



# CONDUCTING A MINI FIELD STUDY

## TEACHER VERSION

**Subject Level:**

High School Sociology

**Grade Level:**

10-12

**Approx. Time Required:**

60-120 minutes

**Learning Objectives:**

- Students will be able to take field notes and write reports about qualitative data.
- Students will be able to understand the importance of reflexivity in sociological research.
- Students will be able to further develop their skills in interpreting numerical data.

## Activity Description

Students will learn about the nature and importance of qualitative research as a complement to numerical data — specifically how sociologists use in-depth ethnographic research to study specific places and groups. After students investigate census data on the demographics of their school’s ZIP code, they will observe a location at their school (e.g., a student center or cafeteria). Students will record their notes, understanding the importance of reflexivity in field research. Then they will write a short paper about their field study.

---

**Suggested Grade Level:**

10-12

**Approximate Time Required:**

60-120 minutes

---

**Learning Objectives:**

- Students will be able to take field notes and write reports about qualitative data.
- Students will be able to understand the importance of reflexivity in sociological research.
- Students will be able to further develop their skills in interpreting numerical data.

---

**Topics:**

- Demographics
- Group behavior
- Social norms

**Skills Taught:**

- Conducting field research
  - Drawing conclusions
  - Making inferences
-

## Materials Required

- The student version of this activity, 5 pages
- Teacher computer with Internet access and a projector to display web sites

A computer with Internet access for each student is preferred but optional.

## Activity Item

This activity uses the following online tool:

- [Data.census.gov](https://data.census.gov)  
<https://data.census.gov>

For more information to help you introduce your students to the Census Bureau, read "[Census Bureau 101 for Students](#)." This information sheet can be printed and passed out to your students as well.

## Standards Addressed

See chart below. For more information, read

["Overview of Education Standards and Guidelines Addressed in Statistics in Schools Activities."](#)

### National Standards for High School Sociology

#### Domain 1: The Sociological Perspective and Methods of Inquiry

Assessable Competencies	Essential Concepts
1.1 Students will identify sociology as a scientific field of inquiry.	1.1.2 Hypotheses 1.1.4 Scientific study of society
1.2 Students will compare and contrast the sociological perspective and how it differs from other social sciences.	1.2.1 Impact of social context on human behavior 1.2.3 Sociological imagination
1.3 Students will evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the major methods of sociological research.	1.3.3 Observations 1.3.5 Research ethics

Domain 2: Social Structure: Culture, Institutions, and Society

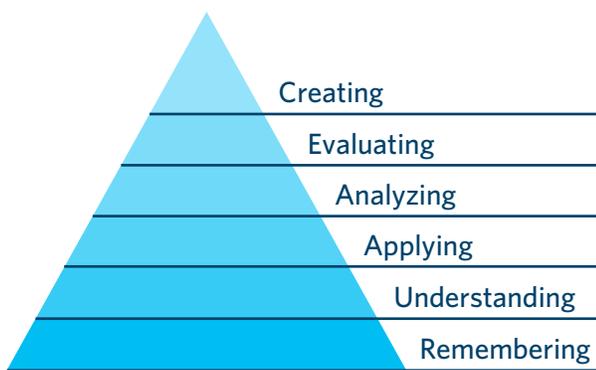
Assessable Competencies	Essential Concepts
2.1 Students will describe the components of culture.	2.1.1 Nonmaterial culture, including norms and values 2.1.2 Material culture
2.3 Students will evaluate important social institutions and how they respond to social needs.	2.3.1 Social institutions such as: family, education, religion, economy, and government 2.3.2 Social statuses and roles

Domain 3: Social Relationships: Self, Groups, and Socialization

Assessable Competencies	Essential Concepts
3.1 Students will describe the process of socialization across the life course.	3.1.1 Primary agents of socialization: family, peers, media, schools, and religion

## Bloom’s Taxonomy

Students will *analyze* interactions in a social setting.



# Teacher Notes

## Before the Activity

Students must understand the following key terms:

- **Demographics** – information about human population characteristics (e.g., age, race, and sex)
- **Field research** – a type of qualitative research that focuses on understanding and interpreting another person’s social world through that person’s experiences, including by observing and interviewing
- **Field notes** – a record of a researcher’s understanding of the lives, people, and events that are the focus of the research; ethnographers take field notes that detail social interactions in a given setting
- **Participant observer** – a researcher who participates in ongoing activities in the setting and records field notes
- **Complete observer** – a researcher who does not participate in ongoing activities in the setting and just records field notes
- **Reflexivity** – the process of examining oneself as a researcher, including one’s assumptions and preconceptions and how they may affect the research design and participants, as well as examining the research being conducted

Teachers should be aware that much of this activity, specifically parts 2–4, will need to be completed outside of class, so they should set expectations with students about when they must complete the assignment.

## During the Activity

Teachers should display the [data.census.gov](https://data.census.gov) tool on the screen and walk students through part 1 of the activity. If students have access to individual computers, they can do this part on their own.

For part 2, teachers will select and announce the location for the field study (e.g., cafeteria, gym, main hallway, or main office). Teachers will call on students to discuss their responses to question 1 before moving on to question 2. Teachers should approve students’ sociological questions in question 2.

Before students begin their field study in part 3, which can be conducted outside of school hours or during lunch (according to teacher preference), teachers should emphasize to students that they will be complete observers, meaning they should be well-behaved and attentive, making sure not to disrupt participants’ interactions in the setting. Teachers should make sure students understand that they must use pseudonyms (i.e., fake names) instead of real names to protect the confidentiality of participants they observe in the setting.

## After the Activity

Teachers should direct students to reflect on what they learned as part of a whole-group discussion. Teachers may choose to note for students the limitations of pure observation (rather than self-reporting, for example) in accurately determining a participant's demographics or other assumptions about social behavior.

## Extension Idea

- Teachers could instruct students to review a peer's field study, providing feedback on its structure and content. Students could assess and grade their peers on how well the study addresses the intended sociological question, describes the setting, explains why the setting is sociologically interesting, describes social interactions, and addresses the concept of reflexivity.

## Student Activity

Click [here](#) to download a printable version for students.

### Student Learning Objectives

- I will be able to take field notes and write reports about qualitative data.
- I will be able to understand the importance of reflexivity in sociological research.
- I will be able to further develop my skills in interpreting numerical data.

### Activity Items

This activity uses the following online tool:

- [Data.census.gov](https://data.census.gov)  
<https://data.census.gov>

#### Part 1 - Gather Background Information

Use [data.census.gov](https://data.census.gov) to fill in the following table with the most up-to-date demographic information about your school’s ZIP code. Type the school’s ZIP code into the search box on the homepage and hit “Enter.” Then on the next screen, look at the “ACS Demographic and Housing Estimates” table. Click on the table and use the “Product” drop down box to select the 2018: ACS 5-Year Estimates Data Profiles.

Note: The data table will be labeled ZCTA5 plus the ZIP code number that is entered. The city and state names will not appear on the table.

**The sample answers below are for ZIP code 48642, in Midland, Michigan. Student answers will vary depending on the ZIP code of the school.**

School ZIP code:                     48642                    

Demographic Information	Data (2014-2018)
Total population	32,096 people
Persons 18 years and over (percent)	78.1%
Female persons (percent)	50.9%
White alone (percent)	91.1%

Demographic Information	Data (2014-2018)
Black or African-American alone (percent)	1.4%
American Indian and Alaska Native alone (percent)	0.6%
Asian alone (percent)	3.9%
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone (percent)	0.1%
Two or more races (percent)	2.4%
Hispanic or Latino (percent)	2.4%

Record any other demographic data about your school’s ZIP code that your class found relevant or interesting:

**Student answers will vary depending on the ZIP code of the school.**

## Part 2 – Describe the Place You Are Observing

1. What specific location in your school will you observe? What is the background and/or history of the school and of that specific location, if relevant? And what makes this location sociologically interesting?

To answer these questions, consider speaking with office staff or teachers who have worked at the school for a long time, looking online for old news stories about the school, reading old yearbooks or student newspaper articles, reviewing the school web site, etc. Think beyond the location you are observing to also consider the city or town and the surrounding community. (If your school is newer, focus on the history of the surrounding community or of schools in your district more generally.)

**Student answers will vary but could include the numbers of staff members and students at the school over time, information on how the school was founded, and the school’s graduation rate over time. Students could find a location like the school cafeteria sociologically interesting because most students go there at some point during the day, meaning it could represent the student population fairly accurately.**

2. Now write a sociological question related to demographics that you will investigate as part of your field study.

**Student answers will vary. An example is: Do the observed racial demographics of students in our school cafeteria match the actual demographics from the Census Bureau for our school’s ZIP code?**

### Part 3 – Conduct Your Field Study

It's time to make observations at your assigned location. You should observe the location for 30–45 minutes and record good field notes on the Field Notes Template at the end of this activity. (You will use these notes to write a paper in the next part of the activity, so be thorough.) Remember to use pseudonyms when writing about or discussing any students or teachers you observe!

### Part 4 – Write a Sociological Analysis

Write a two-page analysis of your findings from this field study, answering your sociological question from part 2. Discuss the relationship between the demographics in the *data.census.gov* tool and those from your observations at your school. Also reflect on your own social identity and how it may have affected your observations and findings.

Did you encounter any problems when you were collecting your data in the field? If so, how did you resolve them (if at all)? And how did you feel during your observation — did you notice any of your own thoughts and opinions affecting you?

**The content of students' papers will vary but could include percentage comparisons of observed racial or gender demographics at their school with data from *data.census.gov*.**

**Students' papers could also discuss how their presence as observers influenced participant behavior. The observed students could be more likely to obey the rules or to "perform" if they saw they were being watched. Students could also feel that their presence, even if they were being quiet and well-behaved, was a distraction from normal activities.**

### Field Notes Template

Researcher Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Location at School: \_\_\_\_\_

Be sure to record the time (e.g., 3:30 p.m.) as well as the following information:

- Duration and exact place of observation in your location
- Aspects of the physical setting (e.g., sights, sounds, touch, and smell)
- People (e.g., Who is there? What can you accurately observe about their age, race, and sex? What are they doing?)
- Conversations (e.g., What topics do you overhear? Include direct quotes when you can.)
- Social interactions and conflicts, including norms (e.g., the “rules” for this setting, including how they are upheld and how they could differ by sex) and behaviors (e.g., people’s responses to each other)
- Your own feelings, emotions, and reactions (e.g., Do you feel awkward because someone might be staring at you?)

Time	Notes

Time	Notes