

Qualitative Mini-project: Flash Ethnography of a Public Place (12%; due on Oct 11th by midnight EST)

In this project, you will write and analyze ethnographic fieldnotes about a public place, in the manner of grounded theory and inductive qualitative coding of data. The process and deliverables are listed below.

Note about Research in Public Spaces

In general, you need ethics board approval to conduct research projects. This involves gaining the informed consent of participants under observation, and we will cover it in the coming weeks. **However**, there is one exception, which is that public places do not require approval, since technically anyone can sit in a public place and jot observations. This exception is listed in the Govt of Canada TCPS 2, **Article 2.3** on Research Ethics Board review:

“REB review is not required for research involving the observation of people in public places where:

- it does not involve any intervention staged by the researcher, or direct interaction with the individuals or groups;*
- individuals or groups targeted for observation have no reasonable expectation of privacy; and*
- any dissemination of research results does not allow identification of specific individuals.*

A public space may be defined as “any area that is not considered a private residence or private workspace and where the participant does not have an expectation of privacy” (University of Virginia). The TCPS 2 implies that during this project, you **CANNOT**:

- Stage an intervention (i.e., interfere in the public setting outside of normal, everyday events). For instance, ordering a coffee at a cafe and writing about it is fine; deliberately spilling your coffee on the floor and asking others for help clean it up is not. A rule of thumb is: if you wouldn’t normally interact with a stranger at the location, don’t interact with them. (If someone interacts with *you*, without you prompting it, that is fine; use your best judgement.)
- Report identifiable or private details of people in public. For instance, you should not look over someone’s shoulder at their phone and report their verbatim text messages. **Do not use real names, even if they are mentioned** (always use pseudonyms). In cases of doubt, err on the side of caution.

Your job is thus to simply exist in a public place and *observe*. Act as you would if you were not jotting notes (i.e., you may also lightly “participant” in the natural manner and write about that).

PROCESS TO FOLLOW:

1. Choose a **public place**. You should be observing people doing something *in public*. Examples of public locations are parks, cafes, restaurants, transport, downtown, markets, festivals, etc. Public places are not private residences (e.g., friends' houses), and exclude anyone you know from your analysis. Examples are: "the life of the coffee shop on X square," or "the skatepark by the garden", or "the life of parc Y" or "the life of le Chalet on Mont Royal."
2. Observe for **three (3) separate days** in that location, jotting notes for **at least one hour** each day. I highly encourage you to jot notes in a notebook (handwrite), unless it doesn't make sense in that location (i.e., using a laptop would help you blend in).
 - Type up **fieldnotes** from your jottings *immediately* after returning.
 - Remember to put any **asides** in [[double brackets]]. Asides are interpretations you have in the moment —feelings, thoughts, opinions — that aren't directly present in the action. **Note that for this assignment, I expect you to have some asides.**
 - In addition to fieldnotes, write an **in-process memo** after each field visit. The memo should be 2 paragraphs: the first, a reflection on what you've learned and emerging questions; the second, a reflection on what you intend to do differently next time to address questions or fill in gaps in your observation to attain better transferrability (i.e., attend to a different area within the location, or different behavior, or different people, time, etc)
 - You might have a question(s) to start with that direct your observations, but keep it vague and don't let them affect the descriptiveness of your fieldnotes and jottings.
3. After all three days, perform **line-by-line coding** of the data using the grounded theory method (emphasis on gerunds for codes). Keep a record of your coding for the submission.
4. After coding, iteratively refine your codes (light standardization); i.e., you shouldn't have every line be a differently worded code. Cluster related codes together (**focused coding**) to determine emergent themes.
5. **Write up your findings** with:
 1. A **Context** section of 1-2 paragraphs, describing the context, exact locations, and exact date and times that you performed the observations;
 2. A **Findings** section with at *least three sections on the most prominent/interesting themes* you discovered, to put in a written report (the exact number of sections depends on the clusters derived from your analysis). In each section, as examples of the broader patterns/behaviors you speak about, you may want to pull out relevant scenes/quotes from your fieldnotes (put them in quotes and italics if you do this), but it is not required.

3. A **Next steps** section, which is a final analytic memo (in-process memo) about a follow-up observations or inquiries you would perform, if you had more time, whether using the ethnographic method (as here) or a different method. This should follow from your findings or in-process memos. For context, see ethnographic papers in HCI for how you report the information.
6. Prepare the submission materials (see below).

Note that this activity does not involve technology directly, and that is by design—the point is to get into the right mindset of deep observation and reduce the distraction of screens. Your skills in this activity will translate to qualitative studies of technology usage.

SUBMIT IN A ZIPPED FOLDER:

- Your raw **jottings** (if handwritten, submit pictures)
- Your three days of **fieldnotes**, *each with time, date and location at the top*
 - *Fieldnotes must be separated by day!* Name them: *fieldnote_day<X>.txt*
 - At the end of each, include a section with your *analytic memo* for that day.
- A record of your **line-by-line coding**. For instance, a Microsoft word document with comments for codes. Your codes must be inspectable.
- A document of **clusters** of codes produced by focused coding and/or affinity diagramming, with brief descriptions beside each cluster. For instance, you might use Miro or FigJam to affinity diagram codes and submit an (inspectable) PDF of your diagram, with names above each cluster. Or, you may submit an Excel sheet with columns naming different superclusters, and codes below the column name.
- A **written report**, with the sections above (Context, Findings, Next Steps)

GRADING:

The instructor will grade the assignment on the following factors:

- **Completeness:** Is everything submitted?
- **Study site:** Is the chosen site appropriate (i.e., follows the above constraints)? Is the site sufficiently interesting enough to write an ethnography about it? (i.e., sitting alone in your room is not!)
- **Fieldnote quality:** Are the fieldnotes primarily descriptive? Are they detailed, “thick” description? Does it describe the scene well enough to the reader? Are there some asides, and are the asides used appropriately?
- **Line-by-line coding:** Is (almost) all the data coded? Are gerunds used for the vast majority of codes?
- **Focused coding and inductive thematic analysis:** Are the code clusters reasonable given the data? Do the clusters seem to emerge from the data? Are the clusters interesting (i.e., categories not known in advance)?

- **Write-up:** Are the findings succinctly written and somewhat interesting (i.e., not completely obvious to the reader in advance)? Do the chosen findings exhibit good coverage of the codes? Do they emerge naturally from the themes identified during focused coding? Do the Next Steps seem reasonable and follow from the in-process memos and emergent findings that are reported?