

Clemson University

Humans of Main Street

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Cantinflas Restaurant and Bar is a small establishment on Main St, Greenville, SC. Saturday, October 21st, I sat there from 7:07 PM to 8:43 PM and took note of the people who walked by. Everything I've noted can be boiled down into five categories: Age, Intimacy, Men, Groups, and Children. However, the most interesting thing I found was not only that these categories often intersect with one another, bringing further context to each observation made, but evidence of the biased assumptions I held of my own culture.

Observations on Intimacy

Based on what I have observed, people in the US do not often engage in physical contact. There are three exceptions to this rule: parents with their children, close female friends, and partners in a relationship. The act of holding hands is something I only observed romantic partners or parents with their children engaging in. However, the nature of this action was different with each situation. Romantic partners holding hands walked at a slow pace, exchanging romantic gestures such as kisses or hugs. These partners were seen slinging their arms around each other's waists as well, in an almost half hug, as they stopped to glance into stores. Parents on the other hand, were walking at a slightly brisker pace, leading children through the crowded street and keeping them close by.

Close female friends can be compared to close male friends, who walked with about a foot of space between their bodies. They walked in lines of two down the sidewalk, turning to talk to a friend in front or behind them. Female friends were almost the direct opposite, walking close enough for their arms to brush against each other. Groups of women walked side-by-side, taking up the entire sidewalk until someone needed space. However, both female and male

friends, when seated, left enough space for their elbows to rest beside each other without touching.

Strangers walking down the street would keep to themselves, walking with their arms crossed, or with their hands in their pockets. Regardless of gender, they walked as men do, with about a foot of space between each other. Strangers refrained from talking to each other, walked at a brisk pace, and did not walk next to each other. I observed two separate incidents where strangers spoke to each other- the first was when a man asked another man about the dog he was walking, and the second was when a couple asked another couple about Cantinflas. In both incidents, they all kept their distance from each other, except for a handshake at the end of the conversation over the dog. It is the way strangers acted around one another that leads me to believe the behavior mentioned above is not average.

The second cultural rule I observed was that the closer people were, physical and social interaction would increase. Strangers were not close with one another, so they did not physically or socially interact. Friends, however, spoke to one another as they walked down the street. Groups that were not as close with each other would observe their surroundings more often than they spoke, while the most intimate of partners would be talking to one another with their arms around each other's waists. Strangers do not engage in conversation with other strangers, and certainly would not initiate a physical action such as holding hands with another stranger. Instead, strangers appeared to huddle away from other people through crossing their arms or placing their hands in their pockets.

Observations on Age

My first observation on age was that older people prefer less excitement than younger people. Groups of young adults would shout over each other as they walked down the street, and their groups contained of five or more members. I noted several groups with as many as ten young adults doing the same. They carried backpacks and wore brightly colored clothing that advertised their interests, such as football teams or TV shows. Groups of three or more consisted of adults. These groups consisted of several couples, and conversations held by them were muted, meaning that I was unable to hear what they were saying, unlike with the young adults. Adults in groups also walked at a much slower pace than young adults, which may be due to their hand holding. Elderly people, however, walked in pairs. I did not observe an elderly couple expressing as much physical contact as younger couples. They only went so far as to hold hands in public, walking at the slowest pace of all the groups, and appearing to prefer walking in silence.

My second observation was that children become more reserved as they age. I did not have the chance to watch several families over time, but I did have the chance to watch several families with children at different ages. The youngest children were carried in the arms of a parent, or in a stroller. Toddlers would walk with their parents tightly holding their hands. As they talked to their parents, they would wildly wave their arms around and point directly at things. Unlike their parents, they would skip and jump as they walked. This continued until the children reached a point where they would walk by themselves, which they would do with about half a foot of space between them and their parents. Teenagers were the same, walking with about half a foot of space between themselves and their parents, but the difference was that they would walk behind their parents rather than next to them.

Observations on Men

As I mentioned before, men appear to be less intimate with friends than women. Men do not treat their children or partners this way. They would hold the hand of their child as they walked down the street, carry them in their arms, or push their stroller as often as women did. Hand-holding, hugs, and kisses were mutual actions between partners. The most obvious observations would be how men would walk with about a foot of space between each other, and in lines rather than squished next to each other.

However, men also seem to have a more dominant role in relationships with women. When holding hands, men would walk slightly ahead of the woman they were with, leading her where to go. When their arms were wrapped around each other's waists, men would walk lightly behind the woman they were with, steering her around people in the crowd. I noticed three different times when men abruptly changed direction without warning, jerking the woman they were with where they wanted to go. The women did not complain, and rushed to catch up with them. In addition to this, groups of young adults, which had five or more members, had more men than women in them.

Observations on Groups

While groups had interesting dynamics such as young adult groups consisting of more men than women, and members of five or more, the most interesting thing I noted was that people appear to spend time with other similar people. Groups consisted of people around the same age, only mixing ages when it came to families. However, groups also consisted of the same ethnicities and body sizes. I noticed people of similar weights and heights walking together as well as people of the same race. Couples especially appeared to be of similar weights. The two

exceptions to this rule would be young adults and families, who appeared to be slightly more diverse, with mixed ethnicities, body sizes, and weights.

My final observation on groups was that strangers have some form of trust for each other. Though strangers kept to themselves and did not physically or socially interact with the people around them, there were times when they would appear to be a group. I noted several instances where strangers would decide almost simultaneously to cross a road despite a red light, or stop to observe their surroundings. Groups of strangers walked down the street in unison, causing me to mistake them as a group at first, but did not socially or physically interact with each other enough to be friends, leading me to believe they were simply strangers headed in the same direction.

Observations on Children

Children are highly protected. Their parents hold their hands when walking through crowds, and do not allow them to wander far, if at all. Infants were held closely to the chest of a parent, or pushed in a bulky stroller that was filled with items relating to them. I only once observed a stranger interact with a child, and this stranger was a street musician who only did so when the child was accompanied by their parents, who of course, had not let them wander out of sight.

In addition to this, both men and women appear to care for children equally. I saw no difference in who pushed the stroller or carried their children. I also saw no difference in the sex of the parents who walked by themselves with the children. Both men and women carried items relating to the children, and both appeared to have equal affection for the children they cared for.

Reflections

There were two aspects of this project that I found difficult. First, I had preconceived ideas about my culture that I found myself realizing were not correct. The most obvious example of this would be how men cared equally for their children. Perhaps it is because of the conditions I observed under, but I had assumed that women would care for children more than men. It wasn't until I began thinking about my observations that I realized this wasn't the case. Another example of this was with the growth in diversity in younger groups. As someone with a biracial family, I had grown used to noticing that biracial families were uncommon. My own experiences had set an expectation for me that I was glad to have flipped when I noticed how diverse the families were.

I also found myself wanting to list observations and explain them rather than finding rules from my observations. This is also due to my preconceived ideas about US culture. I wanted to explain the meanings behind the observations I made, thinking that I already knew what US culture was like. This was clearly not the case, and by piecing together rules based upon my observations I learned several interesting things about culture. I noticed that culture changes, as exemplified by the increased diversity seen in younger groups rather than older groups. Many different aspects of culture are related to one another, which is shown by how many of the rules relied upon the same observations. Finally, cultural rules have exceptions to them. As soon as I noticed a trend, there was an exception to it. This can be seen in the very first rule on intimacy, where people did not engage in physical contact unless they fit a specific role.

This project was difficult but fascinating. My ideas of my own culture were challenged, and my understanding of what culture is has become clearer. Though everyone I watched was different in some way, whether it was ethnicity, sex, age, or fashion choices, they all followed

the same cultural rules without realizing it, showcasing exactly how the “Humans of Main Street” fit together in the end.