

## THICK DESCRIPTION OBSERVATION ACTIVITY

1. First, read the summary of “Thick Description: Methodology” by Tanya M. Luhmann and prepare to discuss the following questions:

- How would you define thick description? What about ethnography?
- What is the relationship between thick description and ethnography?
- How can you use thick description to understand culture?
- What are the qualities of a piece of writing that uses thick description?

2. Choose a space to observe. This should be a space where you feel safe sitting for at least an hour at a time yet somewhere that you are relatively unfamiliar with and do not frequent regularly (i.e., get outside of their comfort zone but not in the panic zone where they feel threatened or unsafe). For example, you might choose to visit a museum or a park in a little-known neighborhood.

3. Before visiting, reflect on the following questions:

- Why did you choose this space to observe?
- What are some of your preconceived notions or expectations about this space?
- What do you hope to find out about this space, in terms of culture?

4. Visit the space, taking with a note-taking tool (paper and writing utensil, smartphone, tablet, laptop, etc.). Jot down notes in two separate columns or areas -- one for observations of their chosen space, and the other for their impressions of their observations. Use their senses and the following questions to help them focus their observations:

- What are the physical objects in this space? What do they look like? How are they arranged?
- Who are the people in this space?
  - What do they look like?
  - What are they wearing?
  - What is their mood or behavior like?
  - What are they saying?
  - How are they interacting with the space?
  - How are they interacting each other?
- What do you smell in this space? Where do these smells seem to be coming from?
- What do you hear in this space?
- What are you physically sensing with your body? Elaborate.

It might be helpful to close your eyes for a bit and concentrate on your senses.

Note: You might also consider, if you are comfortable, talking with people who are using the space and asking them questions such as: “How do you feel about this space?” “How do you feel about the other people who use this space?” “Why do you

choose to use this space?” However, if you choose to add this step, you need to be aware that some individuals you approach may decline to talk with them.

5. Take things a step further after their observation and start interpreting or analyzing what you observed:

- What do these observations reveal about the culture of this space?
- What do these observations reveal about you as an observer and someone who doesn't feel like they belong in this space (yet)?
- What do you believe are some of the cultural norms and values of the people who created this space? What about the people who are occupying it?
- What was your comfort level during this activity?
- What was most challenging?

6. Submit a 1 to 1 1/2-page (500 to 750 words), single-spaced, thick description based on your notes. You should aim to show rather than tell about your observed space (i.e., use specific, descriptive language so that anyone reading it can envision the space and imagine its cultural significance).

Created by Dr. Kris Acheson-Clair, CILMAR.

Luhmann, T.M. (2015). Thick description: Methodology. International encyclopedia of the social & behavioral sciences (2nd ed.) (pp. 291-293). Elsevier.