

JEP Reflective Questions

Social Inequality: Class, Status, and Power (SOC 360)
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INTRODUCTION

Social scientists spend much of their time investigating complex patterns of human interaction within the context of the larger society. A social scientist is primarily concerned with understanding human experience, evident in the form of collective social groups and/or individual people. One of the many methods researchers use to study human interaction is called “participant observation.” The participant observer method gives social scientists the freedom to study individuals and their counterparts by placing them directly with the groups being studied. In other words, researchers gather data through conversations, by participating at various events or meetings, while attending public talks or lectures, etc.

Over the course of the semester, you will observe and participate in the daily activities of those you meet at your JEP site; similar to that of a social scientist. You will also write about your experience on a weekly basis. This packet contains a series of weekly Reflective Questions; prompts specifically designed to help focus your attention to understanding the complexities of the sociology of inequality in Los Angeles. The Reflective Questions are designed to help you reflect on your experiences and prepare you for writing your term paper.

As soon as you leave your JEP site (or ASAP), write down as much as you can recall about your experiences. Use the Reflective Questions as prompts to guide you, but go beyond the prompts, writing about whatever seems important to you about your service project; especially experiences and concepts related to understanding the sociology of childhood. Use your journal to describe the social interactions and activities you observe; trying to do so from the points of view of the children with whom you are working.

Avoid generalizations and psychological explanations of behavior, focusing instead on writing detailed and concrete accounts of people, social settings, conversations (including direct quotes, when possible), etc. You are only required to turn in responses to the questions below. However, you are strongly encouraged to take comprehensive notes throughout the semester. While these may seem time consuming now, the notes will serve as crucial sources of information required for the term paper. To help facilitate this process, you may want to keep a small notebook with you and jot down some notes when you have a spare moment (or perhaps take a moment before leaving the site). The more work you do now, the better your paper will become! You may turn in a copy of your more extensive notes if you wish, as long as they address the issues posed by the Reflective Questions.

Please read through all of the Reflective Questions prior to beginning your assignment. Doing so will help to focus your observations and improve the quality of your journal responses. In addition to carefully reading the term paper assignment guidelines provided by your Professor, you may wish to review the chapter *The Ethnographic Field Research Paper* to learn more about field research [in: Giarrusso, R., Richlin-Klonsky, J., Roy, W. G., & Strenski, E. 1998. *A guide to writing sociology papers*, 4th edition, (pp. 115-131). New York: St. Martin’s Press]. This book is on reserve in Leavey Library.

ALTERNATE QUESTION

If your experience at your JEP site doesn’t allow you to adequately answer a Reflective Question, you may choose another topic to write about. For example, choose a critical incident that might have occurred that week, and discuss the incident with help of a theory that may provide further insight in to why it happened. **Please use the Alternate Question at the end of the list as a guide. Please note: The assigned Reflective Questions for Weeks One, Six, and Eight are required.**

YOUR WEEKLY ASSIGNMENTS:

The core parts of each Reflection Question (which you need to focus on) are highlighted in bold. Use the additional parts of the question to guide/supplement your answer.

WEEK ONE - First Impressions of your JEP Site

Describe your initial experience at your JEP assignment. Include a detailed description of the responsibilities and activities involved in your particular assignment. What are your most vivid impressions of the site? What were some of your expectations (of the assignment, the students, or the site) prior to beginning your assignment and what were these expectations based on (e.g., mass media images, experiences of previous JEP-students, or personal encounters)?

WEEK TWO - The Social and Physical Context of Your JEP Site

Describe the social and physical context of your JEP site. Try to be as specific as possible about the number of people that are there, as well as the age, sex, race, ethnicity, and any other significant characteristics of all those involved in your JEP assignment. Walk or look around your site and take in the environment; specifically, provide details about the size, space, decor, noise level, etc. of the classroom (or meeting room), the building(s) making up the site, its grounds, the neighborhood (or whatever you could see of the neighborhood on your way to your site). **How do the aesthetics and overall feel of the site and neighborhood compare with the USC campus and/or other places you have worked or attended school? What are some of the main difference and similarities? Do you think that these differences or similarities have any impact on the learning experiences of students at the site?**

WEEK THREE - Participant Observation

You have the option to use your JEP experiences and observations as part of an empirical paper (see course syllabus for further details). Most likely, you will be using the ethnographic method (participant observation) to collect your data. According to Denzin (1989), “participant observation is a commitment to adopt the perspective of those studied by sharing in their day-to-day experiences. Participant observers do ethnography, which is the description, classification, and interpretation of a particular group’s way of life.” Writing “memos” is an early step in the process of analyzing ethnographic data. It allows the researcher to step back from the field experience and to think about the emerging themes in an analytical and theoretical manner. The weekly Reflective Questions serve this same analytical purpose, but “memos” are less structured and allow students to pursue their own interests, hunches, and ideas. **In preparation for your empirical paper, write a “memo” that addresses a specific issue/experience involving students at your JEP site. Begin to consider various explanations for what is going on and why.** What are your sociological hunches about this particular issue? Why does it seem significant? Does it run counter to common sense explanations? Does it illustrate a common pattern?

WEEK FOUR - Children’s Lives

When doing participant observation research involving children, it is important to reflect on some of the methodological issues you, as an adult researcher, may face at your site. For instance, you can not assume that the children at your site share your perception of events and interactions, as our worldviews are often shaped by our age and life-experiences. Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind that interactions between you and the child may be influenced by your status as JEP student and the age discrepancy; as this provides you with a certain power and authority in the relationship. **Briefly reflect on some of the other methodological issues you may come across when studying the children at your site (e.g., think of your perceived social class status, and gender or racial identification). Particularly, ask yourself the question whether adults and children perceive events differently and how this may influence the inferences you can draw from your observations.** Pick a noteworthy event or incident involving children you witnessed at your site. How might each of the children involved in the incident interpret or understand it and how would their interpretation differ from yours? On what evidence do you base your conclusions (be sure to provide specific examples/evidence for your statement)?

WEEK FIVE - Narrowing the Scope

By now, you will need to decide upon a clearly defined topic for your research paper. (Please check the course syllabus or research paper hand-out for more specific dates and details.) This week’s question aims to help you identify a specific

research topic. **Reflecting on your experiences at the JEP site thus far, what stands out to you as one of the most significant issues related to social inequality (class, status and power), childhood, and the experiences of children in the class room?** What is it that you want to learn about this issue and/or children as both individuals and a group and how will your JEP observations contribute to this process? What questions/issues related to your research topic might be difficult to examine and understand given the time constraints (e.g., volunteering two hours a week for eight weeks) and limits of the research method?

WEEK SIX - Developing Your Thesis Statement

Please note: this week's assignment has two components.

1. In Week Five, you narrowed the scope of your paper and decided on, tentatively, a paper topic. **This week, you will develop your thesis statement; a research statement or question which you intend to answer using your weekly JEP observations.** The thesis statement is usually a single sentence somewhere in the first paragraph of your paper's introduction that presents your argument to the reader. The rest of the paper, the body of the essay, gathers and organizes evidence that will persuade the reader of the logic of your interpretation of the research data. **Write a thesis statement and a brief explanation on why and how you are going to argue the thesis in your paper using you JEP observations.**

2. Part of testing the strength of a thesis statement rests in getting feedback from other readers. Therefore, **once you have formulated the thesis statement (not to exceed one page) you will post the statement on the Blackboard Discussion Board.** Your PA will pair you up with another student, whose thesis statement you will critique (via the Discussion Board) and who, in return will critique/comment on your statement. You can then use these comments to reflect on the strength of your thesis statement and rewrite it if you feel that is necessary.

WEEK SEVEN - Theorizing about Social Inequality and Childhood

Sociological theory should be an important element of your research paper. **Select one of the theories of social inequality discussed in class and in the readings. How does this theory help to explain “the circumstances” (e.g., learning-problems, popularity, gender role behavior, or bi-lingual education) of the students at your JEP site?** What aspects of the students' experiences are not addressed or adequately explained by the theory and if so, why? How does this theory help you understand the topic that you have selected for your research paper? In addition to responding to these questions, please turn in a copy of your research paper outline to your Program Assistant.

WEEK EIGHT - Review

According to USC's mission statement, “The central mission of the University of Southern California is the development of human beings and society as a whole through the cultivation and enrichment of the human mind and spirit. The principal means by which our mission is accomplished are teaching, research, artistic creation, professional practice and selected forms of public service”.

http://www.usc.edu/private/factbook/USCRole_and_Mission_Statement_1993.pdf

Consider this statement in light of your experiences in JEP. Do you think public service-and specifically your service-learning experiences in the community via JEP-have helped to “cultivate” or “enrich” your “mind” and “spirit” and/or those of the community members with whom you worked? If so, how? If not, why not? Please describe in detail what you have gained from your experiences through JEP from an intellectual, spiritual and/or ethical perspective. How have your experiences in JEP compared to what you expected to get out of the program?

ALTERNATE QUESTION

Take a look at the information in the table below. The 90007 Zip Code is the geographic area within boundaries of Normandie Ave. on the west, Main Street on the east, Exposition Blvd. on the south, and the Santa Monica Freeway on the north, excluding USC campus. (Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census).

	90007 Zip Code	L.A. County
Total Population	45,021	9,519,338

AGE		
0 to 15	20.1%	23.7%
15 to 64	74.8%	66.6%
65 and older	5.1%	9.7%
Median Age (years)	23	32
RACE/ETHNICITY		
Hispanic or Latino (of any race)	58.2%	44.6%
White	16.1%	31.1%
Black or African American	13.0%	10.0%
Amer. Indian and Alaska Native	1.0%	0.8%
Asian	11%	12.5%
HOUSEHOLDS BY TYPE		
Total Households	12,721	3,133,774
Family Households	55.4%	68.2%
Married couple family	33.9%	47.6%
Female h.holder, no husband	16.8%	14.7%
Non-family households	44.6%	31.8%
OCCUPATION		
By Civilian Pop. 16 yrs and over	15,702	3,953,415
Managerial and professional	24.4%	34.3%
Service Occupations	19.8%	14.7%
Sales and office occupations	27.6%	27.6%
Farming, fishing, forestry	0.1%	0.2%
Construction, extraction, maintenance	6.7%	7.8%
Production, transportation, material moving	21.4%	15.5%
Mean travel time to work (minutes)	28	29.4
Walked	17.9%	2.9%
INCOME IN 1999		
% of households with < \$15,000 income	44.9%	17%
Median household income (dollars)	\$17,644	\$42,189
POVERTY STATUS IN 1999		
% of Families below poverty level	31.1%	14.4%
With related children under 18 yrs	35.8%	19.9%
With related children under 5 yrs	40.9%	24.1%

What do the Census data tell you about the relationship between occupation, race, ethnicity and community in the area in which you are working? How does the community compare/contrast with greater Los Angeles County, in terms of the population, poverty rates, educational and occupational attainment, etc.? What do they indicate about the level of structural inequality in the local community? How do your personal observations of the community compare with the census data? What are the advantages and disadvantages of using census data and personal observations in order to “know” a community?