often see things that "insiders" miss (and vice versa).
 - If you go with someone – either an insider, a friend, or someone from this class – limit your group to two, to avoid being obtrusive.
 - Make sure that you attend a major worship service, not a youth group meeting, a prayer circle, or some other event that is not central to the group's religious life.
 - The only exception is if the group is itself very small. Then, their "major" service may be small, too.
 - You will probably wish to stay after the service and talk to people, so they can give you a better idea of what you have seen.
2. Each student will submit her or his own description of the worship service, written well enough to paint a clear picture of the event and its significance for its participants.
 - Write up your fieldnotes immediately after you are done observing (including after you have asked participants any questions you need). Use the "Fieldnotes" template at the end of the syllabus.
 - Use these notes to craft a 4-page (1000-word) essay summarizing your observations.
 - See the "What to Observe" section – below – for guidance about what the essay should include.
3. If the religious group is large and its services are public, you do not need advance permission to attend. If you are visiting a smaller group, however, (e.g., a house church or a meditation circle) it's a good idea to phone a few days ahead and ask permission to observe for your college course.
 - You should also ask consent of any group whose worship services may not be fully public.

WHAT TO OBSERVE

You are looking for insights about the group's worldview, its social organization, the types of people who participate in the group, and the things they gain from this participation. Here are some of the questions you should try to answer:

1. What types of people participate in this event?
 - Look for evidence of economic status, educational status, gender, race/ethnicity, age, life stage, life experience, etc.
 - How homogenous or heterogeneous are they?
 - What types of people participate in what types of roles?
2. What is their basic religious worldview?
 - What religious stories are they telling in their service? How do these stories support the plausibility of their worldview?
 - How do the various elements of the worship service support this worldview? Consider the role played by ritual, dress, music, architecture and so on – and by the degree to which participants do or do not have to be insiders know make sense of what is going on.
 - Why might this worldview be plausible for the types of people who attend the event?

3. How does the group seem to be organized?
 - Do they have specialists? Or does everyone seem to play an equal part?
 - Do they appear to be hierarchical? Or are they seemingly egalitarian?
 - To they run many activities (a school, soup kitchen, missionary outreach, etc.)?
 - What kind of budget must they have, to maintain their activities?
 - *Note: Don't ask this directly. Instead, provide an educated guess based on the sumptuousness of their building, the extent of their activities, and so on.*
4. What other things does the event seem to accomplish for its participants? Here are a few examples of the many questions you may wish to explore:
 - Does there seem to be a clear sense of (internal) community among the participants? What evidence of this do you see?
 - What role might the religion play at various stages in people's life-course?
 - What does the group seem to think about the relationship between insiders and outsiders?
 - What role does the group seem to play in the community at large – either Redlands or the wider world? How does it do so?
5. **You will not be able to cover all of the above questions in any one visit. Choose your focus from among these questions as you see fit.**
 - Remember to use at least five of the concepts you found in the Religion Matters text in your essay. Knowing those concepts well before your visit will deepen your observations.

OTHER NOTES

1. Every religious group has norms about behavior before, during, and after worship services. Established religious groups have somewhat standardized expectations that any visitor ought to try to meet.
 - For guidance, consult How To Be A Perfect Stranger : The Essential Religious Etiquette Handbook, edited by Stuart M. Matlins & Arthur J. Magida. There is a copy in the reference section of the Armacost Library (for library use only).
 - It contains a little background about the religion and its worship, recommended clothing (e.g., if head covering is required, whether jewelry is okay, how dressed up one must be), how the sanctuary is arranged, where guests should sit, when not to enter, in which services guests may participate, and which services are for members only.
 - The guide includes Buddhist, Christian Science, Greek Orthodox, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, Mormon, Roman Catholic, and Quaker worship as well as several Mainline, Evangelical, Pentecostal, and other Protestant forms of worship.
2. Before attending, think about what you intend to observe, and keep in mind your research objectives (*above*).
3. Also before going, think about the ethical and methodological issues of doing participant observation.
 - Never present yourself to others as something other than who you really. This is not usually an issue for undergraduates who may attend one or two services as a part of a course assignment. If asked, you may simply say,
 - "I'm a student at the University of Redlands, and my professor assigned us to visit any religious group other than our own, and since I was most interested in learning more about your religion, I came here today."
 - In a previous class, one student who attended an ethnic congregation's service, although he was clearly not of the same ethnic group. He told a curious member: "My professor assigned us to visit some religious group other than my own, and I live near here and noticed what an active church you seem to have, so I wanted to visit this church." All of this explanation was true and provided a perfect opening for the member to then tell the student a lot more about the congregation.