

Essay on social event: state fair

Environment



1. For the purposes of this sociological assignment, I attended the Illinois State Fair, an annual event in which thousands of people from around the central Illinois area gather to participate in fun rides, concerts, and meet other people from all over the state. The event was an open-air event at the Illinois State Fairgrounds, and lasted the entire weekend; the entire fairgrounds was occupied by food stands, carnival games, large carnival rides, musical venues and more, all designed to create a huge spectacle experience for a large number of people. There was also a pavilion where local art could be judged and sold, as well as a farmer's market where local growers and distributors could sell their wares.

During the two days I attended the Illinois State Fair, I saw a wide variety of people attending the fair, though they were consisted with the kind of demographics you typically see in the rural Midwest. The vast majority of the fairgoers were white lower to middle-class Illinoisans, aged from approximately 5 to 50; most came with their whole families, which meant that both grandparents and grandchildren could easily be seen there. Of those who were not white, the demographics were fairly evenly split between African-Americans and Latin Americans, with approximately the same age distribution; a few Asian Americans were seen attending, but their numbers were much scarcer than any of the other ethnic groups present. The event itself, due to its size and prominence, seemed to get an accurate cross-section of rural Illinois in terms of racial and sociological demographics, which skewed heavily toward white nuclear families and extended family groups.

2. The culture of the event seemed to be one of simple fun and innocent hedonism; the event provided many fun attractions for fairgoers to engage

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in. Temperance was not a factor - while alcohol was not allowed, the food stands delivered typical carnival fare, such as funnel cakes, deep fried Twinkies, hot dogs and so on; the attitude was definitely calibrated toward fun fast food rather than healthy food choices. The open-air atmosphere emphasized the joy of the outdoors; the structures (except for the buildings used for the farmer's market and art exhibition) were all temporary tents and mobile stands, adding an ephemeral quality to the fair itself.

The culture of the event as dictated by the people was extremely casual and friendly; people dressed down, wearing warm relaxed clothing (tank tops, t-shirts, shorts and blue jeans) in order to stay cool in the heat and remain comfortable as they experienced the fair. People were perpetually friendly to each other, with complete strangers treating each other with courtesy and finding it easy to talk to one another. Events like music concerts, auctions and the larger carnival rides were instances where people could let loose, shouting and yelling along with music or in reaction to the twists and turns of a rollercoaster; the entire culture of the event emphasizes an environment of casual joy and relaxation. The primary values one could associate with this event include an emphasis on material pleasures, allowing oneself to indulge in rare outdoor activities and cultivating a sense of community within the larger Illinois area, sharing art, food and ideas within a local setting.

3. The social interaction of the fair plays in very closely with the values and belief systems of the fair itself and those who attended it. The entertainment and fun-based atmosphere of the environment was likely a huge factor in people's attitudes going into the fair. In short, the vast majority of people were extremely friendly and cordial to each other - most everyone had a smile on their face when conversing with each other. It was a kid-friendly

environment, with a moratorium on roughhousing and alcohol; many families were there expressly to take their children to the rides, while they enjoyed the occasional snack and perused the farmer's market. Because of the communal social expectation of friendliness, particularly in the environment that was provided (a circus-like carnival that is much more kid-oriented than many other events), people were likely under greater pressure to behave courteously, and to go out of their way to talk to others. Furthermore, many of those at the fair were vendors and entertainers, who deliberately cultivated a culture of glee and excitement in order to get people to play their games, buy their food, or go on their rides.

Because everyone there is likely under the same socioeconomic level, and of similar ethnicity and family structure, it is easy for people to get along - the vast majority of fair attendants have the same occupations (agriculture, business, teaching), and are all dressed in similar comfortable clothes, making it more difficult to ascertain who is in what social class. Due to this uniformity of demographic and appearance of the attendants, relationships and interactions between attendants was likely much less stratified than in other environments. Everyone looked the same, and had the same issues, and therefore were treated with equal deference and joy.

4. What little social inequality I found was with the treatment of minorities at the fair. There were few to no actual conflicts between individuals and groups that I could see, but a great deal of stratification did tend to occur. For one thing, the few groups of African-Americans and Latinos that I did see largely stuck together, and I saw very little intersectional interaction between whites, blacks and Latinos. In the case of the black and Latino families I saw, they were mostly there on their own to interact with each

other, largely ignoring the other groups in their vicinity. Furthermore, many of the white families would seem to display uncomfortable behavior in the presence of African-Americans, as I noticed several instances of families moving to keep their distance, or securing valuables when they would walk by. While many of the food vendors were African-American or Latino, white fairgoers would treat them with comfort provided they were only there in the context of providing food, goods or services to them.

As for social deviance and control, I noticed a few groups of teenage delinquents who would horseplay throughout the fair. These mostly consisted of groups of 4-5 boys aged anywhere from 8 to 17, who would simply hang out with each other without parents and act out. Sometimes they would heckle other attendants, other times they would try to cheat at carnival games or get extra rides. However, there was a small measure of fair security there to keep them in line; in a few instances, security had to intervene when a small scuffle broke out among groups of teenage boys, but these were few and far between.

5. Looking at the three major sociological perspectives, I believe the Illinois State Fair could best be 'explained' with the ideas of symbolic interactionism. With symbolic interactionism, symbols are used to imbue things with meaning in a society, and the emphasis is on face-to-face interactions with other humans to form the finer points of a culture. In the case of the Illinois State Fair, the fair itself is a symbol; the circus-like atmosphere, the traditional-looking pavilions and carnival rides, all of this is meant to instill a sense of tradition in the people who attend it. Images of the Ferris Wheel, the rollercoaster, cotton candy, and multicolored tents are firmly ingrained in American culture, as they were the primary means of entertainment for

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previous generations - the state fair continues those traditions, with these symbols representing the past, and traditional methods of fun.

The interactionist element to this sociological theory also helps to explain the behavior of the attendants at the State Fair; by allowing a fun venue for many different people to gather, it allows for many more face-to-face interactions that can help to define friendships, cultural exchange and commerce. The presence of the food stands and the farmer's markets allow for people from all over the area to meet in the context of selling and buying goods, and the rides and games provide contexts for people young and old to meet. The jovial atmosphere of the fair is created by all of these smaller interactions, which perpetuate a culture of fun and community that is the hallmark of the Illinois State Fair.