

Students break social norms to study responses

By Ward W. Triplett III

If a stranger starts a strange conversation with you in a strange place this semester, he might be bidding for an A in sociology. Most Sociology 153 professors are requiring their students to break a norm, a norm being anything that society has grown so accustomed to that its dis-

regard will tend to cause some interesting responses from the average person.

"A lot of them are merely violations of private space, or things you don't pick up easily," professor Jay Corzine said. Students must submit a written report of their actions and the consequent responses. The assignment has been a part of the sociology course for 15 years.

"There is a principle that says most norms are fairly obvious, but there is another level that most of us don't think about, but follow in everyday life," Corzine said.

"An example is private space. If there are people on a bus when you get on, most of us will go for an empty seat. Or, if going through a park in warm weather, and one person is sitting on a certain bench. Suppose a second person were to walk up and sit with that person, or if you sat with someone on a bus rather than by yourself. Because of the norms that person has learned from our society, you put him in a very unsure position, and that reaction of it is what we want to study," Corzine said.

and beginning to barter for it.

Norms in action

"Instead of talking about norms in an abstract sense, we have them go out and do it," Corzine said. "It lets the students gain a personal understanding of norms in action."

"We have them first watch the other's reaction, then examine his own feelings. A lot of students have problems with this assignment, because of shyness mostly, but a lot can be learned and changed from it."

Some of the norm-breaking actions have become norms with some students, Corzine said.

"I had a couple in St. Louis who, surprisingly to them, were actually able to get a reduction in price simply by asking for a lower one. They were both women, and said it worked better on women's clothes, probably because those are so overpriced anyway."

"I believe those two started making it a common practice and saved a considerable amount of money."

"I had another couple in Missouri who did a major paper from analyses made just by sitting down in places like restaurants where there were already people, so it isn't all so sensational."

There are not many "off-limits" marks placed on the students, Corzine said, but he emphasized one restriction.

"It is strongly suggested to students that they do not break any laws or rules of UNL."

"Nor can they pose any threat to anyone while they're doing this. There's a lot you can do, you don't have to get obnoxious about it."

Half a sandwich

Students are told to systematically break a norm they themselves have come to recognize. Some of the things that have been done or suggested in the past include:

Starting a conversation with a total stranger in an environment not usually reserved for talk, like in a rest room or during a church service.

Getting on an elevator and opening an umbrella.

Having one person eat half a sandwich at a fast food restaurant at lunch time, and having another come in and finish it after the first has left.

Going into the rest room of the opposite sex.

Picking up items in a grocery store out of someone else's cart, or dropping items into someone else's cart.

Picking up an item in a store, then offering the sales clerk a lower price.

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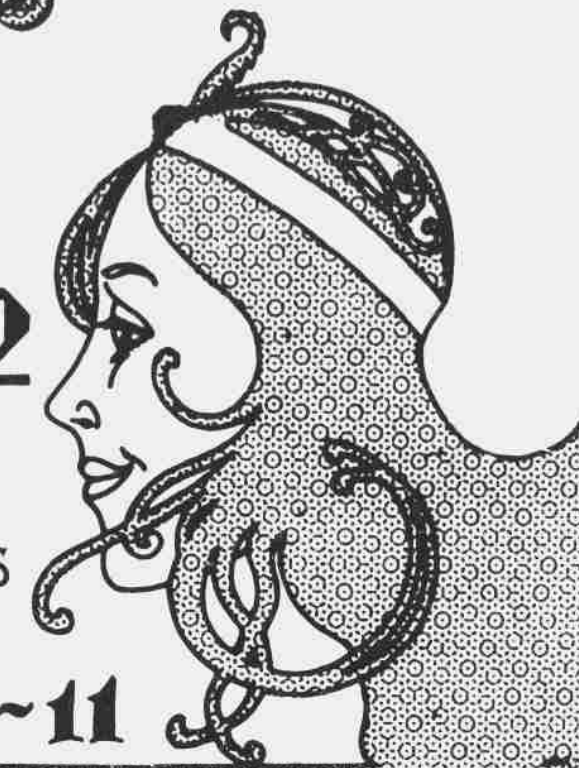
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