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# Conspicuous and Inconspicuous Discriminations in Everyday Life

Victor N. Shaw

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# **Conspicuous and Inconspicuous Discriminations in Everyday Life**

In everyday life, people negotiate on issues, entertain offers and counteroffers, and gain or lose in terms of economic capital, political power, communal status, and social influence. Although life goes on in the form of compromise, feelings of discrimination or misfortune haunt consciously or unconsciously in the minds of living individuals. History continues in the spirit of forgiveness, but residues of exploitation or injustice remain conspicuously or inconspicuously on the records of progressing civilizations.

This study follows an average everyday life to compare individuals with individuals, individuals with organizations, and organizations with organizations in their everyday interactions. Through the eyes of the person, conspicuous and inconspicuous discriminations by one against another, whether individual or organizational, are identified in different occasions, on a typical day, at home, in the workplace, in the community, within the country, around the world, and throughout the course of life.

In the style of Socrates, Plato, Wittgenstein, and other classical scholarship, this study uses ordinary, typical situations to demonstrate critical points, reveal subtle connections, and present important arguments. It offers vivid examples for what social scientists strive to find: the extraordinary from the ordinary, the unfamiliar from the familiar, the different from the similar, and the significant from the trivial. This study offers an opportunity for readers to reflect upon their social experiences, and rethink and reshape their everyday acts and actions.

Victor N. Shaw is a professor of sociology at California State University-Northridge.

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*Sergio Fava*
- 80 Conspicuous and Inconspicuous Discriminations in Everyday Life**  
*Victor N. Shaw*

# Contents

Introduction	1
1 Methodological Approach	3
2 On a Typical Day	15
3 At Home	41
4 Over the Workplace	65
5 Across the Profession	94
6 In the Community	124
7 Within the Nation	146
8 Around the World	167
9 Throughout the Life	189
10 Theoretical Significance	207
Conclusion	221
<i>References</i>	227
<i>Index</i>	235

# Introduction

Life is a journey. In time, it divides into years, months, weeks, days, and even hours. Throughout the course of a lifetime, there are stages, such as infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and senior age. Over space, life revolves around home, builds on work, touches upon a profession, expands in a community, traverses within a nation, and reaches out to the world. Along various extensions of a whole life, there are roles played, deeds made, identities acquired, and statuses achieved, from the head of a family to the position holder of a workplace to membership in a professional association to citizenship of a country and, for a few, to certain reputations around the world.

As people live their lives at every moment and in different settings, they negotiate on issues and make offers concerning each other's fundamental interests. By contrast and comparison, some gain while others lose in terms of economic capital, political power, communal status, and social influence. Although life goes on in the form of compromise, feelings of discrimination, mistreatment, or misfortune haunt consciously or unconsciously in the minds of living individual beings. Although history continues in the spirit of forgiveness, residues of prejudice, exploitation, or injustice remain explicit or implicit on the records of progressing human civilizations.

This study follows an average member of society, Alibaba, to compare and contrast individuals with individuals, individuals with organizations, and organizations with organizations in their everyday dealings and interactions. Through his eyes, conspicuous and inconspicuous discriminations by one against another, whether it be individual or organization, are identified and presented from different occasions and settings, on a typical day, at home, over the workplace, across the profession, in the community, within the nation, around the world, and throughout the course of life.

Each case or situation of discrimination is described and analyzed uniformly in five standard sections. "The Particular" presents the case from the observation and experience of Alibaba. "The Discriminator" focuses on discriminators and their acts of discrimination, whereas "The Victim" draws



## 2 *Conspicuous and Inconspicuous Discriminations in Everyday Life*

attention to victimizations suffered by individuals or organizations under the situation. “The Compromise” presents both sides and their respective perspectives to see how the situation, though problematic, sustains itself as part of social equilibrium or as an episode of the everyday life continuum. Finally, “The Universal” attempts to uncover and learn from the case or situation something general and significant, sociologically or otherwise.

# 1 Methodological Approach

This is a study of everyday life. It is sociological in particular and social science in general.

What is everyday life? Everyday life is the life lived day to day by all individuals in society. It involves physical maintenance, such as eating, bathing, and dressing. It includes mental exercises, such as reading, speaking, and writing. It encompasses social engagements, from verbal communication, material exchange, and cooperative activity to productive labor. Everyday life is repetitive: people do the same things every day. It is also afresh: each day is a different day in life. Everyday life is routine: people follow similar schedules or sequences from day to day. It is exciting as well: challenges may arise unexpectedly, whereas breakthroughs can come by huge surprise. Everyday life is trivial: people fill most of their day with unimportant activities. It is critical, too: one may say words, make decisions, or perform acts on any particular day that impact not only the life of various individuals, but also the fate of an organization, a community, or a country. Most important, everyday life is all about how each and every individual lives, how society sustains, how the world exists, how history unfolds, and how human civilizations progress.

Is there any sociology or sociological significance in everyday life? Sociology is the study of society. Specifically, it inquires what makes society, what sustains society, and what changes society. Everyday life entails acts and activities by individuals in all different settings. It hence affords an abundance of sociological knowledge as how individuals congregate, creating social forces, forming social institutions, and maintaining social momentums, or how society dictates, molding individual minds, moderating individual acts, and cultivating individual roles (Goffman 1959; Rogers 1984; Adler, Adler, and Fontana 1987; Bourdieu 1987, 1990; Larkin 1988; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Moore 1992; Green 2000; Sutherland 2000; Certeau 2002; Highmore 2002a, 2011; Droit 2003; Freud 2003; Caproni 2004; Meyer 2006; Sheringham 2006; Hardie 2008; Lefebvre 2008; Mauk and Metz 2009; Douglas 2010; Sue 2010; Myers 2011; Sommers 2011; Brinkmann 2012; Inglis and Thorpe 2012).

#### 4 *Conspicuous and Inconspicuous Discriminations in Everyday Life*

From a methodological point of view, the question is then this: what approach, scheme, or tool is appropriate and necessary to fetch sociological knowledge from everyday life?

### OBSERVATION AND EXPERIENCE

Observation is both a natural way to view and an indispensable tool to study everyday life. Experience, in comparison, is broader, larger, and more general. It not only provides a background against which everyday life unfolds under observation or without notice, but also serves as a storage where information about everyday life accumulates from observation and other sources (Rauhut and Winter 2010; Bakeman and Quera 2011; Callan and Reed 2011; Hanzel 2011; Isaacowitz and Stanley 2011; Bold 2012; Brinkmann 2012).

### The Subject

The subject of everyday life observation and experience is a person who possesses specific demographic characteristics, lives in particular social settings, and owns certain levels of observing and experiencing skills or proficiencies.

In terms of demographics, younger people may adventure into extraordinary activities for intense observation, while older people can benefit from a greater variety of perspectives for a balanced experience. Men take notice of things that women tend to miss in their observation. Over the history of the United States of America, whites enjoy social dominance as blacks struggle to cope with slavery, segregation, marginalization, and various other forms of discrimination. In the melting pot of any cosmopolitan city, different ethnic groups may still seek to keep their respectively cultured ways of life. Most important, people divide and differentiate by levels of education, categories of employment, amounts of income, and standards of living or lifestyles. A well-trained individual is likely to work in an air-conditioned office, while people with no or little education tend to labor in an environment with exposure to various natural and unnatural hazards. Farmers in the countryside may to a large extent live on the crops they grow, while skilled workers in the city can relatively freely participate in the consumer market with the cash income they earn from industrial employment. A homeless person can relate stories of living in poverty, whereas perhaps only a millionaire may have lived experiences to boast about flying in first-class cabins, staying at luxury resorts, dining in upscale restaurants, playing over the best golf courses, and visiting significant tourist sites around the world.

With respect to social settings, there are comparisons between mansions and apartments, affluent communities and poor neighborhoods, private schools and public educational institutions, comfortable offices and harsh working conditions, high-paying professions and labor-intensive occupations, upscale lifestyles and low standards of living, or in more summary

terms, among upper, middle, and lower social classes. Observation is limited to a situation just as experience remains lodged in social settings. Individuals living in one social setting may never have the opportunity to observe and experience things typical of another social setting. For example, only people who have flown private jets, attended public schools, stayed in hostels, or lived a luxury lifestyle can recollect real and valid observations about each of those particular social settings in their experience. There are, however, people who are able to cross-observe different settings by way of work or a change in life. For example, a lower-class woman works as a maid in an upper-class family, a university professor studies homeless drug addicts, and a person breaks through different social class barriers to become a wealthy and powerful member of his or her society.

Regarding observing skills and experiencing proficiencies, age, maturity, training, and occupation can all make a difference. Older people may see more out of the ordinary simply because they have observed more events and experienced a greater variety of things in their life. A trained social scientist can generalize something from the extraordinary in academic research just as a physician or psychiatrist can make a diagnosis on the basis of a patient's symptoms in medicine. Overall, as one progresses in one's profession, lifestyle, and social environment, one is likely to attain certain levels of skills or proficiencies to observe and experience various nuances of everyday life, from the matter of quality, justice, or meaningfulness to the issue of quantity, insufficiency, or significance.

This study follows Alibaba as an everyday life regular or representative. Cases are identified in his commonsensical eyes or through his normal observation and experience. By measure of personal characteristics, Alibaba is a middle-age nonwhite man living in the United States with his wife, daughter, and son. He was born and raised in a foreign country, where he received his bachelor's degree. He came to the United States to pursue advanced study in his early twenties and has been living in America with professional employment since graduation. Alibaba visits the country of his birth regularly and has traveled to different parts of the world because of work as well as for leisure. In terms of mobility through social strata, Alibaba worked on odd low-paying jobs while in school. He and his family shared a small apartment with another family, lived in a side unit when his wife worked as a live-in housekeeper for a wealthy family, and even stayed in a low-income housing compound for a period of time. Now, the Alibabas live in their own two-story house in a well-off suburb, just like many other middle-class families throughout the suburban community.

Alibaba's attention to discrimination relates directly to his experience in various everyday life settings, especially at work, as a member of a racial-ethnic minority in the United States. He knows too well from his own experience that he does not receive the same level of recognition, compensation, and respect for the things he does the same as members of the majority and that to enjoy an amount of attention, benefit, or reward the same as

## 6 *Conspicuous and Inconspicuous Discriminations in Everyday Life*

members of the majority, he usually has to do a lot more. Also, it ought to be pointed out that in observation of specific situations of discrimination, Alibaba as a well-educated individual is often sharper, more to the point, and more transcendental from his own circumstance than any regular everyday life actor or role-player.

### **The Object**

The object of observation and experience can be people, things, and their interconnections at particular times and in specific settings. A member of an ethnic minority, a resident making trouble in a local community, a developed country taking advantage of an undeveloped nation in the world, and a particular case of discrimination or victimization are all objects under observation and in experience by individuals from society to society.

An object is by definition in itself and by itself. In other words, it exists in independence from any subject of observation and experience. For example, a white person remains white whether he or she is being observed. Employees not treated equally in an organization, customers ripped off by businesses in the marketplace, or poor countries shortchanged by wealthy nations over international trade can be measured, compared, and documented with data, whether those things are being experienced.

In effect, however, an object is often inseparable from the subject it involves. A person is white with social significance because he or she is perceived, treated, and experienced as white in a society where race matters. People, groups, or organizations faring differently in social exchanges are normally or abnormally let go without notice. A situation of discriminations is questioned, investigated, and substantiated with numbers or evidence only when the subjects concerned feel strong about it, present it somewhere, and insist that it be handled one way or the other.

In this study, all the cases described are general. Each can happen anytime when similar people and things converge. Each may stay as a typical, representative, and universal occurrence above and beyond the original circumstance in which it takes place or is experienced by a particular individual. On the other hand, all the cases presented are specific. Some might have appeared trivial if it had not invoked a strong feeling in Alibaba's experience. Some could have never surfaced if it had not become clearly noticeable under Alibaba's observation. Of course, Alibaba observes and experiences as a unique person with all his personal and social peculiarities.

### **The Process**

Observation and experience in everyday life are participant-centered. They begin, stay, and end up with everyday life participants. When nonparticipant observation is designed, it still has to be implemented with individual participants through their specific activities in different everyday life settings.

Observation and experience in everyday life are natural occurrences in either structured or nonstructured formats. Structurally, everyday life observation takes place in institutional settings such as family, workplace, and community, while everyday life experience accumulates through stages of life from childhood to adolescence to adulthood and by categories such as personal life, professional career, and social relationship. In the meantime, life is essentially spontaneous. Individuals can say and do things without planning and preparation. People may have to deal with issues in shock and surprise. Observation must therefore follow the pulse or the rhythm of life as it flows naturally from day to day. Structure for the purpose of research is to be seen only after life crystallizes into shapes and residues.

In this study, observer Alibaba is not a trained social scientist. He observes life as he lives it. There is no special design, planning, or effort made for purposes other than life. Sometimes, Alibaba attempts to replicate times and settings in order to observe something again. He talks to people in similar situations in order to confirm something he has observed. He makes generalizations when he observes something consistently from time to time or from place to place. However, all these acts are natural, either out of personal curiosity or for the sake of social adaptation in his everyday life. In terms of adaptive survival, for example, he can remain calm, prepared, and effective when he knows something is likely to happen under certain circumstance.

## **The Outcome**

For most people, observation and experience from everyday life remain in everyday life. The effect of previous experiences feeding on future observations is natural, becoming automatically part of individual development, growth, and maturation. In content, certain experiences may orient one to certain situations for observation of similar things or accumulation of similar experiences. In other words, observation tends to expand and extend itself in the same line, whereas experience is likely to enrich and fulfill itself on the same track. More generally, one is a product of one's own social experience. By measure of skills, attention to something may cause one's interest to observe and experience it. Repeated observations can sharpen one's skills to see greater details from phenomenal occurrences, while years of experience may afford one to discern more subtleties using common cues and clues. As expressed succinctly in the old saying, experience matters.

Beyond individuals, some may write diaries, some may tell stories, and a few may publish autobiographies about their personal observations and experiences. When all these records and recollections are shared and spread, individual acts and deeds will then translate into social consequences. People learn from each other to become better everyday life observers, experiencing organisms, and living subjects within a community, from generation to generation, across society, and around the world.

## The General

Observation is part of everyday life. Individuals live their everyday life by observing what they do, how individuals congregate to form social groupings, how individual actions translate into social effects, how they learn from tradition, and what they contribute to society. Studying everyday life depends upon observation. Participant observation exposes the details of everyday life as the subject lives it, whereas nonparticipant observation reveals the nuances of everyday life as it is led by the object. Even a secondary analysis of dairies, stories, and biographies owes to observation which lies behind all written and uttered recollections of everyday life scenes and actions.

Experience emerges from as well as feeds on everyday life. People experience life as it unfolds through day-to-day routines and rituals. Life accumulates in experience when people engage in different everyday life actions and activities. While no experience exists without life, life becomes richer and more meaningful only through experience. Studying everyday life is to apply experience to describe, explain, and record experience. Experienced versus inexperienced researchers studying people with more or less experience in everyday life can obviously generate different findings and analyses as research outcomes.

Finally, between observation and experience, the former expands and extends the latter, while the latter builds upon and encompasses the former. For example, observations of various incidents and situations add to one's experience, making oneself not only a higher skilled observer, but also a more experienced living organism in everyday life. Similarly, experiences with different activities and scenarios involve one in a multitude of trainings and exercises for seeing, recording, and adapting to social reality, pushing up one's skills of observation as well as one's capabilities of experience to higher levels.

## REFERENCING AND REFLECTION

Observation is literally to watch things as they are, exist or change. To see what a thing means and how it connects to other things, especially how two or more things are related to one another over time or across space, one needs to engage in referencing and reflection (Luhmann 1985; Bourdieu 1987; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Highmore 2002b; Alvesson and Skoldberg 2009; McIntosh 2010; Chang 2011; Chesters 2012; Peterson 2012).

## The Subject

Anyone who lives can qualify as a subject of referencing and reflection. There is certainly a process of development involved. One must have an experience before one can reflect upon any particular incident, referencing

one thing to another in the general background of experience. And one builds one's experience as soon as one applies one's growing senses to observe things in the environment.

In everyday life, people differ in their abilities for referencing and reflection. Age matters as a longer living experience may present a larger inventory of known things for association, comparison, and reflection. Education makes a difference when it teaches students analyzing, reasoning, and generalizing skills. Professional practice and individual lifestyle may show considerable effects because some types of work as well as some ways of life may prompt people to actively search for or to habitually come across certain connections among things in the world.

As the subject of referencing and reflection in this study, Alibaba takes notice of various conspicuous and inconspicuous discriminations in everyday life to a large degree due to his unique personal characteristics and social experiences. Moreover, he seems to act upon some of his general assumptions and beliefs about individuals, groups, society, human civilizations, and the world as well. For instance, individuals are supposed to be self-sufficient in Alibaba's mind. One discriminates against someone else, one's group or society, and even the world or human civilizations if one takes more than one contributes over one's lifetime.

## **The Object**

Referencing and reflection may center on acts, events, and settings, as well as people concerned and issues involved. When a thing is under the radar as an object, referencing and reflection are to define its meaning, calculate its value, and determine its significance in comparison to other things. For instance, a recently completed trip is compared to all other trips made in one's experience or to someone else's travel to the same destination or for the same purpose to see if it is cost-effective, worthwhile, or meaningful.

When a person is on focus as an object, referencing and reflection are to assess one's acts and actions, evaluate one's position and status, and compare one's goals with means, performance with ability, or gain with loss. Especially when the object becomes the same as the subject or when one reflects upon oneself, referencing and reflection can usually serve as essential strategies to find better ways to do one's job or live one's life on the basis of one's past and existing experiences.

Compared to observation, reflection aims more at connections among people and things. In fact, it is only through referencing and reflection that sequencing, linkage, and structuring can be identified and verified to find relative importance or significance of each and every act, actor, and situation within and outside individual experience.

In this study, Alibaba seems to draw heavily upon referencing and reflection in noting and validating various deficits and differentials in social



exchanges. As a result, discrimination and victimization become a common theme or object when Alibaba reflects upon people and things in his everyday life.

## The Process

Referencing and reflection can take place when observation is under way. They may occur before or after observation. However, in order to conduct any meaningful referencing and reflection, one must have a sufficient inventory of observations in one's experience.

Referencing and reflection involve a series of mental operations on the part of the subject toward the object. First, the object has to be identified, defined, and categorized. Is it a person, an event, or a situation? Second, an objective needs to be set or highlighted. What is the purpose of reflection, for self-assurance, learning, or future improvement? Third, a principle of relevance and a standard of quality must be established or delineated. By what logic or on what ground is the object to be referenced? What criterion is used to evaluate the object? Fourth, connections are to be found between the object and its various referents. Where does the object stand? How similar or different is it to or from other objects? What lessons can be learned? Finally, a record is to be cataloged in memory or in the universe of experience. When does a particular episode of referencing and reflection take place? What does it add to self-experience?

In this study, Alibaba discerns meaningful connections, such as discrimination and victimization, among people and things as an ordinary person. It is obvious that people in everyday life hold standards, set goals, assume attitudes, take positions, and can therefore find unique chains of act and action in social relational dynamics. While Alibaba can entertain his commonsense curiosity with self-discoveries from referencing and reflection, sociologists may add to human knowledge by scientific findings they make from standard research, which may involve anchoring, framing, contrasting, comparing, and other qualitatively inquisitive procedures.

## The Outcome

The general outcome of referencing is connection. Specifically, connection may turn out to be strong or weak, direct or indirect, associational or correlational, and phenomenal or structural. For example, correlation can be either a matter of coincidence or a result of structural interdependence. With connection in sight, there can be a clear identification of an individual subject, object, or situation, a meaningful comparison between one thing and another, and a logical sequence of developments or a natural chain of events over time and across space.

Reflection moves beyond connection, generating inferential knowledge in different forms. Inductively, rules, patterns, and trends can be generalized from frequent, repetitive, or common occurrences or connections to