A MICRO-SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY IN PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION OF CITY BUS RIDERS

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The taken-for-grantedness of the everyday world potentially contains a vast amount of data for the social scientist. A current movement in sociology records these data by a methodology based on phenomenology.[1] The phenomenological method calls the observer back to the raw data, the "things themselves," and reminds him that potential data in human behavior, if casually observed, may be obscured from him in the taken-for-granted world. This study in micro-sociology offered the opportunity to combine a phenomenologically influenced methodology with the art of participant observation. While specific behavioral patterns may vary between individuals and groups, this methodology provides a general research tool for gathering data on human behavior.

George Homans stressed the sociologist's need to have the courage to study ordinary, everyday behavior and to look more closely at the obvious and familiar.[2] By assuming the role of a city bus rider, I shared ordinary life activities of other bus riders and was able to observe patterns in their behavior. I observed bus riders on the #8 bus in Denver, Colorado. This aggregate of people provided data which the casual observer might take for granted. However, it is such data, gathered by participant observation and interpreted phenomenologically, that may allow the social scientist to study the "people's business."

II. METHODOLOGY

"To the Things Themselves"

Using participant observation as a technique requires the observer first to make clear his bias *before* he enters the situation he plans to study. Thus, I was aware of what Douglas terms self-lodging, the transforming of the observer's own identity into the "selves, memories,

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[1]See J. Heap and P. Roth, "On Phenomenological Sociology," *American Sociological Review, 38* (June): 354-367, 1973, and E. Tiryakian, "Existential Phenomenology and the Sociological Tradition," *American Sociological Review, 30* (October): 674-688, 1965.

[2]G. Homans, *The Human Group*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1950.

and imaginations of other relevant others."[3] The participant observer must be aware that his biography may be a factor both in his selection of the group to be studied and in his interpretation of the data the group provides. Not conscious of any potential or actual bias prior to joining the aggregate which rode the #8 bus, I was aware that as the study progressed my own biography could be a potential factor in my interpretation of the aggregate's behavior. Whenever such awareness became known, it was noted and an attempt was made to correct it.

A methodology based on phenomenology requires the social scientist to observe the phenomenon "as it exists," i.e., as nearly as possible to record the *intentionality* of the phenomenon. The cry "back to the things themselves" means that before the social scientist builds abstract theory and/or models, he must first carefully observe and record the phenomena on which those abstractions are based. This study, utilizing such a methodology, was a micro-sociological investigation of the available phenomena of which I was aware among the aggregate of people who rode the #8 bus in Denver, Colorado, from September, 1973, to May, 1974. To gather data I rode the #8 bus a total of 100 hours, an investment of 2% of my life during those nine months.

The Denver Metro Transit System has 317 buses which carry a daily average of 95,000 passengers. I studied one bus, which, at capacity, had an average of 30-40 passengers. Since admittedly this aggregate was a small sample of the total population who daily ride buses in Denver, the reader should be warned about generalizing these findings to other riders of public transportation. However, this study contains information for social scientists interested in research in participant observation.

From 7:15 a.m. to 7:25 a.m., Monday to Friday, the same three to seven white males and females, under forty years of age, waited for the #8 bus.[4] Many of my observations were made during "The Wait."

III. Results

"The Wait: I Wouldn't Touch You With a Ten-foot Pole!"

The people gathered for "The Wait" at the corner of East Evans and South University. As they collectively waited the arrival of the #8 bus, they stood a minimum of ten-feet apart. On occasion, to test the sacredness of this unwritten rule of distance, I approached

[3]J. Douglas, *Understanding Everyday Life*, Chicago: Aldine, 1970.
[4]The one exception was a white female fifty years of age or older.

individuals, breaking into their ten-foot radious of psychological and physical space: I "invaded" their territory. They countered my invasion by gradually moving away until once again the distance was an average of ten feet. While some required more distance, and others less, the average was ten feet.

While maintaining this distance, the people busied themselves reading the morning newspaper, smoking, staring into space, or looking into shop windows. The shops were not the type usually associated with "window shopping;" in nine months they provided little variation in display and design.[5] 1 believe that engaging in this repetitious behavior while maintaining the ten-foot barrier allowed the people to protect their psychological and physical space from potential intruders.[6] Goffman says that the surest way for a person to prevent threats to his face is to avoid contacts in which these threats are likely to occur.[7]

This point may be confirmed by the observation that *no one ever used the bench* the bus company provided for patrons. This bench, in the open, near the street and the newspaper vending machine, invited people to share it. The danger of potential intrusion and conversation was real. "Rookies" used the bench—but only the first several times they waited for the #8. After they become daily riders, they joined the "regulars" in the "line-up" along the shop windows. This "line-up" had its own social characteristics, one of which was The Scout.

The Scout: "Thar She Blows!"

The regulars caught the #8 at the same time, the same location, every morning. A position with definite role behavior ascribed to it existed among regulars. The person standing in the "line-up" nearest the direction the bus arrived became The Scout. He was "expected" to communicate to the regulars that the bus would soon arrive and that they should prepare for it. The Scout non-verbally communicated this message by folding a newspaper, opening a purse to take out bus fare, and/or throwing away a half-smoked cigarette. Then the remaining

[5]The shops included a twenty-four hour diner, a shoe repair shop, an entrance to a psychological clinic, and a drug store where I found myself reading the titles of the same paperback books day after day.

[6]The only time I observed the ten-foot distance violated was during inclement weather when the people would huddle under what protection was available. Perhaps this is an example of a stressful situation forcing people to temporarily abandon their unwritten rules of protective behavior.

[7]E. Goffman, "On Face-work: An Analysis of Ritual Elements in Social Interaction," in E. H. Schein, F. I. Steele, and D .E. Berlew, (editors), *Interpersonal Dynamics: Essays and Readings on Human Interaction,* Homewood, Illinois: Dorsey, p. 233, 1968.

regulars, having seen the Scout begin his preparatory behavior, engaged in similar behavior.

The Scout's role behavior remained constant regardless of which regular filled the position. Although the position varied daily, the required role behavior was constant. Usually the position was filled by the weariest regular; that is the first regular on the scene usually stood closest to the corner. However, if by chance a rookie, someone not known by face or ritual to the regulars, stood in the Scout's position on the corner, his preparatory behavior was questioned. He, an unknown, might be waiting for the #18 (the other bus which traveled past the corner). So when a rookie acted as Scout, the regulars checked the street to make certain that his communication was correct. However, when originating from a "regular" Scout, communication was so trustworthy that regulars never looked for the bus—they simply watched the Scout's actions.[8]

While standing in the "line-up," periodically checking whether the Scout was engaged in preparatory behavior, the regulars did not talk, exchange greetings, or give nods of recognition. All communication was non-verbal, as was most of their communication once on the bus.

The Ride:
"If it's Empty, I'll Take it!"

Boarding the bus, I found about ten passengers already seated. Within a distance of about two miles, the bus filled to capacity. Thus I had the opportunity to observe the behavior of new passengers as they boarded the bus.

A pattern for selection of seats existed among passengers. Their first criterion was space. Empty seats (an empty two person seat) were at a premium and were the first choice of nearly all the riders. When all seats were occupied at least one other passenger, the second criterion for seat selection was sex. Males shared with males, females with females. After the criteria of space and sex, the passenger turned to age and race, in that order. Passengers over forty joined similarly aged passengers. Race was the last criterion: riders segregated themselves.[9]

The observation that free space was the first criterion for seat

[8]The return trip from a downtown location did not involve a Scout. There, on a busy downtown corner, people were waiting for one of eight or nine buses. Since there was no way to know for which bus a person was waiting, and since #8 regulars were frequently absent, non-verbal preparatory behavior often proved inadequate.

[9]The low position of race in the seating hierarchy may be because #8 had few non-white riders; its route was through a pre-dominantly white middle-class neighborhood.

selection was consistent with the ten-foot minimum during The Wait. Apparently, these bus riders needed to maintain distance from fellow passengers. This observation was substantiated in that frequently a passenger left a shared seat for a recently vacated seat.

As well, the Ride provided opportunities to observe *face-work*.[10] On one occasion a standing female was thrown against a seated female when the bus came to an unexpected halt. The exchange was:

"Excuse me!"
"That's o.k."
"Are you all right?"
"Yes, thank you."

Here is an example of Goffman's corrective process of face-work containing the moves of challenge, offering, acceptance and gratitude.[11] This sequence of verbal exchange was triggered by a threat to the offended passenger's "face" and was terminated with the re-establishment of "face" for both offender and offended.

A young woman who mistakenly pulled the cord one stop before she wished to depart the bus provided another example of face-work. When the bus stopped and no one departed, she concentrated on staring out the window. Finally, the driver drove to the next stop where the confused passenger departed quickly. Goffman discusses this avoidance process:

> When a person fails to prevent an incident, he can still attempt to maintain the fiction that no threat to face has occurred. The most blatent example of this is found where the person acts as if an event which contains a threatening expression has not occurred at all.[12]

In such a case, the person engages in "studied non-observation" of his own acts, as did this young woman.

After the bus filled, additional passengers were forced to stand in the center aisle, A position developed similar to that of the Scout during the Wait. The person nearest the rear of the bus communicated the availability of a seat by moving toward it. This movement communicated to others that additional seats may be available, that is, more than one person may have departed the bus. If the Scout did not move, even when the bus stopped for someone to depart, passengers

[10]Goffman, *op. cit.*, p 232, defines face-work as actions taken by a person to make whatever he is doing consistent with face.
[11]*Ibid.*
[12]*Ibid.*

standing in line did not move towards the rear of the bus looking for available seats. Once on the bus, riders exhibited behavior similar to that displayed in the "line-up" and seldom verbally communicated with each other. "Silence is Golden" was the rule.

IV. Conclusion
"Follow the Rules"

This micro-sociological study of bus riders, employing the technique of participant observation and a methodology based on phenomenology, furnished the opportunity to observe the unwritten rules by which people "go about their business." Rules of conduct, such as the ten-foot minimum and the expectations of the Scout, were communicated. Once communicated, these rules became the basis for human interaction. One had to know the rules before he could "properly" ride the #8 bus.

This study revealed the potential storehouse of data available in the taken-for-granted world. An unexplored fortune of data awaits the clever social scientist who discovers that what he has been taking for granted is truly the "people's business."