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Anthropology of the Crowd, Blog 4

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THE LATE GREAT BIKE RACE

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Victoria Gupton

THE NOT-SO-LATE GREAT FIRST POST

August 31, 2015 • guptonvh

This site will (hopefully) be an exploration into what the UCI Road World Championships leaves behind in our great city of Richmond after all is said and done. After the estimated quarter of a million visitors flood our town, what will be left for archaeologists and anthropologists of the future to find? What deductions will they make about us and our society?

I'm not sure, but I do hope to find out.

THE RACE WITH HALF A MILLION FACES

September 7, 2015 • guptonvh

What does a race with half a million faces look like?

Will it be the many faces of families, or the singular faces of individual and couples?

What will their skin look like?

What will they sound and dress like?

What will be in their wallets?

While I would certainly hope that an international race such as this would be as diverse as the world, my gut, or maybe my cynicism, says that the crowd

for this race will be upper class, white, Americans and Europeans. Again, that may sound cynical, but the question really is this: who has the money to travel far and wide for a *bike race*?

Westerners. Westerners with money to travel and time to spend not worrying about the opportunity costs of missing school/work/what-have-you to actually view the race.

Of course there will certainly be exceptions to this, and honestly I hope I'm wrong. I hope the half a million faces traveling to our beloved city will meld seamlessly with the population here- who for all intents and purposes look about as diverse as the population of the world. I hope to see hijabs and saris, and as many shades of skin as there are colors in ROYGBIV.

What I hope and what I logically conclude may be two different things, but in the end without the hope of change there is no change, so I'll go into this race hoping for half a million faces I can scarcely imagine right now.

I'll go into this race hoping for the best.

WHAT ASPECT OF THE CROWD DID YOU FIND MOST INTERESTING?

September 30, 2015 • guptonvh

“Hi, do you have a minute to-“ I started.

She shook her head vigorously from side to side.

“Oh, uh... thank you for your time.”

This embarrassing yet hilarious scenario happened on more than one occasion, and I found it both incredibly fascinating while albeit, a little dismaying. Most of the folks I approached, even if they were hesitant or

skeptical, still obliged to answer my questions; it was those that refused to answer that peaked my interest.

The first time it happened was with a little Italian lady who I was very much excited to interview. She was in a crowd of other Italy supporters and as soon as I approached her she shook her head as if to say, “No, not today, please don’t even try.” While I’m fairly certain that this was because she didn’t speak English, I had no idea what to do or say back in response, so I simply thanked her, and walked away. My first reaction was to think of how rude she was, outright rejecting a young girl who just wanted to ask her a few questions, but those thoughts quickly faded. What would I have done if I were in another country, in a large crowd, approached by a stranger speaking a different language? Well I would shake my head and say no thank you.

The second time this happened went very similarly, with a young man who said in broken English, “No, no English. Thank you.” This time I understood, so I smiled, thanked him, and tried again.

WHAT WAS THE HARDEST PART OF COLLECTING THE DATA ABOUT THE SPECTATORS?

September 30, 2015 • guptonvh

Good statistical procedure—that was the goal. Approaching the crowd without a set method of attaining these random interviews posed a dual challenge wherein I had to ensure that I 1) wasn’t just interviewing one particular type of person, i.e. just men, just women, just people of one race because of my own particular preferences and comfort; and 2) that I wasn’t skewing that data by intentionally seeking out different types of people. While I may only have taken a basic statistics class, I knew that my own personal biases would get in the way of collecting accurate data.

For the first two or three interviews I collected I, unknowingly at the time, sought out only older women. The women I approached were in my comfort zone and safety nestled into my little spreadsheet, never to be heard of again. Only after seeing the data side by side on my spreadsheet did I realize what I was doing, and why. I knew the race crowd was comprised of more than these old women. My solution? I needed to expand my comfort zone and even step out of it at times and force myself to interview people of all ages, races, and genders. While I don't know the end results of the bike race statistics, I hope I managed to find a balance that accurately reflected the crowd. Only time will tell.

WHAT OTHER TYPES OF DATA ABOUT THE CROWD MEMBERS DID YOU WISH YOU HAD COLLECTED?

September 30, 2015 • guptonvh

In retrospect, while the data I collected is certainly useful, I wish I'd asked how many miles people traveled to get to the bike race. This single question implies so much and would have offered a whole new facet of analysis.

For example, what is the single largest limiting factor to human travel? Money.

While asking something such as, "What is your total household income?" would be an overly intrusive question for this project, dealing with sensitive subject matter, the amount of money individuals have to spend on leisure time and travel is fascinating. From which countries did people travel the farthest, and thus spend the most money, to view the race? Is this typical for this country, or unheard of? This question would give anthropologists of the future an idea as to what countries at the time produced citizens who could not only forgo the opportunity costs that come with missing work, etc., but also could spend large sums of money to travel for leisure.

This question is absolutely fascinating, for it reflects the present day world class system. What types of people are most likely to travel long distances for an event such as this? While I unfortunately did not collect this data, I certainly hope other groups did because it is data critical to analysis of the crowd.

DO YOU THINK THE SAMPLE OF HUMANITY IN THE BIKE RACE CROWD ACCURATELY REFLECTS THE “GLOBAL POPULATION” OF THE WORLD? WHY OR WHY NOT?

October 1, 2015 • guptonvh

My inner skeptic is a little too smug. Before the race I'd guessed that the crowd would, unfortunately, not reflect the global population of the world, predominately because of costs. Not everyone in this world has the financial stability to not only forgo the opportunity costs associated with taking time off to attend the event, but the ability to bear the upfront costs of traveling to and attending the race. Who did I think would be able to do this?

Westerners, particularly white Westerners. This may sound presumptuous, or even prejudice at first, but statistically the overwhelming majority of the world's wealth is held in the hands of white Westerners. Citizens from privileged countries such as Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom, America, etc., all have citizens who financially are able to travel the distance to see the race, countries in Sub Saharan Africa, East Asian, and the like simply don't have these resources except among a select few. While this is an unfortunate reality it is still reality, and cannot be ignored.

This is not all to say that the race was some white washed event. As they say, “don't throw the baby out with the bathwater.” The race was no doubt a breeding ground for international citizens to interact and appreciate one

another, but a few passionate citizens of a handful of countries does not make up for the large majority of the world not reflected in the crowd.

Anthropologists of the future will hopefully look back at this inequality and laugh at how things used to be, but for now we can only try to seek out a future where this will be possible.

WHAT CAN A HOLISTIC, ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON HUMAN VARIATION CONTRIBUTE TO HOW WE UNDERSTAND OURSELVES AND OTHERS?

October 1, 2015 • guptonvh

In much the same way we seek to learn from past mistakes in both our lives as well as our shared histories, a holistic anthropological perspective on variation within the bike race crowd allows for just one snapshot of what life was like during that one week in September 2015. If done correctly, the data collected during that week will reflect what life was like. Who is able to go to the races and in what proportions? What can we deduce about the limiting factors of attendance? What groups dominate, and what groups are not represented at all?

These questions, which ideally can be answered, or at least hypothesized by future anthropologists, will serve as benchmarks. Where were we, where are we now, and where are we going? The myriad factors which play into attendance of the race reflect our world socially, economically, politically, and culturally at this very moment. In the future they will hopefully look at the inequities of attendance between states and laugh, because the world then is far more equal. This will hopefully be the case again and again as society as a whole learns from their past mistakes and creates a better world in turn. The data collected from the race will hopefully allow us to understand that it

is our job as citizens of the world in 2015 to fight for equality in the darkest corners of the world in the hope that one day we can see the world's most marginalized people have the ability to travel across the globe to enjoy an international event such as this.

WHAT WAS ONE DAY'S WORTH OF DATA COLLECTION LIKE? HOW DID IT GO? WHAT WOULD YOU CHANGE ABOUT THE WAY YOU COLLECTED DATA?

October 2, 2015 • guptonvh

One day's worth of collect was, in sum, exciting and hectic all at once. Navigating the crowd and not being quite sure of where I was and was not allowed to go, or where the best spot to collect data was, was no doubt frazzling but it came together soon enough. I quickly discovered that I had to interview people in between race cycles because people were, understandably, very focused on seeing the racers. Thus I would conduct an interview, maybe two, then stand back and just wait for the sound of cow bells and shouting to subside.

Personally, the people watching aspect of attending the race was phenomenal. I've never been to something quite the size of this race and just being able to sit and watch people go by was enough for me. The crazy wigs and face paint, scarves and flags, drew me in. While on the whole my day of collection went very well, if I could re-do it I'd change the format in which I collected data. I made the mistake of trying to navigate a huge spreadsheet on my tiny little phone screen and sometimes left people waiting for the next question simply because it took too long to type the answer to the previous one. Next time I would print out a spreadsheet with enough space to write out people's answers and import them later digitally.

Other than this one minor hiccup everything went smoothly, and I wouldn't change a thing.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE RACE CROWD? IS IT WHAT YOU EXPECTED?

October 2, 2015 • guptonvh

As mentioned in previous blog posts, the crowd indeed was what I expected, and while of course there were a few outliers here and there, the general consensus I gathered was that the majority of race attendees were from Western countries, countries which typically produce citizens wealthy enough to make the hike out to Richmond and enjoy the race. However, if I were to describe the race in three words, much like my interviewees were required to, I'd say that it was proud, eager, and patriotic.

While I don't think there were as many countries represented as I'd like, particularly the poor countries of the world, the ones that were represented wanted you to know they were there. There were citizens old and young that did everything short of getting their nationality tattooed on their faces to let you know where they were from, and many of them I was lucky enough to get pictures of.

Even though racially and ethnically the crowd was about what I expected, I didn't expect the enthusiasm to be quite at the level I saw. I thought shirts and flags would be present, sure, but I didn't expect 90 year olds to dye their hair their national colors. The pride was palpable, and contagious—even I couldn't stop myself cheering for the American bikers.

WHY IS MEASURING VARIATION IN A CROWD IMPORTANT? WHAT CAN WE LEARN ABOUT VARIATION FROM THIS TYPE OF SAMPLE?

October 3, 2015 • guptonvh

Crowd variation translates directly into crowd diversity, something we certainly stress here at VCU. Variation in race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation—just to name a few—are critical to learning to empathize and gain consciousness into the human experience as a whole. Without this variation you're essentially locking yourself in a box and throwing away the key. One cannot learn from a textbook how to empathize with humanity; that is gained from pure personal experience with those one would typically consider "other."

This Us versus Them mentality is what starts wars and creates genocide. As my favorite author John Green once said, "There is no them, there are only facets of us." We learn not to separate Us and Them in just this way, in experience with cultures and peoples starkly different than our own. International events like the bike race bridge this gap and serve a purpose far greater than entertainment value; they serve to help humanity in its never ending goal to simply be better. Variation, therefore, is critical; it can save your life.

THE HAVES AND THE HAVE NOTS

October 3, 2015 • guptonvh

Throughout my blogging and experience with the bike race I've undoubtedly put emphasis on certain factors, particularly those of money and race. I do this because this is what's important to me, the social justice of the race. I find it appalling that in a so called international race that some parties are left

out because of inequality. No everyday citizen in Indonesia, India, Pakistan, or myriad African countries could even begin to think about attending the race; it's simply economically unfeasible to do so. Not acknowledging the have and the have nots of the race is simply blinding one's self into thinking we live in a flat, equal world, when that is simply not the case.

The world's poor consistently get the short end of the stick. They don't get to enjoy the magic that I experienced walking through that bright and colorful crowd. If I've learned anything from these experiences it's just that—to always be aware of the haves and have nots, because it is our goal as humans to bridge the gap between the two. I sincerely hope that at least being cognizant of these facts will allow us as a species to take one step further into creating a world where everyone can join in on the international cooperation that creates events like the bike race, and everyone can have the opportunity to walk down that bright street with me.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSEMBLAGE!

October 27, 2015 • guptonvh







Above all else, I think (and simultaneously hope) archaeologist of the future will find flags. Dozens of flags in various shapes and sizes. I hope they find little bits caught on a stranger, ripped and washed down a drain, or even whole flags if they're lucky enough, lost in an act most unpatriotic by their owners.

Next to flags, bike parts and car parts have got to be a close second. There is no way that many bikes made is all those miles unscathed, surely a bike tire popped and landed in a remote location, to be found years to come.

Other than that I can think of nothing else but simply trash to be found, which is not necessarily bad. What did people of the past drink at world events like these? Beer. Beer. And more beer. Surely a crumpled beer can or far too expensive beer cup will be found in the future.

Whether it be a flag, a piece of tire, or a bottle cap, I certainly hope that archaeologists of the future get at least a glimpse of who we are, or were, in that one week in September 2015.