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Social Research Methods

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Social Interactions at the Mall Food Court

Introduction

The South Plains mall was one of the first social places I ever visited when I moved to Lubbock. It became one of the places my family and I head to for some time away from the house. Sometimes we would buy things, but most of the times we would not. I have never really taken the time to really observe the surroundings and the other people to see how others used this popular space. I targeted the food court because I wanted to see how the food court's atmosphere and social interactions are different from a regular restaurant. I wished to find out if there was a major difference in the behavior of people when they are interacting in a restaurant and when they are interacting in the mall food court. I wished to find out if the same social rules that exist in a restaurant would apply to a food place like the mall food court.

Field Notes

General Observations

It was Sunday afternoon on October 7, 2018. I arrived at the South Plains Mall at approximately 2:15 pm.

To not be as obvious in my observations, I brought my family with me, which consisted of my son, my father, and my mother. Once we arrived at the food court in the mall I picked a table where I could easily see the vast majority of the activity in the food court. We sat down and decided to order our own food, which was a tool that I used to blend in more, and then I began to take notes.

I noticed a vast majority of the people in the food court seemed to be in groups of two or more. There were a few loaners that I noticed. Several of the loaners were interacting with their

phones, others were just walking through, some seemed to be walking aimlessly, while others were clearly heading somewhere. I saw no visible racial divisions as there were several races that interacted normally with each other without bias. Many of the groups of people that I observed were mostly family units. A single parent with their kids, a couple with kids, or simply a couple. There were also a lot of teen groups, which were friends with no apparent adult supervision. The groups of teens mostly consisted of two girls who had been or were shopping, while the others were just interacting socially. The male teens did not have any indications that they were shopping, but were there to interact socially with others. A few of them ordered food and interacted while eating. This prompted me to also take note of the fact that there were many groups who were just sitting at the tables simply talking. These individuals did not partake of the many different food choices available and did not eat at all. There was even a man who sat at a far back table located in the corner of the floorplan that was alone, not eating, and was instead working on a laptop. I noticed several people walking through the tables, in and out of the food area without sitting down. There were several adult men who walked through the food court area several times. I did not see this happen with adult females. I noticed the majority of the women who were walking through or partaking of food at the tables were in possession of shopping bags, while the majority of the men who were without a female companion did not possess any shopping bags.

Several of the families were in the food court area to let their children play and ride the carousel. I noticed several fathers and grandfathers pushing strollers, and others carrying children on their shoulders. I heard a shrill scream and crying and located the disturbance to be coming from a small child who I observed was in the arms of an adult, clearly a parent, and was being escorted off of the carousel ride. I observed the lady take the child back onto the ride for another trip, which immediately stopped the outburst of crying and screaming. After the second ride was finished, I observed the mother take the child off the ride and heard her start screaming again this time much louder. I noticed a man step up to the lady and took the crying child out of her arms, place her in a

stroller wagon, and leave. I noticed that most of the patrons of the food court completely ignored the child's outburst and only a few took notice of the disturbance.

Analysis

After conducting my observations of the social interactions of the food court, I reviewed my notes to compare them to what I knew about the appropriate actions in a restaurant. One of the first observations that stood out to me was that in a restaurant you cannot sit at a table and not order anything. This happened a lot at the food court. There were many people who seemed to use it as just a meeting place or even a workspace. The rules of the tables being reserved for paying customers was not seen at this facility. I also noticed that even when families were eating at a table, their children were not kept quiet and sitting down as is proper for a restaurant setting. During many observations I noticed children playing and running around the tables where their parents were partaking of their meal. I also found that due to the massive noise difference in the food court, compared to a sit-down restaurant, no one became visibly upset or angered by the screaming child, as opposed to my past observations in a restaurant when my son threw a fit at a restaurant when he was younger. In my experience, during these outbursts from my son, the people around us looked at us and showed visibly angry facial expressions or they would start whispering about my son's behavior. However, this was not observed at the food court when the child was removed from the carousel ride threw her tantrum. People around the incident did not seem affected by it at all and most people completely ignored it. The ones I noticed that reacted to her outburst did not seem upset or angered by it at all.

Another social taboo in restaurants is walking through the dining area when you are not a customer, or repeatedly walking back and forth across the dining area. In a restaurant, many people would become annoyed by the constant unnecessary foot traffic through the dining area. However, the people dining in the mall food court did not care at all about any of the foot traffic around their tables.

Conclusion

After analyzing my notes and comparing them to my experiences at a restaurant I can clearly see the atmosphere in the food court is completely different than that of a normal restaurant. It has far fewer social rules than a normal eating location. Even though this is designed as a restaurant, with multiple options and way more seating, it is not observed in the same way as even a normal non-fancy family restaurant. I noticed it is a far more laid back and relaxed location. People are more focused on enjoying themselves, socializing, and doing what they want to do rather than to be caught up in the norms that generally follow and control a traditional eating place.

