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# THEFT ON A THIN LINE: EXAMINING SOCIAL REGULARITIES IN A MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

By

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**ABSTRACT**

**THEFT ON A THIN LINE:
EXAMINING SOCIAL REGULARITIES IN A
MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES**

**By**

**Brian Nelson Fry**

**This investigation examines the interactive relationship between structure and agency. Specifically, this study explores one fit between Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field and the interactions that transpire within a mid-Michigan Department of Social Services (DSS) lobby by observing what Bourdieu calls social regularities. The primary purpose of this study is to examine the usefulness of one observation technique, with the practical aim of explicating one way in which field researchers can potentially enhance their observations by interpreting them through theoretical frameworks sensitive to the agency/structure nexus. Hence, the following analysis is best understood as suggestive in nature, designed to illuminate methodological issues, not to generalize or explain the experiences of those sitting in the Michigan Department of Social Services lobby.**

**To My Parents**

**Harvey and Barbara Fry**

**who introduced me to the source of all**

**knowledge and truth: Jesus Christ**

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# INTRODUCTION

Having one's livelihood decided within the context of an impersonal bureaucracy provides a somber, but appropriate, setting for examining methods and theories especially attuned to capturing the interactive relationship between agency and structure. Specifically, this study explores one fit between Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field and the interactions that transpire within a mid-Michigan Department of Social Services (DSS) lobby by observing what Bourdieu terms social regularities. Rather than solely focusing on these interactions (i.e., the social regularities), the primary objective of this exploratory study examines how observational methods illuminate the benefits of a theoretical position that integrates structure and agency.

One objective of using qualitative methods in exploratory research is to "discover important questions, processes, and relationships, not to test them" (Marshall and Rossman 1989, p. 43). The investigation presented here is decidedly exploratory in nature, an exercise in observation. The primary purpose of this study is to examine the usefulness of one observation technique, with the practical aim of explicating one way in which field researchers can potentially enhance their observations by interpreting them through theoretical frameworks sensitive to the agency/structure nexus. Consequently, the following analysis is best understood as suggestive in nature, designed to

illuminate methodological issues, not to generalize or explain the experiences of those sitting in the Department of Social Services lobby. The amount and kind of data gathered simply cannot be used to support definitive conclusions about the setting, but instead must be limited to providing considerations in the area of observations and theoretical implications.

Before examining some of the assumptions that underpin social regularities, it is important to clarify the reasons why I chose to examine social regularities, and the techniques used to observe them, in the first place. Sociologists disagree as to where human agency belongs in their analyses.[1] Consequently, many of their methodological positions stem from the side of the dichotomy they choose to embrace. That is, those who focus on agency are often more oriented toward qualitative studies of the micro-level, while those who concentrate on structure direct the bulk of their attention toward the macro-level with the help of statistics. While this is an oversimplification of the current arrangement, it seems to capture its essence.[2]

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[1] This is not to imply that sociologists can, or should, strive for consensus in the discipline. In fact, the theoretical framework that undergirds much of this research argues that variety, not uniformity, can act as a safeguard against various biases and ethnocentrisms.

[2] Paralleling agency and structure with micro and macro levels (respectively) is achieved at the costly price of exclusion. That is, agency can apply to collectivities (macro) that act, and structure can include micro structures, such as those included in human interactions. "Thus both agency and structure can refer to either micro-level or macro-level phenomena or to both" (Ritzer 1992, pp. 568-569). Consequently, for the sake of linking methodology to the agency/structure debate, the price of exclusion will be absorbed.

When controversy swirls around a methodological issue, the literature tends to reify the constructs of agency and structure, requiring that their followers stand up and defend their choices. Rather than directly enter the debate, some have opted to engage it by rejecting it. Pierre Bourdieu attempts to transcend what he considers to be the false oppositions of subjectivity and objectivity by providing a theoretical and conceptual framework useful for analyzing the relational nature of social phenomena. While this may not always be his direct objective (Bourdieu 1989, pp. 14-15; Bourdieu 1990, p. 34), the concepts of *field* and *habitus* allow him to dissolve the dichotomy between agency and structure and instead link social structures to actions (Adkins and Emmison 1992, p. 309).

Researchers who have interpreted their field work within theoretical frameworks designed to synthesize structure and agency (e.g., Aronoff and Gunter 1992, Adkins and Emmison 1992) have produced analyses especially sensitive to how social structures constrain and enable people's actions. Examining Bourdieu's concept of social regularities, and how these regularities are observed, can provide an initial evaluation of Bourdieu's theory and its compatibility with field work. Given these objectives, this paper is organized into five interrelated sections. I begin by arguing that social regularities, if observed from a variety of reflexive standpoints, can enhance critical theory. I then review how Bourdieu's use of habitus and field may help to highlight

these social regularities. The third section details a description of the setting and methodology, and the limitations of the research design, while the fourth section involves an analysis of the data derived from observations, expounding upon Bourdieu's approach where applicable. An assessment of the limitations of this study and a discussion of future directions for research comprises the final section.

## ENHANCING CRITICAL THEORY THROUGH METHODOLOGICAL ANARCHY[3]

Two purposes direct this section. First, I intend to make an initial case for the importance of regularities by arguing that, unlike structuralism and constructivism, this approach places researchers at the intersection of agency and structure, providing them with a vantage point conducive to linking the two. Secondly, I propose that focusing on regularities can provide a more humanitarian outlook if field research is conducted from a variety of reflexive standpoints.

The dialectical relationship between field and habitus is designed to capture social regularities (practices). The underlying assumption is that the outcome of the dialectical relationship between agency and structure surfaces in the form of social regularities, as captured by the habitus/field dialectic (Ritzer 1993, pp. 577-582). Consequently, one of

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[3] The idea of methodological anarchy was derived from Feyerabend's thesis that science "is an essentially anarchic enterprise: theoretical anarchism is more humanitarian and more likely to encourage progress than its law-and-order alternatives" (1993, p. 9).

the aims of this exploration is to scrutinize this assumption by examining whether social regularities do indeed capture the interplay between structure and agency. The limited scope of this research (to be discussed later) makes this aim difficult to determine with any kind of certainty. Related to this objective, however, is the issue of observation--what are some possible ways of observing social regularities, and can the potential of these methods be realized within the context of field research? In sum, can this study suggest that purely structural and purely constructivist positions are inadequate by themselves, and consequently affirm the methodological usefulness of capturing social regularities?

The answer is yes-- but for different reasons than one might expect. I suggest that viewing the lobby in terms of regularities, rather than in terms of rules or the flexing of structural muscle, is capable of capturing the clients' resistance to the policies and actions of the department. Some would contend, however, that this analysis is nothing more than a game of semantic Twister® and could have just as well been analyzed in terms of agency and structure. If their argument is that one can analyze regularities by organizing it in the language of agency and structure as long as one is attuned to the dialectic between the two, their point is a good one. But if their argument is that focusing on regularities does little or nothing to further our understanding of how social structure is structurally induced

and personally interpreted, then perhaps this study will persuade them to rethink their position.

Looking for regularities encourages the researcher to look both ways-- microscopically and macroscopically. For example, Patricia Hill Collins sensitizes us to the inadequacy of additive models of oppression (e.g. a black woman is oppressed because of her race *and* gender) by demonstrating their inability to conceptualize individuals who "possess varying amounts of penalty and privilege in one historically created system" (e.g. a white woman is privileged by her race but oppressed by her gender) (1991, pp. 225-229). Part of this inadequacy stems from the fact that it is grounded in either/or dichotomous thinking, which brings in its train the practice of ranking. "The search for certainty of this sort requires that one side of a dichotomy be privileged while its other be denigrated. Privilege becomes defined in relation to its other" (Collins 1991, p. 225).

A similar fault clouds approaches that are purely structural or purely constructivist. It is not uncommon to see structural analyses practically disregard the perceptions of agents, or conversely, see constructivist analyses refer to structure in only the most perfunctory ways. In outlining Bourdieu's methodological approach, Wacquant grasps the danger of embracing only one side of the dichotomy:

> Against all forms of methodological monism that purport to assert the ontological priority of structure *or* agent, system *or* actor, the collective *or* the individual, Bourdieu affirms the primacy of

> relations. In his view, such dualistic alternatives reflect a commonsensical perception of social reality of which sociology must rid itself...Social science need not choose between these poles, for the stuff of social reality-- of action no less than structure, and their intersection as history-- lies in relations (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 15).

It is difficult to think of alternatives in light of sociologists' tendency to marry a method (be it qualitative or quantitative) and promising to stay with it "until death do you part." However, Bourdieu's methodological approach encourages us to be mindful of both while still maintaining a structural analysis that is permeable, rather than rigid.

Focusing on social regularities not only provides the researcher with a better understanding of how activity and structure are linked, but also encourages a more humanitarian outlook. This quality, however, is not found in the social regularities themselves, but rather in the methodology that is best suited to highlight them. Because researchers are not able to capture all of a setting's social regularities[4], and because they interpret these regularities in different ways, a variety of standpoints is necessitated. Not for the sake of positivist expectations-- internal and external validity, reliability, objectivity, etc. (Marshall and Rossman 1989, p. 145)-- but for the sake of *variety* .

Encouraging a variety of standpoints facilitates a more humanitarian approach to capturing regularities. "Variety of opinion is necessary for objective knowledge. And a method

[4] This conclusion is simply based on the assumption that no observer, no matter how skilled, is capable of recording all of the activities that take place within a particular setting.

that encourages variety is also the only method that is compatible with a humanitarian outlook" (Feyerabend 1993, p. 32). Of course, the underlying assumption is that looking for regularities encourages more variety than other methods. Standpoint theorists argue that all knowledge is socially situated, and that the standpoint of women (or feminism) produces less partial and distorted views of social reality (Harding 1992, pp. 119-135). Among other factors, this conclusion rests on the conviction that women are "strangers to the social order" and that by cultivating their marginality they are able to "provide empirically and theoretically better accounts than can be generated from the perspective of the dominant ideology, which cannot see... conflicts and contradictions as clues to the possibility of better explanations of nature and social life" (Harding 1992, pp. 124-125, 133). Starting research from the standpoints of those who "have fewer interests in ignorance about how the social order actually works" is "especially revealing of regularities in nature and social relations and their underlying causal tendencies" (Harding 1992, pp. 150-151).

Because the social backgrounds of the researchers vary, so will their concepts and perceptions (Feyerabend 1993, pp. 2-3, 52, 60-61). Consequently, standpoint researchers will view regularities in different ways and learn different things about the social order *and* about themselves. Variety is encouraged when a plethora of reflexive standpoints are brought to bear on a setting or group of related phenomena.

"Listening carefully to different voices and attending thoughtfully to others' values and interests can enlarge our vision and begin to correct for inevitable ethnocentrisms" (Harding 1992, p. 152).

By uncovering their cultural values and interests, standpoint theorists and researchers use their reflexivity as evidence for their research results (Harding 1992, p. 162) and forge a more "objective" view. Harding views "strong objectivity" as an alternative to the dichotomy of value-free objectivity and judgmental relativism, as "extending the notion of scientific research to include systematic examination of... powerful (such as cultural and background) beliefs" (Harding 1992, p. 149, parenthesis added). In a similar vein, Weber's concept of Verstehen, "if properly understood...not only meets the requirements of a legitimate inference in empirical science, but is indispensable in the analysis of social phenomena" (Munch 1957, p. 31).[5] Clearly, to examine "reality" without examining the researcher's perception of it is to let bias and prejudice go unchecked.

What kind of methodology, then, is suitable for capturing social regularities? Incorporating a variety of standpoints is essential, but how is each researcher to proceed? Shouldn't their methodologies adhere to some basic rules? In *Against Method*, Feyerabend argues that: " the events, procedures and results that constitute the sciences

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[5] Munch's conclusion, however, stems from a definition that is not shared by all sociologists. For criticisms of Munch's reasoning, see Baldwin & Baldwin (1978).

have no common structure, there are no elements that occur in every scientific investigation but are missing elsewhere" (1993, p. 1). Similarly, Kuhn (1970) and Latour (1987), by entering the "back door of science in the making" (Latour 1987, p. 4), argue that science does not develop by accumulation but by revolutions and resolving contests, respectively. But without a fixed methodology, how can we be assured that a researcher's behavior will not jeopardize the reputations and projects of their colleagues?

The obvious answer is that we can never be sure. This is not to say, however, that a strict methodology will guarantee appropriate behavior. For the whole of intellectual history demonstrates that "good and bad behavior have coexisted with loose and rigid rules of methodology in various times from Abraham to Goebbels" (McCloskey 1985, p. 40). This is not to say that guidelines or suggestions can never be voiced (I have already discussed the importance of regularities, standpoint epistemologies, and reflexivity), but it is important to steer clear of rules that impede a pluralistic methodology. The idea of a fixed method simply "rests on too naive a view of man and his social surroundings" (Feyerabend 1993, pp. 12, 18, 23, 33).

The argument of this section has been that focusing on social regularities, rather than solely examining social structure or the constructions of agents, provides a better understanding of the structure/agency nexus. This is nothing new. However, what is new is the notion that social

regularities provide the researcher with a better understanding of how structures impinge upon agents and how agents in turn interpret these constraints and seek to modify them, consciously or unconsciously. Social regularities point the researcher's nose in both directions.

Secondly, it has been argued that more can be learned from social regularities when we "reclaim self awareness as a source of insight" (Reinharz 1991, chap. 5), and encourage researchers to be their own methodologist. This kind of variety facilitates a more humanitarian outlook and acts as a check against partial (and hence, distorting) views of social reality that objectify and dehumanize Others (Collins 1991, chap. 11) While this examination cannot confirm these arguments, it does support them.

Gauging how much "support" this study provides, however, is an entirely different question and deserves a response. Regardless of how one measures "support," the answer (at this point) should be "not enough." Conclusions, no matter how well grounded, are still the conclusions of *a* researcher. In other words, they are partial. And the best means to halt the ascendance of a partial view is to require that it scale a mountain of other standpoints and to see how far it gets. Approaching social reality in this way may make the climb more difficult, but it will have been worth it if our accounts produce less partial and more humane views of the terrain.

## HABITUS AND FIELD: A RELATIONAL APPROACH TO REGULARITIES

Explicating Bourdieu's design and use of *habitus* and *field* is a dangerous undertaking when one considers the complexity and depth of his conceptual schema, not to mention his prolific tendencies.[6] Recognizing this, coupled with the space limitations inherent to an article, only a brief overview of habitus and field and the implications of their dialectical relationship will be presented here.[7]

"Habitus and field are relational in the...sense that they function fully *only in relation to one another*" (Bourdieu 1990; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 19). Combined, they are designed to link social structure to agency:

> ...both...*habitus and field designate bundles of relations*. A field consists of a set of objective, historical relations between positions anchored in certain forms of power (or capital), while habitus consists of a set of historical relations "deposited" within individual bodies in the form of mental and corporeal schemata of perception appreciation, and action (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 16).

The habitus is a cognitive framework that is possessed by a group, a collective phenomenon that is assembled and articulated through a group's network processes. To think of

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[6] Not including translations, Pierre Bourdieu has published approximately twenty-five books and two hundred and sixty articles (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 2).

[7] I would like to especially thank Dr. Bo Anderson for his insights into Bourdieu's conceptual use of habitus and field. For those interested in a detailed summary of habitus and field, the reader is directed to Bourdieu and Wacquant's *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (1992) or Bourdieu's *In Other Words* (1990). For an excellent example of how Bourdieu applies the conceptual and methodological tools of habitus and field, Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984) is recommended.

habitus as an analog to language may help. No single individual possesses a total command of the English language. However, if we were to bring every English speaking person together, a complete command of the language would be achieved. Analogously, no single individual possesses the habitus, but only within the context of a group is the habitus fully realized (Bo Anderson, personal communication, September 17, 1993). For my purposes here, however, I will not concentrate so much on what the habitus is or how it is structured by the field, but rather on how it operates and reveals itself.

The term "habit" conjures up the image of something *regular*, a predictable, but non-mechanical way of behaving. Perceiving social phenomena from this vantage point moves us away from talking about "rules" to a discussion of regularities and strategies (Bourdieu 1990, chap. 3). Having a "feel for the game" is nearly synonymous with strategy:

> The notion of strategy is the instrument I use to break away from the objectivist point of view and from the action without an agent that structuralism presupposes...It is the product of the practical sense as the feel for the game, for a particular, historically determined history-- a feel which is acquired in childhood, by taking part in social activities...The good player, who is so to speak, the game incarnate, does at every moment what the game requires...It's clear that the problem should not be discussed in terms of spontaneity and constraint, freedom and necessity, individual and society. The habitus as the feel for the game is the social game embodied and turned into a second nature (Bourdieu 1990, pp. 62-63).

Here we see the objective positions in the social world (e.g. class, race, gender, etc.) instilling and conditioning the

habitus. Once in place, the habitus serves as a filter through which perceptions and evaluations are passed (Bourdieu 1989, p. 19; 1970, chap. 1; 1981, chap. 11). In many ways, then, the habitus resembles a "flexible" internal thermostat-- monitoring and operating according to structural influences, yet responding in ways that are not mechanical.

Bourdieu's model is an interactive one, designed to encompass the structural and the "regularities" it encourages-- be it in the field or habitus (internalized). This perspective illuminates the fibers of experience that stretch across and within a field, and contributes to a wider understanding of how social structure shapes experience and how this reality is perceived and interpreted.[8] For example, this attribute is evidenced in the economic field where actors seek to improve their position by using various forms of capital-- economic, cultural, social and symbolic. (Bourdieu 1984; 1989, p. 17). "It is the specific logic of the field, of what is at stake and of the type of capital needed to play for it, which governs those properties through which the relationship between class and practice is established" (Bourdieu 1984, pp. 112-113). Here we see the field structuring the habitus, and yet we also see the habitus "constituting" the field as something meaningful, something worth contesting or maintaining (Ritzer 1992, p.

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[8] This is not to say, however, that equal "weight" is allotted to structure and agency. Bourdieu makes this clear: "...No doubt agents do have an active apprehension of the world...No doubt they do construct their vision of the world. But this construction is carried out under structural constraints" (Bourdieu 1990, p. 130).

580). Keeping this dialectic in mind, this inquiry turns to the research setting with the intention of highlighting methodological approaches that try attempt to capture the relational qualities of the social world.

## RESEARCH CONTEXT

The research presented here originated in the Winter of 1993 as part of a qualitative field research methods course. Along with thirteen other students and the professor, I attended a weekly seminar to discuss issues and problems confronting us in our respective settings. I chose to observe the Michigan Department of Social Services (DSS) lobby in a mid-Michigan county building for at least two hours a week for approximately eight weeks, handing in my weekly field notes to my professor for her comments and suggestions.

The DSS lobby was primarily chosen for its clientele[9], a group in need of heat and paychecks-- two commodities that are often in short supply in economic recessions during the winter. The setting allowed me to observe a group of people that I perceived as "disadvantaged," providing me with a better understanding of the economic difficulties that some people confront. The lobby also presented few problems in

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[9] By using the term "clientele" I am referring to all non-staff individuals who are present in the lobby. While this term usually indicates people who are receiving some form of economic assistance, I am using it to include individuals who may have been there simply to keep warm, etc. The fluid nature of the setting, coupled with the limited time frame of this investigation makes it difficult to distinguish between those receiving assistance and those who are there for other purposes.

terms of entry (i.e. permission was not needed to enter the lobby), observations (i.e., taking notes) and flexibility (i.e., the lobby was open nine to five). Lastly, given the short time frame and the purposes of this investigation, three attributes of this paper deserve special mention.

First, and as already mentioned, the amount of time spent in the setting only permits me to discuss the setting and methodology in suggestive, not conclusive, terms. Secondly, while a literature review of state agencies and public assistance could have enhanced this study, its absence is not critical to this investigation since the focus here is on social regularities and observation methods, not lobbies per se. Lastly, this study could have benefited by comparing the DSS with other large, state bureaucracies. By having a better understanding of how the DSS lobby compares with other large bureaucracies, I may have been able to make more assertive and insightful conclusions.

The local Michigan Department of Social Services serves a county of approximately 280,000 residents, the majority of whom are of European origin. For example, in 1990, non-Hispanic whites comprised 82% of the population, with non-Hispanic blacks and Asians and Pacific Islanders comprising 10% and 3% of the population, respectively (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1992). Also, in 1989, the median family income in 1989 was $37,361 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1992, STF 3A).

Identifying the "social causes" of the beliefs and behaviors (both "good" and "bad") of DSS clientele required

that I also analyze my own beliefs and actions (Harding 1992, p. 162). The research presented here, then, not only provides a snapshot of a lobby, but a mirror as well-- a way of reflecting on how the experiences of DSS clientele align and diverge from my own.

It wasn't until my sixth week of observation that I began to realize how the lobby had become more than just a two hour block in the middle of my week. It had become more than sitting in a rubber made beige chair, leaning over a brown collapsible table and taking notes. The one-way street of observing DSS clientele was under construction, and another lane, one aimed directly at me, was being built. The relationships, the dialogue, the laughter-- all of it-- pushed me to examine my own behaviors. For instance, you will soon see that the "lobby culture" systematically siphoned dignity from the clientele through a number of "tubes"-- hours spent waiting for a twenty-minute meeting, locked doors, and the presence of three security guards, to name but a few. These conditions required more than an adhesive memory and quick pen, but also pressed me to analyze the conditions that I create in my own relationships: Do I make people wait for me? Do I trust others or do I make them feel like I am surrounded by locked doors and security guards? These questions, and the observations that gave birth to them, are unique to me-- another researcher would not sketch the lobby as I have, ask the same questions, or feel the impact of the lobby in quite the same way. However,

I am confident that another researcher, given the same constraints, would describe the lobby in such a way that it would be compatible with my description (Becker 1970, p. 40).

I see this as a strength. This paper is guided by a theme that emerged (Strauss 1991; Charmaz 1988, p. 110) and is dependent upon my "constructions of other people's constructions" (Geertz 1973/1988, p. 42). These qualities are necessary if I am to try to view the lobby from the clientele's perspective rather than from the agency's. Trying to approach social relations from the devalued perspectives of the clientele guards against the tendency to obscure the advantages I derive from being a white, middle-class man. By *trying* to see the lobby as a client would, I was able to edge closer to what Sandra Harding calls "strong objectivity" because the oppressed (the clientele in this case) "have fewer interests in ignorance about how the social order actually works" (Harding 1992, p. 150).

What kind of experiences am I talking about? Without digressing into a detailed analysis, I will describe and explain the phenomenon that I see as central to the DSS lobby experience. The culture[10] of the setting is arrived at through a struggle between clients and the structure of the DSS. The struggle is over personal dignity-- the extraction, maintenance, and reasserting of it. An analog to basketball may help to bring the struggle into focus.

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[10] To paraphrase Geertz, culture is a web of significance that humans themselves have spun and within which they are suspended. Analysis of culture is thus an interpretive task, seeking the meaning created by the "spinners" (1973/1988, p. 38).

In basketball, teams find themselves alternating between the roles of offense and defense. Analogously, the clientele and the agency also act in ways that are defensive and offensive. For instance, the clientele's self-respect is challenged by having to wait long hours just to see a case-worker for a few minutes. This condition can be seen as an offensive move by DSS, which in turn draws responses from the clientele. By using professional behavior and attire in their dealings with case-workers, the clientele attempt to overturn the case-worker's narrow (as perceived by the clientele) behavioral expectations. These responses are defensive in the sense that they maintain the score (maintain their self-respect), but are also offensive in that they function to reassert their value and worth.

Though it was difficult to locate the social location of the clients, it seemed that they were standing on one of the lower socio-economic rungs on the American ladder. From an intersectional standpoint, their oppression is linked to their locations within the building blocks of social organization-- class, race, and gender. In many ways, by responding to some of the department's practices, the clientele helped to expose these interlocking systems of oppression (Collins 1991).

The experiences of marginalized groups have much to teach us about how society works. By trying to interpret the interpretations of the DSS clientele, I am presenting a view that dominant groups may have trouble understanding or

accepting. Just as Marxism sees the labor process as uncooperative and exploitative (a theory stemming from the dominated), I am committed to telling a story that *tries* to see the lobby the way the clientele do-- as oppressive.

**The Lobby**

The Michigan Department of Social Services provides a number of services to those who qualify for assistance. For example, depending on one's income, assets, number of dependent children, health, and other related factors, one may be eligible for food stamps, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), or some other form of assistance. The waiting period for assistance varies considerably, from receiving food stamps the day after an application is submitted (in extreme emergencies) to sixty days for State Disability Assistance (Field Notes, February 2, 1993). Though the services and the time required to receive them vary considerably, each service helps to bring a diverse group of people to the department.

The DSS lobby, an adjacent snack bar, and the "hidden" sections of case-worker offices that hem it in on three sides are housed in the county building. The case-worker offices are "hidden" in the sense that they cannot be seen from the lobby, and that they can be entered only by having a case-worker or security guard unlocking one of the three doors in the lobby. The county building stretches the length of a football field and a half, is about as wide as the Love Boat,

and in some sections, stretches about fifty feet into the air. The brown brick building is surrounded by two parking lots, with patches of green grass and shrubbery serving as a buffer between the two. The lobby is nestled in the far corner of the building, and when coupled with the offices that surround it, occupies approximately one-half of the building's space.

A revolving door, with a pair of hinged doors on each side, are the main entrances into the lobby. The shape of the room resembles a large plus (+), fat in the middle, with short, stubby ends. The white tile floor and ceiling are accented by three neutral colored walls and one blue wall, with rectangular and square tables and beige rubber made chairs arranged in fairly straight rows. The walls hold a few posters and are spotted with three "bank teller" like windows-- two for appointments, and one for picking up checks (Field notes, February, 1993).

Perhaps the most noticeable construction in the lobby is what I call the "security island," and its inhabitants. A semi-circle of 3' high partitions is positioned in the middle of the lobby and holds a security guard and a case-worker (who is occasionally "relieved" by one of the other two security guards) in its center. It is often here where clientele and agency stare each other in the eye (Field notes, February, 1993).

On some days, you can hear the hum of the ventilation system and on a rainy day, the squeak of wet tennis shoes

shuffling across the floor. Near-silence is the norm, but on certain occasions the silence is broken by a loud phone conversation on the in-house extension phone, laughter, greetings, a parent instructing their child to come back and/or behave, the sound of classical music playing in the snack bar, and about every five minutes, the calling (read shouting) of a client's name over the intercom. The lobby does not possess any distinct smells, but once in a while, a whiff of coffee, body odor, or perfume, floats up your nose (Field Notes, February, 1993). The setting which I have just described, and the analysis that will be developed later, were arrived at by using a specific methodology, and it is this to which I now turn.

**Methods**

I had never been in a DSS lobby before. This made for what I term "lobby shock," otherwise known as LS. In the beginning, I suffered from the most common symptoms of LS-- a sense of being overwhelmed, an inability to understand various behaviors and the meanings attached to them, and a constant wrestling match with the stereotypes I held of people receiving public assistance. Fortunately, with each additional observation period, coupled with two interviews and class discussions, I was able to treat the LS and began to overcome my sense of being overwhelmed.

To resolve the lobby shock I engaged in four treatments: (1) gaining access to the lobby, (2) weekly observations, (3)

two interviews, and (4) classroom discussions. Combined, these practices provided me with the tools that enabled me not only to describe, but to an appreciable extent, also to interpret the silent struggle for dignity that goes on inside of an apparently harmless lobby.

1. Gaining access to the lobby was easily achieved. The lobby is open to the public to the extent that all are welcome provided they are there for some purpose related to receiving assistance. Two of the front doors display paper signs that read, "No Loitering" but it is difficult to determine whether one is loitering or just waiting to have their name called over the intercom. The fluid nature of the setting, coupled with the long hours of waiting, made it difficult to distinguish between those who were waiting to see a case-worker, and those who were simply trying to stay warm on a cold day. In addition, the "gate keepers" of the lobby, the security guards, posed very little threat as they spent the bulk of their time talking with each other, reading, or patrolling the "catacombs" that lie behind doors one, two and three (Field notes, February 9, 1993). I blended into the setting relatively well, often just wearing blue jeans and a denim shirt.

2. I observed the lobby on eight different occasions, often changing the day of the week, but rarely ever changing the time and length of observation (1 to 3 p.m.). I spent the bulk of my time taking notes, with my note pad laid bare on a table or draped over my leg. At times, I disguised my

note taking by flipping through a magazine or by kicking back in my chair and doodling on the margins. The only time I would completely cover up my note pad was on occasions when a client would sit close enough, and at the right vantage point, to be able to read my observations.

My role subtly changed over the course of the study. At first, I functioned like a sponge, soaking up every detail, unsure of what would be important (Field Notes, February 2, 1993). This led to complete saturation, and a distinct sense of disorientation and boredom. Every pore of my mind seemed full, and I couldn't seem to maintain my concentration-- I wanted to capture every article of clothing worn and every conversation. Frustration would best describe the feelings I had at the end of my first two observations. However, this initial condition had its advantages, for "to know the exact questions to study and the precise procedures for studying is in fact to know most of the answers" (Wax 1977/1988, pp. 294-295). I felt this way for the first two weeks, but in the third week I caught on to what would eventually take center stage in my analysis: the pickpocketing of clientele dignity and their struggle to maintain it (Field Notes, February 16, 1993).

My participation in the lobby was primarily limited to brief (approximately two minutes or less) conversations with clientele. There is only one exception in which my conversation unexpectedly developed into an informal interview while the interviewee and I sorted through a box of

coupons. On one occasion, I asked a security guard for an application for food stamps, and visited the snack bar (Field Notes, February 2, 1993). Minus these exceptions, I spent my time keeping to myself and taking notes on what I observed. However, in many ways, my "observing behavior" also doubled as participation. By reading a magazine or drawing in my notebook (as they perceived me), I was simply behaving like the majority of the clientele-- I too was waiting. Thus, in this sense, I was also participating-- participating by observing, and vice-versa.

Recognizing this, the impact of my role on the lobby culture automatically comes into question. As noted above, I had never been in a DSS lobby before. This proved to be discouraging at the onset, but ultimately I think it provided me with a vantage point that a current or former DSS client could not possess. Just as Whyte, in *Street Corner Society* (1955), took advantage of his status as an outsider, I too was able to transcend certain blinders because of my outsider status (Emerson 1988, p. 12). However, the extent to which my outsider status hindered my observations is difficult to ascertain. Nonetheless, I contend that my lack of familiarity does not detract from the credibility of the investigation. While it is impossible to say whether the clientele were identified and described accurately (Marshall and Rossman 1991, p. 145), the desire to present the lobby from their perspective has served as an additional guard against an analysis that asks subordinated groups to

"replace" their "ways of knowing with the dominant group's specialized thought" (Collins 1991, p. 229). By not "knowing DSS inside and out," I was able to develop a number of hypotheses independent of other researcher's constructions, thereby producing a study almost entirely grounded in observations, not observations *and* journal articles. As for me, I experienced satisfaction and confidence in my ability to do qualitative research when some of my hypotheses were encouraged or supported in my formal interview, class discussions, and returned field notes (Field Notes, April 9, 1993). Few feelings compare with the feeling that you are on to something.

Observing the lobby on eight different occasions produced 70 pages of single-spaced notes. These notes, coupled with my instructor's comments, yielded rich data, allowing me to construct a tentative analysis of the lobby and the methodology. Becker (1970) notes the advantages of using data gathered from field work:

> ...the rich data produced by field work have an important use. They counter the twin dangers of respondent duplicity and observer bias by making it difficult for respondents to produce data that uniformly support a mistaken conclusion, just as they make it difficult for the observer to restrict his observations so that he sees only what supports his prejudices and expectations (p. 52).

In summary, I have little doubt that my subjects were true to me and that I was true to them in my analysis. To suppose that the subjects of the research were affected by my presence and that they intentionally altered their actions is to not only presume that they wanted to, but that they were

free to (Becker 1970, pp. 44-48). Whether my analysis of this "observed truth" is properly focused will be discussed later.

3. As formerly mentioned, I conducted two interviews-- one formal and one informal. My formal interview was conducted with Ms. Paterson[11], a case-worker/specialist at DSS. Ms. Paterson, a white 45 year old woman, had been a case-worker since 1971. She operated much like a public relations spokesperson for DSS, and provided me with information soaked in history and experiences. However, I wish to note that despite her public relations role, I sensed a real genuineness and honesty in her answers-- partly because the party line was not the staple in our interview (Paterson 1993). In many ways, I felt "all the warmth and personality of exchange of a conversation with the clarity and guidelines of scientific searching" (Oakley, p. 33).

My informal interview was not only informal, but also unplanned. During my last scheduled observation, Mindy, a white middle-aged woman, had casually engaged me in conversation by eliciting smiles and short quips from me by discussing humorous incidents in the lobby. Near the end of my observation time, I noticed her thumbing through a box of coupons by herself. I asked if I could join her, and a forty minute "interview" was born. I did not ask how long she had been a DSS client, but our conversation made it clear that she had been there long enough to know how the system works

[11] This is a pseudonym. Names of people and locations have been changed to maintain the anonymity of my informants.

(Field Notes, April 2, 1993). Mindy helped me to understand what I could not see at the lobby-- her home life and past experiences.

4. Class discussions were invaluable to my project, always forcing me to ask the questions: "Why?" and "Is there something else at work here [in the lobby]?" My notes and analysis were, in part, pieced together by my professor and classmates. To them I am indebted, and their participation undoubtedly helped me to make connections and dig deeper. Specifically, class discussion enhanced my analysis of informal waiting behaviors, and the dialectical approach taken here was suggested by my professor. Though it is impossible to trace each of their contributions, their contributions are included (and appreciated) in my presentation and analysis.

## ANALYSIS: THEFT ON A THIN LINE

Have you ever tried to walk a tightrope, and then, in the delicate process of walking and balancing, get pickpocketed? Probably not. I recognize the absurdity of the question, but metaphorically, this question isn't absurd at all-- it's very real. For DSS clientele, the tightrope and pocket-picking work together, in many ways producing a reduced photocopy of the macro (Burawoy 1991, pp. 274-9). This condition, theft on a thin line, will be explicated by illuminating my observations with a sociological highlighter.

The analogy of walking a thin line was derived from my interview with the DSS specialist, Ms. Paterson. I asked her, judging from her past cases, what kind of affect (if any) did receiving assistance have on a client's dignity. Her response illustrates the thinness of the line and its quality of separating those who have from those who do not:

> When you do this kind of job for that long [17 years], you realize that there's kind of a thin line there, you know, a fine line, between somebody that's able to have a job and those that aren't (Paterson 1993).

I am inclined to think that the majority of the clients spend much of their time getting on and falling off of the tightrope, unable to manage a lengthy balancing act (Field Notes, February 16 - April 2, 1993). This condition, however, is not the only one they share. Not only do they attempt to walk a thin line, but they also try to clutch their purses and guard their back pockets at the same time. However, the purses and wallets that I am referring to do not contain money. They contain something much more valuable-- their pride, their dignity. Nevertheless, dignity and a bad investment do share one overarching quality-- what took a lifetime to earn can be systematically drained.

Recognizing the limited scope and duration of my investigation, it is difficult to describe and examine the balancing act of the clientele. Conducting more interviews with clients would have helped me to have a much better understanding of how they interpret their experiences at the department. However, the data gathered do lend themselves

to an analysis of the second dimension of the performance--the theft. *The lobby culture is both a condition and a consequence of a struggle between clients and the agency, in which clients attempt to resist the pickpocketing of their dignity by the agency*. It is to this conflict which I now focus.

I have divided the overall struggle into two "struggles," each one depicting the agency's removal of pride and the clientele's resistance to their pocket-picking. These contests, though separated for ease of analysis, should not be seen as separate and independent of each other. Rather, they should be viewed as *interdependent* and *reinforcing* of each other, just as Bourdieu's habitus and field function in relation to each other. Specifically, the removal of dignity is evidenced in waiting relations and client/worker relations.

**Waiting relations**

It is DSS's expectation that "when a client walks through the front door, they're in and out of here in two hours" (Paterson 1993). This may be their goal, but this does not seem to be their practice. The length of my scheduled observations (two hours) made for a convenient test of this expectation. On numerous occasions I noted that clients who were there before 1 p.m. (when I arrived) were still there when I left at 3 p.m. (Field Notes, February 9 - April 2, 1993). However, the entire blame should not be

directed at the agency, for clients sometimes show up without appointments, and at times, a number of new clients arrive on a given day (Paterson, 1993). In general, though, I suggest that the majority of clients waited at least two hours, and usually longer.

I argue that this situation is grounded in status (among other factors too numerous to engage), with both groups (caseworkers and clientele) acknowledging that it is the clientele, not the caseworkers, who will wait. Status groups are determined and stratified according to their status situation, which is essentially a social assessment of honor and lifestyle (Weber in Runciman 1922/1991, pp. 46-49). Though Weber's primary purpose is to demonstrate that status groups attempt to strengthen their economic position via loosely structured communities, I contend that his analysis is applicable to DSS waiting conditions. I submit that caseworkers are conscious of the status accorded to them by the clientele, take advantage of this inequitable state by doing little or nothing about existing waiting conditions, and thereby unwittingly make the status disparity even more pronounced. However, I am not making the case for some kind of conspiracy, but rather am asserting that perhaps waiting relations are a natural outcome of status (and power) inequities. I wish to stress, not so much the differences in status situation, but the apparent lack of initiative on behalf of the agency to modify the length of time spent waiting. I can't help but think that if their clients were

from the middle-class that the waiting duration would decrease significantly. Granted, to an extent this condition is unavoidable given the nature of the setting and the services offered, but to wait two or more hours to go through an assistance application for twenty minutes seems somewhat excessive (Field Notes, April 9, 1993).

There is more to waiting than just the passing of time. I have chosen to subsume the physical setting under the term "waiting," because this too, directly influences how the clientele feel about waiting. The chairs they sit in matter. The floor, the tables, all of it-- may influence how the clientele feel about their wait *and* about themselves.

I have already described the setting in some detail, but I will stress the specific physical qualities that serve to pickpocket dignity from the clientele. Perhaps it is best to analyze the physical, not only from what is present in the lobby, but also from what is absent. I will start with what the lobby contains.

Briefly, the lobby is fairly clean, odorless, and very quiet, especially considering the large number of clients present at times (up to 55 people). However, it is clear that the collapsible tables and rubber made chairs were not designed for comfort or appearance. You would be hard pressed to find this type of furniture in the office of a doctor or church lobby, for instance. In addition, the relatively bare walls, tiled floor, cardboard suggestion box, intercom manners and security island may also serve as

additional fingers working to lift dignity from the clientele (Field Notes, February 2 - March 16, 1993). To suggest that these accommodations would be more comfortable and aesthetically pleasing if the clientele were known to be members of the middle and upper-classes seems plausible.

Perhaps this can be demonstrated through a line of questions: If the clientele belonged to a higher status group, would they: 1) have a cardboard suggestion box; 2) leave the walls bare (except for posters designed to make sure you use condoms when having sex and bleach when cleaning your hypodermic needles); 3) have tile instead of carpeting; and 4) have collapsible tables (or at least as many as they do)? I do not propose that the answer to all of these questions is "no," but I do suggest that these conditions and furnishings would be different if the clientele consisted of individuals from the middle and upper classes.

## Client/Worker relations

I hesitated to develop a separate category for the relationships between clients and workers for the primary reason that I did not feel that I had obtained a sufficient amount of data. But I am no longer convinced that this is the case for three reasons: I did observe a significant amount of *initial* interactions between clients and caseworkers at the doors leading back to the offices, interactions (and lack of) between the security guards and clients, and thirdly, the brief, formal interview I conducted

also provided me with some additional insights. I will briefly deal with each factor.

When a client's name was called over the intercom, they were directed to door number one, two, or three. There they would meet their caseworker (who often opened the locked door from the other side), and it is here where I saw the vast majority of interactions between clients and caseworkers.

In most instances, female caseworkers would smile, hold the door open for clients so as to allow them to pass through first, and then look out into the lobby as the clients passed through into the maze of office partitions. Male caseworkers, on the other hand, often held the door open with their back to the lobby, walked back to the offices first, and would greet clients in a matter of fact tone: "Donald Shrier? Come in." Men and women also differed significantly in the amount of eye contact with clients. Women often looked into the client's eyes, while men often provided only cursory glances (Field Notes, February 9 - March 23, 1993).

This pattern is practically photocopied in security guard/client relations. There were always three security guards on duty-- two men and a woman named Lisa. The two male officers often walked around together, always seeming to "look over" the people's heads, rarely focusing on certain individuals. Lisa however, frequently talked with clients, often turning impatience into smiles (Field Notes, March 16, 1993). She frequently looked clients in the eye and often

joked with them, much the way some waiters and waitresses do with "their regulars."

The presence of three security guards may point to a much larger issue. Namely, the clientele are not trusted. The lack of trust is also evident in the construction of the snack bar. Nearly every item that could be purchased is placed out of the customer's reach (Field Notes, February 2, 1993). Unfortunately, this assault on the clientele's dignity is only one of many.

**Professionalism and Gone on Vacation: Responses to waiting and to client/worker relations**

Thus far we have seen how the clientele have been robbed of their dignity via waiting and client/worker relations, but what are the consequences of these conditions? How do the clientele maintain their dignity in the face of a "dignity holdup"? I suggest that through what I term "professional" and "vacation" behaviors, and through specific support relationships, they resist the assaults experienced in waiting and in client/worker relations.

The clientele did not passively sit and watch their dignity wave good-bye. They resisted-- they fought back. Whether they succeeded or not is difficult to ascertain, but the struggle continues nevertheless. I have divided the clientele's struggle into two coping/resistance strategies: professional and vacation behaviors. These strategies suggest that the clientele have internalized derivations of their social order:

> Cumulative exposure to certain social conditions instills in individuals an ensemble of durable and transposable dispositions that internalize the necessities of the extant social environment, inscribing inside the organism the patterned inertia and constraints of external reality...An adequate science of society must encompass both objective regularities and the process of internalization of objectivity whereby the transindividual, unconscious principles of (di)vision that agents engage in their practice are constituted (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 12-13).

As my data indicate, clients take action in three main forms: in their attire, language, and waiting behavior (Field Notes, February 2 - April 2, 1993). Though clothing and language are observed within the context of waiting, I have separated them for ease of analysis.

**Attire and Language**

My stereotype of what people "on assistance" looked and dressed like was under assault from observation day number one (Field Notes, February 2, 1993). However, it took a month of observing before I noticed that outside of the lobby doors, the DSS clientele could *not* be identified by their clothing:

> It just struck me...that I would not be able to identify DSS clientele outside of this lobby. They look like your average person-- whatever that ambiguous term may mean. They are a diverse group who don't dress as if they are "poor" or in need of assistance. Some look a little disheveled or have trouble talking, but they are in the minority here (Field Notes, February 22, 1993).

It is also interesting to note that my stereotype of what an attractive woman looked like had always excluded women who were "poor" or "lower class." I embarrassingly noted this:

> ...I must confess something. I have realized, for the first time, that my stereotype of what an attractive woman looked like has always excluded women who were "below" middle class. I have been surprised, so many times, to see many attractive women here at DSS. This should not surprise me at all, but this illustrates how my social location has really formed my idea of where an attractive woman is to be found, and what she probably "should" look like (Field Notes, March 9, 1993).

Even though clients could not be identified by their clothing outside of the lobby, they could be characterized when inside of the lobby. They could be categorized as either a "professional" dresser or as a casual dresser, a "vacationer." Some clients may have been resisting the unprofessional setting (i.e. rubber made chairs, collapsible tables, lengthy waiting, etc.) by acting professional, by responding in ways contrary to the perceived expectations of others (their caseworkers). Others dressed as if they were on vacation-- sweats, jeans, warm-up suits, etc.

Young African American women (early twenties), undoubtedly, were the most professionally dressed group in the lobby. New flats, coordinated with a print dress, suit, or knit sweater, and matching gold jewelry were favorite combinations. Whereas young black women tended to dress professionally, white men tended to carry the accessories of a professional or else talk in a professional manner (Field Notes, February 2 - April 2, 1993). It wasn't unusual to see a white man, in general, using a leather satchel or folder of some sort to carry their applications and other DSS materials, or to see them addressing the security guards as

one would treat a fellow co-worker (Field Notes, February 22, 1993).

At times, some white men employed language indicating that they were educated and/or formerly employed in some type of professional atmosphere. For instance, in talking on the phone, some white males used a rather "learned" vocabulary. For example: "Yes, my name is Gary Simms...this is in regards to...request if we could eliminate any more...this year I've already incurred...I'm estimating about..." (Field Notes, February 22, 1993). However, I suggest that courtesy is a professional use of language of sorts, and was used by more than just white male clientele (Field Notes, February 2 - April 22, 1993). It seems that all racial-ethnic groups, to varying degrees, exhibited professionalism by often thanking case-workers for their time and assistance. The notion of ungrateful recipients does not correspond with the data I have collected (Field Notes, February 2- April 2, 1993).

All of this is not to say that the "vacationers" were impolite or never dressed in anything but sweats and T-shirts. Rather, their attire and language are exhibited in ways that are best understood within the context of waiting.

## Waiting

Rather than acting as "professionals," other clients waited in more casual ways, as if they were, so to speak, on vacation. This term is not intended to sound derogatory in

any way, but is merely used as a descriptive device that I have created, which is based on a tentative mixture of observations and personal assumptions. These clients often slouched in their chairs, spread their feet out, and blankly stared at the wall or rested their head while waiting (Field Notes, February 2 - March 23, 1993). They also dressed, as previously noted, much more casually-- and acted in ways that complimented their clothing style.

Vacationers tended to struggle with the waiting process more than professionals. That is, I contend that many of the clientele tried very hard not to act (or be) impatient. Every minute spent waiting was a minute reminding them of their inability to make it financially-- and in America, this means that "something must be wrong with you." While vacationers resisted the lengthy wait in their own ways, their fidgeting and frequent seventh inning stretches suggest that their strategies were not as successful as the professionals' methods (Field Notes, February 2 - March 23, 1993). Consequently, reinforcements were called in for help (e.g., they often napped, frequented the snack bar for refreshments, and joked around with other clientele.

Whereas "professionals" would often spend their time reading, vacationers often sat with their shoulders slumped as if they had just finished a hard day of packing and moving and were now resting with a Mystic juice or soda in hand. They often stared out the window or floated into daydream mode by staring at some part of the wall (Field Notes,

February 2 - March 23, 1993). It is important to remember, however, that these generalizations are just that-- general, and that some professionals behaved like vacationers, and vice-versa.

However, one behavior distinctly sets vacationers apart from professionals-- laughter. Vacationers tended to talk louder, draw more attention to themselves, and smiled more (Field Notes, February 22 - March 23, 1993). Acquiring an audience was not difficult in the lobby due to the room's generally quiet nature, and at times, it seemed as if some of the clients almost cultivated the attention (Field Notes, March 16, 1993). Professionals drew attention to their actions primarily through their conversations on the phone or by talking with their case worker. Both of these actions I think point to a strategy of resistance.

By drawing attention to their actions, the clients may have been trying to reclaim their dignity by regarding the lobby as a sort of "social workplace," an environment where interactions were carried out under the supervision of those who signed the paychecks. "Inequalities of attention grow out of the most fundamental forms of social inequality and must be understood partly as a feature of a society divided into classes" (Derber 1983, p. 64). By defining a space in the lobby as theirs, and acting in such a way as to maintain their dignity (i.e. professional conversation on the phone or joking with friends), the clientele worked to transform the lobby from a site where pride is pickpocketed into a room

where they could carry out their interactions without having to justify the "excessive attention" (as viewed by dominant groups) that they were acquiring (Derber 1983). This analysis, however, should be seen only as an initial attempt to understand a complex setting, and calls attention to the need for more interviews with clients.

While the professionals and vacationers resisted the waiting conditions in different ways, their divergent results (professionals seemed to be more resigned to their situation) raises an interesting question: Are professionals more accepting of their situation than vacationers because they have internalized the structural limitations inherent to bureaucracies, perceiving the bureaucratic machine as a mountain of forms, cases, and applications that cannot be successfully resisted? Power relations, like objective structures, function as dispositions and perceptions because they are also internalized (Bourdieu 1985, p. 729). Is it possible that the lobby professionals had internalized these limitations and resisted less than vacationers because of this structural deposit?

> More like a class unconsciousness than a "class consciousness" in the Marxist sense, the sense of the position occupied in social space (what Erving Goffman calls the "sense of one's place") is the practical mastery of the social structure as a whole that reveals itself through the sense of the position occupied within that structure. The categories of perception of the social world are...the product of the internalization...of the objective structures of social space. Consequently, they incline agents to accept the social world as it is, to take it for granted, rather than rebel against it...The sense of one's place, as a sense of what can or cannot "permit

> oneself," implies a tacit acceptance of one's place, a sense of limits...to be...respected or expected. And it does so all the more strongly where the conditions of existence are most rigorous and where the reality principle most vigorously asserts itself. (Hence the profound realism that generally characterizes the world view of the dominated; functioning as a sort of socially constituted instinct of observation, it can be seen as conservative only in terms of an external, and therefore normative, representation of the "objective interest" of those whom it helps to live, or survive.) (Bourdieu 1985, pp. 728-729)

If lobby professionals have indeed internalized a different "part" of the habitus, this would help to explain the diverse actions of the professionals and vacationers. Secondly, this would also support Bourdieu's assertion that the habitus is fully realized only in the context of a group's network processes.

**Relationships**

Some forms of resistance cannot be subsumed under professional or vacation behavior. Namely, client relationships (with each other and with their families) transcend the categories I have created. I will focus on two relations that deserve special mention.

It was observed that the majority of men do not accompany their wives to DSS (Field Notes, February 2 - April 2, 1993). Ms. Paterson, the DSS specialist, supported this:

> ...usually the dad doesn't want to come, and I think for more of the reasons that we just talked about [lack of pride, low self-esteem] a few minutes ago. It's like, you know, he can't support the family, it's a matter of dignity (Field Notes, April, 1993).

However, if they did come, it was clear that they'd rather be somewhere (anywhere) else. In accompanying their wives, men (vacationers and professionals alike) tended to distance themselves from the entire DSS process. For instance, men frequently watched the kids or simply waited while their wife met with the case worker or picked up their check (Field Notes, February 2 - April 2, 1993). Their actions seem to speak to the discomfort they felt in the lobby. Their actions seemed to say, "Yeah, I'll come and do this for the wife. I have better things to do, but I'll come anyway." Adopting this approach, I contend, helped them to resist the assault on their dignity as men who are expected to support their families. Despite the growing acceptance of women as bread winners, I think it is fair to say that men, in general, are still expected to bring home the big paycheck. This expectation places a significant amount of pressure on men to provide for their dependents. Consequently, I suggest that sitting in the lobby was a constant reminder to men that something "was wrong with them" because "they couldn't even support their own family."

It wasn't until the end of my study that I awakened to another significant relationship that was present in the lobby the entire time-- mother/daughter (new mom) relationships. This kind of relationship consists of a mom (who frequently is in her late thirties to late forties) who comes to DSS with her daughter (often in her late teens or early twenties) who now has a child or two of her own (Field

Notes, March 23 - April 2, 1993). Though I have few notes on this relationship, I can now see that this is one of the most consistent "support" relationships at DSS. The mothers often play with and watch the children while their daughter waits in line. Perhaps this relationship helps to fill the void left by men too embarrassed to go to DSS with their wives, or may just fill the gap left by men long since gone. This pattern may also suggest that extended family networks (e.g. child care) are utilized to a fairly significant extent by people of lower socio-economic status or that the pattern of "older babies having babies" is inter-generational (M. McCoy, personal communication, April 7, 1993).

It is difficult to tell whether these strategies effectively bent the hoses that operated to siphon their dignity. I have mentioned those cases where I felt success was achieved. However, at times it was clear that the professional act was "stretched". For instance, one man's response simply gave it away:

> A white male, 33 [years old]...is talking on the phone [inside extension phone used to contact case workers from within the building], "Under ADA, under President Bush, under ex-President Bush...I...am entitled...section...code...I'll drag you into court and sue you for $3.5 billion (Field Notes, February 16, 1993).

Instances such as this were rare. For the most part, professional and vacation behavior seemed to succeed to an appreciable extent, relieving at least some of the loss incurred from having one's dignity continually sapped.

**Data Quality**

I previously compared participant-observation to a two-lane highway, and as with all highways, the yellow lines do not always prevent vehicles from driving over into the oncoming lane. There were times when I wanted to be selective and only observe and record behaviors that confirmed my hypotheses and hunches. I resisted this impulse, and in fact, spent an entire scheduled observation trying to undermine my hypotheses (Strauss 1991; Field Notes, March 16, 1993). Nevertheless, it was a constant struggle to be true to what my eyes saw. After seeing a client return from the snack bar with two bags of Cheetos and two Mystic Juices, I recorded the tension I felt:

> I was hesitant to write that down...because that kind of observation is what some people point to and say, "See, they don't know how to save; it's the way they are [referring to black culture, or to poor culture]." I must report what I see. I must guard against selective observation (Field Notes, March 23, 1993).

All of this is not to say that I wasn't biased or selective--all it says is that I tried. As hinted earlier, I was, and still am, very sympathetic to the needs of poor people and those on assistance-- even more now. I have tried to present the lobby as the clients see it (Becker 1970). Whether I succeeded or not, I don't know-- only they can say. This question of evaluation points to the need for more interviews with clients. Undoubtedly, my investigation would have been sharpened if more time would have been spent interviewing and just getting to know the clients. However, I am confident

that the dominated perspective presents a view of reality that sharply differs from one derived from those who dominate. Somehow turning the container of reality on its head (from my perspective as a young, white male) makes everything that isn't glued to the bottom fall out. We then get to look at and analyze the pieces that don't fit, that don't stick. I hope this study has helped to put some of them together.

## CONCLUSION

Considering the time limitations of this study, the conclusions drawn seem reasonable and grounded in the data I have collected. However, I regret that my hypotheses are not established in more weeks of observations, and especially in client interviews. Secondly, throughout the course of this inquiry I have often felt that my analysis would have been enhanced had I been more familiar with topics in micro sociology (e.g. Sheff 1979). More familiarity with this literature, I think, would have enhanced my analysis of the lobby.

However, as noted in the introduction, this has been an exercise in observation by emphasizing social regularities, reflexive observations, and the need for incorporating research from a variety of standpoints. By using Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field (for the purpose of highlighting social regularities), it is hoped that an

appreciation for observations specially attuned to social regularities has been cultivated.

Taking the emphases of this paper as a cue, it should be clear that more research, conducted from a variety of standpoints, is needed. Specifically, future research in this area (be it more methodological or descriptive) could build upon this exploration by conducting more interviews, particularly with clients. Secondly, future analyses may want to avoid the dichotomies I have used, primarily because they may fail to capture the experiences of the case-workers. That is, while the case-workers may "oppress" their clients in terms of making them wait, they too may be "oppressed" by the same large bureaucracy. More interviews with case-workers may support this hypothesis.

It is hoped that this exploration will enhance the future observations of field workers, regardless of their settings or specific interests. I also hope that this investigation has developed some promising leads that can be interpreted within Bourdieu's theoretical framework. While the complexity of social relations makes it difficult to theorize about the their interconnectedness, if this study has succeeded in sensitizing the reader to these relations through the observation techniques used in this investigation, then it has realized the modest goal of helping field researchers to better analyze the processes and questions that they will inevitably face.

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