Participant observation – due Tuesday 2nd February

Exercise A: Select an event or activity to observe and, ideally, to participate in at some level. The event or activity may be quite simple, common, small, or frequent—or it may be elaborate, unusual, and different from your own cultural tradition—but it must meet the following criteria:

* You have a right to be there, or you have secured permission or an invitation to attend from persons in charge.
* It is not familiar to you.
* It has a clear beginning and end.
* It is limited in time so you can observe the entire event.
* It is legal and risks little harm.
* You are curious about it.
* You have a trusted acquaintance familiar with the event—your key informant—who will accompany you or host you at the event and answer your questions about it.

Observe the event, taking a few notes on a small pad, if this can be done unobtrusively, to refresh your memory during debriefing. Request to participate in some way: to throw the ball, serve the coffee. During the event or the debriefing, ask your key informant to explain what you observed. After the event, after consulting your field notes and your key informant, debrief yourself by composing a typed document of notes. Include in these notes:

* What happened at the activity? Include sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile memories.
* How you felt during the activity.
* How people responded to you.
* What your key informant told you.
* Evidence that your presence influenced the scene.

Questions for reflection notes:

1. What understanding was gained from participation compared to just observing?
2. What did having a key informant add to your understanding?
3. What was learned from participant observation at this event that a questionnaire or interview about it might miss?
4. For what purposes might a questionnaire or interview be better than participant observation?

Exercise B: Impact of the Observer

In both versions of this exercise you’ll observe a patterned behaviour under two conditions. You’ll compose an ethnography—that is, you’ll describe the pattern and infer the cultural rules. You’ll also comment on the effect of the two conditions of observation.

*Holding the Door:* Observe door-opening behaviour in a public place. Hang out with the smokers on the sidewalk, for example, while watching a popular entryway to a classroom building. For several minutes at a busy time and again at a slower time, pick out individuals (“Observed1”) and watch them pass through the doorway. Observe the etiquette during individual events of door behaviour. That is, does Observed1 passing through the door hold the door for the next person (“Observed2”)? In what manner does Observed1 hold the door, for whom, how long is the door held, how far away from the door can Observed2 be and still motivate Observed1 to hold? Is there any visual or verbal communication between Observed1 and Observed2 during the event? How often does Observed2 become a holder?

* PHASE 1: BLENDING IN: This first time, take no notes in public, make no attempt to stand out. Are door holders aware of what they’re doing? Can they describe the shared understanding? Did your watching make door users self-conscious? (In this phase, they probably didn’t even notice you.) Note down your observations and your conversation after the observation and not while being observed.
* PHASE 2: STANDING OUT: Repeat this observation with the protocol sheet, so that door users will notice that a person with a clipboard is observing them. Watch for evidence that your activity influences the door holding. Experiment with your location until you’re clearly being noticed by many door holders. Compare what you’re observing now with what you observed the first time. How does self-consciousness alter their behaviour?