

Possibilities and constraints of analyzing visual conduct with an eyetracker device – or, are there variations of ritual constraints of public gazing while walking?

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Certain techniques which make possible to record naturally occurring events play a crucial role in the phenomenologically oriented and interpretative social research. For example, Sacks turned to the analysis of conversations because the tape recorder allowed the recording of talk in interaction, and due to this, its repeated listening and sophisticated analysis (Sacks, Psathas). When video recording became available, analysis of establishment and organization of interaction on similar principles was extended to visually available conduct as well (Goodwin, Heath). In our study we will consider the possibilities and constraints of recording a further aspect of human conduct, namely gazing, with regard to interpretative analysis. In other terms, we will ponder on the usability of eyetracker instruments – which records the timing and spacing of gaze direction - in research on interaction.

Since its beginnings, sociology, just like some other social sciences, has been and continues to grapple with the issue of understanding the details and consequences of living in a mass society compared to some more traditional way of living. However, relatively few studies have actually raised the issue of change in interaction conduct in this regard. Besides describing and characterizing some general possibilities of eyetracking in research on interaction, we will present a study which aims to analyze the 'style' of gaze behavior in public places. Specifically, on the bases of a 'visual interview' procedure and with the help of an eyetracker instrument, we will analyze and compare the pattern of gaze behavior of two groups of people while walking on a street: people living in little towns and people living in big cities. The ritual requirements (Goffman) of public behavior - in our case walking on the street - in relatively smaller communities, include individual identification of others, such as other streetwalkers. At the same time, it seems plausible to us that this ritual requirement - perhaps due to ecological/cognitive reasons - cannot be fulfilled in big towns or cities, where too many people are passing by too quickly. We do anticipate differences between the gaze behavior of little town dwellers versus city dwellers while watching a couple of scenes recorded from the perspective of a streetwalker.