Bus Rider Ethnography Assignment

Overview

Go to the Santa Rosa Transit Mall. Take four trips on Santa Rosa city buses. Observe the people at the Transit Mall, on the bus, at the bus stops, and their surroundings. Take notes. Notice some regularities or potentially cultural patterns. Devise some explanations for them. Write and turn in a brief ethnography describing some aspects of "Santa Rosa Bus Rider Culture", explaining those aspects, and illustrating with specific examples. Guidelines for your bus travel, observations, and writeup are included below.

Expect the fieldwork for this assignment to take a solid block of three to five daylight hours, door to door. To avoid wasting time, plan in advance using the bus schedules.

Getting to the Santa Rosa Transit Mall by car

If you have access to a car, you can simply drive to the Santa Rosa Transit Mall. For a map and other information, just type "Santa Rosa Transit Mall" into Google. There is a parking structure there, or you can hunt for scarce street parking or nearby lots.

Getting to the Santa Rosa Transit Mall by Sonoma County Transit bus

Alternatively, you can take a Sonoma County Transit bus from SSU to the Santa Rosa Transit Mall. If you do, you may use observations from the trip to and from the Transit Mall as additional material for your ethnography. Some past students have made interesting comparisons between the riders on the two systems.

You have a choice each way between Route 44 or route 46. Both leave from, and return to, the bus stop near the SSU parking kiosk. Bus 44 runs more often, including weekends, but takes 40-50 minutes each way. Bus 46 is an express that runs only a few times a day, weekdays only, but takes only 20-30 minutes each way. The regular, one-way fare is $1.70. Students with student ID taking 6 or more units may pay the student fare of $1.45 each way. Sonoma County Transit Bus schedules and maps are available at http://www.sctransit.com/routes.htm

To see schedules specifically between SSU and the Santa Rosa Transit Mall:

1. Go to http://transit.511.org/
2. Click "Schedules and Route Maps" on the left.
3. In the box "Select a Transit Provider", pick "Sonoma County Transit" and click "Go"
4. Click on either Route 44 or Route 46
5. In the section labeled "Create a Stop to Stop Schedule", click the desired route (going to Santa Rosa from SSU is going north; returning is going south)
6. In the "Select Origin Stop/Station", select where you are leaving from (Sonoma State University or Santa Rosa Transit Mall) and click "Go". The choices are in geographic, not alphabetical, order.
7. In the "Select Destination Stop/Station", select where you are going (Santa Rosa Transit Mall or Sonoma State University) and click "Go"
8. Click "Printable Version" for a cleaner (yes, printable) version.
9. Do it again for the other direction; the schedules for the two directions are different.
If you take the Sonoma County Transit bus, you could save a few cents by buying a transfer for a Santa Rosa City bus destination. Do not do this. You must get at least one Santa Rosa City bus transfer slip to attach to your paper.

**Santa Rosa City bus trips**

Once at the Santa Rosa Transit Mall, take four city bus trips selected from the lists below. Take two from list A, and two from list B. Each trip is a loop that brings you back to the Transit Mall. The first trip costs one dollar. Additional trips during the next two hours are free. There is no student discount.

*Make sure you get a transfer slip* when you pay for your first Santa Rosa City bus trip. Usually, the driver will automatically hand it to you. If not, ask for a transfer. There is no extra charge. The transfer is good for unlimited city bus trips for the next two hours. Just show it to the driver when you board the next bus. You do not have to hand it over. The boxes they have to collect old transfer slips are just convenient wastebaskets; do not use them. Keep the transfer. Do not use it to board a Sonoma County Transit bus back to SSU, because the county bus driver will keep it. You must attach your transfer slip(s) to the paper you submit. No transfer slip = no credit.

Check the bus schedules (links below) and plan your trip in advance, allowing time for transfers and delays. Plan on doing this assignment during the day, so you can see what is going on and do not feel threatened in the dark.

Bring at least three one-dollar bills and more than a dollar in change. The total cost will be less than you would pay for a burger and fries, but it must be in exact change.

Take two trips from list A and two from list B. You may take them in any order you wish.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Route</th>
<th>Minutes</th>
<th>Route</th>
<th>Minutes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 West 9th Street</td>
<td></td>
<td>1 Mendocino Avenue</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Sebastopol Road (weekdays only)</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>2 Bennett Valley</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9W Sebastopol Road (weekends only)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>4 Rincon Valley</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Roseland</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>7 Montgomery Village/Rincon Valley</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8 Sonoma Avenue</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Santa Rosa City Bus schedules and maps are available at http://ci.santa-rosa.ca.us/default.aspx?PageId=2313

**What to do**

When you board the bus (don't forget to get a transfer!), go towards the back, into the elevated section if possible. From the back of the bus, you will have a better view of the others on the bus without having to obviously turn around. Write down what bus route you are on, and what time the bus leaves. Try to be subtle about taking notes, so you don’t make people uncomfortable. Leave your music player home, and do not use your cell phone. You need to hear what is going on, and to be free to interact with people if the occasion arises.

Both while waiting at the bus stops and while on the bus, watch people. Your purpose is to discover recurring, somewhat consistent patterns of behavior that you can describe as shared rules of behavior, meanings, or values, that is, aspects of bus rider culture. You may notice more
than one culture, or subculture, on the buses. For example, young people might share a different
culture from older ones, or English speakers might share different rules about how to interact
than do Spanish speakers.

Just a few of the many things you might notice include:

• Details of behavior such as
  o body positions and body language
  o how people direct their gaze
  o how they interact or do not
  o how they talk or do not, in what language(s), etc.
  o things they carry with them and what they do with those things

• Any behavior that seems to be repeated or shared by many bus riders.

• Any behavior or events that seem to be exceptions or to be out of place.
  o What values or rules of behavior did these events violate? Analyzing exceptions is a good
    way to discover what the generally shared values and rules are, because you have to
    figure out what they are exceptions to.

• Are gender, age, dress, or other characteristics connected to how these values or rules work?

• Any particular events or interactions that might be interesting or provide some insight into the
  norms or values of Santa Rosa Bus Rider culture

• How people form groups at the bus stops and on the bus: individuals, same-gender pairs of the
  same age, multiple-gender pairs, apparent mothers and children, groups of similar or mixed
  ethnicity, apparent race, etc.
  o Are there any patterns in behavior associated with these groupings?
  o Are there any exceptions that highlight the norms?

• Why do you think these people use these buses? Consider politely asking a few people.

• Do their reasons vary on different routes?

• Could these reasons tend to shape "Santa Rosa Bus Rider Culture"? How so?

• Is the bus riders’ culture between on different routes, or in different neighborhoods?
  o Neighborhoods might differ by the size, condition, and type of lot and dwellings and/or
    businesses there
  o By the kind of landscaping (or lack of it)
  o By the frequency of metal grates or bars on doors
  o By the kinds and conditions of vehicles parked around
  o By the language(s) on signs and store displays

• When you begin to form impressions, consciously test them with further observations
  ("Maybe only men sprawl over multiple seats… no, now I see a few women doing it, too."))

Use these suggestions as a guide, not a checklist. Read them to prime yourself to be observant,
then just actively pay attention. You will probably notice interesting things that are not
mentioned in this list. Just be alert.

Do this exercise by yourself as much as possible. You may travel with a classmate or friend if
you feel uncomfortable venturing out alone, but sit well apart on the buses, and keep separate
while waiting for buses. The point of this is so that you can focus on the other people around you
without being distracted. You are also more likely to fall into a conversation with a stranger if
you do not appear to be occupied with a friend. Chance conversations with strangers may give
you interesting information. On the other hand, try not to become involved with any one person
for too long, because that could keep you from noticing others and the general scene around you.

**Taking notes**

Try to take notes without being so obvious that you disturb people, while also observing and participating in the situation around you. Of course this is impossible, but try. Observing and recording as constantly as possible will help you to recall events and impressions, and to match them to different places, routes, and times. When you are writing your paper, this may help you notice and verify patterns, and will help you to illustrate them with specific events and details.

**Writeup**

Write a five page micro-ethnography of some aspects of Santa Rosa City Bus Rider culture (or sub-cultures, if you choose to separate groups with different bus cultures). The paper should touch on the following points:

- Specify the date of your trips, the specific bus routes you took, and when each actually departed. *Attach your Santa Rosa City bus transfer(s) to the paper.*
- Describe some rules of behavior, values, or ideas that seem to be shared by most bus riders you observed on the bus, at the Transit Mall, or at other bus stops. That is, suggest some shared aspects of bus rider culture that led to the particular behavior you saw.
- If you noticed different subcultures among bus riders, describe the different groups and how their cultures differed. What are some shared rules or ideas of each subculture of bus riders?
- Illustrate and support your discussion with specific examples of things you saw people do. What events or interactions support your conclusions about bus rider culture(s), or seemed particularly interesting or informative?
- Try to explain these features of the culture, and/or the differences among subcultures. Consider explaining features of bus rider culture in terms of adaptation, meaning, or system. How do these features of their culture make sense for Santa Rosa bus riders?
- Do these cultural features fit together in some logical way? Do they reflect any general themes that run through the bus rider culture?
- Evaluate your own responses to the experience. Did anything surprise you? If so, can you learn anything about bus rider culture from that? Can you learn anything about your own preconceptions from it? Did anything make you (or anyone else you observed) uncomfortable or upset? If so, describe the event(s) and try to explain the reaction. Did you observe anyone acting ethnocentric, or find yourself thinking or behaving ethnocentrically? Finally, how do you feel now about the public transportation system? Who uses it? How might using buses affect other aspects of their lives?

Write this paper as an argument or an explanation of your conclusions about bus rider culture, not a narrative of what you did and saw. Explain your interpretations, and use concrete incidents or observations to convince me that they are reasonable.

Use 12-point type, double-spaced, with reasonable margins. Use a spelling checker, and proofread your work before submitting it. Recall that I require both a paper copy (*with the Santa Rosa City bus transfer(s) attached*) and a computer file of the same paper emailed to me or submitted on a diskette, CD, or USB drive.
Turning it in

Turn in your essay BOTH on paper, AND as a file attached to an email message to me. I will return the paper copy with comments and a grade written on it. The paper copy is due in class on the day indicated on the class web site. The computer file OF THE IDENTICAL PAPER is due by midnight of that day. I must have BOTH versions to give you credit. Name the file in this format:

203-07s-3-bus-SimpsonBart.doc

Your word processor may add a 3-letter file extension like ".doc" or ".wps".

Drafts

You are welcome to discuss your assignment with me or give me a draft to review before the assignment is due. My comments and suggestions may help you write a better essay and get a better grade. If you email a draft, please name the file as above, but add "-draft", like

203-07s-3-bus-SimpsonBart-draft.doc

Grading

This paper is worth 200 points, out of 1000 for the course.