

ON FIELDNOTES

Jim Spickard, University of Redlands
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Social science often asks us to observe people. We want to see what people do, and we also want to know what they think about what they are doing. Whether we observe them in the laboratory or in their “natural habitat”, we need to keep track of our observations. Memory just doesn’t do it. Social scientists have developed various ways of taking notes, many of which are useful. I have found the following four-column system to be very helpful, at least in part because it separates one’s actual observations from what one thinks about those observations. Doing so is crucial, if one is to figure out what is really going on.¹

External Details	What I Observed	My Thoughts about What I Observed	Connections (Tame or Wild)
<i>This column reminds me where the event was, who was there, etc. E.g.:</i> Mass at XYZ house, Denver. 9/27/04. Present: the core community, plus John Q, Fred R., Stacey P., plus five others I don’t know and wasn’t introduced to.	<i>This column contains a detailed list of what I actually observed. E.g.:</i> Mass began late. Roger R. was celebrant, introduced by Rick C. (as usual). Rick spoke at some length about the latest police raids in the local parish. Mike S. (in the audience) added news about the President’s latest war speech. Roger acknowledged both of these, saying that it was in just such times as these that Jesus asked his disciples to come together, as we do now, in prayer for the state of the world. First reading from Isaiah, on the duty toward the poor. Second was parable of the sower. Roger spoke for 2.5 minutes on these, connecting them to the recent actions of the Mayor’s office cutting funding for anti-poverty work. Floor opened for group homily (as usual), and Mike spoke of the need to remain faithful, despite acts of our national “leaders”. Kim spoke of the frustration at seeing so many people in need. ...<i>(etc.)</i>	<i>This column allows me to record my thoughts about what I observed, ideally matched to the relevant spot in column 2. E.g.:</i> Note how negative tone is set, allowing (later) transition to positive tone in mass itself. Need to see this as part of the ritual, not separate from it. Celebrant draws explicit connection (which did <u>not</u> happen last time). These are not today’s standard readings. I wonder who chose them – and why? Mike usually talks here, and often on the same subject. Do people have informal roles? Or do they just know each other well enough to rely on certain people for certain insights?	<i>This column lets me record wilder ideas, including connections with other situations, readings, thinkers, etc. E.g.:</i> Those police raids are in M.D. parish; I wonder what Father Tony is telling his parishioners tonight? What passages is he using? How are they responding? The <i>Sojourners Community</i> has a very different approach, according to Jim W’s description of their practices. So do most of the Quaker groups I’ve visited. Why? Do their rituals serve a different function in community life?

¹ Tamah Nakamura pointed out to me that one also needs to record one’s emotional reactions – including “evil thoughts” that one might be having about the people one is observing. I agree, because these often provide useful clues to things hidden in the social scene. I generally put these in column three; others might wish to give them their own column. Later scanning lets one locate patterns to such emotional reactions, which – like psychoanalytic counter-transference – often highlight patterns of which one is not consciously aware.