Field Note Sample:

Observations at a University Weight Room

In this field note excerpt, participant observation takes place at a university sports and recreation complex’s weight room on a February afternoon. The male participants are assigned descriptors in place of names (e.g., WORK BOOTS, GOATEE). Observer’s comments (OC), in addition to the descriptive detail, are deliberately included as part of the sample. Code the following excerpt in the right-hand margin using Process Coding, Initial Coding, or Values Coding, then write an analytic memo based on the codes. If Process Coding is chosen, diagram the social action at work here.

The prominent odor in the room can be described as “musky, sweaty clothes.” The ceiling height is approximately twelve feet and has air conditioning vents to maintain a comfortable temperature, and speakers where rock music from a radio station is playing at a moderate volume.

The east side handweight floor is covered with black, rectangular, rubber mats. The designated area for this observation has three weight benches: metal frames with adjustable, dark red, patent leather, padded platforms that can accommodate a person sitting on and/or leaning against them. Benches are spaced to allow people to work by them while others work on them. Weight and accessory racks, holding various sizes and pounds of round metal disks, are located against the east wall and central pillar.

The north wall has large windows providing sunlight to complement the florescent lighting. The south wall also has windows with a view of the Center’s hall and towel booth. Laminated or plated signs on the east wall state “Weight Room Policies” such as “Collars are Required” and

“Repack your Weights.”

Prominent on the east side are seven foot high mirrors extending across the length of the wall.

*OC: It’s like a voluntary, contemporary torture chamber; only the serious need apply. With all the metal and glass there’s a feeling of coldness, hardness, massiveness in the environment.*

A white twenty-ish man in baggy jeans, a loose white t-shirt, and tan WORK BOOTS is seated on a weight bench. He rises, grips two handweights, one in each hand, and lifts them simultaneously in arm curls. His face clenches in an expression that looks like pain as he raises the weights to neck level. Throughout this exercise he is standing about three feet from and facing the wall length mirror. His medium-length hair is honey blonde.

*OC: His dress is not typical of what most men wear in this weight room. Most wear shorts and athletic shoes. Through his loose fitting clothes and by the size of his forearms I sensed that he was fairly muscular.*

WORK BOOTS is still seated at the bench but the weights are on the floor. He leans back, his hands interlocked behind his head, his legs spread apart. He looks at himself in the mirror. He then looks to the side, breathes in, stretches his arms, stands, and talks to a THIN MAN next to him. WORK BOOTS picks up the same weights as before and continues his arm curls for approximately twenty “reps” (repetitions). Throughout this he looks at himself in the mirror, smiles, then grimaces his face, looks down, then looks at himself in the mirror.

*OC: The man thinks he’s hot. That classic leaning-back-with-your-arms-behind-your-head-legs-spread-apart pose is just too suggestive of stereotypical male sexuality (“I’m a fuckin’ man”). He was checking out his muscles—the breathing in to expand his chest was a personal pleasure sensation to feel himself. The continuous looks and smiles he gives himself in the mirror make him look like an arrogant S.O.B. His self-esteem seems very high and he seems pleased with his own physical appearance.*

A fairly large but somewhat muscular man with a GOATEE, green ball cap, grey t-shirt, and blue shorts sits on a weight bench close to WORK BOOTS and arm curls one weight over and behind his head. His feet are not flat on the floor, but on “tiptoe.” GOATEE does approximately seven reps with one arm, then switches to another. He, too, faces the mirror but is now approximately ten feet away from it.

*OC: The “tiptoe” seemed so out of place—a stereotypical feminine action in juxtaposition with his large body frame. Weight lifting ballet—“masculine dance.” Dancers rehearse with mirrors, too.*

WORK BOOTS, standing, makes eye contact with himself in the mirror for approximately fifteen seconds. His mouth twitches. He picks up the handweights and continues his reps, continually looking at himself in the mirror as he does so.