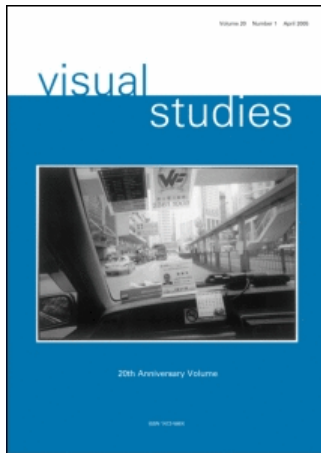


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Teaching students observational methods: visual studies and visual analysis

PAUL TEN HAVE

My experiences in teaching classes in 'observation' for sociology students is used to explore aspects of doing visual studies and visual analysis, using the direct or camera-aided observation of pedestrian traffic as a case in point. The students had to do some observational assignments 'out in the streets' and report on their experiences and findings, trying to make sociological sense of both.

I fed them some ideas from Goffman in order to help them 'see' things in a sociological way. I also tried to unsettle their common sense sociology and methodology by confronting them with some ethnomethodological notions derived from Eric Livingston. In so doing I wanted to focus their attention on the visual methods actually used to organize pedestrian traffic 'on the ground', rather than restricting themselves to a structural overview 'from above', or 'from aside'.

INTRODUCTION

For a number of years, I have been teaching courses in "observational" methods to sociology students. The program included three assignments: an exercise in "direct observation" and one in "indirect observation" – that is by using a camera – and finally a small research project based on direct and/or indirect observation. In most cases, the students observed scenes of public or semi-public life. The "indirect observation" was mostly done by making photographs of situations like waiting in line or leaving/entering trains, but some used a video camera. They had to write a descriptive and analytic report, and turn in the photographs or video-tapes as well. I will, in this paper, use these experiences – theirs and mine – to discuss "observation" not just as a resource, but especially as a topic.¹ I will report on some aspects of my students' work, especially the relationship between visual and analytic perspectives, using the study of pedestrian traffic streams as a perspicuous case, as inspired by some reflections by Eric Livingston (1987:21–27).

FORMS OF OBSERVATION IN STUDENT ASSIGNMENTS

For most students, the first assignment – direct observation – was not too problematic. Most of the time they chose to do covert observations, passing as innocent participants or bystanders while observing some scenes of social life. They therefore showed a marked preference for situations in which their presence and their looking around seemed to be not unusual. In my instructions I stressed that observing one's surroundings is a normal aspect of being in a public area, that everybody looks around, even if often in a furtive manner, so that doing observations for an assignment would not be visibly noticeable in such areas. The students were requested to carry out two observations, lasting 15 minutes each, on two different occasions. I encouraged them not to take notes during those periods, but scribble some keywords soon afterwards and write their report later in a quiet place. A substantial proportion of the students did not trust their ability to remember enough details and therefore tried to make some notes during the observation periods. They selected scenes which would allow such note-taking, like a library, or they simulated some reading-and-writing activity while sitting in the train, for instance. But even then, the alternation of looking around and making notes made some of the people in the vicinity suspicious. While doing their observations, the students also observed how other participants in the scene managed their looking around activities. They observed, for example, how males used the reflections in train windows to look at female passengers, or how people used scanning eye movements for hiding their selection of "interesting objects". The students, of course, used the same kinds of strategies to carry out their assignments.

Findings such as those outlined above can be subjected to analytical study.² As part of their ordinary membership, people "know" what kind of activities are expected in the various scenes in which they find themselves. Different scenes have different repertoires of more or less "fitting" activities and people adapt

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their actions to these repertoires in one way or another. Some may choose to restrict their activities closely to the fitting repertoire, trying not to draw attention to themselves. Others may choose to do things that do not fit very well, putting up with any negative inferences that may be made. Looking around is ambiguous because it is, on the one hand, a normal and necessary aspect of being with people, while being on the other suspicious if it suggests a distribution of attention that deviates from current expectations. Looking intensely at someone may fit a situation of “focused interaction” – although it may make the other uncomfortable if it lasts too long – but will be felt to be out of place when the interaction is expected to be “unfocused” (Goffman 1963). In a conversation, on the other hand, it would be continuously looking around that would be seen as deviant, as “doing disattention”. In other words, where one’s eyes are is taken as an indication of where one’s mind is, while the extent to which one “minds” another person’s business has to fit the occasion.

USING A CAMERA TO RECORD BEHAVIOUR

For the students, the problems they feared or experienced with their first assignment in naturalistic observation became much more intense with the second assignment that required them to make a visual record using a camera. In class, many students voiced their reluctance concerning this assignment. They expected to be embarrassed and encounter various kinds of objections from the people in public spaces whose behaviour was to be recorded. After doing the assignment, most students reported with relief that the experience was not too bad after all, but some encountered fierce opposition to their visible intention to use a camera. This was especially prominent on an open-air flea-market, where one student was physically threatened. We inferred that the possible availability of stolen goods might be a reason for this. Many of the students had taken various kinds of precautions to disguise their use of the camera in order to avoid embarrassment and objections. Some students disguised their intentions by apparently taking pictures of tourist objects or of a friend who was visibly posing for a picture, while in between these they were shooting the street or market situation. Others took a tourist scene as (part of) their target object, for instance studying the interaction between a “living statue” or a man operating a street organ and his public. Many pictures and videos were taken from quite a distance, or from behind the people being targeted. In our discussions of these experiences, it became clear that the students expected their victims to wonder why they

were taking pictures or making a video. Using a camera in public is thus apparently treated as an accountable action. In fact, when occasionally asked “what is it for?”, an answer like “an assignment for school” proved to be sufficient in most cases. When the students simulated that they were taking a picture of a friend or of a tourist scene, the motive for doing so seemed so obvious that no questions were asked or accounts required.

THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL STATUS OF OBSERVATIONAL DATA FROM A STUDENT VIEWPOINT

One persistent theme in students’ reactions to the assignments, especially concerning the analytic parts, was that they would have liked to interview the people they observed in order to understand their “motives” better. That is, they thought that observation without talking to people made it more difficult to understand what these people were up to. For example, after they had observed that passengers in trains avoided sitting next to people when there were still places where one could sit alone, they wrote in their reports that for a deeper understanding of such patterns of avoidance, one would have to interview passengers about the matter.

My defence of limiting the assignment to observation was that social life in the public realm is in large part organized on the basis of visual displays and their silent interpretation, so that in order to grasp that organization, one did not need to have access to “motives” as verbalized by the subjects themselves. It would be sufficient, I said, to use one’s membership resources oriented to visual displays in order to analyse the visual organization of everyday life.³

The objections of the students to the limitations of observation as a method of collecting sociological data can be seen to be based on a general conception of action-as-motivated, that is – in our culture – shared by common sense and most of the social sciences. The idea is that “motives” – and activities of the “mind” more generally – precede any action, and that therefore one needs to know what someone had on his or her “mind” before one can really understand that action. Furthermore, it is often assumed that actors would be able to explain their motives, when asked. There are, however, conceptions of action and mind that suggest a different relation between actions and (verbalized) minds and motives; for instance that verbalized motives can be seen as accounts, produced after the actions to which they refer.⁴ The first set of conceptions

and assumptions provides the grounds for the pervasive use of interviews as the major source of information on actions and motives across a wide range of social institutions from celebrity shows to news interviews, police interrogations to therapy sessions, and also in the social sciences. David Silverman has used the expression “the interview society” to highlight this aspect of current Western societies (Atkinson and Silverman 1997; Silverman 1993, 2001).

Since ethnomethodology subscribes to the alternate conception of mind and action, it comes as no surprise that interviews are hardly ever used as a primary data source for its studies. It has, instead, a marked preference for using recordings, as is most evident in its off-shoot conversation analysis (CA) (cf. ten Have 1990, forthcoming; Heritage and Atkinson 1984:2–3). In CA, however, the focus of interest has been mostly on vocal rather than visual aspects of social (inter-)action. In fact there seems to be, as yet, no firmly established tradition of visual ethnomethodological studies.⁵ It is my purpose here to discuss the dilemmas visible in my students efforts to cope with their assignments, in order to explicate some of the basic issues in such studies.

STORED IMAGES AS DATA

As the students commented, their distancing strategies caused their photographs and videos to provide less access to various interactional details – such as facial expressions and gaze direction – than might be desirable for some kinds of sociological analysis. In fact, they often analysed their data in terms of overall “patterns” that made such details less important. In my general instructions, however, I had encouraged them not only to look for overall patterns, but also to consider the ways in which actual, concrete instances of social organization were accomplished in and through such details. So there were rather sharp discrepancies between my analytic suggestions and their data collection methods.

As mentioned before, the purpose of the course was to train students in making observations that could be analysed sociologically. Because the time available for the course was limited, I suggested that the students select scenes of public or semi-public life, in order to minimize time lost due to negotiating entry to settings. Over the years, a number of scene types emerged as most popular with the students, mostly because of their accessibility. These included: seating arrangements in public transport, open-air markets, service lines,

leaving/entering trains, pedestrian crossings, and less common: library use, waiting rooms, playgrounds, parties and club scenes. The remainder of the paper is given over to a consideration of one empirical area, pedestrian traffic streams.

PEDESTRIAN TRAFFIC AS A CASE STUDY

Quite a number of students studied pedestrian crossings, especially what are called “zebra paths”. They used direct observation, photographs and/or videos to study how people used such facilities, often focusing on the fact that many pedestrians (in Amsterdam!) did not follow the official rules that stipulate that they should only cross when their lights are green. Most of the time, the students took a “side position” to observe or record the crossing behaviours. That is, when the crossing ran north–south, they would take for instance a south-west position. This was in line with the general preference for an oblique or diagonal position, avoiding facing the subjects directly, that was observable across the chosen settings. So the students tended to choose a non-participant role, and a position that would minimize the chances of their observing presence being remarkable: they were acting as people “just standing there”. There was some variation, however, in their distance from the crossing. Some made a video from a large distance, while others took it from a position right beside one end of the zebra path. In the first case, these materials could only be used for a global pattern analysis, noting for instance that when one person started crossing during a red-light period, others tended to follow. In the second case, this could also be done, but one could additionally analyse particular incidents. One could observe, for instance, “non-vocal negotiations” in a multi-person party about whether to cross at a red light, or the bodily ways in which a crosser reacted to a vehicle’s horn signal evidently used as a complaint about his action.

I often commented on such choices and their practical and analytic implications after the fact, when the students reported their findings and showed their materials. The purpose of the pedagogic exercise was to encourage the student to discover these things from their own experience, so that they might choose a different tactic when working on a future assignment. This was particularly successful in one case which I will discuss at some length. As her first assignment, one student, Irene van der Eng, had observed pedestrians in a busy shopping street from a table at the first floor of a fast-food restaurant. In my comments, I referred to a seven-page chapter in Eric Livingston’s book *Making*

Sense of Ethnomethodology (1987) on “pedestrian traffic flow”. He contrasts the social order of pedestrian crossing, as depicted by a sociologist filming the behaviour of people crossing a busy intersection from above, with the order that is created by the pedestrians who actually do the crossing together, on the ground.⁶

PERSPECTIVES FOR VISUAL ANALYSIS

Seen from above, a crossing cycle starts with two rows of pedestrians facing each other. When the lights for the pedestrians turn green, both rows move forward and the “pedestrians form themselves into ‘wedges’ and ‘fronts’ behind ‘point people’” (Livingston 1987:21). What remains mysterious, however, is how exactly the participants themselves get this complicated job done.

The perspective of “wedges,” “fronts” and “point people” is, of course, from a vantage point that none of the participants had or could have. Pedestrians do not use these documented, geometrically described alignments of physical bodies; they are engaged in a much more dynamic forging of their paths. They are engaged in locally building, together, the developing organization of their mutual passage. That organization is, and accommodates itself to, the witnessable structures of accountable action as they develop over the course of their journey.

To understand how pedestrians manage their crossing we must, metaphorically, move the camera to eye level. (Livingston 1987:22)

So Livingston offers two contrastive depictions of pedestrian crossing, one based on an observer’s image from above and one from a participant perspective on the ground. Only the latter, he suggests is able to show the actual *lived work* of pedestrians crossing. He provides a verbal sketch of the actions and orientations of a crosser in visual interactions with the others engaged in crossing from the other side, but he does not seem to ground his “observations” on concrete instances observed directly or indirectly. Here is one fragment of his sketch:

Even before a “front runner” or “scout” comes into physical proximity with the opposing flow, the small group of people in front of her observable path begin to move so as to allow a place for her passage. The people behind the bifurcating interface see this directed

movement and begin to orient themselves toward following those in front, continuing their motion in that direction. While this is going on, the “scout” has already headed for, and moved into, the opening that is being provided for her. (Livingston 1987:22)

In other words, the actual crossing consists of a continuous flux of changing scenes perceived and adaptively co-created by the participants as they see and find locally available possibilities.

Returning to the contrast between his sketch and the film images, Livingston writes:

During the ongoing course of the crossing, the pedestrians are intrinsically building the interface between their two conflicting currents. That interface as it is seen and produced by the pedestrians is quite different from the way it appeared on the sociologist’s films. When it is seen on films made from above, the interface itself provides the films’ witnessable phenomenon. Through his interest in accounting for pedestrians’ behavior in terms of documented, regular, repeating structures of practical action, the sociologist attempted to render that interface through the use of geometric figures. The phenomenal basis of his theorizing – the pedestrians’ production and maintenance of an interface between the two oppositely directed currents of walkers – was hidden by his methods of analysis and his natural theorizing. (Livingston 1987:23)

Livingston connects the contrast in depicting methods – filming from above and at eye level – with a contrast in analytic interests. Filmed from above, one gains access to social life as a *product* in overview, but at the same time the lived-work of its *production* is hidden from this “over”-view. He does not claim that his verbal sketch provides an analysis of the productive work of crossing, however: “It gives an idea – or, as an ethnomethodologist would say, technical access to – the intrinsic, locally produced, in situ organization of the walk across the crowded intersection”. It could be used as a “invitation”, so to speak, to go out on the street and “elaborate the description in terms of the actual lived-details of the organizational work of pedestrian street crossings”.

Inspired by my discussion of Livingston’s example, Irene took this “invitation” to come down to the ground not just metaphorically, but almost literary. For

her next assignment, she wrapped a video camera in a bag, held it under her arm, and walked the streets with the camera running. Watching the tape one can infer how she manoeuvred, avoiding people who walked slower than she did, seeking opportunities to keep her pace, etc. In short, one observes an image that represents both what she saw and how she acted on that basis. This image is, of course, not complete, as the camera, tied to her body, was less flexible than her head and eyes, but it provided a useful approximation of a participant's perspective, and as such it can be contrasted with the onlooker's perspective that was available in the pictures and videos shot by the other students. For her last assignment, Irene decided not to use video again, because she wanted to have the complete bodies of the other pedestrians in view, not just the limited part available with a camera at a rather short distance, which, on the other hand, would be required to avoid having other walker's bodies in between. So now she used a more traditional kind of participant observation, walking the streets and making "mental notes" of what she observed.

At a recent conference – the International Conference on Conversation Analysis, ICCA-2002, in Copenhagen – a video was presented based on images shot with a miniature camera that was hidden in a pair of glasses, sending its images to a receiver at the back of the wearer. These data were used as evidence in an exploration by Marc Relieu, a French ethnomethodologist, of online text-based chatting on a mobile phone while conversing with a friend. The image of this camera corresponds more closely to the view of the one wearing the glasses than in the arrangement used by Irene, but as Paul McIlvenny, who was present at the showing, remarked, it still does not catch the actual sight since it does not follow the eye movements. Furthermore, the scope of the image is extremely limited, which may not be a serious problem when studying mobile phone use, but makes it hardly useful for studying pedestrians manoeuvring on the streets, where peripheral vision is so important.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I would maintain that each of the observational techniques employed in the student assignments have their possibilities and limitations. It might be suggested that for a topic like pedestrian traffic, a combination of "perspectives", as embodied in and realized through various ways of doing visual studies, might provide the best results.

In the case of Irene, for instance, it is my impression that her two first assignments – the first a direct observation from above, the second with a camera under her arm – contributed to the richness of her final "traditional" participant observations. These exercises had alerted her to a range of phenomena that she could now study as part of the overall action stream. Now she could, for instance, shadow people, both those who walked alone and others who were "with" someone else.⁷ What she discovered was, among other things, that within a couple walking on a busy shopping street, a kind of division of labour tended to emerge. One partner – often the male, often walking in the left position – would watch the traffic straight ahead and initiate changes in pace and directions to fit with the stream. In this way, he seemed to free his companion – often female, walking to his right – from these tasks, which allowed her to look around at people and shop windows. So he acted as the driver of the "circulation unit", she as the passenger. This pattern, it seems to me, is immediately recognizable as "the way we do". Just as Livingston's sketch, it depicts a set of obvious solutions to common problems of modern city life.

Another phenomenon, which might be called "a preference for movement", was also observable with a variety of methods. When walkers were faced with some kind of temporary blockage – whether it would be a red light, some people standing or a car crossing their path – they would tend to adjust their path or their pace, whichever was most convenient, rather than stop and wait for the blockage to be lifted. So they might walk around a group standing before them or adjust their walking, slowing down or even running, when another "circulation unit" was about to cross their path. Such patterns were clearly "demonstrated" in Irene's tape from her arm-held camera, but these could also be found on a tape shot from a side position, or through direct observation.

As Livingston stresses, pattern descriptions like the ones given above do not constitute "detailed ethnomethodological analyses", but they can be seen as a first step, or "a pedagogy" for anyone caring to go out and see for themselves, not only that it is done in the ways indicated, but how that is actually accomplished. In such an activity, the "methods" of visual observation discussed above may have different functions. The "arm-camera method", for instance, is instructive in demonstrating a walker's body movement, because one sees and can vicariously experience those movements and the actual situations which have provoked them. Methods of direct observation or tapes made from an

aside position may provide access to multi-party accommodations in body movements, gestures and/or positionings. But whatever the method, the observer still has to do inferential work in order to perceive the systematics of the movements in relation to their environments, as well as the work of their accomplishment. The types of inferences to be made may be different, but inferential work as such seems unavoidable. While a “body-held camera” can be quite instructive, it has its limitations too. The usual way to videotape interactive activities, using a “side position”, may often be the best solution, as can be seen for instance in Christian Heath’s studies (1986; Heath and Luff 2000). And as he has stated (1997) and demonstrated, additional fieldwork will often be required in order to enable the analyst to make sense of the taped events. In this regard, pedestrian traffic is different from many other kinds of settings, as one can observe and experience this kind of collective action without bothering anyone.

NOTES

- [1] This contrast between using something as a resource or a topic is well known within ethnomethodology; the locus classicus is Zimmerman and Pollner (1971).
- [2] My perspective in this and other sections of this paper is, of course, deeply indebted to the writings of Erving Goffman, most notably *Behavior in Public Places* (1963).
- [3] The notion of “membership”, and the inevitable use of co-membership of the researcher as providing access to the sense of situated actions, is essential to ethnomethodological understandings; cf. Garfinkel (1967), Garfinkel and Sacks (1970) and ten Have (2002) for a general discussion.
- [4] These remarks were especially inspired by the work of Jeff Coulter (e.g. 1979, 1989), who combines both ethnomethodological and Wittgensteinian traditions in a radically sociological conception of “mind-in-action”.
- [5] But see Ball and Smith (1992, 2001) and Emmison and Smith (2000).
- [6] A similar set of remarks, but this time concerning highway traffic, has been made in a short excursus by Michael Lynch (1993:154–158), who refers to concrete inspirations from Harold Garfinkel’s lectures and unpublished writings.
- [7] Some previous studies on walking-in-company include Goffman (1972:40–50) on “participation units” and Ryave and Schenkein (1974) on “notes on the art of walking”. The first is probably based on dispersed field observations, the second on two video recordings; no information on their “positionings” are given.

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