

War at the Gas Pump: A Nexus Approach

As you all know, the theme of this present conference is "Peace", and one of the suggested conference topics is the role of the practicing anthropologist in promoting peace. Now, in my opinion, promoting peace implies that the scientist who is trying to do so has to take a proactive stance, and actually has to use his or her science for activist purposes. This is where Nexus Analysis fits in, which was in fact **conceived** as an activist form of scientific enquiry within the Ethnography of Communication. And as we have already heard, the goal of Nexus Analysis is to pick up some unresolved social issue that is crystallized in a social action, and to initiate a change for the better in this social issue by initiating a change within this specific social action. So part of the program of Nexus Analysis is to analyze which people, places, concepts, objects, histories, discourses and so on intersect in this social action under study, and basically, to hunt for possible points of leverage within this network, to see where social change could be successfully and actively initiated.

In my paper today, I would like to present a case study of how one could tackle such a task of identifying points of leverage for social change by means of a Nexus Analysis. As I hope to show, Nexus Analysis can indeed be very helpful in uncovering these points of leverage. My example comes out of the same project as already presented by my colleague Margaret Toyne in her paper. The focus of the project, as you remember, was a broad Nexus Analysis of the social action of pumping gas at a gas station, viewed in the light of the US War on Iraq. As we have heard, protesters of this war have claimed that behind the war were actually US oil interests.

Now, for my particular part in the project, I picked up on an issue entailed in this discussion, which is the issue of US dependency on oil imports due to a high oil and gas consumption. For my own personal agenda as an activist researcher, I assumed that conflicts over oil might ultimately be avoided if oil became less important due to a reduced consumption of it. And with this in mind, I decided to focus my attention on the actual consumers of an oil product, gasoline. I wanted to know if in studying the consumers and interacting with them I could maybe detect any points of leverage for the initiation of a change in their consumption behavior, in view of the bigger issue of reducing oil consumption overall. And by the same token I also wanted to know in how far the average consumer was actually aware of the issue of the possible connection between the War on Iraq and the US oil economy which after all supplies them with their gas.

So let's take a short moment to locate my study in the broader context of our Nexus of pumping gas at a gas station and to see how it fits in.

As we have seen just before, Nexus Analysis takes as its unit of analysis a social action - in our case that is pumping gas at a gas station - and then it investigates the trajectories of people, objects, and discourses within the unit of analysis of a social action.

What I focussed on in my part of the project, and what I'm focussing on in my talk, are the **people** involved in the social action, who we call the social actors in Nexus Analysis. I basically wanted to get at which discourses and objects figured most prominently in their realities, so to speak, while they were engaged in the action of pumping gas. One of these discourses that was obviously particularly interesting for me was the discourse on the relation of the War on Iraq to the oil industry. And, again, my purpose in doing this was to locate the most salient points, the soft spots if you will, **in relation to** the social actors, for initiating social change towards a reduction of gas consumption, according to my agenda.

For that purpose, what we did was that two of my colleagues and I went out to 5 different gas pumps in the Washington DC Metro area, and we interviewed a random sample of a total of 41 customers by means of previously conceived questionnaires. So we did a kind of instant street survey with them, following a fixed agenda of questions; and I chose this format because we could apply it rapidly, at the gas pump, while people were getting gas, and it also permitted me afterwards to do a quantitative analysis of the answers, and to see what the frequencies of the responses would tell me.

So let's take a look at the results I got. First of all, I can report that 40 out of our 41 persons interviewed said that they **had** heard the stories that the War on Iraq seemed to be somehow related to oil and gasoline. Of these, 48.8%, so that's almost half, said they actually **believed** that the war **was** related to oil issues, and 39% said they did not believe that it was related.

I think this first result already is quite promising for an activist researcher, because if the consumers already see a relationship between the war and the oil industry, it might be easier to convince them that changing their consumption behavior could ultimately influence international politics *via* the oil industry, through a reduction of the demand for oil. So this is a first important point to note.

Some further results I got reflect more directly on the people's gas consumption. Half of the people we interviewed were specifically asked whether having and driving a car was essential to them, and a vast majority of 87.5% of them indicated that it was indeed essential to them to have and drive a car. However, I also found that two thirds of those asked could actually imagine **some** scenario in which they might consider giving up or at least reducing the use of their car. So even though they were set on having and driving a car, they seemed somewhat open to alternatives. More concretely, another finding was that 46.3% of all people interviewed

showed themselves in some way favorably disposed towards public transportation, which means that they either use it already, or would consider using it. But a lot of them also mentioned bad service or bad access to public transportation as a reason for currently not relying on public transportation instead of on their car.

I think that this taken together - a tentative openness to alternatives to driving, and a general positive attitude to public transportation - constitutes a second important point of leverage for social change that could be picked up in concrete measures and interventions later on.

Relating to this, there is another aspect I would like to mention, which is that 3 of our interviewees specifically mentioned alternative fuels as a desirable innovation. We did not prompt them for these responses, which I believe makes them more salient. So I would argue that public transportation and alternative fuels are the most salient concrete points of leverage for the initiation of change in gas consumption behavior, as found in my study. Car-pooling, for example, was much less favored in the responses.

But I also found that one particular issue which an activist agenda, that is trying to instigate social change towards less gas consumption, has to deal with, is a certain **personal** investment of the consumer in the act of buying gas. Let me explain what I mean by that. Remember that a majority of the people interviewed said that having and driving a car was essential for them. What's more is that, I also started noticing a pattern in the responses where people would somehow cast the issue of getting gas as a personal *need* (that applied to 25% of our **informants**); and furthermore, **half** of them actually used the first person pronoun (I) in describing why they were buying gas, in expressions such as "I need gas", "I'm empty", "I'm out", "I'm on E" etc., instead of referring to their car or the tank on the car, being low on gas. In

order to analyze this in detail, I used a qualitative method of investigation, namely Kenneth Burke's Grammar of Motives. Here is a brief outline of Burke's framework:

Burke's Grammar of Motives basically states that in their discourse, people can construct motives in terms of five perspectives - in terms of the act (what was done), in terms of the scene (where it was done), in terms of the agent (who did it), in terms of the agency (how was it done, or the means used), and in terms of the purpose (why it was done).

Note that a motive analysis following Burke does not pretend to establish THE fundamental underlying or "true" motive for an action (in our case here, pumping gas or getting gas). Rather, the motive analysis aims at investigating how exactly participants characterize and explain their action in discourse, and thus position themselves in relation to it. My own assumption here is that if you want to change a social action via the actors, as my study ultimately proposes to do, you **have** to know how they portrait themselves within that action, in order to know on what terms to interact with them.

So, again - we have a pentad of options for motive construction in discourse - act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose. So, for example, explaining the act of getting gas in terms of the car would be a motive construction in terms of the agency. Explaining it in terms of the convenient location of the gas station would be a motive construction in terms of the scene. And explaining the act of getting gas in terms of the **first person** is a motive construction in terms of the agent. And as I said, this latter is exactly what about half of our consumers did, when they gave responses like "I'm out of gas" or "I'm on E". If we add to this the recasting of getting gas as a personal need (as in "I need gas"), I think we will realize that the agent, the first person, involvement in the motivation for getting gas is very high and very salient indeed in our sample. Thus, I want to argue that if we want to initiate a social change in terms of people's gas

consumption behavior, we certainly have to be aware of the fact that we are dealing with a matter that is personal to the people, to the consumers. We would be interfering with what they construct as a very private behavior, it seems - at least that's how they position themselves. So that is an important finding. We could, however, imagine trying to **use** this personal investment and recasting it in the light of more politically (and environmentally) responsible consumption - a kind of "every individual counts" approach in a marketing campaign, for example. There, we could maybe also stress personal **gains** of more responsible gas consumption. Or we could try to shift the consumers' focus away from themselves, and more on the **object**, the car, and to increase awareness of good and bad mileages, and of gas-guzzlers versus energy efficient vehicles.

So, to sum up, in my case study, an engagement and interaction with important social actors involved in the social action under study, which is pumping gas, has resulted in findings which highlight some salient points of leverage for the initiation of social change according to my agenda, which was about reducing gas consumption and thus indirectly influencing world politics via the oil industry. I was able to attest an awareness of possible political connections with the oil industry, as well as a general rather positive attitude towards public transportation and possibly also alternative fuels, but also a strong personal investment in the act of gas consumption. In terms of our Nexus Analysis framework, this means that I have attested the discourses on war and on alternative fuels, as well as the object, if you will, of public transportation, to circulate through the realities of my social actors. These are then the most salient potential points of leverage for the initiation of social change for now. I think that Nexus Analysis has provided a particularly helpful framework in which to uncover and explore such points of leverage, and in a more complete project over a longer period of time, a full-blown Nexus Analysis would allow us to analyze **more** trajectories within our social action, to locate

more salient points, and to view their possible ramifications within a broader context and within the network of the interaction of the trajectories of people, objects, and discourses. Ideally, we could then also use the newly gained knowledge to follow through with our activist agenda presented at the outset, and for example, instigate some kind of public relations campaign targeting the reduction of gas consumption, motivate political powers to invest specifically in public transportation and alternative fuels, and motivate the consumer to individually take charge in the issue by consuming more responsibly. Only then our Nexus Analysis would come full circle, and would achieve what it was meant to do, which is to create social change for a better social future.

Thank you.