

# Paper 6: Findings of Ethnographic Study

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## 1 South Cafe Findings

Coffee houses, in general, are interesting locations to study because of the vast amount of similarities among a seemingly heterogeneous environment. When this project was first announced, I quickly stacked a list of social environments. Some of my ideas included clubs, particularly gay clubs, coffee houses, coffee bars, alcoholic bars and restaurants. I narrowed my selection to coffee houses based on advice to choose a convenient, but oft frequented place. Particularly, I decided on South Cafe because it was both convenient and small. Upon discovering that Miguel Antunes was also studying South Cafe, we decided to work together to gather notes; we were there at different times of the day and night, of different days, which, we thought, would give us a nice representative sample.

Quickly, however, we discovered that even in a small setting like South Cafe, many unobservable events may be occurring - too much to study in a mere ten weeks. The first hypothesis revolved around defining attractors to South Cafe. Since I am currently working on a project involving attractors in a different social setting, I was most familiar with the details of hypothesizing, codifying, and resolving attraction variables. My first thought was to cut and paste the hypothesis and variables from one project to this one, replacing my topic there with South Cafe's clientele. While an excellent idea at first, this proved to be a monumental project. Brainstorming with my partner, I found myself often referring to other coffee shops by comparison; ideas starting

coming up to study other coffee shops (I.E.: Xando, Starbucks, &c.) in order to understand what type of people went to those shops instead of South Cafe. Soon we started seeing many variables that could account for that: size of shop, type of service (waiter versus self-service), smoking tolerance, location of the coffee house, type of clientele based on individual franchise locations. This first plan of attack snowballed into a project that would have taken more than a mere Drexel University term to study.

With five weeks of field notes, more than half-way through the term, we decided to start over again, looking through our notes to see what type of patterned behavior could be observed. After a brainstorming session, my partner was able to arrive at a new topic: the increasingly aggressive behavior of the staff workers as the night progressed at South Cafe. Here I found myself at a disadvantage: I had never stayed long enough at the cafe to notice any changes in behavior. However, seeing the original point of teaming up - to catch different observations at different times - this was not so much of a disadvantage. I could observe the workers well before they ever started to get aggressive to the customer and note any aggressiveness, in case they already were so (in which case we would accept the null hypothesis.)

The immediate problem with this approach was the fact that servers would not customarily display their aggression outwardly towards customers other than the ones they were serving. As a participant observer, this placed me in a strange predicament of *guessing* if an employee was being aggressive towards someone else. While increasing the difficulty of this assignment via this objective, I was fortunate to come across such an encounter with one of the servers called Perri.

Perri was a generally passive and peaceful person. So the change in her behavior towards one customer struck me as quite odd, making this needle in the haystack stick out like a sore thumb. Ironically, I encountered this behavior when I was *not* there as a researcher taking notes. A fellow Sociology colleague, she was worried about the fact that she had not written her graduate school entrance essays. Being as they were due shortly, she quite stressed at not having completed them yet. To evoke the aggressive behavior, all that was needed was an indignant customer. She exchanged a few heated words with this customer, and served him as normal, but with an attitude. She turned towards our table and before even asking how I was doing, since we oft times had conversations of her personal life, she said, "Listen, No, I didn't bring that paper in for you, I have been too stressed. What do you want?" I asked her to calm down, take a deep breath, and

that it was OK. The paper, which she promised me, was her senior thesis on women in the male entertainment industry.

Although unable to experience, or observe aggressive behavior, I was able to use narratives with one of the workers to get examples of such attitudes. Maggie, a Sociology major at Temple University, gave me some interesting information on her aggressiveness. There are three general conditions under which she becomes aggressive: a certain consecutive sequence of high maintenance customers; if it is a slow business day, with nothing to do; and if people monopolize her attention. She recounted a story of a couple, who seemed to be upper-middle yuppies. Their bill was \$13.75 and they gave her \$15.00. She gave back the change to them, and they left without giving a tip. However, if she notices that her customers are not going to leave a tip, she invokes some guerilla tipping practices. She asks if there was something wrong with the service. To this question, she has noticed two general reactions: the customers say no, and give over the tip; or the customer gets angry, stating that they have been insulted for being asked such a question. Maggie supposes that people who have worked in the service industry can appreciate the necessity of tips, and tip well. In fact, many of the customers who do tip well are those who really cannot afford it (possibly because they have more likely worked in the service industry.)

Apart from this second hand information, being far from objective, there was no possible way to observe the behaviors we were studying. There seemed to have been no discernible patterns where aggressive behavior cropped up. I assumed that this was because I had been observing the workers before they actually got out of work. Conferring with my partner, I realized that he was having similar difficulties in observing patterned aggressive behavior. Like my partner, my belief of the existence in patterned behavior, due to my familiarity with the location, made objective, unbiased observations difficult. I was attempting to see and record that which did not actually exist. It was difficult to pull myself away from the coffee house as a patron and friend of the establishment for a bird's eye view. But I neglected this gut feeling for the longest time because I believed that I was in the best position to understand what went on in the cafe *because* of my intimate relation to it. After all, I had learned in class that the more you frequented a site of study, the more you would learn. What I failed to realize was that I originally had not come to the cafe as a researcher! I believe that things would have been different if I had originally arrived at the site as an observer, *and then* went back over and over again.

To conclude, the restriction of time on the ability to research and observe the occurrences at the cafe led to inefficient and improper procedures to observe and codify patterned behavior. We were unable to develop efficient coding techniques, an efficient observation schedule, note taking techniques, and most importantly, note analyzing techniques. Perhaps I will be able to avoid these problems in my longer study on the Amateur Radio community since it also involves the techniques and methods taught in this course.