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Operationalizing Avoidance Behavior: Substantiating the Presence of Conflict in an Alpine Community

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Vorbemerkung der Redaktion:

Gene Muehlbauer, während langer Zeit Assistant Professor für Soziologie und Anthropologie am Lake Forest College in Illinois/USA, hat an der Wisconsin-Milwaukee Universität studiert und bei James Silverberg promoviert[1]. Zusammen mit anderen Forschern (etwa Robert Netting, John Friedl, Daniela Weinberg und Ellen Wiegandt) gehört er zu jener jüngeren Generation von amerikanischen Ethnologen, die sich im Laufe der vergangenen Jahre immer wieder mit den Problemen unserer alpinen Kulturen beschäftigt haben[2]. Muehlbauer hielt sich verschiedentlich im Wallis auf, um in einer kleinen Berggemeinde Feldforschung zu betreiben[3]. Die Gemeinde selbst ist hier mit Rücksicht auf ihre Bewohner nicht näher gekennzeichnet, doch fällt dies nicht ins Gewicht – es geht um anderes. Der Titel der nachfolgenden Studie nimmt die doppelte Absicht des Forschers klar vorweg: Thematisch berührt sie den intimen Bereich innerkommunaler Konflikte, deren Äusserungen vorwiegend unter dem Aspekt der methodischen Bewältigung und Bedeutung dargestellt werden.

Muehlbauer beobachtete während Wochen aus versteckter Position, wie sich die Dorfbewohner im einzelnen verhalten, wenn sie sich auf dem Hauptplatz begegnen oder meiden. Zur Protokollierung der minutiös beobachteten Vorgänge und Verhaltensäusserungen bediente er sich eines speziellen methodischen Verfahrens, welches in der amerikanischen Kulturanthropologie als sog. *actonic ethnography* (nonverbales Verhalten im weitesten Sinn) bekannt geworden ist[4]. Das alltägliche Dorfplatzgeschehen erscheint hierin als eine komplizierte Handlungsszenerie, deren Struktur durch die Akteure *(actors)* und deren beobachtbaren Verhaltensäusserungen bestimmt wird, die sich in grössere und kleinere Handlungseinheiten *(scenes, idioscenes)* analytisch zerlegen lassen.

Muehlbauer zeigt in einfacher Form, welchen Schwierigkeiten sich ein Ethnologe aussetzt, der nichtsprachliche Begegnungsmuster und Meidungen (z.B. Blickwechsel, Blick- und Körperabwendungen, Blickfixierung, Vorhalten von Gegenständen usw.) beobachten, aufzeichnen und interpretieren will. Doch liest sich sein Bericht nicht nur als Beispiel einer visuellen Beobachtungstechnik, die für Aufzeichnung und Darstellung (vgl. *data-sheet*) mit Bleistift und Papier auskommt. Die Beobachtung des Meidungsverhaltens *(avoidance behavior)* ist nicht wissenschaftlicher Selbstzweck, sondern interessiert vor allem deshalb, weil sie in das auch für die Volkskunde(!) relevante Spannungsfeld zwischen «*real*» und «*ideal culture*» hineinführt und dort genauer nach vorgegebenem, erwartetem und tatsächlichem kulturellem Verhalten fragt[5].

Im vorliegenden Beispiel machte die Analyse eine Diskrepanz zwischen «real» und «ideal culture» offensichtlich: Die Frage, ob es allfällige traditionelle Spannungen zwischen Familien und Parteiungen gäbe, wurde von den Dorfbewohnern verneint, herabgespielt oder verharmlost, doch das tatsächliche Meidungsverhalten (als beobachtbare Verhaltensäusserung) drückte in objektiver Form das Gegenteil aus. Eine spätere, hier nicht ausgeführte Identifizierung der Akteure erwies nämlich deutlich, dass die Meidungen nicht zufällig waren, sondern zwischen Angehörigen ganz bestimmter Gruppen und Parteiungen stattfanden. Der Anteil der registrierten Meidungen betrug 7,5 % und mag auf den ersten Blick gering erscheinen, doch ist er bedeutungsvoll, weil er einen für den fremden Ethnologen

verbal kaum fassbaren dörflichen Antagonismus ausdrückt. Auch wenn die hier dargestellte Methode *(actonic research)* nur einen kleinen Ausschnitt der realen Kultur aufzudecken vermochte, bewies sie gerade da ihre Tauglichkeit. Und ausserdem: Die Resultate regen an, in der Gemeindeforschung vielleicht vermehrt über die Vitalität von verdeckten Konflikten und Spannungen nachzudenken.

Ueli Gyr

A great deal of concern exists in anthropology, and in the social sciences generally, with the relationship between the questions a researcher asks, the answers he gets, and the ethnographic reality which may or may not be captured by this process of verbal elicitation. In anthropology, the classic case of confusion resulting from this methodological problem is, of course, Tepoztlan (Redfield, 1930; Lewis, 1951; Levy, 1968; McGoodwin, 1978). While questions about how an informant feels may always pose difficulties for social scientists, questions about what an informant does can be verified through observation. Then what remains to be overcome is subjectivity and inaccuracy in observational techniques. Our goal in this paper is to report on a technique which attempts to systematically observe and record behavior in a manner which minimizes observer subjectivity and inaccurary and allows for cross-cultural comparison.

In the course of a 1974–75 ethnographic study of economic and social change in a rural Alpine community in the Swiss canton of Valais, we encountered what appeared to be a discrepancy between «*ideal*» and «*real*» *culture*. While the majority of our informants denied or played down the presence of extreme factionalism in social and political life in the commune, we had discovered various kinds of evidence to the contrary. For example, we occasionally observed people avoiding each other in various ways as they walked through the village, leading us to hypothesize that this behavior may be in some way related to antagonistic feelings and attitudes between the two local political parties. We decided that it would be interesting and perhaps fruitful to systematically observe such «*avoidance*» *behavior* in order to check its regularity of occurrence, and to determine who the participants were; that is, if the majority of avoidance behavior took place between rather than within political parties.

Due to the advantageous location of our apartment above the main thoroughfare of the central village cluster of the commune, observation on a regular basis was possible. Furthermore, because of various physical factors such as the height of the window above the street, the opaqueness of the curtains from a distance, etc., we had the opportunity to make our observations completely unobtrusively. It was

possible to observe people below us on the paved street, which is about 15 meters wide, flanked by our building on one side and the cemetery and the schoolyard on the other. Activity on this stretch is primarily as follows: movement to and from the stores located 100 m to our left and 200 m to our right as we looked over the street, movement to and from the church, cemetery, or school house across the street from us, or movement through the village, since, as we said, this paved street is the main route through the center of the village.

Beyond these necessary tactical considerations, we wanted to make our observations as systematic and comparable as possible, given the time limitations imposed on us by our involvement with other kinds of data collecting. Inspired by Professor Marvin Harris' book «The Nature of Cultural Things», and by the related work of Professor James Silverberg and his students at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, we decided to use the technique of *actonic analysis* for the observation, recording, and later analysis of avoidance behavior. By selecting this method, we hoped to operationalize the concept of avoidance behavior, thus validating the comparisons of various incidents of such behavior over time, as well as in potential cross-cultural comparison. We also wanted to find out if the actonic approach would provide a feasible method of observation, given a limited number of observers working without motion picture or video tape equipment.

We embarked upon a two week period of exploratory observation. During the first week we had three primary goals: to practice using the techniques of observation and recording, given the equipment we had available; to develop a data language along the lines that Harris suggests in his book: to make some initial attempts at summarizing or condensing the data, and at low level analysis, in order to provide feedback to the data collecting process.

Since there were only two people observing, we normally limited our observations to two-adult-actor idioscenes, each observer concentrating on one of the actors. A *scene*, in Harris' terminology, is the behavior which occurs from the time the first actor enters an observation area until the last actor leaves. An *idioscene* is a specific occurrence of a scene. Because we were interested in adult behavior, we did not consider scenes including child-actors, although we considered children in some cases as actone objects. We should note here that in Harris' terminology an «*actone*» is among other things, the smallest behavioral unit considered useful for observational purposes. An «*actone object*» is an object manipulated in some way as a result of the actones emitted by the actors. While much behavior, some of it

obviously avoidance, took place in multi-actor scenes of more than two-adult-actors, we found it necessary to eliminate such behavior for comparative purposes. When we did occasionally try to record scenes with more than two-adult-actors, it was difficult to tell towards whom behavior was directed (or away from whom in the case of avoidance).

The process of observing and initially recording idioscenes was perfected relatively quickly. As technical devices we had a tape recorder, which we both used at the same time – as we will explain in a moment – and a notebook and pencil. One of us spoke our observations of the idio-actones of the actor he had to observe into the tape recorder, while the other wrote observations on the note paper, in a shorthand developed through experience with the data language and the nature of behavior in our field of vision. Because we were interested in the time of the idio-actones emitted by an actor relative to the time of those emitted by the other actor, as well as their locations in space at such times, we developed a system whereby we were able to note these facts during observation. The observer who wrote his observations numbered the idio-actones as they occurred. He then called out the number of the actones as he recorded them, this signal being picked up on the tape recorder, thereby placing it within the flow of the reported behavior of the other actor. This number corresponded to numerals listed on the note pad next to which the corresponding behavior and the place indicator were recorded.

We found that the behavior emitted beneath our window was relatively simple – in terms of number of kinds of actones we observed, as well as number of actones per scene. Because of this behavioral simplicity, we were usually able to note and record our observations fairly completely at the actonic level. It was important that we could do this, because the behavior we term avoidance often involved only a few actones on the part of one or both actors. The level of behavior we considered actonic level was on the «macro level» as described by Harris. For example, we considered grosser head movements and the direction of the movements as important and observable behavior at the actonic level, but such movements as the twitching of an eyelid were not deemed important. Our actones varied a bit from Harris' in that we did not require an observable environmental effect as a necessary condition for the occurence of an actone.

During this period we also discovered several problems, the worst of which were climatological. For example, when it rained, people carried umbrellas, making it difficult to observe their behavior. Also, when the sun shone directly on the windows, it was very difficult to

see through them. Another problem was that occasionally actones would occur in such quick succession that we had to report behavior at a level of generalization somewhat above that which we had intended. Generally speaking, however, these problems were not greatly significant over the entire project.

In our efforts to develop a data language, we utilized a terminology which, although based on vernacular English, was as precise in our usage as we could make it. To a great extent it was adapted to the physical features of the area under observation. Direction of movement, for example, was expressed in terms of the arbitrary parameters which we had imposed on our viewing area. Thus our use of the cardinal direction, North, meant in the direction of the side of the street on which we were located. South meant in the direction of the side of the street opposite our viewing post; East, uphill and to our left as we looked out our window; West, downhill, and to our right as we looked out our window. Northeast, Southeast, Northwest, and Southwest were the most precise variations of the cardinal directions possible given our mode of observation.

Following Harris, words such as «run» and «walk» indicated «total body actone». Terms such as «turn» and «lift» were followed by reference to that part of the body involved, as in «turn upper torso» or «lift left arm». Actone objects, (for example, baskets, umbrellas, etc.) retained their vernacular nomenclature. What was most important, and what was most time consuming, was the necessary emphasis on consistency in usage of the selected terminology, between us as two distinct observers, and by both of us through time. Proficiency in use of the data language involved continual revision at first, as well as constant practice. Our efforts resulted in the establishment of a notebook containing the final agreed upon data language.

During this first week we also began the process of summarizing or condensing our data. We utilized a method, similar to that proposed by Harris, of recording the data in a form useful for later analysis. We added a technique to show time and place of behavior occurrence (see *Data Sheet*).

The second week of observation was devoted to further practice and refinement of techniques, as well as to defining «*avoidance behavior*» and identifying the actors. Because, for reasons of time and interest, we intended to concentrate on avoidance behavior, to the relative exclusion of other kinds of behavior, we wanted to establish an operational definition of avoidance. We also wanted to contrast avoidance, as part of the defining process, with the broader range of behavior occurring

in our zone of observation. We, therefore, set out to note and roughly record all two-adult-actor scenes occurring during this period of observation – amounting to about 20 hours, and representing 176 idioscenes. A range of behavior was established which included, on a tentative continuum from non-avoidance to avoidance as follows: talking-laughing by both actors for 10 minutes, to nods by both actors, to placing an object between head/body and another actor.

Avoidance behavior took two major forms. The most frequently occurring form was for one or both actors to turn their heads toward some aspect of the environment other than the other actor, until the two actors had passed each other. We term this part of the environment an actone object, somewhat varying from Harris' usage, but conforming to our need. The second form of avoidance is for one actor to place an object between his or her head or body, and the head or body of the other actor. By «place» we mean the actual manipulation of an actone object, or the movement of the actor's body to a point in space which would achieve the same result.

We observed a third kind of behavior which might be considered avoidance, but which we had to eliminate from our findings. This behavior involved actors who walk past each other without any perceptible changes of gait, without nodding, without speaking, etc. You could say they «ignore» each other. We were convinced that in many cases this behavior was evidence of hostility, but it may also have been a result of having just talked to the individual a few seconds before, or any number of other reasons. Since we couldn't distinguish hostile examples from other kinds, we had to exclude such behavior from our calculations.

A second goal of the second week was to identify the people who we observed as they passed by our observation post. We found it almost impossible to capture avoidance behavior with a still camera, and still keep an oral or written record of observation. Also, photographing conditions through the curtain and window were not ideal. Photos did, however, help us in our identification of some actors. Photographs were taken as people entered our field of vision, and the photo number noted on our observation notes for future reference. During the second week of observation and a few weeks thereafter we were able to learn the names of most of the people whom we did not already know, and who frequented the center of the village.

Following the initial two weeks of preparatory observation and practice with the techniques of *actonic analysis*, we allocated an average of approximately two hours per day for 70 days over the next twelve

weeks for observation. This period of observation occurred during a time when formal political activity was relatively quiet, since commune elections were more than a year off. We were somewhat limited by other duties in the selection of observation times, but we generally tried to maximize our efforts by working during what we knew to be the busiest times of the day. Due to considerations of time and interest, we concentrated on fully recording only avoidance behavior, while noting the total number of two-actor idioscenes that took place during our period of observation. In order to get an idea of the representativeness of our sample, in relation to the composition of the entire commune, during the last two weeks of our project we kept a record of all participants in two-actor scenes.

At the completion of the project, after 140 hours of observations, we had logged a total of 1,105 two-actor idioscenes, of which 83 or 7.5% were classified as avoidance. While the data can be manipulated in various ways for various purposes, the most interesting statistics with regard to our project concern the proportion of inter- and intra-party avoidance behavior taken totally, and by sex. The percent of avoidance behavior occurring between actors of different parties was 63%. Of the avoidance idioscenes occurring between a male actor and a female actor, 70% were between parties. When considering avoidance idioscenes involving only women, 46% were between parties, and when considering only men, 100% were between parties.

The obvious importance of these figures is that they demonstrate the relevance of party affiliation for avoidance behavior among males and females. There apparently is some relationship between avoidance and party affiliation for men, while there appears to be a less obvious relationship for women. Using these statistics as a guide, we were able to extend our investigation of this subject using other methods of data gathering. These investigations provided further information suggesting plausible explanations for the avoidance behavior of both sexes.

Outside of statistical findings, our actonic research provided us with information of a more specific nature about individual antagonism. This knowledge gave us direction in asking questions about the relations between families, the answers to which helped us to develop a picture of the factionalism which underlies the phenomena of political parties. Furthermore, by determining the presence and degree of avoidance behaviour and its relation to factionalism, through the methods of actonic analysis, we were able to gain an insight into real culture or modes of behavior which contradicted the ideal or presumed culture as expressed by our informants.

Finally, we learned that actonic analysis could be used to a limited extent in the course of traditional ethnographic research, with the aid of commonly available technical equipment, but without requiring expensive video equipment.

Notes

[1] Gene Muehlbauer: Common Interest Associations, Intensification of Factionalism and New Leadership: Responses to Economic Change in a Swiss Alpine Community. Unpublished Ph. D. Dissertation, Typoscript Wisconsin-Milwaukee 1979.

[2] Vgl. dazu Pierre Centlivres: Un nouveau regard sur les Alpes: L'anthropologie américaine découvre le Valais. In: Ethnologica Helvetica IV (1980), 35–62.

[3] Gene Muehlbauer: Common Interest vs. Uncommon Enmity. The Transition from Informal «Familienpolitik» to Formal Political Association. In: Ethnologia Europaea XI (1979/80), 119–138.

[4] Die Diskussion wurde vor allem durch Marvin Harris in seinem Buch: The Nature of Cultural Things (New York 1964) vorangetrieben.

[5] Zur Bedeutung des «actonic approach» in der Volkskunde, vgl. Arnold Niederer: Vergleichende Bemerkungen zur ethnologischen und zur volkskundlichen Arbeitsweise. In: Ethnologica Helvetica IV (1980), 11–34, hier: 20f.

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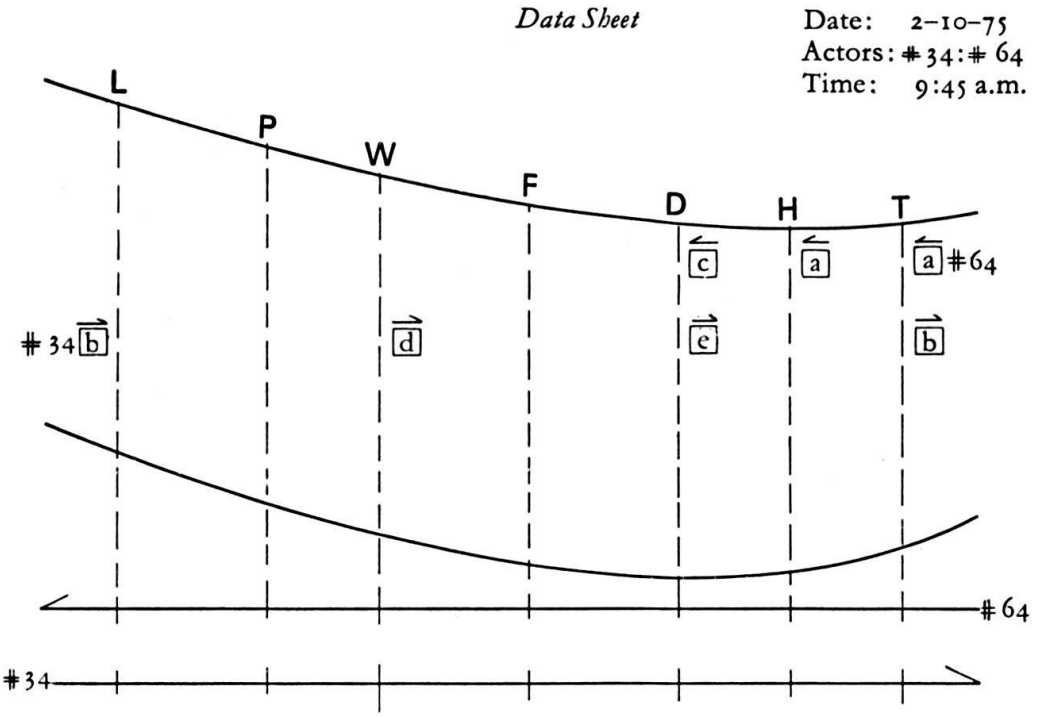

Actones numbered by their serial order for each actor along actor's line at bottom of diagram

Actones lettered by content as follows:

[a] = walking, hoad straight
[b] = riding scooter, straight ahead
[c] = head turn (½) north (toward a child at 64 right)
[d] = head turn (1) SE (direction of cart attached to rear of scooter)
[e] = head turn (1) W (head straight)