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### Social Theory in the UNC Student Union on a Friday Morning

It would seem obvious that social theory would appear when closely studying a public setting. The theories of three men occur during an observation of the Student Union on a Friday morning. Simmel's theory regarding dyads and triads can be applied to the different groups of people utilizing the Student Union. A worker at the Alpine Bagel Co. shop exemplifies Goffman's idea of *line* and *face*. The theory of traditional authority by Weber relates to the socialized impulse of waiting in lines.

The Student Union at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill on a Friday morning remains busy on a consistent basis. Students read newspapers, watch television, chat with friends over a bagel and coffee or study. Employees at the Alpine Bagel Co. shop take orders from the hungry students and when afforded a break talk between each other while preparing for the next round of food orders.

The social geometry of this system is very diverse. There many single students, sitting alone at the tables, never looking up. There are other tables with couples or groups of three or four. If the table consists of more than one person, a conversation is being carried out. In some cases a third member joins a table of two or perhaps a cell phone call brings another member to the group. One large group of five Spanish-speaking men arrives. They talk loudly in their foreign language.

The groups of two people sitting at the tables obviously form a dyad. As stated by Simmel, the dyad depends on the other member because without the other individual

there is no group. In a triad or larger group if one member drops out a group still exists. This concept can be applied to the fact that when there are two people sitting at a table they are talking. The two individuals continue conversation because they do not want the other to leave. The conversation gives each person a reason to stay because if one leaves there is no group. Each individual does not want to be left alone.

Simmel refers to this distinction of a triad or larger as a “super-personal life which the individual feels to be independent of himself.” For these reason there is not a dyadic relationship between the individuals sitting alone and the rest of the room. This single person does not feel the need to remain in this place to continue the dyad. If the person were to leave there would still be a group. There is no intimacy between the room and the loner sitting at the table. For this reason, the single person rarely looks up at people entering and leaving the room. The people sitting alone do not recognize any relationship with the other people in the room.

Another one of Simmel’s theories regarding social interaction was displayed at the Student Union. In two cases a dyad became a triad with the addition of a new individual. Simmel states that “no matter how close a triad may be, there is always the occasion on which two of the three members regard the third member as an intruder.” (p 135 *The Expansion of the Dyad*) This occurred in the case of a boy and a girl sitting at a table. When another boy came up to the table, the discussion became between him and the other boy. The girl was regarded as the intruder for some reason (perhaps the topic). This continued for a few more minutes until the boy who newly entered the group seemed to sense the girl’s discomfort and chose to leave.

A similar case occurred between a group of two girls and a cell phone. The two girls had been talking until one girl received a phone call. Although an actual person did not physically enter the group, the new individual's presence was known. The girl not on the phone sat in uncomfortable silence while her friend finished the phone call.

The employees and the customers of the bagel shop had such a quick and temporary relationship with each other it was difficult to measure in the concept of dyad or triad. But one man working at the bagel shop stood out in his relationship with everyone. When a long line appears, the man becomes louder and changes his stance. His face constantly remains serious and he never smiles. He stands taller when taking orders from a large group, but when the line dissipates he slouches back against the counter behind him talking quietly to his fellow employees.

This employee provides a wonderful example of Goffman's theory regarding lines and face. A line as characterized by Goffman is "a pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts by which he expresses his view of the situation and through this his evaluation of the participants, especially himself." (p 330 *On Face-Work*) When the bagel shop becomes busy, this employee finds himself to be an important participant in the situation. Through his change in tone, he feels he can move the line along faster by shouting "Next in line!" By working during a congested period, the employee claims the face of an effective worker.

When there is no line or merely one person to be waited on, the employee recognizes the more relaxed state, and thus relaxes himself. When there is no line, there is no need for him. He can sit back and talk to his fellow employees. Because of this

change in action and appearance, he cannot be said to maintain the face of a consistent, dependable worker. He simply turns on the face when an audience (customers) arrives.

Another social situation common in many cultures in the world presents itself in the Student Union; the concept of the line. Students automatically understand the concept of the line. With the temporary barriers assisting to form the line, the students quietly fall in place one after the other while staring up at the menu above the workers. No one questions the situation and each patiently waits for their turn.

The concept of waiting in line comes into our lives as a tradition. Many members of society may recall learning about standing in lines and patience in the early years of elementary school. In that way Weber's theory regarding power can be related to lines. Waiting in lines acts as a form of traditional authority. We wait in lines because we always have. This is a form of power, because the line is controlling us, stopping us from simply skipping the line and getting our food. To wait in line is against a person's instinct, because if you are hungry you expect to eat. In this way lines are a form of power because they make you do something you would otherwise not do.

Simmel's theory on dyads and triads does not fully convey the social relationships found in the Student Union. The people eating alone do not feel as a single member of a larger group. If they did, then their behavior would be more relaxed and less isolated. The people eating or studying alone rarely looked up at what was going on around them (making me an oddity, because I was alone but people-watching). If the loners felt to be a member of the group they would not be hesitant to watch other people and make contact with them. Instead those people isolate themselves, causing themselves to be outsiders and non-group members. These people try and succeed in not changing the

social system of groups around them. Just the presence of a person does not create a social interaction, conflict or at least contact is needed.

The three different theorists all attempt to explain the same thing, social interactions. By uniting these ideas, a complicated theory emerges, where the number of people and the intensity of the situation dictate the interactions of the individuals within the group. The theory would go on to state that these people either form into groups within the larger group or separate from the larger group becoming an outsider. The social interactions are based on an understanding from shared experience and culture; the relationships are restricted by social norms according to this theory. A more basic look at a theory arising from this observation is that people affect people. A social creature's actions change in front of an audience and as a result of the audience. As a person, I have the possibility of influencing the social setting. One thing not discussed among these authors of theory is the extent at which the presence of an observer influences the social setting. I cannot be sure my presence did not change the actions of individuals. That is a hole in this theory; the observer cannot truly observe everyone involved.