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Sociology



Window Shopping and The Art of Walking

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Simulations

Window Shopping

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Window Shopping

This is a simple piece of research in the naturalistic tradition. Like most naturalistic work its first objective is descriptive rather than explanatory. It is about finding out what happens.

You may have noticed that when someone is window-shopping they seem to create an area of personal space between themselves and the window such that other people hesitate to pass between the window and the looker. This research activity asks you to investigate this further.

Focus your research on the question:

“Under what conditions do walkers acknowledge the rights of a window-shopper to an unimpeded view of the window?”

The conditions will involve variables such as:

- different kinds of walkers (how will you classify them and apply the classification?)
- different kinds of window-shoppers (how will you classify them and apply the classification?)
- distance between window and looker
- different kinds of shop
- different densities of pedestrian traffic (in relation to space available for pedestrians - narrow pavements / pedestrianised shopping precincts).

Your most difficult problem is going to be operationalising “respecting window-shopping rights”. How will you know that someone who avoided passing between the window and the looker, did so to respect window- shopping rights?

Adopt a **field experiment approach**. At any one time one of you should be the window-shopper, one of you should observe what happens, and one of you should stop and question walkers who respect or violate window-shopping rights.

Before you go to your research location:

1. Devise a form on which the observer can record:

- location
- kind of shop
- distance between window-shopper and window
- degree of obstruction caused by window-shopper
- pedestrian flow
- kind of pedestrian
- behaviour of pedestrian.

2. Decide the form of words the interviewer will use to ask questions, and the way in which they will record the answer.

The Art of Walking

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The Art of Walking

Analysing “how we walk in public” is a simple and effective way to ease students into a couple - and probably more - areas of the course.

At the start of a course the sim can be used to introduce ideas about cultural learning (socialization, values, norms, roles, status etc. It can also be used to get students to think about the distinction between structure and action and how the two combine in social situations: in this instance, a stroll down along any public space (such as a street or school corridor).

Deeper into the course it can be used to introduce and illustrate Interactionist perspectives – from the idea of micro sociology, through the social construction of reality and ideas about the presentation of self (how we learn to “walk properly) to deviance, both conscious – choosing to obey or disobey rules – and unconscious: very young children, for example, tend to “walk randomly” precisely because they haven’t been socialized yet into the art of walking...

The Simulation

Tell your students that today you are going to explore the “underlying rules of everyday social interaction” (following Berger’s suggestion that sociology involves making the everyday seem strange).

The behaviour you’ve chosen for this purpose is walking in public and their task is to devise and apply the “rules of walking”.

If this is a new class you could begin by letting them practice “walking”. This will give them a few ideas about the rules governing this mundane activity.

If they need some help you can give them “The Art of Walking” to read or, if you prefer, use the reading to identify various rules you can feed to the students as and when required.

The reading can also be used to suggest different scenarios that you can introduce into any discussion - such as whether or not there are situations in which the “rules of normal walking” are temporarily suspended and how are we able to recognise such situations?

This exercise is best completed in small groups because it encourages the group to discuss their thoughts. If they wish group members can practice walking while their peers observe their behaviour.

How you follow-up this exercise will depend on the area of the course you’re teaching and, as we’ve suggested, it can be adapted (and referenced) at different points in the course to illustrate different points.

The Art of Walking

Based on A. Ryave and J. Schenkein "Notes on the art of walking" in R. Turner (ed), Ethnomethodology (Penguin, 1969).

If we had to programme a robot to walk about without bumping into people and without committing other walking errors, we would find that the amount of skill and knowledge we would have to give it would be huge.

Simply to navigate, the robot would have to be able to judge the speed, trajectory and estimated time of arrival of other walkers. It would also have to know how to give information to human walkers about its own speed, trajectory and eta.'s. In human walking most of this problem is solved by all walkers knowing that proper walking is walking at more or less constant speeds, in more or less constant directions: erratic, zig-zagging, variable-speed walking causes all kinds of confusion, and people who walk like this are regarded as very odd.

This is not just a practical problem. It is also a moral one. People behave as if they had rights to certain areas of ground. If I am walking in a constant direction at a constant speed and giving good evidence of this, then in public spaces I claim the right to the space immediately in front of me. It is a matter of complaint if you get in my way, and if you do you are likely to apologise.

There are other problems to be solved in walking. For example, there is the question of which people are walking together and who is walking alone. Generally it is not regarded as proper to walk between people who are walking together.

What knowledge would we have to give our robot to enable it to recognise 'to getherings'? Walking in step and walking side-by-side are often part of maintaining a "togethering". Sometimes this is a tricky matter: where lamp-posts intervene or a path is suddenly too narrow a togethering is briefly disrupted. However, it is usually very quickly restored.

Walking together is not an optional matter. Try falling into step with a stranger and see what happens. Similarly, watch out for people bickering in the street: falling out with each other and falling out of step with each other.

Our robot would not only need to know a great many rules for walking, but would also need some rules for knowing when the rules applied. Thus, for example, in the rush hour rules about not walking in step with strangers seem to be suspended.

Source

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