In an ethnographic field research project, your data come from observing or interacting with people in everyday social settings, which are known as “the field.” The data are gathered through observation when a researcher visits the setting, participates in the setting’s activities (called participant observation), and/or interviews participants in the setting.

GOALS AND METHODS OF ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELD RESEARCH

1. Ethnographic field research sets out to represent as accurately as possible the process of social life from the point of view of the participants (or “members”) in the field setting being investigated. Since a scientific hypothesis is an explanation of social processes proposed by someone outside the research setting, the ethnographic researcher does not engage in the testing of hypotheses. However, some sociologists do engage in fieldwork to test hypotheses about what happens in social settings or why it happens. This kind of fieldwork, which we refer to as “structured field observation,” is discussed in Chapter 8.

2. The ethnographic researcher usually conducts research by closely observing what people are doing, by talking with them informally, and often by participating in activities with them. If interviews are conducted, the ethnographer uses questions that encourage respondents to answer in their own words. The choice of methods used in ethnographic research depends on the characteristics of the setting and its inhabitants and on the personal style of the researcher.

Unlike most deductive researchers, then, the ethnographic field researcher does not use a predetermined research instrument, such as a written questionnaire. And unlike the structured fieldwork described in Chapter 8, ethnographic field research rarely involves quantitative measurement. While pre-designed and quantitative methods are useful for measuring some aspects of the social world, they do not convey the intricate and subtle transactions that the ethnographer seeks to understand.

3. Reports based on ethnographic field research—called ethnographies—often produce new theoretical insights, but they are most distinctive for their vivid descriptions of actual social scenes and transactions. In other words, even after collecting data, the ethnographer typically does not attempt to propose a hypothesis about why something happens in the social world. Instead, ethnographic research attempts to uncover what happens in a social setting, how social relationships are conducted, and what those events and relationships mean to those involved.

In doing ethnographic research, your sociological imagination is exercised by the opportunity to see society’s institutions, such as the police, the judicial system, and the health care system, as they are actually enacted in the personal lives of specific individuals. Because it takes sociology out of the classroom and into the “real world,” and because it allows you to view the world through the eyes of people very different from yourself, an ethnographic field research project can be especially challenging and exciting.

ASKING AN APPROPRIATE QUESTION

Often the goal of your research project will be specified by your instructor. Ethnographic research assignments frequently ask you to do one of the following:

1. Look at social interaction in your everyday life—among family members, friends, fellow students, or coworkers, for example—in new ways. The goals are to describe patterns and processes that often pass unnoticed in your daily interactions and to use your sociological imagination to relate these personal patterns and processes to specific course concepts. This kind of project might ask you, for instance, to talk to fellow students about their relationships with friends; to observe how those in your dorm, apartment, or family deal with odd behavior; or to watch how individuals attempt to present a certain impression of themselves to others.

2. Visit a setting selected by your instructor, in which social activities of special concern to your course occur, and investigate how those present carry out routine activities and make decisions. Examples of this kind of assignment are going on a police ride-along, attending traffic or small claims court, or interviewing a mental health professional.

In some classes, however, you may have to develop your own question to address through ethnographic research, or you may simply be assigned to visit a setting of your choice and describe what it is like. If so, remember that, unlike much other sociological research, the goal of ethnographic field research is not to determine what causes some social event or relationship. Therefore, avoid devising a research question that asks why something happens in your research setting. Instead, concentrate on asking what (or
example, “What does a police officer do during his or her time on the job?” or how (for example, “How do those sharing an elevator ride deal with one another in the limited space available?”). In the sample student paper at the end of this chapter, the author addresses this question: “How does a judge decide whether or not to recommit a psychiatric patient against his or her will?” Here are the kinds of “what” and “how” questions that will point your ethnographic research in the right direction: What do people do in this setting? How do they explain what they do? What kinds of things interest and concern them? How do group members work together to accomplish a task? How are new members taught the values and procedures common to the setting? What do group members mean by any special words they use?

REVIEWING THE LITERATURE

In a deductive research process, a review of relevant research done on the same topic is used to develop a hypothesis for testing through data collection. However, because the kind of fieldwork we are describing here does not involve hypothesis testing, instructors assigning ethnographic research projects often do not require that you summarize the literature on the question you are investigating.

Nevertheless, your instructor, in order to encourage you to become familiar with work already done on the question you are investigating, may prefer that you give an overview of relevant research on your subject. Or you may find a literature review useful in getting a feel for ethnographic research, perhaps in choosing a setting or a question for your research or in understanding the issues of concern to those who will be observing in the field. In this case, use the guidelines for library research in Chapter 6 to get an overview of the sociological literature relevant to your project.

COLLECTING YOUR DATA

UNDERSTAND THE ASSIGNMENT

Where are you supposed to go? What are you to look for? Are you expected mainly to present your own reactions or to describe what others do in the setting? Is the task to demonstrate your ability to apply course concepts to what you see, to provide a detailed account of interaction in the observed settings, or both? Is there a specific question you should address?

PLAN AHEAD

1. Begin early in the quarter or semester. Field data cannot always be col-
to your field setting several times to get the additional information or understanding that you need.

2. Make arrangements to interview or observe. While the prospect of getting permission may make you anxious at first, you will find that most people are receptive to showing or telling you about their lives. You can assure them that their identities will remain confidential if the information is personal. Be sure to follow the procedures established by your college’s Human Subjects and Ethics Committee, which might require you to submit your research plan for approval or to obtain written permission from those you observe or interview. Consult your instructor for details.

When scheduling your observation or interview, allow plenty of time. Unanticipated events may occur; your subject may begin to talk at length about some particularly interesting topic, or you may think of additional questions on the spot. Also, you will need to allow time to record, transcribe, or elaborate on notes immediately after the contact.

3. Plan how you will record your data (a summary of recording options follows later in this chapter). In interview situations, it is best to tape-record or to make notes during the interview. Likewise, notes made while observing are more reliable than those made after you’ve left your field setting. The methods you choose will depend on the situation and your personal style. But, whatever approach you take, be prepared ahead of time with adequate supplies of blank recording tape, batteries, paper, and pencils, as appropriate.

OBSERVE THE SETTING

Although you may know a lot about the setting and the interactions you observe, it is crucial that you leave behind your previous assumptions and even your knowledge about them in order to learn something new. Adopt the attitude of a naive outsider so that you can begin to look in a new way at events and experiences you used to take for granted. In other words, don’t try to figure out beforehand what conclusions you should come to or how you will use the information you are collecting. Just be as attentive to detail as you can in order to get as much valuable information as possible.

When observing, don’t presume you know which events or interactions matter most. Keep your eyes and ears open to everything that is going on around you. Notice your surroundings, all the people who are present, the time taken by events, and so on. Attempt, above all, to look at the setting or situation through the eyes of the participants.

When interviewing, follow these guidelines:

1. Don’t talk more than you have to. Listen carefully to the respondent’s comments.
2. Avoid leading questions that define the respondent’s answer, and avoid questions that point to “yes” or “no” answers.
3. Rather than asking who someone knows, ...
them feel forced to justify their actions or lifestyle. Also, respondents' answers to "how" questions are usually more specific about real events, providing you with the concrete examples you need to describe in detail what goes on in the setting.

4. Don’t overwhelm your interviewee with multiple questions. If you are a new interviewer, you may be especially sensitive to silence, but don’t rush in with comments, clarification, or further questions if the respondent pauses. Allow the respondent time to think and to complete his or her responses fully.

5. Encourage the respondent to be fairly specific about the details of events or experiences: Exactly who was involved? What happened? When did it take place? Remember, however, that probing should be gentle (for example, “Could you tell me more about that?”), not an interrogation.

6. Relax, allow your natural curiosity about your subject to direct you, and listen.

RECORD YOUR DATA

Since the final paper you produce will be only as good as your recorded data, it is crucial that you record observations or interview responses accurately, in detail, as soon as possible after the event. Otherwise, you will inevitably forget or distort what was said or done.

In observational research, take notes on what you see or hear as it happens. If that is impossible or bothers those you are observing, then record what you observed as soon as possible afterward. You may even want to take periodic note-taking breaks away from the setting during your observation to jot down a few words or phrases that will trigger your memory later.

If you are interviewing, it is best to tape-record the conversation (with the interviewee’s permission). Don’t be shy about asking permission to tape or take notes during the interview. People are often agreeable once they understand your interest in accurately representing what they say.

If subjects seem reluctant to let you tape, don’t force the issue. Just listen to their responses and reconstruct the interview in writing as soon as you can afterward. Don’t editorialize in your reporting of what was said. Likewise, don’t edit your interview to make responses seem more sensible or because something seems “inconsequential.” If you edit or editorialize, you may leave out something significant. Report all the respondent’s comments, keeping them in their original order. And be sure to include all your questions, as well as the answers to them.

If you do tape-record an interview, it will be helpful to transcribe it into written form. There are special dictation machines that make transcription easier. Or, at least, you should listen carefully to the interview and take notes on both your questions and the responses.

In all cases, make your notes specific. Describe in detail what you ob-

what, when, and where. Include concrete details about the physical setting, what went on, and your reactions: How did you feel about the people with whom you were involved? Remember that in ethnographic field research, you are the research instrument; it is through your person, your interactions, and your relations that you learn about the people and settings you are studying. For that reason, your personal reactions are especially important.

You may be required to submit the originals, or a typed version, of your field notes as an appendix to your paper. Or you might choose to include your notes in an appendix, in order to give your instructor a better appreciation of what happened in your setting or interview (and of how hard you worked to gather your data). Even if you will not be submitting your notes, keep them legible and organized. Be sure, for example, to date every entry. The quality of your paper relies on the quality of your field notes; the more clear data you have available, the stronger your paper will be.

EXAMPLE OF OBSERVATIONAL FIELD NOTES

The following sample observational field notes will give you an idea of their general format and content. The example is excerpted from the notes written up by a student in an introductory ethnography class. The assignment asked students to observe interactions in public settings. The student chose to observe a familiar scene that was part of her everyday life—riding the bus.
OUR COMMENTS

Unlike your final paper, which should be double-spaced, it is usually acceptable to single-space your field notes. However, be sure to leave wide margins, for comments (your own or the instructor's) and coding.

It's perfectly normal to be nervous about entering a new situation. Take a deep breath and try to relax. Like the subjects in these notes, many people being observed are quite friendly and very willing to talk about their work.

We all have assumptions about other people and the world we live in. What is challenging and fun about sociology is the opportunity to get past those assumptions and learn new ways of seeing things. Remember to keep an open mind.

Whenever possible, make a note of direct quotations right away. Otherwise, paraphrase as accurately as possible.

Notice how the drivers all keep looking at their watches! It's important to note as many little details as possible, even if you can't recall them all completely. This early observation about the bus driver's precision about time turned out to be a major theme in the field notes: through her observation, the author of these notes came to appreciate the rhythm of the bus driver's workday and the memory skill it takes to do the job.

The question about how people “click off” on the bus is too directive. It doesn't produce much useful information. Contrast it to the more open-ended question that follows about what the subject thinks is the most outstanding feature about bus riding.

Remember that your notes are not a formal treatise. Describe gestures, sounds, even smells, through whatever means necessary to bring the setting or conversation alive for your reader.

What did the subjects do that led the observer to believe they were preoccupied or hurried?

In many ways, you already have much practice at entering new social settings. Use your everyday conversational skills to make contact with your subjects—they're “just people,” too!

Notice how important the inclusion of the driver's “chuckle” is. Without noting it, it would be hard to tell whether he is being sarcastic or funny or what. Don't trust your memory to remind you. Even though it's obvious at the time, it's easy to forget when you observe many settings and talk to a number of people.

Notice the results of asking the subject what is outstanding (or interesting or unusual or important) about the setting from his or her point of view. An issue is raised that the observer had never considered but that is central to the experience of bus driving. Much more information could have been elicited, however, by probing for details with “what” and “how” questions: How did the person try to get around paying the fare? How did the driver outsmart the two riders who wanted to avoid buying transfers? What excuses do people offer for not having the money?

Observation 3: Bus Riding

With considerable trepidation, I boarded the bus to campus with the intention of speaking to bus drivers about their perceptions of bus riding and their role in it. Previous observations had led me to the conclusion that bus drivers were either identified with, or detached from, their roles so much that their attitudes and behaviors were very brusque and “macho.” The first of many such assumptions was shot down as I discovered that today's driver on my route was a young Hispanic woman of slight build—hardly the burly type at all! I approached her after everyone else had left the bus at the campus terminal. I introduced myself, told her that I would like to ask her a few questions about her job for a class assignment. She said that she liked her job, that “it's great if you like driving!” but that she had just a few minutes. I asked her if I could wait at the terminal for her after my class and ride the entire route with her. She said sure, and explained a process I didn't completely understand about how she would be replaced at 4th and Colorado at 11:00 something that morning, for a lunch break, but would be back on the route later, and her “last run of the day” left UCLA at 3-something. I agreed I would wait on campus until her last run passed through. What struck me most was how precisely she knew the route and schedule: “Fourth and Colorado” had such exactness, and sounded so familiar to her; both times she mentioned about the schedule were to the minute, and were from memory. As I stood to leave, she glanced at her watch.

I sat on the stairs which lead down to the bus terminal after class that afternoon. I figured I might have a wait of up to an hour and that I might as well try to work up the nerve to talk to the drivers who hang around on the stairs between runs, or who go up them to get a snack on campus. One driver I was familiar with from riding his route walked downstairs and commented that he had found a “good seat, out of the sun.” I told him that I was observing bus riding. He said it (bus riding) is “very interesting” and that I should “take a notebook or a tape recorder along on a ride.” I asked if he'd ever noticed something I'd observed, that people seem to “click off” while on the bus, almost like they're not really there. “Oh, sure, well some get sick on the bus, so they do other things. That's why you hear the 'bzzz' (the stop-the-bus signal) so much. They suddenly (he mimics someone becoming, I know, looking around—indicating someone realizing where they are).” He'd been passing, moving slowly down the last few steps; he now glanced at his watch, quickened his pace, gestured in a wave, and returned to his bus.

There were a few other drivers coming and going, but I didn't initiate any conversation. Some seemed hurried, some preoccupied. One, however, was walking downstairs with a snack. He commented that he'd gotten himself a treat. He said, "I'm starving. I haven't had time to get something to eat." I told him I was sorry I'd finished my banana already, or I'd be happy to share it. We agreed on the rib-sticking virtues of bananas. (Food: the universal bond?) I told him I was observing bus-riding for a class. He smiled, "That (bus-riding) is really interesting. [Chuckle] Yes, that's really interesting." I asked what feature he thought was most outstanding about bus-riding. He said I should see the number of ways people try to avoid paying. I indicated surprise, since I'd never observed this. He assured me it was common, and described a few instances—one person who tried to just get out of paying the 85-cent fare, two guys who tried to avoid having to buy transfers (and how he outsmarted them), the ways people give excuses for not having the money.
EXAMPLE OF INTERVIEW NOTES

Following is a brief excerpt from the interview notes that Tiffany Seden (TS) took while researching her paper on the legal system for mental illness (see pages 123–139). Although she could have asked for permission to make an audio recording of the interview, this example illustrates the type of notes jotted down during or immediately after speaking with her primary subject’s psychiatrist, a medical doctor (DR).

TS: Why are you here today?
DR: Court needs to decide whether or not he is able to provide for self—adequate food, clothing, shelter. Whether or not he’s a danger to self and others.
TS: What do you think he needs?
TS: What do you think of whole court process?
DR: Waste of time. Fifteen to twenty patients I have to see every day. Can’t be wasting time here for eight hours/day. Second time I’ve had to be here this week.

The interview excerpt illustrates how Tiffany’s bold move to speak directly to a participant in the process she observed paid off. The remarks she can attribute directly to the psychiatrist are very revealing about his perspective on the legal system related to mental illness. Being able to convey the voices of actual actors in a social scene makes her paper much richer and more graphic.

It is understandable and acceptable that Tiffany did not have time to take notes in complete sentences; the goal of her original notes was simply to make an accurate record of the conversation, which otherwise might be quickly distorted or forgotten. When using this excerpt in her paper, Tiffany just “fleshes out” her notes into the complete thoughts originally expressed in her interview. For example, the response she summarizes as “Stay in treatment” is returned to the original, “If he needs to stay in treatment.”

However, when she directly quotes these interview notes, as she does in her paper, Tiffany should not include material that wasn’t actually noted at the time of the interview. For instance, her conclusion that the patient was more of a nuisance than a human being to this doctor could be included as part of the text of the paper, but it should not be cited as a direct quotation from her interview notes.

Two of Tiffany’s inquiries are phrased as “what” questions, which typically elicit more useful information from interview subjects than “why” questions

patient should be institutionalized?” the psychiatrist might just have responded “yes” or “no.” Asking “What do you think . . . ?” allowed her subject to describe events in his own terms. She might have gotten more specific responses if she had been able to focus her questions. For example, “What do you think of this whole court process?” is a broad inquiry, to which the reply (“It’s a waste of time”) was very general. She might have learned even more if she had asked specifically what the subject thought of a particular aspect of the court process.

ORGANIZING YOUR DATA

The observations and answers you collect in your fieldwork are the data on which your paper will be based. In this step of your research process, you use the material you have collected to answer the question that your instructor assigned or that you formulated. This is an exciting process; as you look back over your notes, you will notice that the setting you have learned about in personal way reveals interesting information about the nature of social life.

ANSWERING AN ASSIGNED QUESTION

If your instructor asked a specific question in your paper assignment, now is the time to consider how what you saw, heard, and experienced addresses that question. Here are some guidelines:

1. Go through your notes and make a mark by every comment, observation, or response that seems relevant to the question being asked. Don’t be too discriminating at this point. Better to include too much at this stage than too little.
2. Copy these relevant pieces of data onto separate note cards, or photo copy your original notes and from the photocopy cut and paste the relevant excerpts onto the cards; this will allow you to lay out the bits of data side by side, much as you would for materials in a library research paper (see Chapter 6). Note that you should never cut up your original notes. Always save your originals and use photocopies or carbon copies for cutting. Also be sure to indicate on each card the page number of your field notes from which the excerpt was taken, so that you can include the citation if you quote the excerpt in your paper.
3. Now consider what the information on each card says in response to the question asked in the assignment. What does it tell you about the setting you observed and/or the people you interviewed?

* These guidelines assume you will be doing this sorting in hard copy. If you have the time and
4. Look for patterns among your cards. Move them around to illustrate to yourself how the information fits together. For instance, you might stack together cards that contain examples of the same kind of behavior. Or you might arrange appropriate cards to reflect stages in a process.

Course materials and the paper assignment itself may be useful in helping you notice the patterns in your data. Recall concepts covered in the class that are relevant to your project. Review carefully just what the assignment directs you to look at. Then consider how your data illustrate those concepts or teach you something about the social relations you observed.

For instance, Tiffany Sedlin, the student author of the sample ethnographic paper that appears at the end of this chapter, was asked by her instructor to observe and write about social responses to troublesome behavior. The instructor recommended two articles that would be useful to students in considering what they observed in the court setting Tiffany chose. These readings contained judges’ strategies for determining whether to release or recommit psychiatric patients petitioning to leave the hospital. In analyzing her observation and interview notes, Tiffany might have listed these strategies, and then stacked in separate piles excerpts from her data that illustrated them. In fact, you will note in her paper that she uses subheadings (“Ability to Provide Necessities,” “Caretaker,” “Commitment to Further Treatment”) to highlight her observations of each strategy. In this way, she is able to draw a clear link between her observations and the relevant course materials.

ANSWERING A BROADER QUESTION

Perhaps you were simply assigned (or chose as your project) to participate in and describe a social setting. It will be still be useful to sort out excerpts from your notes as described in the preceding section, but you will probably have more freedom to establish the categories in which you will organize your observations.

Begin by carefully rereading your field notes to refresh your memory about the events. Then start to look for patterns in your notes. As in the case of an assigned question, you might use course concepts to organize this search. Better yet, you might try to find the categories and terms used by people you observed, asking yourself how they understand and describe their activities.

For example, if you were taking a course in deviant behavior, your text would probably spend considerable space defining “deviance” in terms of breaking social norms. But in ethnographic research, you would find that the people you observe don’t talk about “deviance” or “norms.” Thus, rather than looking in your notes for examples of what your text would define as “deviance,” it would be more enlightening to pinpoint what specific behaviors your subjects perceive as odd or disruptive and to note the ways in which...
be preferred, discuss your plans with your instructor. In either case, return to course concepts and themes frequently. Ask yourself how the events or comments you are describing reflect or illustrate sociological ideas. This will help you avoid the common mistake of making overly psychological interpretations of those whom you observe or interview.

If your assignment doesn’t specify a particular question for you to answer or a specific setting for you to analyze according to course concepts, then you can simply organize the themes you discovered in your notes in the essay format. You might choose three points to make about one of the themes that you found most interesting or revealing. Or, you might develop your paper around three different themes.

Whichever format you use, it is important for your paper to incorporate the reactions you experienced in your research and recorded in your notes. Inevitably, those engaged in ethnographic field research encounter people, events, and experiences that fascinate, surprise, confuse, or even upset them. It is a challenge to make effective use of such reactions without getting sidetracked into self-analysis. A good way to make your personal reactions relevant is to ask yourself what they illuminate about the setting. Describe in your paper how your own feelings and thoughts helped you better understand the people you studied and their interactions.

When writing your paper, you may quote your field notes directly. When you do, punctuate and cite them as you would any other source. Or, you may choose to summarize an incident or a response in an anecdotal way to illustrate a point. As long as they are relevant to your assignment, use your collected data in as many ways as you can; they make up the empirical basis for your discussion.

SUGGESTED READINGS


A SAMPLE STUDENT PAPER

The following sample ethnographic field research paper was written by Tiffany Seden for a class in the sociology of mental illness. Choosing between two options the instructor offered for observing and writing about social responses to troublesome behavior, Tiffany visited Court 95, a local courtroom psychiatric hospital. Judges must gather information about each case and decide whether the patient should be hospitalized involuntarily or released from the institution. Tiffany observed and spoke to participants in one case before, during, and after its hearing.

Tiffany’s title and her introductory remarks highlight the idea she used as the theme for her paper: that the decision whether or not to commit an individual for involuntary psychiatric hospitalization depends less on the person’s sad, mad, or odd behavior than on the social circumstances in which he or she lives. Tiffany uses her original data to illustrate this point, which is made in several assigned readings for the course. Notice how she consistently makes connections between concepts drawn from these course readings and the empirical data she collected. Her conclusions are supported with specific observations, which she summarized in her field notes. Many of our comments relate to her use of her observational notes: although she has elaborated on her observations in a way that makes them very dramatic and interesting, such elaborations should be included directly in the text of her paper; only her original notes should be quoted directly.

Tiffany’s paper demonstrates that she is a capable and diligent student. She has succeeded in grasping several complex concepts regarding the sociology of mental illness. She is a good example of a student whose good writing could be made even better by applying a closer eye to such details as grammar and punctuation.

Finally, Tiffany’s paper reflects her sociological imagination by connecting the experiences of one person—Michael, a psychiatric patient she spoke to while observing in Court 95—with broad social processes, such as the social control of disruptive behavior.
OUR COMMENTS

Because of the length of Tiffany's paper, she has included a title page (as recommended in Chapter 4).

The Legal System for Mental Illness: Cure or Containment?

Tiffany Seden
Sociology 148
Professor Pellner
December 9, 1991
Tiffany’s first paragraph introduces the reader to the course perspectives and concepts relevant to her paper. In it, she cites the sources of both specific terms (Goffman’s “organizational havoc”) and ideas (Horwitz’s notion of “mental illness” as a label) she is using.

Tiffany should include a description of the methods she used to gather the data for this paper: readers need to know how she got her information in order to assess the conclusions she draws from it. Some readers would benefit from a brief description of the assignment as well as some background information on California’s commitment procedures.

In place of her fourth sentence, a stronger, more direct statement of Tiffany’s learning process would be: After reading Holstein’s “The Placement of Insanity” and visiting Court 95, I concluded that . . .

Tiffany does a good job of using her field notes to illustrate her point. Her notes successfully capture the scene she observed and the patient’s place in it. However, the format of the notes she used throughout this paper poses a significant problem: it’s not clear whether descriptions such as these are taken directly from her notes (if so, the source should be cited) or are her elaborations of them (if so, they should be included directly in the text). Remember that quoted notes should be presented as close as possible to their original form. The citation should be put at the end of the quotation and be formatted like this example: “You know, I fight off demons too. That’s why I took the name Michael” (Seden 1991). Finally, she should make it clear that she has created a pseudonym to protect the anonymity of her research subject.

When observers find an individual’s behavior incomprehensible they are likely to apply labels of mental illness (Horwitz 1982, p. 16). When these behaviors disrupt community life, a conflict over claims of place arises and thus exposes that order to what Goffman calls “organizational havoc” (Holstein 1984, p. 35). Through the use of legal proceedings, judges may inflict involuntary mental hospitalization upon those who they deem possess a “grave disability.” However, my visit to Court 95 and reading Holstein’s “The Placement of Insanity” helped me to the conclusion that a “grave disability” is not taken as sufficient reason to hospitalize an individual against his or her will. A more important criterion is the “viability” of the individual’s living situation and the capacity for that situation to control the havoc related to their mental illness. I was also awakened to the notion that the goal of hospitalization “is not to cure the patient but to contain him in a niche in free society where he can be tolerated” (Goffman 1981, p. 180). Thus, the regard for the patient’s cure is minimal and the concern for a more “havoc-free” environment is of utmost importance.

In order to maintain this “havoc-free” environment, judges may sentence “gravely disabled” individuals to involuntary hospitalization. Grave disability associated with mental disorder means that an individual is self-endangering or socially disturbing.

The following case, observed both in the waiting room and inside Court 95, describes a “gravely disabled” individual:

Patrick John Michael Reilly, a 32-year-old white male, was a manic depressive with signs of euphoria, irritability, delusions, and little sleep. “My name is Patrick John Michael Reilly. My Catholic name is Michael, after St. Michael who fought off demons. You know, I fight off demons too. That’s why I took the name Michael. Did you get that?”

His posture was perfect. His eyes were wide. His hands tightly gripped the seat of the chair almost lifting himself up. The court guards entered the waiting room where Patrick and I were talking. “Sing the Thorazine song.” Patrick began to sing loudly, disrupting the entire T.V. room. “He’s really fucked up,” added the other guard who was constantly taunting and encouraging Patrick’s extreme behavior.

Frequently Patrick became socially disruptive and harmful to himself and others. We can see this in his physician’s testimony:
Tiffany might bolster her credibility by including attribution to authors directly in the text, such as "However, according to Holstein, judges expect..." and "Also, Goffman maintains that hospitalization is considered to be a last resort..."

Be sure to double-check for punctuation (such as using an apostrophe to show the possessive of "psychiatrist") and usage and spelling (the singular form of "diagnoses," needed here, is "diagnosis").

Tiffany does not make the source of this list clear. Her format—indented and single-spaced—implies that she is quoting, but no source is cited.

Caution! Verbs must always match their subjects. In the first sentence following the list of criteria, the subject "any" is singular. Therefore, Tiffany's predicate should be "it is not present." Likewise, pronouns must match the nouns they refer to; the sentence should read, "a person's [singular] inability to care for him- or herself," rather than "for themselves [plural]."

"On the eleventh he was brought into the emergency room by his three-hundred-pound roommate and a social worker. His mood was euphoric and irritable. He was singing and screaming in front of his board and care. He was hyperverbal and joking. He put a hole in the wall of the nursing station."

It is evident from Patrick's fabrications and actions that he is indeed mentally ill. However, judges expect that most of the individuals brought before the court are in fact extremely disturbed (Holstein 1984, p. 40).

Also, hospitalization is considered to be a last resort when other options of care are non-existent. "There has been some pressure to keep the potential patient in the community as long as possible..." (Goffman 1981, p. 180).

The laws in California coincide with this theory so closely that involuntary commitment is difficult to arrange. Thus, even though judges may believe the patient is severely mentally ill, the symptoms of mental illness and a psychiatrist diagnoses is not enough to distinguish between those who will be hospitalized and those who will be set free. Judges use the following criteria to decide whether or not to subject an individual to involuntary commitment:

1. The person's ability to provide life's basic necessities.
2. The willing presence of a "caretaker" to supervise the candidate patient.
3. The candidate patient's cooperation with a community-based treatment/custody regime.

If any of these three elements are not present, disruption is unavoidable, and hospitalization becomes more likely (Holstein 1984, p. 35). Therefore, "grave disability" does not merely entail a person's inability to care for themselves. A tenable living environment with the ability to maintain peaceful surroundings is even more substantial. Under these circumstances, in order for Patrick to be committed under California law, he must also lack one of the above three criteria.
Here again, it is important to watch out for inconsistency between nouns and the pronouns related to them. Tiffany may be seeking to use nonsexist language by using a collective pronoun (“themselves”) rather than a limiting singular male one (“himself”); if so, she must be sure to precede it with a plural noun (“However disabled patients may be, the ability to provide themselves…”).

Tiffany has located a good excerpt from her field notes to illustrate the points she read about in Holstein’s article. However, her presentation would be smoother with a transition, such as “The following observation illustrates the line of questioning Holstein describes.”

Tiffany uses her field notes to bring her reader into the courtroom with her. However, it does not seem from this example that she has used an excerpt from her original notes, which would be most effective, but has included a later description and elaboration of her observations.

For consistency with “patient’s,” the pronoun that follows it should be singular (“himself” or “herself”).

Ability to Provide Necessities

However disabled a patient may be, the ability to provide himself with life’s basic necessities is primary. Holstein’s article lists a few questions the judge may ask: “Does the person eat regularly? Can the person shop for and prepare food? Does the person dress him- or herself? Does the person have a place to stay?” (Holstein 1984, p. 45).

The judge asked Patrick’s physician, “Is he disabled?” Dr. Powers took a deep breath and pushed his lips together and let out his breath while tilting his head to the side, which showed boredom, and responded, “Yes.” The judge, wanting more of a response, asked him for more information. “Why do you think he cannot provide himself with food, clothing, or shelter?” The doctor looked up at the ceiling, tilting his head slightly and bringing his head back down he looked back at the floor. “His irritability prevents a manageability. He’s not stable enough to be discharged. He refused his medications; however, he has been taking them since Tuesday because of the hearing.”

Judges are also concerned about a patient’s income. A patient dependent upon assistance payments such as Social Security, Social Security Disability Insurance, and unemployment, is more financially secure than those who live a more independent life by working and renting a private apartment (Holstein 1984, p. 16). The reasoning behind this is that the mentally ill have a more difficult time holding onto a job, so financial stability is not assured when they are supporting themselves.

The judge asked Patrick’s physician whether or not Patrick had an income. Dr. Powers answered, “Yes,” in a low voice, looking straight at the floor just in front of the witness stand. The judge asked, “SS, SSI, SSDI, and unemployment?” In the same monotone voice, still looking at the floor, Dr. Powers answered, “Yes.”

This exchange illustrates that the patient’s mental status is not primary, and the judge’s concern may lie with the practical circumstances of the patient’s ability to provide themselves with the basic necessities.
When Tiffany writes, “Because the patient is mentally ill . . .,” she is veering away from the sociological perspective presented by the course materials serving as the foundation for her paper. The sociological stance used by Holstein and Kowit, for example, emphasizes that mental illness is a label applied to only some people displaying disturbed or disruptive behavior.

Tiffany does a good job here of recognizing the relationship between ideas presented in course readings and what she observed in the field.

Tiffany’s recurrent trouble with pronouns strikes again. (The plural pronoun “their” incorrectly follows a singular subject “the patient.”) This is a common example of a good writer whose work could be made even stronger with some fine-tuning.

Without an overview of the legal process being observed, this reference to a “prosecuting attorney” is confusing to the reader.

The possessive form requires an apostrophe: “judge’s.”

Note how Tiffany uses her field notes as evidence, just as she might refer to materials from a book, article, or lecture. They should be cited, just as other materials would be.

T. THE ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELD RESEARCH PAPER

Caretaker

Because the patient is mentally ill, everyday tasks become problematic. Thus, a judge may prefer that someone live near the patient for supervision. Holstein states that “Caretakers are seen as necessary components of a tenable living situation for a person who is seriously mentally ill” (Holstein 1984, p. 51). According to Holstein, “family members, the staff of board and care homes, physicians, landlords, neighbors and the staff at the Salvation Army or the local rescue mission may serve as acceptable caretakers” (Holstein 1984, p. 53). This caretaker must be competent and enforce medication and treatment. Patrick’s board and care served as a sufficient caretaker.

Commitment to Further Treatment

The judge also elicits the cooperation of the patient to commit to a treatment for their disturbances. Because Patrick lived in a board and care facility, supervision is not as good as supervision by a parent or spouse, and therefore, before the judge released him, she made sure that Patrick would continue taking his medication on his own.

“Would you like to stay in the board and care?” asked the prosecuting attorney. “Yes,” Patrick answered, trying to contain himself, taking short breaths, “I came to the hospital having seizures.” Patrick went into great detail describing his seizure. “If the doctor prescribes medication will you take it?” “Yes,” Patrick raises his voice and becomes angry. “Yes, only if he prescribes only those four medications.”

The judges main concern was that Patrick take his prescribed psychotropic medication. She never asked if he would continue seeing his doctor for psychotherapy. He even told the judge in his final statements that he didn’t like his doctor.

“You may step down now if you’ve said everything you want to say,” said the judge. Patrick takes on a tough-guy tone. “I want a new doctor . . . .”
Tiffany's sociological perspective is slipping here. She refers to "mental illness" as a disease—as something to be "cured," with "symptoms" to be controlled. This differs from the view of it as a label, which Holstein and Goffman adopt.

Here is a different kind of subject/pronoun confusion. It's not clear what noun the pronoun "their" refers to. Is it the "judges" who have a "need for containment"? Similarly, who has an illness that needs a cure?

This indented quotation, part of Tiffany's conversation with the patient's psychiatrist, is discussed at length in the section "Example of Interview Notes," pages 118–119. Note here, however, that the indented material—which should be reserved for direct quotation of field notes—inappropriately includes Tiffany's later conclusions.

Medication does not cure the mentally ill; it merely controls the symptoms. Nonetheless, Patrick's release was partly determined by whether or not he would resume taking his medication rather than by his commitment to psychotherapeutic treatment. Thus, the preservation of a havoc-free environment was a greater priority than was Patrick's cure.

Judges based their decision regarding involuntary commitment on criteria related to their need for containment, rather than on finding a cure for their illness. My conversations with others in the court process revealed a similar lack of concern with helping the patient. In talking to Patrick's physician, I realized that Patrick was just a job to him:

"Why are you here today?" I asked the doctor, who seemed very irritated. "The court needs to decide whether or not he is able to provide for himself adequate food, clothing, and shelter. Whether or not he's a danger to himself and others," the doctor took a deep breath of boredom. "What do you think he needs?" I asked. "He needs to stay in treatment," he answered. "What do you think of this whole court process?" "It's a waste of time. I have fifteen to twenty patients I have to see every day. I can't be wasting my time here for eight hours a day. This is the second time I've had to be here this week." I felt like he really didn't care what happened to Patrick. Patrick was more of a nuisance than a human being.

The guards also didn't show much care or consideration for the patients:

"Sing the Thorazine song. "Do your Elvis impression." "This guy has a really sick background." The guards would laugh at and taunt Patrick. I knew it bothered him because of the way he responded: "When people make fun of me I need to walk or do push-ups." Then he knelt down and did fifty push-ups.

These conversations and observations lead to the conclusion that concern for the patient as a person is minimal.

After I left Court 95, I thought about the four hours that I had spent with Patrick and a few things stuck out in my mind. I was there just a little while, and Patrick has to live with himself and his illness all the time. He has difficulty thinking out problems that most of us solve subconsciously.

Tiffany's reference to the "norms that we take for granted" is a good sociological description of the patient's problems. However, her references to "his illness" and "problems that most of us solve subconsciously" are more psychological than is appropriate for the course.

Tiffany uses her conclusion to express some of her opinions about what she observed in the field. Note, however, that she keeps expression of her personal feelings brief. The strength of her paper is that it is based on the empirical data she collected and analyzed.
References should be put on a separate page, as Tiffany has done.

Tiffany should have included her interview and/or field notes in her list of references. Since the format was not specified in the assignment, she should have discussed the required information and preferred format with her instructor. Here is one possibility:


REFERENCES