

BULLSHITTING: ROAD LORE AMONG HITCHHIKERS*

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This paper explores how people create tall tales to make frustrating activities “engaging”—as Goffman uses that term. The data are the stories hitchhikers tell one another about their travels—what they call “bullshit.” The analysis of these data suggests that bullshitting provides people with a way of managing their problems. By using difficult situations as bases for heroic autobiographical stories, people can use their problems to produce a positive self-image. Hitchhikers appear to use these stories as partial solutions to their adolescent identity problems.

To most scholars the playful side of social life seems relatively unimportant subject-matter. (For exceptions, see Aronowitz, 1973; Lever, 1976; Simmel, 1917:1955; Mead, 1934:1964). But because play is a large part of public life and because people often “make fun” out of serious problems, we ought to know more about play. To address this issue I will present data about the road stories called “bullshit”¹ that hitchhikers tell one another during long rides to entertain themselves, forget their boredom with the scenery, and transform themselves into heroic characters.² Road stories should probably be categorized as a type of fiction or narrative because they are presented as tales of adventure³ and are quite unlike the bullshitting that students do on exams. Bullshitting on exams uses a non-fiction “essay” form and the content is presented as knowledge rather than experience.

The road stories presented here are only one genre of fiction bullshit. A more familiar genre is the “big fish story,” which like road lore, describes an event when the story-teller was the principal character and about which the audience has little or no information. The story-teller is free to manipulate the details of that event to make it a better story, increasing the size of the fish and the height of the waves around the boat, exaggerating the seamanship of the boat’s crew or elaborating on the faultiness of the fishing equipment.

Social scientists have noticed that people feel free to tell stories to strangers—particularly bartenders and cabdrivers—who they will never see again (Davis, 1959:1975; Terkel, 1972). People will tell all kinds of stories about themselves if there is no negative evidence to discredit them and there are others who are willing to listen. Bullshitting is like other kinds of talk that exploit the possibilities of speaking “off the record.” People can gossip because there are no records of what they say (Shibutani, 1966; Rosnow, 1977; Suls, 1977; Bailey, 1971). Corporate managers can make promises they have no intension of keeping, to create a necessary but temporary solidarity.⁴ The spoken word can be forgotten or denied at a

¹I first heard this term applied to road stories by one youth who was worried about my study. He was afraid I believed what I heard. He warned me that hitchhikers liked to “bullshit.” He gave me enthusiastic descriptions of people who told great road stories, implying that while these stories might not be true, he liked them and admired those who told them well. When I talked to a few other hitchhikers about bullshitting, they also did not expect bullshit to be accurate but to be like stories. Rather than attempting to present here a formal definition of bullshitting, I am giving a picture of it that fits hitchhikers’ views. A formal definition, fixing bullshitting between lying and accurate accounts of personal experience would give this term a technical significance that it does not have for hitchhikers. Bullshitting is a form of sociability (Simmel, 1917:1950).

²Road stories have been used in novels by Kerouac (1957), Thompson (1971), and Wolfe (1968a).

³These stories appear to be a kind of tall tale. For a discussion of modern tall tales in quasi-folk groups see, Coffin and Cohen, 1974.

⁴Some of these “off the record” policy statements have been referred to as gentlemen’s agreements. For some discussion of the uses and limits of these agreements, see Kinch, 1970.

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later date. So even if an audience to bullshit fiction, corporate policy discussions, or gossip may hear an opposing story or in the future, it makes no difference to the “talk at hand.”

To say that people feel free to lie in these situations is both an accurate description of the possibilities of talking “off the record” and a misrepresentation of the intentions behind doing so. When people bullshit or gossip, they do not so much tell lies as create situations where events can be elaborated in non-ordinary ways. Just as a stage play is not a lie though it takes events from life and heightens their drama to make good theater, so bullshitting takes events and heightens their story-telling possibilities (Berger and Luckmann, 1966).

Bullshitting is a style of non-ordinary talk about “normal” life (see, Schutz, 1967); it is a way to review this life literally and to represent the individual experiences in life as heroic drama—as extra-ordinary. Truth and falsehood are not issues in bullshitting because this kind of talk is playful; it is a way to make conversation more fun. When Simmel (1917:1955) describes playful talk as “sociability,” he observes that the content of conversation is relatively unimportant compared to the pleasure of interacting. In word play, as in other forms of play, the game’s the thing.⁵

Huizinga (1950) and Piaget (1962:1955), who have made some of the most careful attempts to understand play, suggest that play is never supposed to be true to life. When people play, they move from ordinary to a non-ordinary reality of the players’ choosing. Like art, play provides people an escape from the reality of everyday life. In free forms play allows players the opportunity to make a reality in their own terms. If bullshitting makes normal life extra-ordinary, then how can it be at all useful to people in managing everyday reality? This is the research question discussed here.

THE STUDY

During the summers of 1971 and 1972, I drove across country on major interstate highways, picking up hitchhikers, interviewing them about their experiences on the road, and listening to their conversations with one another. I conducted fifty-two interviews, mainly with hitchhikers who were going long distances but also with some (twelve) going short distances via interstate highways (see, Carlson, 1972; Weiss, 1974; Miller, 1973).⁶

Most of the long-distance hitchhikers were students on summer vacations from high school or college, recent high school graduates who could not find jobs, veterans of the Viet Nam war who had no jobs, some of whom couldn’t go home because they had “drug problems”, or army deserters. Almost all of them were male. There were only three women traveling without a male companion, all taking short trips, and two women travelling long distances with a man as part of a “couple”. Because “the road” is a predominately male society, hitchhikers might have been considered “young men sowing their wild oats” or

⁵People think of play as “smaller than life” because children’s toys are often minatures of common objects. Since bullshitting exaggerates reality, some may argue that it should not be described as playful. Recall however, that children also exaggerate their size and powers by pretending to be “super-heroes.”

⁶While I conducted this research, I drove a VW bus which could hold five hitchhikers at a time. I had trouble interviewing hitchhikers in the back while I was driving, so I listened to hitchhikers talk to one another. When someone else drove or sat next to me I would ask questions about age, family background, and travel plans. Then I asked about their experiences on the road. Most would answer without elaborating on their experiences. If I were driving for a long time the person next to me might tell stories with the stated purpose of entertaining me. Sometimes the hitchhikers seemed to define me as a woman rather than a researcher, and would flirt or try to impress me with heroic stories. Most defined me as an outsider—because of my researcher role and sex—and didn’t volunteer information. Most of the data I collected was of conversations among hitchhikers.

During some of this research I was accompanied by a male friend, who was frequently included in conversations with the hitchhikers. His treatment confirmed that most hitchhikers considered me an outsider.

participants in a puberty rite in another day or culture (see, Friedenberg, 1972; Van Gennep, 1960; Goode, 1951; Cohen, 1964). Contemporary hitchhikers take delight in identifying themselves as “bums.”

I could not record my interviews with or the conversations among these hitchhikers because of engine noise from the car. Instead, I stopped every second or third day to dictate field notes into a tape recorder. In these notes I could describe the most recent interviews and conversations in detail, but I could only sketch those of a few days before. These data suggest that bullshitting becomes a *lingua franca* for young people from all regions of the country and classes of the society. In this language, they weave a “road reality” filled with adventures and heroes to supplement the normal experience of hitchhiking.

ROAD TALK

People who travel extensively tell stories about their trips. Part of a vacation in Europe or Yosemite is exchanging adventures with other travelers and bringing the best tales home to tell friends. Hitchhikers who bullshit simply sustain one category of traveler's lore: road stories. For European tourists and hitchhikers alike, traveling is meant to be fun (see, Cantor and Werthman, 1968; Cohen, 1972; Boorstin, 1961). The pleasure of a trip would be difficult to savor without some discussion of it. And the pleasure of this talk is greater when travelers dramatize their experiences to make a good story.

Telling stories, hitchhikers make a distinctive lore. Their experiences in traveling by thumb are unlike the experiences of tourists who “see Europe” in packaged tours or take their campers to a National Park for a few weeks (Cohen, 1972; Boorstin, 1961). Since storytelling travelers usually limit their subject matter to situations or events made close-at-hand by their style of travel, their material varies by their mode of travel. The content of road stories tends to revolve around the particular experiences of those traveling by thumb.

Travel lore is also shaped by the social community that spawns it. The hitchhiking community is mostly populated by adolescents. The reason for this seems quite simple: they have lots of time and little money.

Hitchhikers bullshit because it is one of their few forms of entertainment. Being on the road has a glamorous image—for reasons that become more apparent in the analysis—but much of the time spent traveling is boring. When hitchhikers wait for rides, ride for hours, or walk around strange towns that have little or no interest to them except, perhaps, a temporary job, they find very little which is entertaining. Unlike most of their peers, they do not have easy access to televisions, radios, or the print media. Their access to popular culture entertainments is limited during the long waits for and in cars. Some hitchhikers, particularly college students, carry books or magazines with them so they can read while they wait, but reading matter is extra weight that many prefer not to have in their packs.

If you ask hitchhikers what they do to entertain themselves on the road, they will tell you that the fun of hitchhiking is meeting new people and seeing new places. “Going places” may provide the experience of being on to road, but meeting people is probably more important; it is the occasion for bullshitting—for turning experiences into adventures.⁷

Bullshitting as Entertainment

Bullshitting stories told on the road fill long hours of waiting by making familiar activities of hitchhikers the basis for an oral fiction, a kind of adventure story.

I never thought we would get out of Montana. We heard that some hitchhikers got ax-

⁷For an analysis of what makes “an adventure” see, Simmel, 1919:1959. Many of the characteristics of adventure described by Simmel appear as consistent characteristics of road life as displayed in road lore.

murdered here—got cut up in pieces last year near here. There was some cowboy who picked them up and took them for a ride and cut them up and buried them and kept something like fingers or something. The police caught him and found these fingers of these people with him. They thought there might have been some cannibalism involved, too.

S. went on to say that one night they stayed in a cabin (in Montana). There was a dirt road that went up to the cabin and they walked up it and went inside. They ate some stuff and they were sitting on the cabin floor and all of a sudden, they heard a truck drive up and it stopped. A man got out. They were really scared because they had heard people chopping up hitchhikers and they didn't know what to do. S. said, "I decided that we should go out and talk to him because he was probably just as scared of someone coming to cut him up in pieces as we were about someone doing that to us." So S. went outside and said to the man "What are you doing here?" and the guy said, "I have some unfinished business" . . . and he looked around and went over to the haystack and started poking around in it (Sixteen year old, Washington).

Frightening stories about strange happenings in strange places are commonplace forms of exchange among hitchhikers. They are extremely appealing to audiences of young hitchhikers who are likely to find some of the people they meet and the places they go frightening because of their novelty. Scary stories constitute one very effective and the most common form of "bullshit."⁸

Appropriately, the example of bullshitting presented above begins with a prologue: a story this hitchhiker heard from someone else. He draws from the bullshit tradition to set the stage for this particular story. The relatively mundane cabin story is made more frightening by its juxtaposition to the ax murder story. The potential risk of the situation is realized by the arrival of a stranger with an odd interest in haystacks. The storyteller becomes heroic by going out to speak to that man. This story is a classic case of bullshit because it takes a familiar situation from life on the road (staying in abandoned buildings), heightens its risk, and makes the storyteller a hero for facing this risk with some composure.

Many hitchhikers find even familiar road situations somewhat frightening. They have a diffuse fear of "evil forces" that might somehow "get to them" while they are alone in strange places. They feel, and probably are, vulnerable in ways they do not understand. A story that is well told will make the story-teller brave enough in the face of a plausible danger to pass as a truly heroic character. Too much exaggeration can make the story implausible and the heroics plainly "bullshit." Because these stories depend on listeners' identification with the storyteller and the story's setting, the aesthetics for this genre are, then, dramatic realism.

Bullshitting as Mapping

Sometimes travel stories are much less dramatic and seem to function as a kind of shop talk. Adventures can be presented as tourist information, providing other travelers with a sense of what it is like to visit places they have not yet seen. They engage in a kind of "mapping." These stories, even if they are exaggerated, are taken very seriously by hitchhikers because they provide information hitchhikers cannot acquire through the guide books or tourist leaflets provided for more conventional travelers.

He said that he had gotten to Barstow, California and he was talking to an old hitchhiker . . . who had said, "I once got stuck in Barstow for four days and Barstow is hot; I mean, it is a miserable place." So he and his friend spent all but their last two dollars on a ticket out of Barstow to Needles, California, where they got a ride (Nineteen year old, Ohio).

⁸ Scary stories are commonly exchanged among children. The novelty of scary "bullshit" stories is that they are told in the first person while children's scary stories are usually not (see, Opie and Opie, 1959).

Typical conversations among hitchhikers who have just met each other begin with the question, "Where have you been?" and much of the earliest exchange among new "road mates" revolves around mapping.

Mapping is a process of analyzing the United States and neighboring countries as hitchhiking settings. Hitchhikers primarily map distances between places, usually by the amount of time it takes to get from one part of the country to another. This kind of mapping is best done in stories that describe "great rides" with nice people who go straight from where the storytellers were picked up to where they were going. They are balanced by ones that lament the long waits in bad weather and bad company that characterize "bad rides." "Good ride" stories include profiles of generous people, great destinations to visit and, occasionally, good job opportunities for people who need to make a little more money for travel. "Bad ride" stories draw menacing pictures of local police and "locals" in some section of the country who are described as capable of making the life of a stranded hitchhiker miserable or very short. Mapping provides answers to the question, "Where've you been so far?" and gives hitchhikers some information about what they may encounter in their future travels. It also legitimates story-telling by making it appear a useful and generous means for sharing road knowledge.

Bullshitting A Worldly Self

Road stories, like other kinds of fictional bullshit, tend to be autobiographical. That they are told in the first person seems to have a dual function: they entertain and they introduce the storyteller to the audience. Bullshitting is the kind of sociability that hitchhikers engage in most frequently, in part because they are continually meeting strangers and want to appear interesting.

Hitchhikers produce positive impressions of themselves not only by manipulating the style of storytelling, but also by exaggerating their experiences as travelers. Like people with a collection of national park stickers on their campers or lots of stamps in their passports, they publicize themselves by revealing evidence of the breadth of their travels. To "map well" appears to demonstrate that the storyteller has seen the world, both wide areas of the country and what human beings can do, good and bad. In bullshitting, hitchhikers "map" to create a worldly image.

Unlike many types of travelers, hitchhikers play on the risks of their mode of travel to produce a positive self-image. They can feel heroic and appear that way to others for having left the parochial environments of childhood. They can claim to be adventurous for having exchanged their protective and familiar hometowns or neighborhoods for the unpredictable road (Simmel, 1919:1959). Their sense and appearance of bravery is enhanced when they describe terrible experiences encountered since leaving home, or things they have done that the "folks back home" would never have allowed. To have many stories and wide experience in travel is evidence that they have become capable of making their own way in life.

To make an impression on their peers, hitchhikers must present an array of good and bad stories. They use bad stories to display heroism and good stories to show that they have culled good times from their independent lives. Bad stories predominate because the teller can show the greatest social sophistication by analyzing and managing unpleasant incidents.

The following story illustrates some of the presentational possibilities of "bad stories."

They said they were in Michigan and decided to go up into Canada. They hitched a ride from some guy who was "really spacy." For some reason he couldn't stop the car and almost crashed through the gate at the Canadian frontier. The customs agents might not have wanted to search them too carefully, but since this odd thing happened, they decided to search everyone in the car very carefully. The customs man found two little packets of marijuana seed. He (the storyteller) said that the officials in Canada were

very polite; they would say "sir" to him and were completely the opposite of the American officials who were nasty and insulting. They said something like, "Are these your packages of seeds, sir?" or "Are these your packages of Marijuana, sir?" (Eighteen year old, Washington).

In telling this story, the hitchhiker presents a worldly image. He is able to describe the different etiquette of Canadian and United States customs agents, demonstrating that he kept his wits about him under stress and that he is able to make fine social distinctions; he also lets his listeners know that he uses drugs, and he shows his sense of humor about a "bad ride" that caused him to be arrested. The over-all message of the story is that the teller can take care of himself.

"Good ride" stories complement bad ones. The "worldly" hitchhiker can talk about all the friends that he has made in his travels, all of whom would take care of him if something really terrible happened.

He talked about having hitched up there (to British Columbia) before. He said that he met this guy hitchhiking who had invited him up to a cabin with him and they had hunted and fished in the middle of the woods (Seventeen year old, Minnesota).

The worldly hitchhiker has enough guts, daring, endurance and friends to "make it" on the road.

Hitchhikers can transform their experiences into word play and present a worldly self because they live in a community of strangers. They carry little personal baggage that could cue other hitchhikers to their past; they act in a role that does not clearly define their behavior; and they tell their stories to other hitchhikers who have vested interests in glamorizing life on the road.

ENGAGING THE ROAD

People are willing to take on voluntary roles, like that of hitchhiker, because they find themselves engaged by the activities prescribed for the role.⁹ Goffman (1961) has demonstrated that role engagement is both a thrilling and tenuous thing. It is based on people's sense of challenge in an activity. As long as they find the challenges of a role equal to their skills in addressing those challenges, they can lose themselves in the role. But if they develop too much facility in handling role tasks, they feel demeaned by the role, express distance from it, and finally drop it (Goffman, 1961).

Bullshitting can extend the challenge of a role. By exaggerating the challenges verbally, people can make any activity a little more interesting. Some jobs seem to be sweetened in just this way.¹⁰ Truckers, longshoremen, seamen, loggers have developed a lore that is a source of engagement for participants (see, for example, Weir, 1977; Coffin and Cohen, 1974; Terkel, 1972). Similarly, by making the presentation of a worldly self a complement to their travels, hitchhikers use the boring moments on the road to increase, rather than dilute, their engagement.

⁹ Many groups that have had difficulties entering the labor force have developed stakes in voluntary careers. Some women have made careers out of volunteer work (Daniels et al., 1975; Lopata, 1971); some youths have worked their way up the status system of a gang (Cohen, 1955; Cloward and Ohlin, 1960; Whyte, 1943:1955); some of the hitchhikers seem to have made a career of "bumming". Just as volunteers and gang members develop identities around voluntary and often temporary commitments, so hitchhikers gain a sense of themselves by treating their travels seriously and committing their identities to road culture.

¹⁰ Varieties of work evoke special styles of talk that helps people to feel their work identity and convey it to others. Not only do people learn "shop talk", but special vocabularies or verbal shorthands easing the work process. Learning to use work-related styles of talk is an aspect of becoming part of an occupational group (see, Runcie, 1974; Terkel, 1972; Weir, 1978).

Hitchhikers may spend only a few months or summers on the road, never committing themselves to the road in the way that workers may become committed to their jobs. But they can develop stakes in making life on the road a stable, if not long-term, source of identity.¹¹ Bullshitting can help them stabilize a hitchhiker identity, both by making road life more interesting and by allowing them to play with the bases for producing an identity—making a place for oneself in the world and a self that can be esteemed by others.¹²

Bullshitting can make a job or life on the road more valuable because participants transform themselves into heroes, playfully converting unpleasant or boring experiences into challenges that confirm the fine character of those who face them well.¹³ For people so experienced in their job or traveling that they find little adventure in it, telling stories can replace the lost challenge of the role itself.

The Bullshitting Career

Not all hitchhikers bullshit and not all of those who do bullshit in the same way. Styles of bullshitting seem to vary by age. By examining these age-graded differences among hitchhikers, we can see how their styles of bullshitting, or attitude toward it, mark hitchhikers' careers in becoming worldly members of their community.¹⁴

Very young hitchhikers, twelve to fourteen years old, neither bullshit nor pay attention to other people bullshitting. They seem to have identified hitchhiking as a cheap form of transportation that older boys use. When they get rides they tend not to talk with other people in the car. Their quiet seriousness suggests they either find traveling such a challenge they are literally speechless or they feel they are too young to belong to, and speak as a member of, "road culture."

Hitchhikers between sixteen and eighteen years of age not only recognize bullshitting, but are mesmerized by what they hear. They are the major audiences for bullshitting because they tend to believe most of it. When they speak of their own road experiences, they seem awed by what older hitchhikers consider routine road problems. Finding routine road experiences astonishing, they are open to believe anything anyone else says about the road. Certainly, most do not have the experience to know what is improbable.

Eighteen to twenty-two year olds are the major bull-shitters. Many have had previous experience hitchhiking, and have mastered the basic road skills of getting rides and finding places to sleep. They begin to explore the possibilities of bullshitting, trying out various ways to render their experiences dramatically interesting.

Hitchhikers who are about twenty-two to twenty-five years of age and think of themselves as adults, tend to do less bullshitting. When they tell stories, which they still love to do, they make it clear that it is fiction by saying, for instance, "Once upon a time I had an uncle" When they talk about their experiences on the road, they are more likely to talk about the

¹¹ It is well-known that work identities are important to people's self-esteem (see, for example, Braude, 1975). People may not love their jobs or feel fulfilled by them, but even negative attachment to their work may be a basis for identity (see, Terkel, 1972).

¹² Some of the literature on play emphasizes its seriousness as a socializing mechanism or form of practice (see, Aronowitz, 1973; Lever, 1976; Piaget, 1965; 1962). If young people "play" with making an identity from hitchhiking, they may be seriously practicing skills in identifying themselves with their activities.

¹³ Because bullshitting is common in work cultures surrounding working class jobs, it may be a strong element in working class culture. Workers who hold the most dangerous or most routine jobs would have the best motive for translating experiences into a non-ordinary reality in which difficulties represent challenges. If true, then the development of non-ordinary work realities may contribute to workers' abilities to sustain difficult jobs.

¹⁴ Some literature suggests that people use age as an important measure of their progress in a career (see, Roth, 1963; Faulkner, 1974).

variety of things they have done or seen than elaborate one incident. What they communicate is they have done so much that they need not exaggerate; they are no longer “green kids.”

This pattern seems to parallel the stages of role engagement and distancing that Goffman (1961) describes in children riding a merry-go-round. Just as riding a merry-go-round may be considered a “child’s game” to be disdained by older children and adults, hitchhiking is a “youth game.” Most participants travel during adolescence and drop out when they conceive themselves adults. Age-graded youth careers like hitchhiking may provide an identity for young people while they are unemployed adolescents, but these identities are usually traded in for a work identity when young people find “good jobs.”¹⁵

Hitchhikers leaving “the road” begin to express discontent with the loneliness, and the slowness and unpredictability of travel. They begin to assume adult roles and display the last stage of role distance from hitchhiking.

They talked about how disgusted they were with hitchhiking and he said he’d rather take a plane or a train or a boat when he was traveling than hitchhike again. She said, “no more hitchhiking!” No more hitchhiking!” He said he was going back to his land in the mountains and that he felt he was ready He was going to do some writing and photography (Twenty-two to twenty-four year old, Wyoming, twenty to twenty-two year old, Georgia).

For most hitchhikers, being on the road is a transitional identity. By being “bums” and proclaiming their heroism in that role, these people can leave their home communities and explore the occupational and cultural possibilities that were beyond their horizons in childhood. In a community of peers, they find rewards for doing so, but like merry-go-round riders most cannot sustain their engagement in road life when they feel too old for the role.

“Well, there’s something to it—casting your fate to the wind,” he said. But he also said that wasn’t enough—that casting your fate to the wind was kind of great but you got over it (Twenty year old, Ohio).

Variants

A number of hitchhikers start late and begin their lives on the road without the experience to “act their age.” Frequently, the biggest bullshitters are older hitchhikers who have just completed their first trip by thumb. Given some experiences to work with, they become totally engaged in bullshitting. This is as true of those beginning hitchhiking late because they have been in other youth roles (student, street person) as those beginning after dropping adult roles (marriage, steady job).

C. had just finished a story about driving to the West coast with his wife and child and he said that he didn’t have a family anymore—that he had been married for five years. The first eight months had been glorious; the rest was a bummer, too heavy They (C. and B.) decided to get out of Minneapolis—they had just wanted to get up and go someplace It was C.’s vacation. B. had quit the hospital and become a “bum” They decided to hitch to Chicago and do it with very little money (Twenty year old, Minnesota).

Hitchhikers over twenty-five also have slightly different careers than those described above because they continue their road life long after they conceive of themselves as adults. They do not define the road as a youth ghetto. They are the “real bums” who want to disengage themselves permanently from “normal” life. They recognize that younger hitchhikers are

¹⁵There are a number of such youth careers. The most obvious ones are school-related careers—working on student newspapers, participating in school sports teams, or becoming active in school politics. For literature on some of these careers, see, Coleman, 1961; Pleck and Sawyer, 1974; White, 1943; 1955; Henry, 1963; Friedenberg, 1972. Some adolescents participate in less legitimate youth careers—as members of gangs, as beachbums, or as members of drug sub-cultures. (See, for instance, Cloward and Ohlin, 1960; Cohen, 1955; Wolfe, 1968b; Berger, 1971; Davis, 1971; Whyte, 1943:1955).

only temporarily on the road so they tend to distance themselves from the “kids.”¹⁶ Because they define the road as a setting for adults they add an air of legitimacy to the adolescent career, making life on the road seem a true test of character and the hitchhiker identity seem a worthy self.

EXTRAORDINARY AND ORDINARY ROAD REALITIES

People who travel generally expect to get away from their ordinary lives and have adventures. Young people who travel by thumb can treat their mode of travel as adventurous in itself. They do not enter strange places enveloped in the protective cover of a “tour;” they face day-to-day problems in finding rides, food, and places to sleep. Because they are open to changes in their environment that can affect their style of travel, hitchhikers claim to have chosen a most adventurous and extraordinary way to see the world (see, Cohen, 1972; Boorstin, 1961; Simmel, 1919:1959).

Hitchhikers take pride in the unpredictability and difficulties of their travels much as loggers, fishermen, and other workers take pride in work with similar characteristics. They do this by translating problems into challenges and boredom into opportunity—by creating a non-ordinary reality in their stories. People who bullshit create heroic images of themselves; they can only do this by consenting to a reality in which activities become more worthwhile as they become more frustrating or challenging.

The road reality woven by hitchhikers includes little that is ordinary. People exclude any discussion of routine events. When hitchhikers wait a long time for rides, they begin to make the wait itself a source of satisfaction, knowing they will be able to exaggerate it in a “longest wait” bullshitting contest. A boring afternoon can be transformed into a day among “hostile natives” who never pick up hitchhikers unless they decide to kill them. Similarly, a hitchhiker who runs out of money and pan-handles for change on a street corner can remake that experience into a story of generosity, where the hitchhiker manages to find a “good person” just as he is about to starve. In road reality, there are standard ways that experiences can be made more dramatic. Police regularly steal from those they arrest; remote rural areas are consistently full of wild and threatening creatures such as the abominable snowman, who invariably shows up when the hitchhiker is stranded; good parental figures show up when the traveler is lonely and in deep despair about the future; and there are always wonderful rock concerts and political rallies to attend where good people always share their drugs and sometimes their bodies.

The hitchhikers who leave the road present another picture of road life. Once they have no stake in maintaining the romantic and extraordinary reality of the road, they talk about the frustrations of waiting for rides, their anxieties about taking rides from drunken drivers, and the sleepless nights they have spent in strange cities because they did not know where to go and were afraid to sleep where they might get robbed or beaten up. They also talk about the menial quality of low-paying jobs taken to finance their travels.

When these disenchanted hitchhikers talk, they do not simply present an overabundance of “bad” road stories. They do not romanticize their discomforts. If they romanticize anything, it is the virtues of their goal—whether it is their home town, new job, or the place their girlfriend lives. They place their experiences in the reality of everyday life—where discomfort is stressed rather than challenge. Their disenchantment with hitchhiking is clear; they no longer find the road extraordinary.

¹⁶ This pattern is paralleled in other situations. People who gain occupational identity from a role tend to distinguish themselves those who assume the role as “amateurs.” Painters and photographers distinguish themselves from “hobbyists” (see, Christopherson, 1976) and professional thieves put down “punks” (Sutherland, 1937:1960).

For "engaged" hitchhikers the extraordinary reality of the road provides at least half the reason and much of the pleasure of traveling. Rather than having to see themselves as nobodies in their home communities, working at low status jobs or living off their families, they can use the road reality to transform similar types of work and dependence on the road into wonderful adventures. They can become road heroes, fighting terrible fates and encouraging good ones, playing with their identities and making self-presentation a source of pleasure rather than despair. While they are on the road, they know who they are and like it.

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