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Ethnography Reflection

While I was spending time in Union Square conducting research and taking field notes, I chose to focus on the main subway station, the Union Square stairs, and Forever 21 because the area between these three points is populous and has a diverse group of people. My presence impacted what I observed – while noting the pathways people take coming in and out of the subway station, people especially took the effort to walk around and not bump into me since I was physically standing in front of the station. I tried to reduce the impact of my presence by standing in the area to the right of the station exit (or entrance), where people usually are on their phones, constantly looking up, to which I concluded that they were waiting for someone. The main obstacle that I faced while observing was that since I was looking at everyone around me and taking notes, a few people started glancing at me. To not look too suspicious, I attempted to lose their interest by walking away and changing the location from which I observed.

The theme that repeats the most within my notes, which I subconsciously focused on, is the social patterns within Union Square. I noticed that there were significantly more men than women wearing headphones. Those wearing headphones were always alone in their own bubble, avoiding eye contact with strangers. In Forever 21, I noticed that all the men enter the store wearing headphones. Many of the men who shop in the small men’s section of the store wore hoodies, which, combined with the headphones, produces a slouching effect. Men never enter with other men, while women almost always shop in groups and never wear headphones. This is interesting because it reminded me of gender roles and how it is not very socially accepted for men to be as obsessed with their appearances as women are. The men who enter Forever 21 are always alone except when entering with a woman, and their slouching may indicate discomfort for shopping at a store that is mostly filled with women.

I also noticed that the main places where warm reunions take place were left of the subway station, on the Union Square stairs, in front of the park, and in front of Whole Foods and Forever 21, and how people do not wear headphones when they are with other people. However, those waiting for other people are always on their phones. This indicates that technology (headphones, cell phones) has become a means of dealing with loneliness and the awkwardness of being alone. This is interesting to me because I never thought of how controlling technology can have on social interactions. It also brings up the question of whether people in waiting areas at the station and stairs would talk to other people waiting if they did not have phones, and whether people who are not on their phones would be more social with strangers.

I could engage in the research by standing next to someone in a waiting area who is not on a phone and see if he or she would talk to me. I would continue looking into the topics I am interested in by revisiting the locations and collecting more data, only focusing on taking detailed notes on social interactions in relation to other factors (headphones, location, gender).