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An Ethnographic Study of the Influence of a Mobile Home Community on Suburban High School Students

Steven I. Miller[1] **and Beverly Evko**
Loyola University of Chicago

This study provides an ethnographic account of a mobile home park with specific attention upon the lives of adolescents living in the park and attending a local suburban high school. A symbolic interactionist perspective is utilized. Historical factors leading to the mobile home experience, as well as present policies at the local, state, and federal levels, perpetuate the outsider status of the mobile home park dweller. The mobile home unit and the mobile home park defy conventional categories and are thus "polluted"; an extension of this attitude comes to attach to the consumer of the mobile home experience as likewise being polluted or undesirable. Furthermore, the park dweller appears in the eyes of the American "mainstreamer" to fail to uphold an important symbolic value: the sacred site-built house. Park students are shunned in the school and, when at home, tolerate an adversary relationship with park management. An aura of fear in the park is reflected in the passivity on the part of the tenants. Most importantly, his lack of belonging is an obstacle to the self-image of the park adolescent. He is considered profane in one-to-one relations and becomes part of a new minority group (the mobile home park dweller) in terms of other group relations.

INTRODUCTION

How have dwellings, resting on wheels, concealed by "skirting," come to be part of the American experience? Why do people feel privileged to have an opportunity to rent a small space on which to park their homes?

[1]Requests for reprints should be sent to Steven Miller, School of Education, Water Tower Campus, 820 North Michigan Avenue, Loyola University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois 60611.

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And, how have law-abiding citizens come to live with high fences surmounted by barbed wire as part of their home environment? This study describes and analyzes life in a mobile home park, Robben Island, a real place with a fictional name.

This study has two major objectives: (1) to briefly describe the historical process occurring in the United States that led to the mobile home park, and (2) to indicate the implications that residency in a mobile home park has on daily life. The particular focus of the study is upon adolescents growing up, attending school, and spending the formative years of their lives living in a park environment. It also examines the unique features of the mobile home and the quasi-governmental authority of the park landlord over the lives of the tenants, and investigates the self-image and the social image that appear to be associated with life in the park.

Further, it will be seen that the events in the lives of people at Robben Island are not unique experiences and that there is a repetition of experiences; a similarity in what residents in the park can come to expect as part of "mobile home living.[2]

Robben Park is considered an unrestricted mobile home park (one which has no age restrictions for tenants). In this study, terms referring to *mobile home owner* (mobile home tenant) and *mobile home park* have the following meanings: *mobile home owner,* one who rents space in a mobile home park from a mobile park owner for the purpose of parking his mobile home; *mobile home park,* a contiguous parcel of privately owned land which is used for the accommodation of mobile homes occupied for year-round living.[2]

The people who are the subject of this study live at Robben Island Mobile Home Park. As will be shown, they suffer from ambiguity in their social and legal place in contemporary American society. The dual roles of being both owner–tenant and or making one's home in a dwelling are only two instances of factors contributing to the frustration of mobile home park dwellers.

A negative public image of the trailer unit can be traced to the early 1930's. Edwards (1977, p. 65) observed that an image of *trailer camps* established during World War II (1942–1946), "has plagued the mobile home industry...many influential people hold prejudices about mobile homes." The term "influential" refers to people who influence the decisions that result in restrictive local zoning ordinances regarding land use and zoning of mobile home parks.

When, in the mid-1930's, O'Brien (1936, p. 36) sought the perils and pleasures of the road in his house trailer, he found signs greeting him with

[2]State of New York, Senate Bill no. 7730-A. An Act Section 1, 233, May 7, 1974.

"No More House Cars." At one point, he attempted to board a ferry in Florida, and justifiably feared that his "covered wagon" would be turned away.

Records indicate that "no statutory definition" of the house trailer existed; however, there was a general definition: "A house trailer is a two- or four-wheeled (usually the former) vehicle with no independent motive power, towed by a private passenger car."[3] By 1930, 100% of house trailer production was for vacation use. By 1937, however, 50% of house trailers were used by vacationers, and the remaining consumers consisted of retirees and migratory workers. The latter two groups represented 200,000 families making their year-round residence in the house trailer (Berhnardt, 1971, p. 176).

With the need for housing for defense workers in World War II, the Trailer Coach Manufacturers Association was alerted to the need to provide housing for workers. Lobbyists proposed to the National Defense Council that trailers could provide the answer to the housing needs of workers (Edwards, 1977).

On the recommendation of Charles F. Palmer, the defense Housing Coordinator in 1941, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, declared that trailers would be used to provide "temporary shelter housing for defense workers.[4] It was not long, however, before the trailer located in what were termed "camps" near defense industries, received attention because of overcrowding and generally unsatifactory conditions such as poor sanitation. Edwards (1977, p. 112) believes that much of the present-day attitude about mobile homes as units to be used only for temporary housing, or "only in areas of disaster or housing crisis," can be traced to the World War II period. In 1941, the "trailer movement" was receiving national attention as an already well-established "controversial" subject. By the time Cowgill (1941) completed his dissertation on the subject of house trailers, almost 2000 trailer cities had sprung up in the U.S.

By 1975, the Trailer Coach Manufacturers Association was calling itself the Manufactured Housing Institute (MHI).[5] This trade association now has its headquarters in the Washington, D.C. area where its primary service of representing the interests of the industry before the Federal Government can be most effective. As many as 200 manufacturing firms now produce mobile homes at some 500 factory sites in the United States.

[3]National Highway Users Conference. House Trailers: A Survey of All State Legislative Provisions Which Apply to Their Ownership and Use. Washington, D.C.: National Highway Users Conference, 1936, p. 7.
[4]*New York Times.* March 10, 1941.
[5]Manufactured Housing Institute. Quick Facts. June 1979, pp. 1-10.

There are an estimated 12,000 mobile home dealers and some 24,000 mobile home parks.[6]

In the period 1960–1973, the mobile home industry captured an increasingly important share of the single family housing market (with annual mobile home shipments increasing from 9% of all single family housing starts in 1960 to some 33% in 1973). After that time, shipments of mobile homes fell to 15% in 1977, where it has stabilized.[7]

The present-day mobile home park dweller, and particularly the adolescent must contend, then, with the historical image of the trailer-turned-mobile home, and he is often hard pressed to understand why he must defend where he lives.

RELATED RESEARCH

The academic research that has been done in the area of the mobile home often focuses upon housing preferences and/or retirement communities. Cowgill (1941) examined the question: Will the mobile come to replace the traditional site-built house in American society? In addition, Drury (1972) reviewed the literature from 1955–1967 to examine why more Americans chose the mobile home during that period of time. Knight (1971) compared housing preferences among young families in traditional and mobile home communities. Hoyt (1962), Johnson (1971), and Fry (1977) studied retirement mobile home communities in Florida, California, and Arizona, respectively. Although in the case of Hoyt, the fact that the retirement community consisted of a mobile home park was incidental to his study.

The results of the study that Cowgill undertook were awaited with considerable interest by the housing industry because of the predictions that had been made in 1936 by two prominent men: Robert W. Babson, the famous futurist, and William B. Stout, the originator of the prefabricated home, who predicted that within 20–30 years half of Americans would be living in mobile homes. The announced results of Cowgill's study put these fears to rest. He found (1) this mode of life did not contribute to a disintegration of family life, (2) the people he lived with and studied were "stable, happy, dependable," and living in what he termed "well regulated communities that were becoming more so," and (3) in the future, no more than 15% of Americans will live in mobile homes. Cowgill saw in 1941 that the

[6]*Standard & Poors Industry Surveys.* April 1, 1980, pp. 113-115.

[7]U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Office. Third Annual Report to Congress on Title VI of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974 (Mobile Homes), Washington, D.C., pp. iv-1.

mobile home was here to stay, but he predicted that it would probably never replace the site-built house.

Drury (1972) reviewed the literature from 1955–1967 to find an explanation for the increase in the production of mobile homes. In her view, the mobile home industry enjoyed growth while competitors in manufactured housing fell by the wayside because they attempted to meet the standards of local building codes, whereas the mobile home industry developed *outside* of existing codes, thus avoiding the expenses of meeting housing standards. She acknowledged that the mobile home has never been recognized as permanent housing by Americans.

Knight (1971), studying housing preference among young site-built home owners and mobile home dwellers, found that restrictive zoning laws reflect the attitude that mobile home park dwellers are considered undesirable additions to a community and site-built home owners are considered very desirable (an attitude Knight considers unfounded). The classification of the mobile home as a vehicle has kept the financing of the mobile home unit expensive relative to conventional housing as they neither qualify for a subsidy nor have quite enough income for conventional housing. The average tenure of the mobile home park resident is longer than had been expected and indicated a lower degree of mobility than expected. Even the highest quality of mobile home is not preferred when compared to a site-built house, and the overwhelming preference of both mobile home owners and conventional home owners was for a site-built house. This last mentioned finding is consistent with the attitudes reported in the study of Robben Island.

Johnson (1971) found that park residents appear very comfortable in the park because there is a ceiling on the amount of display of wealth that can be and is made. Johnson also found that the strong sense of insider vs. outsider that developed in the park makes residents feel very safe from vandals and burglars. However, in contrast to her findings, the research of Robben Island residents found that they are aware that it is *they who are outsiders* and that there is vandalism in the park.

Hoyt (1962) utilized a structured questionnaire in face-to-face interviews with a sample population of male heads of households in Bradenton Trailer Park in Florida. He commented that park residents tend to regard the park as a temporary place, and to regard their home as their place of origin. The socioeconomic demarcation that is felt outside the park is not found within the park, and this is most comfortable to park residents.

Fry (1977) used interview and participant observation in the study of two mobile home communities in Arizona. She found that such planned, designed, and developed economic endeavors are relatively new in American society, and that the concept of a community that has not evolved gradually (one that is packaged and promoted) requires us to consider community-

as-commodity. The concept of community-as-commodity is related to the present study, especially, as it is not often realized that the park itself is a commodity and a part of the mobile home industry.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

This study provides a symbolic interactionist perspective and a participant observation methodology. Dramaturgical principles are employed; that is, the behavior of park dwellers is considered in terms of a theatrical performance, for, as Goffman (1973, p. xxi) indicates, dramaturgical principles concern how the individual:

> presents himself and his activity to others, the ways in which he guides and controls the impression they form of him, and the kinds of things he may or not do while sustaining his performance before them.

The perspective of interactionism provides an analytical scheme of human society and human behavior that is distinctive. Blumer (1969, pp. 1-6) suggests three premises at the very heart of symbolic interactionism: (1) "human beings act toward things on the basis of the meaning that the things have for them," (2) "the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows," and (3) "these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters."

One of the positions taken in this study is that an important aspect of the life of the mobile home park dweller is the study of the objects, i.e., the physical, animate, and conceptual, that comprise the life of the mobile home dweller and that of the nonpark resident. It will be seen that the meaning of objects often differs between park dwellers and nonpark residents. For example, park dwellers consider the mobile home as a permanent residence which has all the meaning of "home" for them, whereas nonpark dwellers consider the mobile home as a recreational vehicle or temporary emergency shelter only.

As previously stated, the meaning of symbols may undergo transformation. As new meanings toward objects are worked out, behavior toward the objects will change accordingly.

In sum, as Blumer (1969, p. 78) points out, and underlying theme of symbolic interactionism is that human beings are not passive creatures who automatically respond to the objects in their environment. Rather, human "response" is mediated by the use of meaning which may be referred to as "symbols," and it is through the mediation of symbols that one interacts with himself, his fellows, and, in fact, all "objects" that constitute his world.

Blumer (1969, pp. 242–243) does not discount the existence of structure in society. He acknowledges that there are such matters as social features: stratification, role relationships, and institutional relations. They are important, however, only as they "enter into the process of interpretation and definition (of the situation) out of which joint actions are formed." Thus, interactions do not occur between social roles but between *people.* It is the individual participant in an interaction who is required to interpret and handle what confronts him, be it a topic of conversation or the solution to a problem.

Braroe (1975, p. 187) observes that in societies that are stratified, "ethnically or otherwise," it is apparently common for various segments of the society or the community to make "moral evaluations" of one another and these evaluations are frequently found to be uncomplimentary. Mobile home owners would say about those not living in the park, "I know they think we're trailer trash." At the same time, they would pride themselves on the fact that, unlike their accusers, they did not strive to "keep up with the Joneses." They are not "stuck up." People not living in the park refer to park dwellers as "low class" and "a group apart." Adolescent and younger children would use the term "trash" to underscore the "profane" nature of park dwellers in their eyes.

It was stated that one version of the interactionist perspective is the dramaturgical approach. It is this approach that will be used to attempt to further understanding of life in a mobile home park. According to Burke (1969, p. xxii). "dramatism invites one to consider the matter of motives in a perspective that, being developed from the analysis of drama, treats language and thought primarily as modes of action." Goffman (1973, pp. 254–255) acknowledges that the term "dramaturgical" has its limitations as well as its strengths. Certainly a stage performance cannot be said to be real life. However, the analogy can be drawn because the techniques required for the individual to define and sustain his performance in both real life and on the stage demand the mastery of similar techniques.

For example, to *show* an individual that he is being ignored because he has temporarily fallen out of grace is different from a classification that came to light in the present study, which is, that of *not even ignored.* To be ignored implies an initial recognition of the individual and of his existence, but the "not even ignored" fail to enjoy even this initial recognition and may be said to be "invisible." In the course of this research, teachers and school administrators repeatedly referred to "trailer park kids" as being *"invisible" as far as their classmates are concerned.* The park student is simply not part of the social stage nor of the cast of performers. His presence is only acknowledged when follow classmates wish to remind him of his profane status.

A 17-year-old senior high school student related:

> Trailer park kids hang around together. I don't know if house kids (a term that park students use to refer to a suburban home dweller) are afraid of us. We *are* more rowdy. They *never* talk to us. I go by the (class) rooms at passing. I can see the kids from the park just sitting there before and after class. We call anyone who lives in a house a "jock." Sometimes "jock" just means athlete. When Sandy Keller (a classmate and park resident) says, "I wouldn't talk to those jocks," she means they won't talk to her. They call us freaks.

The park students use the term "house kids" or "jock" to refer to students who live in houses. The senior just quoted uses both terms in his conversation. He is making a distinction concerning the particular use of "jock" among park students. In the high school culture, the term jock refers to an athlete or someone closely associated with the clique of athletes. It is only among high school park students that "jock" has a dual meaning which includes living in a house. This dual meaning is a key symbol arising out of a (non-) interaction context.

The Robben Island students are the first on the school bus early in the morning and last off in the late afternoon. They live farthest from the school. During the school year the park students would shout at the suburban students getting off the bus, "Make the bums walk." As one student who rode the bus and who lives in the park remarked, "They dropped off each kid at his house. That made us even later getting home." Park students sit in the back of the school bus. Suburban students sit in the front of the school bus. This appears to be accepted practice and is a reflection of the complete lack of social mingling between park students and their suburban peers. However, at the beginning of the school year, a new student, "Walter," moved into Robben Island. Walter is known for "saying what he thinks." Not being accustomed to the isolation of park students from their schoolmates, he reacted to the situation. With Water as the leader, the other park students threw wads of paper at the house kids and they taunted and jeered them with comments such as: "You think you're better than we are, man." "If you keep your nose at that altitude it'll get to be an icicle."

Nevertheless, house kids continue to ignore the Robben Island students throughout the course of such eventful bus rides. A Robben Island student commented about such a ride: "They totally ignore us and that makes us even madder. They are totally separated from us. They don't talk to us. This gets the trailer kids enraged. I do think it's rage. I see their faces." Another park student said:

> It's not just fun. I can see the anger in their faces when they (park students) call them (house kids) "stuck-up." When Walter says, "You better not talk to those people. Look at the expensive homes they live in," the park nod in agreement.

Park students, then, are regarded in essentially three ways: (1) they are invisible and do not exist in terms of the school cultures, (2) they are ig-

nored, or (3) they are treated contemptuously. Underlying all of these is the idea that park students are profane and as such they have no place in the drama of face-to-face interaction. The park student is prevented from entering the stage of interaction and thus of impression management. It is as if he has no impression to manage; he is a park dweller. Even when efforts are made to enter the stage, witness Walter, the park dweller is not permitted to enter the stage of action by his peers. Thus, during these critical years of adolescent development, years in which the individual struggles to develop his identity, the overriding experience of school life for students living in the mobile home park is one of being "not even ignored": invisible.

Duncan (1978, pp. 100–107) argues that the self is born in dialogue with others, but when those who are necessary to use for our definition of self are indifferent, disorganization of self occurs, because the human being discovers his social existence in relationship with others. In Goffman's (1971, p. 30) view, through the treatment the individual gives to others and receives from them, he comes to have a definition of himself.

The problem of the "lack of place" in the group is one that faces the adolescent living in Robben Island, although it is also a general problem of adolescence as well. This "lack of place" magnifies adolescent alienation, so common in America and other societies, where it is not generally mediated by formal socially approved passage rituals.

The lack of place that the Robben Island Park student experiences is not simply the cultural lack of place for adolescents in American culture. In addition, his lack of place relates to the fact that he makes his home in a mobile home park. When the adolescent living in Robben Island, attending the local high school, rides on the school bus, walks in the school corridors, sits in the classroom, eats in the cafeteria, and attends extracurricular school activities, he is less than a pariah, for no sign is given to him of his existence by his mainstream classmates who are his agemates and peers. Sometimes exceptions to being invisible occur. For example, in an English class a student began his speech with the information that he lived in the mobile home park. The classroom full of students responded with uninhibited catcalls, hisses, and abuses such as "trash."

The Robben Island student seeks companionship with the only students who will associate with him, other students living in the park. There are some 2000 students who make up the student body of the high school, and of this number 100 students attending the school live in Robben Island. Thus, the social opportunities of park students are limited. Even in circumstances where the park students aggressively confront their suburban-dwelling peers, they remain invisible.

Park students spend a great deal of time discussing their profane status. They recognize it but are unable to understand it. They offer explanations to themselves and fellow park dwellers: "Kids in suburbs *do* do

better in school." "We aren't involved with the kids at school *at all.* We know who we are." "We feel people don't like us because they look down on us. People who live here with families are lower class. The retired people here have money." "In an apartment it's different. People think you live there because you like the comfort. It's not as stereotyped as people who live out here. They say we live in a small tin house."

Why does the mobile home park-dwelling student have no place in the school peer group? The position taken here is that students living in Robben Island have a lifestyle that excludes them from the social circle of their agemates and classmates. That is, the typical suburban student lives in a traditional, site-built house, one that is erected in compliance with local building codes. The park dweller, however, lives in a factory-assembled home. Construction standards of the mobile home do not have to meet the standards of local building codes.

The homesites, in this case, Robben Island, is privately owned property, and is on land that is, according to local zoning ordinances, an area of light industry. It is *not* zoned for residences. The family of the mobile home-dwelling student pays the park owner a monthly rent for the privilege of residing in the park and is bound to comply with the Park rules and regulations if he wishes to retain tenancy in the park. The family is at one and the same time an *owner* of a mobile and a *renter* of lot space in a privately owned park. In brief, the mobile home dwelling student is part of a family that "consumes" a product that is inconsistent with the lifestyle of his suburban peers. Symbols name, and powerful symbols are those that one believes to have a capacity to consecrate those styles of life which are "true" and "proper," the styles that are the sources of social order (Duncan, 1978, pp. 21–22).

The mainstream home owner, in his own view, thus upholds the social order, whereas the mobile home owner does not. The students living in the park have internalized the same symbols and their symbolic importance. "You see al those great houses and come home to your tin can," is a point of view the students express one way or another. Many of the park dwelling students state that they believe it is the lack of a house that makes them "different," but they are often not certain. "Maybe we are feared." "We are not liked because we are loud." "We do not do as well in school as house kids." "It's true, trailer park kids are not good students."

Thus, the mobile home dweller lacks the possession of one of the most powerful "sacred" symbols of the culture in which he lives, the house. Goffman (1967, p. 31) reminds us that "as sacred objects, men are subject to slights and profanations." Since the house is a "sacred" symbol, those who do not possess this sacred symbol and, further, those who possess a product (a mobile home dwelling) that is regarded as "profane" have themselves become profane people.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in the study of mobile home park living is consistent with the theoretical perspective of interactionism which lends itself to participant observation.

One assumption of the study is that the early years of an individual's life have a profound influence on his later life. The assumption is similar to a view held by Kimball (1976, p. 257) in his discussion of the transmission of culture; that is, that the formative years of life are years in which patterns are formed. Two important cultural influences upon the adolescent under study take place in his home environment, which includes the mobile home park and his school. Both the park and the school are influenced by the larger community in which they exist.

A participant observation method was utilized in a field study of Robben Island Park. A preliminary study of the park was conducted during the 1978–1979 school year, with full-time field work covering the 1979–1980 school year and follow-up visits to the park during 1980–1981. The primary field investigator was a doctoral student with a background in anthropology and education. The secondary investigator, within the University, was primarily concerned with strategies for data analysis and interpretation. It is difficult to precisely indicate the number of hours devoted to the various sites, but a reasonable estimate would be around 100–150 hours.

Although there is not a social center in Robben Island, it was possible to gather with mothers and their children as they waited for the school bus in the morning and to talk with park residents in the laundromat. Meetings were also conducted with Robben Island informants in their homes. All individuals were initially informed regarding the purpose of the study, Robben Island Park, and that investigation of mobile home park life was in connection with work at a local university. Individuals both within and outside the park were generous in sharing their views and knowledge concerning the park. Park residents were particularly eager to communicate regarding park life because they believe that "mobile home living" is generally not understood by outsiders. Questions to informants were open-ended. "How do you find living in the park?" "Have you lived elsewhere?" Questions are equally open-ended for interviews with persons living outside the park. The open-ended questionnaire format was chosen for its flexibility and unobtrusiveness (Becker & Geer, 1957; Patton, 1980, Chap. 7). While the questions were open-ended, the general topics of interest (including feeling, knowledge, and opinion questions about life in the park and school experiences) were formulated by the investigators before field work.

Persons living outside of Robben Island were interviewed at their places of business and were selected because of their professional or social knowledge of the park, for example, school personnel, township officers,

police, and fire fighters. The individuals outside the park tended to be good informants; however, within the park itself, there were differences that became apparent. For example, Robben Island women and adolescent males, mostly of high school age, were by far the best informants, retired men were also good, adolescent girls were good to fair, and male heads of households were poor, in that they seemed to measure carefully what they offered. Johnson (1971, p. 12) who studied a California mobile home park found that females were good informants and that the men were "taciturn."

In addition to participant observation in Robben Island Park and the senior high school, and to a lesser extent in the elementary and junior high schools, in-depth interviews were conducted with park residents, educators, and citizens in the township. Further, telephone interviews, correspondence, and library research were utilized.

Extensive field notes were taken during the interviews with supplementary comments and reflections added as soon as possible after the initial recordings (Backstrom & Hursh, 1963, Chap. V). Accurate analysis of field-based data presents a host of potential problems related to the reliability and validity of the findings (Becker, 1958, 1970). These problems can, however, be minimized by careful editing of field notes with attention being paid to emergent patterns of behavior within the context of the broad questions being asked. With these considerations in mind, data analysis consisted of the integration of three complementary frameworks: (1) coding of responses for themes following Bogdan and Taylor (1975; see also Bogdan & Biklen, 1982 for a more recent and detailed account of the development of coding categories), (2) the constant-comparative method developed by Glaser (1965), and (3) the use of theoretical perspectives related to "grounded theory" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and the concept of triangulation explicated by Denzin (1978). Additionally, the use of representative excerpts to illustrate various points was guided by the consideration made by Lofland (1974).

While space does nor permit a full explication of these perspectives, some comments are in order. Thus, the responses in the field notes were scrutinized for possible interesting and consistent patterns, i.e., feelings of rejection experienced by mobile home youth as they attended school, common negative reactions expressed by dwellers concerning managers, etc.

The identification and interpretation of patterns was facilitated by the constant-comparative method whereby an emergent and novel response, i.e., formation of the perception of "outsiders" by both mobile home and fixed home dwellers, is continually held up to critical scrutiny by way of other evidence and especially "negative" or "contrary" cases (see Robinson, 1951 in the context of "analytic induction"). The intent of the con-

stant-comparative method is to identify and justify plausible patterns of behavior and to suggest, where appropriate, novel theoretical frameworks of interpretation. Last, the framworks suggested by Glaser and Strauss and by Denzin were utilized in the data analysis. From Denzin, several aspects of trangulating strategies were incorporated, specifically, triangulation by observers, data, and theory. Triangulation involves the use of multiple strategies that can be brought to bear on the data as a means for increasing reliability and external validity. For this study, the two authors served as cross-checks to one another (observer triangulation). Additionally, the review of the literature served as a focal point for locating the phenomenon of mobile home dwelling as a potential source of unique behavior patterns of adolescent youth (a form of data triangulation).

Perhaps the most central triangulating strategy in this study concerns that of theory triangulation. In this sense, the interactionist perspective suggested by Blumer and Goffman is used as a general framework for the interpretation of the behavior of adolescents and adults. This point of view is also broadly related to Glaser and Strauss' notion of "grounded theory" in that, using an ethnographic paradigm, the emphasis is on showing how inductively-generated data can be interpreted by using other theoretical perspectives.

Participant observation utilizing the above procedures provides, then, unique opportunity to both participate in, observe, and analyze informal events.

ROBBEN ISLAND MOBILE HOME PARK

Robben Island Mobile Home Park is located in the township of Blue Meadows. Park residents, with few exceptions, are American citizens. The Robben Island resident lives under the same Constitution and Laws as do his fellow citizens, but he, unlike them, is subject to an additional authority, the mobile home park manager, who intercedes between him and his local government.

> ...the park manager or owner provides a quasi-governmental authority at much closer hand than the local government, which is the nearest authority for conventional...(site-built house) residents. (Knight, 1971, p. 4)

Robben Island lies in the unincorporated area of Blue meadows Township. The township was a sparsely settled farm community, until the Village of Blue Meadows was founded in the mid-1950's. At that time, 13 square miles of the township's 28 square miles became incorporated into a village of residents with a planned industrial park. By 1970, the young

village boasted 6000 single family dwellings (usually ranch style) and 500 rental units, owned and occupied by blue and white collar workers. Beyond the incorporated village, there are acres of unoccupied land followed by service stations, fast food operations, motels, auto dealerships, and small heavy industry. It is here in a strip of highway fronted by open fields, junk yards of used auto parts, gravel mounds, and adult book stores and houses of prostitution that Robben Island Mobile Home Park is found.

Robben Island park is a physical island, for it is separated from the environment around it by highways. To the north there is a tollway and on its west, south, and east boundaries there are six-land highways. The park consists of three parks independently owned and operated. They are separated from each other by a high chain link fence topped by three rows of barbed wire, the type of fencing commonly found around governmental installations, sporting areas, and prisons. There are holes in the fences so that the children move among the parks.

Robben West is owned by a conglomerate and managed by a couple with two daughters, one of whom is a student at Blue Meadows High School. The park consists of the manager's (site-built) house and office, a small fountain with a plaster Grecian goddess, a swimming pool, grocery store, laundromat, small playground with swing sets, and a tool shed. Rural style mailboxes line the main streets of the park. At the entrance to the park there is a large glass-enclosed map charting the locations of the homes in the park, and to the right there is a mobile home sales lot with plastic flags draping the new mobile home models on display. To the left, there is a modest swimming pool. Park tenants are permitted to have porches and detached sheds on their lots. There are many decorative features, and lots are dotted with plastic ducks and deer. There are no tress in the park. There are many dogs in the park, generally of large breed.

The following are comments that adolescents shared. The laundry and grocery store are in the same building, back-to-back. There is a small playground with swing sets next to the store. "Nobody goes to the children's playground. Kids under 13 go the pool. There's no place to go in the park." Park management forbids loitering in the store, in front of the store, in the laundry, in front of the laundry, or any other place in the park. "There's no place to go. The worst time is the winter. People really smoke up then; that's about all they do." "What we need in the park is a recreational hall and someone to sponsor activities." A study on housing environment by Wilner, Walkley, Pinkerton, and Matthew (1967, p. 140) reported that an "important correlate of housing quality is that, for instance, of play facilities for children." It is a fact that there is no place for play in the park, and there is further no place to gather and talk.

Warnings are posted on the windows and walls of the laundry and reveal the adversary relationship that exists between park management and the children and teenagers in the park. Recently, vandalism of the laundromat was a problem but now a large reward and increasing fear of eviction have eliminated such behavior.

Frequent use of the word "control" in referring to the behavior of children and teenagers reflects the attitude that is common among Robben Island managers and of many of the park parents as well. Children are to be curbed and controlled, a contrast to the prevailing attitude in the village and in Blue Meadows High School where self-realization, self-expression, and independent behavior are considered goals for the middle class adolescent. The long arm of control reaches beyond the physical boundaries of the park. As school bus drivers and officials of the bus company related, "If a student misbehaves on the bus, the park manager will get rid of him; move the family out." "I've never met a man as hard as the manager of Robben East. He's quick to get rid of a student. He says, 'They don't have to be mollycoddled.'" The parks are quiet, but they are conspicuously people-quiet. There are no sounds of human speech, of children laughing, playing, or talking. The children that do go to the pool are very quiet. In this respect, the desired control the of the youngsters appears to have been accomplished to the pleasure of the park management.

Robben South is what the residents of Robben West and East call "a shame." "Now, *that's* what you call a trailer park" is a typical comment. The park consists of two, long, unpaved streets that are dusty in the summer and muddy when it rains. There are some 14 wide models in this two-street park but no double-wides. There are many shabby, run-down mobile homes, as well as RVs or campers that are hooked up to utilities and are used for permanent housing. During the course of the study, black-jacketed members of a motorcycle gang moved into the park, further eroding the confidence of both neighbors and observers in the safety of the park.

Robben East is a tree-lined, paved park, with models ranging from ten wides to double-wides. There is a laundry in the park and a large field where residents can be found walking their large dogs. The mailboxes are located in the manager's office and consist of pigeon-holed open slots. The manager sorts the mail and deposits it in each tenant's box. The manager's unleashed dog (all tenant dogs must be leashed) is always on the premises and each evening he and his dog patrol the park in a motor scooter. The manager lives in a very affluent suburb where residents of the park have driven to see his "big, beautiful house."

Robben Island Mobile Home Park lies in the unincorporated area of the township. Whereas village residents enjoy services such as police protec-

tion, fire protection, recreational parks, library, garbage pick-up, and road and street maintenance, Robben Park residents must acquire such services elsewhere.

Robben Park is called an "open" park because there are no age restrictions for tenants. Many occupations are represented by park residents: a police commander, patrolmen, teachers, construction workers, and owners of small businesses including restaurants and bars. There are senior citizens who have retired from similar occupations. The manager and the park custodian of West agree, "People here could live where they want. Most of them could." There are 1273 mobile home units in the park. West is the largest of the parks with 682 units, followed by East with 440 units, and South with 152 units. Of 107 students living at Robben Mobile Home Park who attend Blue Meadows High School, 59 are from West, 13 are from East, and 34 are from South. Blue Meadows High School is a 4-year high school (grades 9–12) with a student population of 2251.[8] Table I shows a distribution of park students by park and grade level.

THE ADOLESCENT SUBCULTURE

The following school-related characteristics further bring to light the problems of park students at Blue Meadows High School. Among the 107 park students, there are four Hispanics residing in West, 11 in South, and none in East. As a result of the concentration of high school students in Robben West and South, the students from these parks tend to associate with each other and to be viewed as a group by their school peers. The students from Robben East are far less likely to be identified as residents of the park by their peers.

The number of students in the park, and the fact that junior high and elementary school administrators view them as a group, has consequences

[8]For readers not familiar with American secondary education, a few points of clarification. American secondary (high school) education consists of four years of schooling terminating with a high school diploma. Public high schools are free and open to all students offering a wide variety of courses and programs. The usual "tracks" within high schools are referred to as college preparatory, general, and vocational. Placement into a track is usually done at the beginning year (freshman) of high school and is based on such criteria as standardized test scores, grades, teachers recommendations, and personal preference. Although tracking is common, it does contain a fairly high degree of flexibility; students are not "locked-in" into a given track. Grades are given for each course during the year and at the end of the year. After a given number of credits have been earned, with an acceptable grade point average, the student receives a high school diploma. There are no external exams given with different "levels" of achievement, as in the British system. High schools vary in quality across the country. University admission is based on entrance exams (Scholastic Aptitude Test), high school grades, class standing, and references.

Table I. Distribution of Park Students by Grade Level at Blue Meadows High School

	Males	Females	Total
Robben East			
Grade 9	3	2	5
Grade 10	1	0	1
Grade 11	1	4	5
Grade 12	2	0	2
	7	6	13
Robben South			
Grade 9	1	10	11
Grade 10	4	4	8
Grade 11	2	5	7
Grade 12	2	6	9
	9	25	35
Robben West			
Grade 9	10	9	19
Grade 10	8	7	15
Grade 11	9	10	19
Grade 12	4	2	6
	31	28	59
Robben Island Mobile Home Park totals	47	59	107

for the students. When attendance areas are shifted to adjust the distribution of student population among local schools, park students are the ones shifted. As one student reported:

> I went to Roosevelt for first grade. Then I went to Taylor for second grade. There was an enrollment shift at Roosevelt; that's why I was sent there. Then I was moved back to Roosevelt for third, fourth and fifth. Then I went to Madison Junior High.

As can be seen in Table I, park students comprise 107 students in a student body of 2251 students. A freshman boy from the park remarked, "We are outnumbered" in the classroom. He drew a diagram with a classroom full of students represented by circles and one park student represented by a single X. "There's only one of us. No one will talk to us before class or after class."

At lunch time, park students from West sit at the table near the jukebox in the school cafeteria. South students sit at a separate table. East students mingle or eat alone. Other students from the student body do not join the park students, nor would park students even sit at any other tables in the school cafeteria; they would not be accepted.

As previously mentioned, we again have here examples of how Park students are perceived by others and by themselves as reflecting an unaccep-

table lifestyle. This presents an interesting anomaly where the Park students are not exhibiting a *value system* that is diametrically opposed to that of the majority of students; but, rather, it is the perception of the majority of the minority as being inferior *because* they are associated with living in an undesirable dwelling. This segregation or isolation phenomenon is broadly similar to the experiences of black students who, through the social policy of busing, are transported to majority white schools. Armor (1972), for instance, in reviewing the literature on busing, found that black students who had been transported to majority white school tended to isolate themselves and in some cases reaffirm their segregated status by appealing to the uniqueness of their subcultural experience. In the case of Park students, their "segregation," while not based on racial or ethnic characteristics, is reaffirmed, justified, and perpetuated, by both their own and the mojority's perceptions of being "outsiders."

This phenomenon of isolation–rejection can, alternatively, be interpreted in terms of other perspectives. Thus, one can see elements of a "self-fulfilling prophecy" operating here as well (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). That is, Park students come to identify (and to some extent believe) themselves to be outsiders and these attitudes are, in turn, reinforced by other students, teachers, and the larger community. Likewise, *the attributions* (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1967; Jones & Nisbett, 1971) that others make of Park students are based on "external" factors, i.e., type and location of dwelling, while the self-attributions made by the students concerning their lack of worth are "internal" based on how they compare themselves with others in their immediate environment (Festinger, 1954).

These attitudes are also held by members of the faculty: "It's rare for park students to participate in school events." A student from East had a lead in the school play but the director of the play added, "That's very rare. Park students don't participate." When examining school records, it was found that of 15 graduates from Robben Park in the Class of 1979, five students had participated in a total of nine school activities: four of these students were from East and one was from West. One of these students was a member of the National Honor Society.

The high school has a program called the Young Adult Program (YAP) for students who want to work during the school day and take high school courses in the evening in order to earn credits toward a high school diploma. Students who enter the YAP program are listed with those who drop out of high school. The distribution of students entering YAP to complete high school requirements and dropping out of school is given in Table II.

Of 107 students from Robben Island Mobile Home Park attending Blue Meadows High School during the 1979–1980 school year, 14 students

(13%) dropped out of the regular day school program. Six boys and nine girls dropped out of regular high school. A social worker at the high school stated, "I think it's harder on the girls living in the park." The girls may find the social isolation that park students experience in the high school particularly difficult. Furthermore, park parents often have their daughters stay home from school to do household chores and to look after younger children in the family. The high standards of housekeeping found in mobile homes in which adolescents resided were largely due to the efforts of the adolescent. When the subject of prejudice comes up, park residents state, "If only they could see how nice inside it is." "People think we're trash. My trailer is spotless." The upkeep of the mobile home appears to have importance in the self-perception of the park student.

Many of the park students have lived their entire lives in Robben Park or some other mobile home park. One sophomore said, "I've always known I live in a different community. I had to be bussed to go to grade school. You can go through a nice suburban area. The differences are obvious." A 16-year-old who has lived in the park 8 years said, "We used to live in a nice suburb, in a tri-level, a beautiful house. The contrast between this place and my old neighborhood is—God, tremendous!" A student who has always lived in a park said, "Living in a house would be so much better. It hits you every day. You take the bus and pass all those great houses and come home to your tin can." A 16-year-old junior (who dropped out of Blue Meadows during the course of this study) said, "I hate living in the court. I was almost born in a park. I've lived in one all my life."

The adolescent students at South and East are usually in their mobile homes when they are at the park. Students at West have organized

TAble II. Robben Park Students Leaving Blue Meadows High School for YAP or Dropping Out

	Boys	Girls	Total
Robben West			
YAP	1	3	4
Drop	2	1	3
	3	4	7
Robben South			
YAP	1	0	1
Drop	2	3	5
	3	3	6
Robben East			
YAP	0	0	0
Drop	0	1	1

themselves into two groups, those who take drugs and those who do not. "We have a family of high school kids 14–18 years old. Cindy is the mother. Sherri is my aunt. I'm one of the kids," a junior student at West related. "There's mom and dad, all the little children, aunts, and uncles, I'm a kid." Students who belong to this group agree with a sophomore who said, "Being part of a group is *very important.* When I became part of a group I felt good about myself. I had to do what they did to remain in. They used to call me 'goody-goody.'" The park students in this group "drink to get drunk but prefer pot." They say, "Hard drugs are definitely going around."

Among high school park students, the topics of conversation center around "house kids," "beautiful village houses," "the bad and unpredictable manager," "eviction fears," and "who will make it." Many students drop out of school and students encourage themselves by voicing the belief that they will make it. "Jan and I are the only two in the family (group family) who will make it. The rest will be only blue collar workers. I *know* we're the only two who will make it. The others aren't dumb; they just don't do well in school." Students commonly say, "My sisters dropped out but I'll make it." "My girlfriend dropped out but I'll make it." Park boys often express their determination to "make it" and graduate from high school. Adolescents living in the mobile home come to realize that although they are American they are often denied their rights as citizens because they live under a quasi-governmental power: the mobile home manager or owner. Outsiders at school, they find themselves outsiders in the park, as well, for theirs is an adversary relationship with the park owner. For any misconduct both in the park and on the bus, students are burdened with the threat to their families of eviction. The observed impotence of parents vis-á-vis the park owner does little to encourage the student that his family or he himself has much control over his life. The "friendliness" of mobile home living is often no more than an awareness about each other's lives. Mobile homes are close to each other and much can be learned "through the walls" about neighbors. There is an absence, however, of social relating that is pscyhologically nurturing, or social interaction that builds social skills. Adolescents do not observe their parents relating in the park just as they themselves do not relate with schoolmates in the school. Although park students are "forced" to associated with each other because they are excluded from the peer culture at Blue Meadows High School, they do not have an opportunity for learning social and relational skills from each other when they cannot even meet together to speak.

In sum, the social isolation of park students, their awareness of their physical situation, and the atmosphere of fear and intimidation prevailing at Robben Island Park provide few opportunities for the adolescent to build his confidence and self-esteem. Furthermore, not only does he come to feel

powerless about his life ("What can you do?"), but he sees that his parents also feel that they have few choices and little control of their own lives in the park. Such an atmosphere does little to help the student to join the mainstream. As two senior boys remarked, "I don't see anybody wanting to live here." "As soon as I got a car, I tried not to be here."

CONCLUSION

This study has been about social and cultural meaning, the meaning of human interaction in both its material and symbolic dimensions. These material and symbolic meanings have an influence upon the lives of individuals and the groups to which these persons belong. In this study, the fact of living on an "island" (Robben Island) has been illustrated to be an important habitat for all residents of the island, but particularly for the adolescent who for the most part knows no other environment. The trailer, established as profane in the American psyche, remains so even when it is called a mobile home.

The park student must not only live with the historical symbolism of his dwelling but with later myths about mobile home living. The combination of the burden is awesome for the adolescent, and he seeks answers, "House kids don't like us; well, we *are* more noisy." "House kids *do* do better in school." Such are his efforts to understand why he is invisible in the high school culture. Many conclude that the reason is that they are regarded as "trash," but why? Mobile homes are now large, look like houses, and have many of the same features. These Americans have become members of a new minority group because they consume an American product, the mobile home unit, and they choose residency in a mobile home park.

The policy implications of this study for social workers, educators, and others would seem to lie in re-emphasizing the importance of environmental influences on peer group formation, truancy, dropout rates, and school performance. Although the experience of these American adolescents may be unique to this society, we feel the phenomena described can be generalized to youth in other societies who, while not necessarily living in mobile homes, are still residentially segregated. For other social science researchers, a possible interesting area of inquiry (specifically between this society and Great Britain) would be to see if there are restricted language codes between mobile home dwellers in the two countries, as suggested by the work of Bernstein (1961) in comparing lower class children to middle and upper class children. That is, there may be unique patterns of language development and use that are shaped and reinforced by the

specific living arrangement and which may interact or be independent of social class backgrounds.

It is hoped, then, that the present study, while limited in scope, is suggestive of future research efforts on unique subcultures.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

STEVEN I. MILLER, is Chairman of the Department of Foundations of Education, School of Education and Professor of Sociology of Education and Qualitative Research Methods, Loyola University of Chicago. He has published articles dealing with methodological issues in qualitative research and the sociology of education. He has authored three textbooks and is presently working on one dealing with issues in the philosophy of social science.

BEVERLY EVKO, is a specialist in the anthropology of education. She has served as Lecturer for the Division of Continuing Education, University College, Loyola University of Chicago. She is presently engaged in ethnographic research dealing with structure and functions of libraries as informal centers of peer group learning.