"Flushing" Out Sociology: Using the Urinal Game and other Bathroom Customs to Teach the Sociological Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Teaching the sociological perspective to individuals new to the discipline can be challenging. As such, numerous pedagogical techniques abound. Most common are methods of lecture and class discussion, which can effectively illuminate sociological concepts. However, the use of "interactive exercises" can also be a valuable way by which to underscore the connection between individual actions and social structure. So stated, this paper identifies a number of "everyday" participatory exercises designed to spur classroom interaction and highlight core sociological concepts. Specifically, I use interactional scenarios within the typical American men's public restroom to emphasize: 1) that individual actions, even those that exist in the mundane, are influenced by larger social-cultural forces; and 2) that a number of core sociological concepts can be found and explored in a place generally ignored or taken for granted.

Introduction

Teaching the sociological perspective to individuals new to the discipline can be challenging. As such, numerous pedagogical techniques abound. Most common are methods of lecture and class discussion, which can effectively illuminate sociological concepts. However, as Burns (2003:110) notes, "conveying sociological insight is not simply an intellectual process. Getting into the lived experience of students seems a better way to trigger thinking processes..." Stated differently, the use of "active learning exercises" can be a valuable way by which to underscore the connection between individual actions and social structure (Duffy, 1995). In addition, active learning exercises may contribute to the overall academic environment by increasing classroom participation as well as the retention of key concepts (Burton, 1988; Ahlkvist, 1994; Misra, 2000; Burns, 2003).

So stated, this paper identifies a number of everyday participatory exercises designed to spur classroom interaction and highlight core sociological concepts. Specifically, I use interactional scenarios within the typical American men's public restroom to emphasize: 1) that individual actions, even those that exist in the mundane, are influenced by larger social-cultural forces; and 2) that a number of core sociological concepts can be found and explored in a place generally ignored or taken for granted.

Finding Sociology in everyday places: a review

Any number of local settings and/or scenarios may be analyzed to reflect the sociological imagination. For example, Garfinkel (1967) routinely revealed how everyday activities, once "rediscovered," exposed structural features (e.g., cultural beliefs, organizational norms). Instances include the scrutiny of casual conversation for codes of socialization; stranger engagement and bargaining techniques as interactional exposés; and games of tick-tac-toe as well as personal space violations for normative understandings (Garfinkel, 1967: Chapters 2&3).

Works that are more recent include the "rules" of walking (Ryave and Schenkein, 1974), the interpretative differences between spit and saliva (Brouille and Turner, 1992), and the "proper" way to hang toilet paper (Burns, 2003:110). Beyond these innovative forms, scholars have further heightened students' understandings of sociology by integrating elements of popular culture. Articles in this vein include the use of fiction (Sullivan, 1982; Hendershott, 1993; Cosbey, 1997), music (Martinez, 1994; Ahlkvist, 1999, 2001), film (Demerath, 1981; Burton, 1988; Dressel, 1990; Prescosolido, 1990; Leblanc, 1997, Misra, 2000), cartoons and comic books (Hall and Lucal, 1999; Scanlan and Feinberg, 2000), board games (Jessup, 2001; Ender, 2004), jokes and comedic satire (Davidson, 1987; Reeves, 1996), and personal stories (Jacobs, 1996) to clarify the sociological imagination.

The scholastic interpretation of the everyday fosters active learning by encouraging students to become "living users" of knowledge rather than passive recipients (Pescosolido, 1990). Indeed, it may be argued that the said techniques oblige students to "put into play" sociological understandings as they carry out their everyday dealings.

The first lecture: excusing oneself in the bathroom

During the first day of lecture in Introductory Sociology, I ask students to participate in an in-class exercise adapted from a popular Internet game known as *The Urinal Game*©[1]. The reason I use of this exercise so early in the semester is three fold. First, the game is a nice way to break the ice with classroom members. I can socialize with students in a relaxed manner and them with me. Second, such an activity encourages the construction of a classroom community. By this, I mean the game helps to initiate a standing norm of classroom interaction and participation. Third, the exercise, when complete, allows the class to reflect upon numerous sociological concepts as well as the discipline itself.

Which urinal do I use?

With the opening lecture, I introduce the class to the basic orientation of sociology -- the study of external dynamics on human behavior. However, rather than start with a definition, I tell the class that sociology may be found in the restroom. Following the typical array of laughter and surprise, I next invite participation in *the urinal game* to relay that grounding orientation. Moving to the chalkboard, I begin by drawing a bathroom entry door and three large urinals:

Entry Door	Urinal 1.	Urinal 2.	Urinal 3.
[]	0	0	0

Following this, I tell the students that they will be playing a game to test their knowledge of men's room etiquette in the typical American public restroom. Further, I ask students to assume an enculturation or cultural transmission of etiquette based on the norms of interaction for heterosexual American males in public restrooms. In the end I state, "You will be presented several scenarios from which you must select the proper urinal to use."

Scenario 1:

A man enters an empty restroom. Which of the following urinals does the man use?

[] 0 0 0

In this scenario I often play the part of the man in need of a bathroom break. I emphasize the act of "restroom going" by visually entering an imaginary door and facing (with my back to students) the chosen urinal. I feel that such "goofs" help form the classroom community mentioned earlier. Upon entering, I ask students to direct me to the "correct" urinal.

Scenario 1 – traditional correct answer:

[] 0 0 X

Students often direct me to the far left urinal (the one marked with an X). When queried why they direct me to this particular urinal, students respond that the far left urinal provides the most distance between the door and the individual at the urinal. "It is part of the culture of American men's restrooms," a student argued. "Men don't like to give the impression that they are looking at or initiating contact with other men," another reported. "They (men) are supposed to come in, stare at the wall, do their business, and leave." Indeed, this is supported by a recent article in *Men's Health* (2006:11) which reports:

> Public restrooms are a breeding ground for nasty germs... So what can you do to minimize your risk? Simple: just use he toilet closest to the restroom door! A study of 51 public restrooms found that toilets [closest to the door] had the lowest bacteria levels. The reason: most people want privacy, and usually pass on the first toilet heading for the one further in...

But this said, what happens if students pick the "wrong" urinal? With respect to this activity I argue that there is no wrong urinal as all picks can be used to foster discussion. If students pick the middle or left urinal, the instructor can simply query this as well. Indeed, "nontraditional" answers can bring up interesting perspectives for debate and should not be ignored. For example a male student once stated, "If I really have to go, and I mean about to pee my pants, I'll go to whatever urinal is open. I'd rather violate the bathroom rule so I don't have to walk around with a wet stain on my pants." If these situations arise the instructor may use such answers to call attention the constructed nature of normative hierarchies

Nontraditional answers to the scenarios are not an unlikely occurrence during this activity as I do find norm violators from time to time. One student, for instance, stated that he was too lazy to walk to the far end. In such situations the instructor may highlight the concept of deviance and/or acknowledge the

individual's act, discuss it, and then query the remaining students to see if a trend emerges.

Finally, students have been known to highlight bathroom norms that differ from our setting and which are embedded in "Non-Western" cultures, or in situations that differ from the one highlighted here (e.g., open showers in sports locker rooms, urinal troughs in bars and pubs). The instructor may feel free to discuss these scenarios as she or he wishes, but in the end, one must remember that the game is built around the assumption of heterosexual interactions of American males in public restrooms with urinals, and is specific to this construction.

Indeed, the instructor planning to use this exercise needs to be aware of the various outcomes and not assume that all students will fall into the expected patterns, With all of this in mind however, and regardless of the various outcomes, the game is still a valuable form through which to create classroom participation and highlight specific sociological concepts.

Scenario 2:

In this scenario a man enters a restroom but finds it occupied with an individual at the far left urinal. Which of the following urinals does the man use now?

[] 0 0 (I)

In this scenario I ask for a student volunteer to play the role of the individual at the far most right urinal (identified by the symbol (I)). My calling for student participation is simply another technique of student engagement and community building. In the past, I have freely picked both male and female students to perform these roles. I do, however, enjoy picking male students as they traditionally play the role to its fullest. They commonly stare straight ahead (that is, pick a spot on the wall just above the urinal) and often fail to move from that position. Such actions of "immobility" work to my advantage as I am able to reference this "routine behavior" in later discussions about gender and normative forces in the bathroom.

Scenario 2 – traditional correct answer:

[] X 0 (I)

Though it places me right next to the door, the correct answer is the urinal at the far left (identified again with an X) as it gives maximum distance between the student and me. "But what about the problem of the door," I question. "Is this not a contradiction of the first scenario?" One individual responded:

You've got no choice. You have to give yourself space between you and some other dude; otherwise people will think there is something wrong with you… as to the door? You got to do what ya got to do. You just hope no one else comes in.

In a discussion like this I am afforded the opportunity to highlight norms of gendered interaction in the bathroom. I ask the class questions like: Is it ok for men to talk to each other in the bathroom? Why or why not? How does this differ from interactional opportunities in a women's restroom? How does this differ from interactional settings, for both men and women, in non-bathroom settings?

From these questions I am able to make connections between individual actions and social structure. By highlighting norms of the bathroom, and by querying their existence, students begin to identify many origins of behavior in the larger social forces of culture and socialization.

Scenario 3:

In our final scenario, a man enters a restroom occupied by an individual at the far left and far right urinal. What does the man do now?
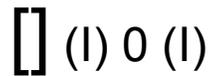
[] (I) 0 (I)

I again employ a student volunteer to play the individual at the far left urinal. He or she joins the aforementioned student already situated at the far right urinal (identified by (I)). By asking for additional student participation the norm of student interaction is strengthened and reinforced. Further, this action gives the students a living visual of the "troubling" scenario that falls before them.

Scenario 3 – Correct Answer:

The reader may note that I no longer ask which urinal the man uses. Instead the question reads, "What does the man do now?" Given the unique nature of the gendered norms uncovered in scenarios one and two, the only "correct answer" is as one student responded: "Walk out, wait till someone leaves, and then go back in."

Though students may give answers different than the one noted above, the ending that is true to the Internet version of *The Urinal Game* is to "walk out, wait till someone leaves, and then go back in." Indeed, this ending is designed to highlight the power a society has in structuring the behavioral expectations of its members, as well as close the game in a playful and humorous manner. However, if other answers arise, the instructor may query those in manners similar to the scenarios previously noted.

Flushing out the themes

At the end of the game I thank the students for their participation and ask them to reflect on these routine but strange interactions. I begin by asking, "What do these social encounters tell us about ourselves and our society?" In reply, students identify unwritten rules, as well as the "fluidity" of those rules; they highlight gender differences and come to realize that the details of human life are often built within the larger features of society.

Norms: the unwritten rules of society

"What are the expectations of behavior in a men's public restroom?" After some deliberation, and with a more-or-less collective voice, the students agree that, "Men are expected to do their business quietly, quickly, and independently." With this, I take a brief departure from the "bathroom" and ask students to reflect upon a number of expectations in various settings (e.g., what are the expectations of behavior in a college classroom... in a football game... on a sidewalk?). In their answers I tell students that they are referencing social norms, or shared standards regarding proper and improper social conduct. Norms are the "do's and don'ts that societies attempt to instill in their members," (Sanderson, 1999:45).

"But why have norms," I inquire next. "What do they do for us?" Typically, the discussion turns to a conversation of rules and the patterning of social life. "Without rules we have chaos," one student expressed. Indeed, norms are important to people because they regularize and standardize behavior and thereby create order and predictability. Without norms, "one would not be able to anticipate the behavior of others and thus, not organize one's own behavior" (Bradshaw, Healey and Smith, 2001:128).

Subsequent to establishing the importance of norms, I take the class back to the men's restroom and question, "If norms standardize behavior, then why are men's restroom norms so different from men's behavioral norms in non-bathroom settings?"

Socialization: learning social norms and experiencing culture

"I don't think guy's actions outside the bathroom are all that different than inside the bathroom," stated a female student. "They try to act all tough and independent outside the bathroom too." At this point in the exercise, I introduce the idea of socialization and explore student perceptions of gender differences inside and outside the restroom. I often ask, "Why do men act this way?"

In response, students tend to name overarching stereotypes and expectations about gendered behavior (i.e., men are independent, woman are clingy). With this in mind, the goal of the game is not to entrench gender stereotypes but to

bracket student responses into workable categories. Charon (2005:20-23) states:

> The whole purpose of social science is to achieve accurate categorizations and generalizations about human beings...The problem for almost all of us, however, is that many of our generalizations are not carefully arrived at... too often we create categories of condemnation or praise.

Thus, while the urinal game can be a fun exercise for students, it is often prudent to remind them that our categories of discussion are merely talking points and not universal features.

This being said, students do identify differences between men and women. From a sociological perspective, these differences are due in part to socialization -- the process of learning social norms through interaction, communication, and formal instruction (Bradshaw, Healey and Smith, 2001:134). Additionally, the norms men learn are generally based on the axioms of independence, physical strength, shame avoidance, and emotional absence (Pollack, 1998), while the norms women learn are typically structured within ideas of community and connectedness (Edward and Hamilton, 2004).

If we relate these axioms to the urinal game we can make suppositions between individual actions and the nature of gender socialization in our society. For instance, one can highlight the independent way by which men visit and use the restroom, and the stoic manner by which boys are taught to be "sturdy oaks...stable, and independent" (Pollack, 1998 in Cargan and Ballantine, 2003:52). Further, it may be suggested that men are socialized into a norm of hyper-heterosexuality-- an avoidance of behaviors typically associated with the "feminine" and/or "non-heterosexual male" (Faludi, 1999).

Hence, one can make the case that men avoid interactions in the bathroom so as not to leave others suspicious of their sexuality ... or of their sexual prowess. Faludi (1999) argues:

> [Our] culture reshapes [a boy's] most basic sense of manhood by telling him that masculinity is not drawn from inner resources... but from a culture of ornament... manhood as body... flexed biceps and Viagra...(adapted from Charon, 2005:192).

Referencing Faludi's (1999) cultural analysis, one could also argue that men shun restroom interactions so as to avoid the potential "shame" another's eye might inflict for not measuring up to a constructed conception of masculine worth.

Such explanations may be explored by the instructor as she or he sees fit, but common to them all is the connection between social forces and individual behavior. Indeed, it may be argued that our behaviors are crafted within the "common understandings" (otherwise known as "culture") forged by socialization (Becker, 1982).

Bringing the sociological perspective home: men's worlds and women's worlds

Seeking to establish the connection between bathroom behavior and external social forces (e.g., socialization and culture), I ask the students to flip the gendered scenario: "What are the gendered interactions in a women's public restroom?"Students often joke that women use the restroom as a social event. "Women go to the restroom in 'packs,'" one student said. "Yeah," another responded. "It's perfectly acceptable for a woman to ask another [woman] to go to the bathroom, but you'll never see a man grab another man by the arm and say, 'Hey come on I need to talk to you in the restroom.'" [2]

Indeed, I tell the students, it may be argued that men and women attend to different socialization experiences, thus making their interactions--in and out of the bathroom--essentially cross-cultural actions (Maltz & Borker, 1982; Tannen, 1990, 1994, Risman, 1998). As Edward and Hamilton (2004:1) explains:

> Whereas boys are socialized to express dominance and independence (power and status) in social interaction; [Traditional and/or stereotypical gender expectations] hold the feminine role within communal qualities that include inclusion, support, and solidarity.

In the end, students are able to make connections between the taken for granted way that males and females act in the restroom and the structured elements of culture and gender socialization. I tell my students that a sociological examination of the bathroom means recognizing and analyzing the central role that culture, socialization, and gender play in our lives.

A final point: multiple meanings, the "social construction" of reality, and lessons learned

In the final act of the Urinal Game, I ask my students to reflect on the ways by which we construct meaning and derive understanding. Like all actions, the "things we do in the bathroom" are understood only in a social environment. Stated in another manner, any given action must be interpreted within its particular cultural, historical, and situational backdrop. For example, the behavioral norms in a public restroom might contrast substantiality from settings where structural dynamics override modestly and privacy (e.g., a jail cell, a sports locker room, a bar/pub).

To bring this point home, I identify the fluid nature of other "bathroom-like" customs. For instance, I tell students that urinating at a urinal will not get one arrested, but doing so in a public alley might. Using another illustration, the unzipping of one's pants in a public restroom is a general norm. But vary the social context and one varies also the meaning and symbolic understanding of

unzipping one's pants. I often ask the students to consider alternative scenarios: Is the individual in their partner's bedroom? Are they at the doctor's office? Or, is the individual at a childhood playground?

In the end, students find that "meanings" and "rules of conduct" differ immensely in their specific contexts. Further, they are introduced to the underlying idea that any given "reality" is a collection of beliefs and expectations bound by time, space, and location (Berger, 1967). I tell the students that the ability to analyze these "realities" from multiple points of view and from their specific social contexts is the acquisition of a sociological imagination. It is the willingness to look beyond the taken for granted ways by which we generally explain human behavior and make inferences to its genesis in the larger social processes that surround us (Mills, 1959).

SUMMARY

The Urinal Game, as a classroom exercise, assists me in achieving several goals at the beginning the semester. First, by use of the game I am able to "break the ice" with the class in a relaxed manner. This helps to quell not only my anxiety in starting a new term with unknown faces, but it seems to alleviate some of the students' apprehensions as well. Second, the game establishes a rapport with all parties involved. The students get to interact with each other and their instructor all while structuring a norm of academic investment and participation. Third, the exercise allows the class to reflect upon numerous sociological concepts as well as the idea of sociology itself. Indeed, as an active learning exercise students are obliged to "put into play" sociological understandings as they carry out their everyday dealings. In summary, I argue that the Urinal Game helps students capture the centrality of sociology (that is, the impact of larger external social forces on individual behavior) in a place often overlooked for sociological insight.

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END NOTES

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[1] *The Urinal Game* is created and licensed by CleverMedia. CleverMedia designs, develops and publishes games and multimedia applications. They may be found on the World Wide Web at: www.clevermedia.com.

[2] One student noted that the communal way by which women go to the bathroom could also be considered a safety issue that most men don't think about –or don't have to worry about.