

Qualitative Methods Paper

Due Monday 28 May by 17h00 (by email to me)

Write a short paper (1500-2000 words) discussing a social space and the strategies that go along with it, due May 25. This must be based on at least one successful interview that you conduct with someone.

What is a social strategy?

Social worlds don't just automatically stay in motion. They require constant work to keep them functioning, and to keep actors moving through them. Social actors are deeply invested in the ongoing maintenance of their worlds. Every time you remake a world, you have a chance to shift its parameters very slightly, and perhaps to shift your place in it. As people have strong interests in how the world unfolds, and also in their own "station" in the world, they develop *strategies* that organize their social action.

Some examples of social strategies are quite straightforward:

- Street protest could be a strategy for trying to change society by influencing the government.
- Getting a university degree could be a strategy for upward class mobility.
- Migrating to look for work is a common strategy for coping with economic precarity.

Note that in these cases, it's well known what the strategy is supposed to accomplish, but there is still a layer of indirection. The means are deeply separated from the ends, in space and in time. The protest doesn't *immediately* change anything, and it's never guaranteed to work. You may not change class position overnight. Even if you get work, it may not solve all the problems of precarity.

But often, social strategies are more sneaky. They can have unconscious, even egotistical motives. People may not *know* or *want to admit* that their action is strategic, because they prefer to see themselves as acting for non-instrumental reasons. (People have strategies, in fact, for trying to control how people perceive their motivations!)

So for instance, getting a university degree could conceal a strategy for competing socioeconomically with a sibling, or for finding a potential spouse. Being a political activist could provide massive personal ego gratification. Migrating for work could be a strategy for escaping a community situation that is too tense to discuss openly. Taking care of children could be an insurance policy against future precarity, but one might nevertheless want to believe that it is pure altruism and love.

I must note here that *not everything we do is a social strategy*. When you choose what food to purchase at a cafe, you might have preferences and tastes, but the choice of food isn't a "social strategy" unless it has some significance for your place in the world. For instance, if I were to eat at a restaurant with a vegetarian, even though I'm not vegetarian, I might choose not to eat meat, because I don't want my friend to see me doing something that they might find offensive. Then my choice of food would become *strategic* in a way that it isn't when I'm eating alone, because it would be about relationship maintenance and impression management. Social strategies affect our place in systems of social recognition, so if you're wondering "is this a strategy?" ask "does this affect how someone is perceived by others?"

I also note that social strategies are partly learned, partly improvised. We may have some choice about what strategies to pursue, and we can sometimes invent new ones. But we also learn from others what sorts of strategies are possible and when they're appropriate. A *social space* is just a site in which social strategies can *function*. (Thus when you are a complete outsider, it's hard to have effective strategies!)

What is a social space?

What makes something a social space is its system of social recognition and visibility. Prototypical social spaces would include families, friend circles, neighborhoods, university departments, and other places where people *know where they stand*. Note that recognition need not be mutual or symmetrical; in fact it is deeply

hierarchical. Most social spaces do have hierarchies of some sort (even in friend circles, one person might be more popular or charismatic than the next). A lot of what happens in social spaces is about trying to maintain or improve one's position. (Of course, people don't always have a lot of latitude in their choice of strategies; a lot of people are somewhat trapped in their place.)

A social space often corresponds to a specific geographical location. For instance, a "campus" is a symbolically defined space that can more or less be defined physically in the world. But a social space does not *have to be* a physical space. For instance, social media creates virtual spaces that are deeply social even though they have no specific geographical location. Personal webs of relationships also create virtual social spaces — if you have friends from childhood who are now widely spread out in space, but you keep in touch and recognize each other's places in the network, that counts as a social space too. Families are another example of social spaces that can vary widely in how they are geographically localized (some families live in the same place, others don't).

If you're in doubt about how to locate a social space, just ask me!

The assignment

Because social strategies often aren't entirely conscious (or mix together "respectable" and less respectable aims), it's difficult to ask about them directly. What you need to do is learn about the *kinds of things people are doing in a particular social space*. Then you will be able to draw some conclusions of your own about the relationship between social strategies and the spaces they exist in.

Here is how you should proceed:

- 1) Choose a social space that you find interesting for some reason.
- 2) Find someone interesting and (if possible) thoughtful to talk to about that space.
- 3) Interview that person for at least 20 minutes about what it's like to be in the designated space.
- 4) If your first interview is very successful and has lots of good data, it is enough for this assignment. If you find it a bit unsatisfying, try doing a second one.
- 5) Write a short paper that discusses at least two social strategies and their relationship to the social space they emerge from. Do make sure to explain exactly what the social space is, where it is located in the world, and what makes it interesting. Please also reflect a bit on who your interview subject is, who you are, and what made your interview work (or not).
- 6) Send your completed paper to me by email.

Notes

- *Interview guidance:* It's best to talk about concrete things in an interview, rather than generalities. Try to find out about *particular people* who belong to the space, and how they got there. You might try to ask about how a particular person becomes successful and gets recognized, or how a specific marginalized person gets marginalized/loses recognition. Also, ask about interesting events or controversies and — this part is crucial — *how people reacted to them*. If there was a scandal, find out what happened, but also find out about its aftermath, and whether anything changed as a result. Sometimes social spaces fall apart or grow; this is interesting too.
- *Interview methods:* Either take notes during the interview, or tape-record it. Whatever you do, make sure you capture *specific statements* so you can analyze them carefully later. Specific language is ethnographically important!
- *Readings:* If it is relevant, feel free to discuss the module readings on social spaces and strategies.
- *Interpretation:* Creative and interesting interpretations of your data are highly encouraged.

If you have any questions, please email me and I'll clarify or help.