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Notes

¹ I thank Ed Epping for this observation.

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An ethnography of a neighbourhood café: informality, table arrangements and background noise

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Abstract: Café society is something that many of us as customers and/or social theorists take for granted. Cafés are places where we are not simply served hot beverages but are also in some way partaking of a specific form of public life. It is this latter aspect that has attracted the attention of social theorists, especially Jürgen Habermas, and leads them to locate the café as a key place in the development of modernity. Our approach to cafés is to 'turn the tables' on theories of the public sphere and return to just what the life of a particular café consists of, and in so doing re-specify a selection of topics related to public spaces. The particular topics we deal with in a 'worldly manner' are the socio-material organisation of space, informality and rule following. In as much as we are able we have drawn on an ethnomethodological way of doing and analysing our ethnographic studies.



Figure 1. The Flaming Cup

Suburbia. Nestling just off a traffic jammed city road, beside a hairdressers and a mobile phone shop, yellow paint flaking off to reveal a 60's funky purple, is the 'Flaming Cup Café'. In the wind its metal panel cutout cup, with flames, swings back and forth creaking. On the pavement outside a sandwich board advertises 'tea, cakes and sandwiches' in brightly coloured fake chalk on a blackboard background. It opens at nine in the morning and is closed by around 4pm. At lunchtime it gets jam-packed with local residents and office workers because it is one of only two cafés in a fairly large suburban neighbourhood.

The authors of this article found the Flaming Cup whilst carrying out ethnographic fieldwork on a 'high tech' ICT project called 'Living Memory' (LiMe). There is not the space here to do justice to the multiple ambitions of LiMe's 3 years of research which drew on the skills of concept designers, interaction designers, creative designers, software engineers, prototype builders, programmers, web-site developers, information scientists, ergonomists, psychologists and more (however see Whyte, Laurier and Buckner 2000). The particular 'slice of LiMe' we will present in this article is based on our ethnographic study of pre-existing communities of practice in

a suburban neighbourhood and also describing what occurred when a number of prototypes were introduced to the 'locals' (see also Whyte, Buckner & Laurier, forthcoming.). During our fieldwork we dealt with a number of community settings (primary schools, a small public lending library, a large shopping mall, a medical centre, 3 pubs, a bi-annual charity fair, a historic building which housed a local history society, church societies, notice boards and a residential street).¹ In this article the public place we would like to concentrate on, for a number of reasons, is the Flaming Cup café. As it happens the Flaming Cup also served as a site for carrying out field trials of a table with an intelligent information interface.² Testing our prototype electronic coffee table in a café provided a wonderful opportunity to do a kind of 'breaching experiment' in the socio-material order of such a place, an intervention which sharpened many of our observations of the ordinary functioning of the cafe.

Before we move on to our ethnographic work it is worth reviewing some of the existing literature on the social life of cafes, the particular topics it has raised and the concerns with public space that arose out of our collaborative research.

A brief excursion on the historical rise of the café

Cafes and bars came to replace the street as the primary place for the common gathering of town and city residents in late seventeenth and early eighteenth century in Britain, Germany, and particularly nineteenth century France and Italy. In nineteenth century Britain, long after the golden epoch of the coffee houses, cafes and later tearooms were split off from bars which sold liquor, while in France and Italy no such strong division was made. Without going into any great detail it is worth noting that as a result of this historical evolution cafes in Britain have some key differences from those found in other countries in Europe by dint of this lengthy separation from the consumption of alcohol. Cafes in the UK have tended to specialise in providing tea, coffee and other soft drinks, along with simple dishes.³ They tend to keep the same opening times as high street shops (i.e. 9-5.30-ish and Monday to Saturday). In the last decade of the twentieth century in the UK cafes and bars have begun to merge into places closer to their French or Italian counterparts. Bars have extended their function into the provision of quality food and non-alcoholic hot drinks. Meanwhile many cafes have sought licenses to sell alcohol and extended their evening opening hours (sometimes beyond those of bars). At the same time there has been a more general boom in coffee drinking at the expense of both tea and alcohol, which has led to numerous new franchises such as Costa Coffee, Starbucks and Café Nero opening places which might once again be called 'coffee houses'.

Historical sociologists such as Jürgen Habermas (1989) have rooted grand claims about the rise of the public sphere in amongst the everyday world of coffee houses in Britain, *salons* in France and *Tischgesellschaften* (table societies) in Germany. These were places, according to Habermas, where a new form of public life involving politics, letters and culture could emerge from the previous opposition between the private realm of civil society and the family, and the public sphere of the state and the court. Habermas points toward the manner in which periodicals such as the Guardian Newspaper and the Spectator Magazine were intimately interwoven with the coffee houses in the early eighteenth century. Coffee houses were places where affairs of the state, national events of the day, notorious court cases, political scandals and civil etiquette were discussed and argued over. They were places where sociable reading occurred, since it was the reading of journals and periodicals in the cafes that provided the basis for the talk of public life that occurred (Haine 1996). So interlinked were the coffee houses and the reading of periodicals that letters to the editors of these papers could be submitted directly at the coffee houses in specially designed post boxes (Habermas 1989, p42). Coffee houses, as Habermas elegantly celebrates them -

...preserved a kind of social intercourse that, far from pre-supposing the equality of status, disregarded status altogether. The tendency replaced the celebration of rank with a tact befitting equals. The parity on whose basis alone the authority of the better argument could assert itself against that of social hierarchy and in the end carry the day meant, in the thought of the day, the parity of "common humanity". Private gentlemen made up the public not just in the sense that power and prestige of public office were held in suspense; economic dependencies also in principle had no influence. Laws of the market were suspended as were laws of the state. Not that this idea of the public was actually realized in earnest in the coffee houses; but as an idea it had become institutionalized and thereby stated as an objective claim. (Habermas 1989, p36)

Picking up once again on these utopian qualities of cafes though this time with reference to nineteenth century working class cafes in France, Haine (1996) proposes the ideal of a café of that place and period -

The café provided an opportune space in which to create relations based on spontaneous solidarity. This fleeting fraternity rested on three values. The first was selectivity - that is, the freedom of participants in café sociability to converse with whomever they wished. The second value was autonomy - the right not to be

interrupted by third parties once you had begun to talk with a particular person or group. The third involved the idea of tolerance - that is, the concept that no one in the café should take offense at the minor irritations and insults that accompanied socializing in a small space amid a dense urban agglomeration. (Haine 1996, p150)

From even this very brief reading of the socio-historical literature on cafés we can get a sense then of cafés as places where social status is on a quite different footing than in a palace, council chamber or family kitchen. They are public places where common codes of conduct are adhered to, *informal* and yet as Haine hints there are values specific to them as *places of that type* which guide norms of behaviour for their customers.⁴

Ethnographic studies of table waiting work and cyber-cafes

In Haine's historical descriptions of working class cafés in Paris he provides a rich fund of details on their operation and the etiquette that was expected in each. He does much in fact to give life to Habermas' somewhat scant depiction of cafés as places where 'ideas' could become institutionalised. In our ethnographic work we have sought to avoid using a *theory* of the public sphere and the private sphere since our criticism of Habermas' version of the life of cafes is that it is subservient to his need to try and give life to an idea from social theory rather than give us an idea of the life of cafés. As we noted earlier, Haine's work is one source for historical material on how cafés were organised in Europe, a perhaps still more sympathetic account can be found, not in research specifically on the social life of cafés (of which there is a paucity), but on ethnographies of restaurants. William F. Whyte, an American sociologist who had previously carried out an ethnographic study of a slum (the renowned 'Street Corner Society', 1943) studied how the activities of work were distributed in a restaurant between waiters, kitchen staff and customers (Whyte 1949). His early studies on waiting on tables formed part of the inspiration for Goffman's doctoral research in a small hotel in Scotland much of which focussed on co-ordinating the team performance of the dining hall staff of the hotel (Goffman 1956).

In the contemporary period these studies have been revisited by, firstly, researchers interested in particular forms of labour relation and performance required by the service industries and, secondly, by researchers who are looking at the newly emerged variants frequently referred to as cybercafés (Nunes 1999; Wakeford 1999). An outstanding example of the former is Crang's (1994) study of 'Smokey Joe's', a restaurant where the performance of the staff is seen to be of equal or greater value to customers than the food itself. 'Dining as theatre.' And what Crang brought out for us to see is the fine details and many rules (including step-by-step scripting of

the waiter's actions by the restaurant's owners) by which the 'spontaneous solidarity' of a restaurant comes to succeed or fail. More than that he reminds us that these 'informal' gathering places are hardly utopian when the actual labour which manufactures their ambience is made conspicuous. Labour which relied on the craft skills of Smokey Joe's staff as much as the management's scripts for their performances.

Crang describes how he, as a waiter, through his performance of various well-rehearsed techniques involving displays of attentiveness, pre-occupation or simple motion, produced table service. For instance, when food was late during busy periods, he looked furiously at the kitchen and thereby performed his role as the 'concerned waiter' to the expectant diners. Offering us a window into the expert ways in which managers create the ambience of an informal place he reports that the manager urged the waiting staff to keep moving, even if they had no immediate tasks to do, because their movement made the restaurant buzz. Crang also further details how his body movements were implicated in the organising of the restaurant space: thus 'walking with a determinedly quick stride' was a way of displaying that he was busy and thus brushing off all but the most determined customers and at the same time tempering customer frustration since his bodily movement was showing he was dutifully serving as quick as possible. In his depiction of customers clicking their fingers to summon waiting staff, whilst the staff muttered 'I'm not a dog' in response, he reminds us of the subordinate status of the staff and that such performances are, though highly polished, not always happy or willing ones.

In Nina Wakeford's (1999) ethnography of a cybercafé she draws on Crang's work to examine how a 'landscape of computing' (p180) is produced by the staff and customers in a 'real' place. She notes how carefully the café's décor was arranged to produce a sense of its 'cyber'-ness - only using certain colours for its walls and furnishing its supporting surfaces in matt silver metal. Beyond the assembly of materials it was the activities of customers and staff, as she puts it toward the end of her article, that brought the café to life:

Bodies-in-movement produce and incorporate accounts of their journeys as they encounter durable materials and discourses in the landscape of translation. Customers walked around the café floor interacting with both machines and cyberhosts (part of the café staff), consuming machines and food, experiencing the décor and music and hearing the history of NetCafé.

Her account is unusual in the cyberspace literature for its lack of hyperbole about technology and its willingness to see the routine grounds for doing

computing in a café. As the quote suggests Wakeford also has a sense of the café not as a static map-like space which contains the rules for its use in various material artefacts and texts but rather as a place in which actions unfold sequentially combining, translating and disconnecting the human and non-human parts of the cybercafé.

Cafes: The Missing What or Where the Action Is

All too often social and cultural studies of public space and community gathering places pass over the 'just thisness' or 'what' of our activities in favour of relating these 'various extant social practices back to a context-free "core" of rules, norms and other social structures' (Lynch 1993, p272). Drawing on an example given by Garfinkel of the status relations between jazz musicians as a classic sociological case of 'missing the what' of playing jazz, Lynch re-announces ethnomethodology's policies of describing just what such activities as playing jazz are.⁵ In terms of the study of public places (Watson 1993) puts it thus:

What ... I am recommending is a new sociology of knowledge which does not seek to operate from 'on high', imputing overarching perspectives to groups, or societies 'as wholes', as the Karls Marx and Mannheim (plus countless others) have done, but a sociology of knowledge which addresses peoples' practices, their typifications/categorisations in action, their activities and interactions, their communicative interactions conceived in the broadest sense. (p. 23)

It is no surprise then that we are indifferent to Habermas' overarching theory of the public sphere even though we still wish to consider the ordinary conceptions about cafes it exploits to build its topic (confusing natural language's resources with its own, Garfinkel and Sacks 1970, p337). Our concern is with the 'ground floor' (Lee and Watson 1993) understanding of cafés that is available and accomplished by the people and things that inhabit those coffee-scented settings,⁶ a located knowledge of the kind which we can find in Crang and Wakeford's ethnographies.

At ground level the city crowd, as we encounter it, has been treated reductively by many urban theorists as consisting of a crowd of 'strangers' (Hannerz 1980; Lofland 1973). Yet if we join that crowd of strangers for a moment we find that they are not all homogeneously seen or treated as 'strangers'. From a quick look around we see: members of a bus stop queue, tourists being lead by a guide, teenagers hanging out, babies in prams, strollers, window shoppers, security guards, browsers, families, street cleaners, newspaper sellers, beggars, film stars, and of course, customers in

a café (Lee & Watson 1993; Ryave & Schenkein 1974). Our ethnomethodological interest in a city neighbourhood leads us in the direction of trying to show the 'real-world' and 'real-time' ways in which places and their inhabitants (temporary or otherwise) are displayed and seen for what they are.⁷ As Crabtree writes:

To this it might be added that as the performance of situated activities relies upon the practised and competent use of material arrangements, and as there is a distinct uniqueness to materially embodied spaces (hence our being able to distinguish bus stations from supermarkets, golf courses from football pitches), that many of the arrangements, practices and competencies explicated will also be unique, tied essentially to the particular settings 'within' which they are located (to bus stations, supermarkets, golf courses, football pitches and the rest. (Crabtree 2000, p10)

A further adjustment that we wish to make in our ethnomethodologically-informed approach is to shift from a work-setting to a consumption-setting. We would not wish to imply that consumption is opposed to, or is separable from 'work', consuming is qualitatively, if not quantitatively, just as much work as producing is. Equally workplaces have been treated by sociologists as prime sites of consumer practices (Du Gay 1996). Our ambition is to alert the reader to a change in the general topic of our ethnomethodologically-informed ethnography from traditional studies of work *as* work (Garfinkel 1988; Harper and Hughes 1993) to consumption *as not only* work.⁸ To put it simply we are interested in how the 'customers' of cafes and bars accomplish 'doing being customers' (in the sense of keeping the worlds of cafes and bars 'utterly mundane' (Sacks 1992: pp215-221) more than we are interested in how the staff organise the work of producing service in these places (Cavan 1973; Crang 1994; Wakeford 1999; Whyte 1949).

An exemplary ethnomethodological study of a place with rules guiding conduct, and how these rules were used by its inhabitants, which guided our enquiry was Wieder's (1974) study of a convict's halfway house. An unlikely milieu for comparison with a café perhaps yet Wieder's study provided inspiration in terms of its treatment of the convict's code as preserving and producing the *sense of the place* in which it was implicated. In Wieder's case it was the code of loyalty amongst the residents of a halfway house: a 'language' which was initially somewhat opaque to Wieder and had to be acquired by inhabiting the halfway house for a reasonable period of time. In our case it was elements of café life which, paraphrasing Wittgenstein, were hard for us to analyse precisely because they seemed obvious and we frequently overlooked them. It was Latour's (1992) work on

the important organisational features of 'things' which provided a pointer toward 'where the action is' in the Flaming Cup. Also, as we noted at the beginning of this article, by altering certain mundane pieces of 'equipment' in the café (notably the furniture and the background noise) as part of our prototype testing other orderly features of the setting were brought from the background to the foreground. Most important of all we learnt a great deal about the life of our café by becoming *regulars*, thereby following the ordinary paths through which a person *becomes* a regular and finding ourselves with the particular rights and obligations that go along with this mundane identity.

All of the above has been related to the question which had arisen for us as part of our collaborative work with designers was whether 'informal public places' (like cafés and bars) were less codified rule-bound and institutionalised than workplaces, as argued by Habermas (1989) and Haine (1996).⁹ Whether, although characterisable as places where people have "greater freedom in interpretation of their roles' requirements" (Misztal 2000: p8), they actually *were* places where people reflexively played with their roles in a persistent and remarkable manner. One thing we were certain of was that the best place to try and learn about informality was a place like the Flaming Cup, which we had come upon in our suburb as a place of that kind. So we knew where to go without yet interrogating how we had come to have such an immediate sense of the Flaming Cup as an informal place.¹⁰

Ultimately the interactions which we considered significant to the informal settings that we were considering were selected on the basis of four elements (which were based on Wieder 1974, p73):

1. The interactions were observable as regular, repeated patterns of interaction. We were able to see the patterns day in, day out in the places we were investigating and those patterns persisted even as the staff and customers in those places changed.
2. The orderly nature of informal interaction, although of some concern to the customers of cafes and bars, was of high professional relevance to the staff of the cafes and bars. Producing 'informality' or 'intimacy' or 'a sense of community' as well as clean tabletops, fresh cups of coffee or pint glasses or real ale were the requirements of the staff of these venues.
3. The patterns of informal interaction were of relevance to our research in another fundamental way, since drawing on actor-network theory (Latour 1992) and ethnomethodologically informed ethnography, we have set aside *a priori* explanations (such as sociological theories, political economic structures and so forth) in order to see informality as it is accomplished on each occasion by the members/actants in our sites of interest. The sense, then, of what is happening *as informal*

interaction is through reference to what any competent customer of those places knows of informality, be they a solicitor's secretary, cultural geographer, designer, police officer or delivery driver.

4. From the numerous interactions occurring in the settings, we have selected those revolving around and constitutive of the 'table' in those places. Again reflecting the premises of actor-network theory, the table is treated as a relational entity which is multiple and mobile whose stability and organisational features are accomplished in use.

Rules for reserving tables at the Flaming Cup



Figure 2. Instruction to the user of an informal setting: 'When the shop is busy- please queue for food before taking a seat that way everyone is happy. -Thank you'

Many of the most exclusive restaurants in Europe require the booking of a table months in advance, indeed in some cases up to a year in advance. Some may not even allow a table to be booked *unless* the customer is already in some way known to them. Merely booking a table is a first step in the *production of formality* in these kinds of socially exclusive restaurants

(Finkelstein 1981). At the Flaming Cup Café there is a sign on the door (see Fig.1) requesting that during busy periods customers do *not* attempt to reserve a seat before they have queued up at the counter to order their food. The sign is hard to miss, written as it is on a lilac-coloured A4 sheet of paper, secured with blue-tack at the average height off the ground where most customers will find its instruction directly in front of their gaze. It is also situated above a small pink sign which contains a warning about a ramp surface which customers might miss their footing on. After you become a regular at the Flaming Cup Café then you know the rule and the warning by way of knowing, how, where and when it applies.

For the staff this DIY pink sign was an ever vigilant yet friendly (it is, after all, handwritten, polite in tone and pink) doorkeeper (Latour 1992). It is a doorkeeper in the sense that it is passing on an instruction to those who enter the café, not only reminding customers to behave in a manner that suits the staff's need for maximum turnover of customers per table but also implicated in how an entrant to the Flaming Cup sees the scene ahead of them. For the staff if the sign's rule is followed then during busy periods the tables need never lie empty, and thus unavailable for eating or drinking at, due to a queuing customer having deposited their bag or coat on the seat to 'reserve' a table. For the customers the sign indicates the correct conduct they and others should adopt during a busy period to fit in with the ways things are done at the Flaming Cup. Of course the Flaming Cup's request is not a highly idiosyncratic or unusual way of getting the business of a café done; customers are familiar with such requests in other cafes and are unlikely to be confused or angered by it ('what the hell do they mean, queue first then take a table!'). Though barely requiring more than a moment's registering, the ink-on-pink sign *frames* the entrance to the Flaming Cup as a cheap and inclusive place to dine since it is those kinds of places which write and post their rules in such a way and as one of the first items *in your way*.¹¹

In their ethnomethodological analysis of queuing Lee and Watson (1993) tease out the 'minimum adequate organisational form for the establishing of turn order, direction etc.' (p46). Unlike many analyses of the organisation of space their attention to the fine details and ordinary understandings of the members actually doing the queuing picks out, amongst other aspects, the dynamic features of the queue. They show how the queue although apparently having static categories (such as head of the queue, second in the queue, tail end of the queue) nevertheless *moves* members through its order from one category to the next. Each member of a queue has a 'moral requirement' to be aware of their changing place in the order of the queue and to take their turn promptly or they will be susceptible to justified complaints from people further down the line. What we are looking at is some of the spacing of organisation and organising of space that lies before

and after the queuing sequence in our café. The doorway with its sign thus provides a sequential order to the space which customers are about to enter (and by entering through the café door with its audible creaking hinge and tinkling bell they are immediately placed into the category 'candidate customer'). The sequential order as we summarise it, though it can be decomposed into smaller units¹² is:

Join the queue
Take a seat

However there are many 'tactics' (De Certeau 1984) customers utilise to get around the 'queue-first, seat-second' rule such as by simply ignoring it and reserving seats with an item such as a coat or a bag. And it is worth bearing in mind that if enough customers tactically ignore the text-on-the-door then it will no longer be seen as a relevant rule once inside the café, it would clearly be a sign that everyone ignores (as in the classic wasteland sign "no dumping" with piles of rubbish lying beside it). Also there are customers to whom its rule fails to apply, such as those who are picking up take-away food, yet their display of queuing at the counter assists in the apparent observance of the rule. Additionally they are clearly not going to break the rule by not taking a seat when they have finished queuing. They are able to see in the writing on the pink card the members to whom the rule applies.

Returning to the 'ignorants' (as we will call those who break the rule without the matter being raised by other customers or the staff) who place a coat, hat, bag or other personal item on the table; why is it that their placing of a 'deposit' to hold their seat succeeds even though it is breaking the rule?¹³ Perhaps because objects that can be seen by everyone to be someone else's possessions (or 'possessional territory', (Goffman 1971, p38) can only be interfered with at some degree of risk by a stranger, even when the possessions are being used to break a rule.¹⁴ To move someone else's coat or a bag off a chair breaks a more fundamental rule of public places while following another which means that the 'mover' is liable to be challenged with: 'do you mind!' or 'hey get your hands off my jacket!', 'stop thief!' or a similar accusation. Size of the seating area matters in the use of possessions in this way; the Flaming Cup is a small café where the staff and customers can see almost every other customer at a glance. In a larger more anonymous dining area (such as was found at a nearby shopping mall) the risk of actually having one's coat stolen should it be left reserving a table was proportionately greater. Not only can a reserver no longer so easily monitor their reserving item, the staff monitor their seated customers, but also regulars become further diluted.¹⁵

Being able to deploy the personal-items-on-seat tactic is further

dependent on the socio-materially ordered manner in which members enter a place. If we consider for a moment one of the exclusive formal restaurants mentioned at the outset of this section; reserving a seat with a coat or bag *just cannot be done* since customers on entering the restaurant are shown to their table (which thereby generally becomes theirs for the duration of their meal) or to some other distinct holding area such as the bar or cocktail lounge by the waiting staff. Moreover allocation of customers to tables is almost entirely done in advance by telephone, letter or e-mail bookings etc.

The Flaming Cup's rule of non-reservation is gotten around by a more subtle tactic if there are a group of customers dining together. Just as a person might divide off their belongings to stake a seating claim so arriving packs of people splitting into table reservers and queuers and thus 'bending' the rule by presenting a situation whereby the group (as a unit) can be seen to be complying with it in part since some of the group are immediately queuing and at the same time disobeying it since the other part of group are reserving seats. So we can see that an element of informality is written not just on to the pink card on the door but also into the flexibility inherent in the ways in which seating can be taken by newly arrived customers and its reliance on a degree of craftily established compromise amongst 'locals', 'ignorants' and the 'polite' customers. Taking this as evidence that "informal" rules allow for greater play with roles would only be justified if we treated rules as self-sufficient items, whereas rules even in very "formal" settings are followed and shown to be followed in multiple ways (Sharrock & Button 1999).¹⁶

Unwritten visually displayed codes of conduct at the Flaming Cup

In Haine's (1996) history of working class cafés in Paris he points toward the arrival of the café *bar* where customers would "*faire une partie*" as key in increasing the sociability of these places (see esp. pp160-178). In contrast he asserts that: 'the dominance of the table in the eighteenth-century tavern had discouraged the intermixing of strangers and different groups' (p169). Certainly one of the contrasts between the Flaming Cup as a café and public houses in the same neighbourhood was the absence of a bar for eating or drinking at. Yet the furnishings of public places are not so crudely deterministic, they establish their order through practice and the common practice at the Flaming Cup which further secured its place as a neighbourhood café was *table-sharing*.

On entering the café during a busy period a first-time customer witnesses people sharing tables, and not just the pre-acquainted, since frequently lone customers and/or groups have arranged themselves at one of the round tables so as to politely disattend one another (see figure 6).¹⁷ A customer can see table-sitters as *unacquainted* by such discernible actions as:

sitting at separate tables, table-sharers avoiding each other's gazes (in a similar fashion to the way one can discern who are strangers and friends in a lift/elevator; Caesar 2000), orienting to other members of their group through conversation & glancing, moving their chairs farther away from each other or perhaps using reading-a-newspaper/magazine/book as a boundary marker if they are sitting alone. Many of the customers at the Flaming Cup are 'regulars' rather than first-time customers and so have built-up plenty of their own ethnographic experience of how things are done at the café, how to avoid making mistakes there and also in some respects how to avoid or encourage table-sharing. We will do no more than note here that the use of possessions such as coats or bags on spare chairs is one way of making an initial unwillingness to share and the possible indication that the seat so marked is being reserved for a queuer or an acquaintance yet to arrive at the café.

Table-sharing further produces a feeling of informality as unacquainted customers are put into a situation where there are plenty of opportunities to initiate a conversation.¹⁸ By sharing a table the customers can expect no easy exemption from 'small talk' from the other customers they are sharing with (Cavan 1973). Initiating and continuing small talk requires active work from the parties to the talk, and declining to respond also requires work to ensure that the decliner is not open to scorn and negative moral evaluation.

Despite being built of standardised steel, wood and Formica, being the same size and shape, with matching sets of chairs, not all tables are equal in the Flaming Cup. The arrangement of the tables within the space of Flaming Cup lent the individual tables differing value according to where they were positioned. The prime example of this feature being the window table (see fig. 3), which was almost constantly in use, and thus by far the most popular of the tables.

Since the tables in the Flaming Cup were of the same design (with the exception of two smaller tables that were fitted into two tight spots near the café's central pillar), they could be substituted into the window seat area and still be seen as the same 'window' seat. We took account of such arrangements in the introduction of our prototype table with its electronic augmentation. Indeed it was deliberately placed 'out of the way' inside the café (specifically, in the furthest corner from the serving counter and the windows). Even this table location was of a certain significance since a group of elderly women who were 'regulars' at the café used this table location consistently as 'their' table. During a pre-installation visit by Eric Laurier they wanted to know why their table was to be moved and what was going to be put in its place. They joked that whoever put the table in their place should expect "trouble". The fact that such a matter could be raised at all is the indication of the lease-like entitlements that regular customers acquire

to certain seating positions within a café, even though they are apparently only passing through for a cup of coffee or a sandwich like every other customer. And once again an indication of the way in which the seat reserving rule might run against the entitlements to seating of regulars.¹⁹ One of the clear benefits of being a 'regular' is, then, being given priority in the allocation of seating rights.

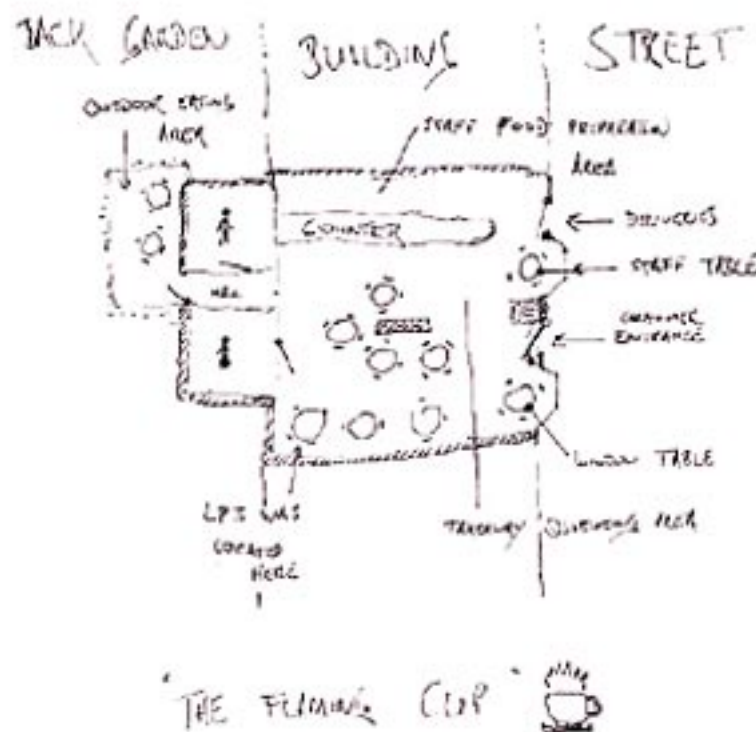


Figure 3. A table in a different place has a different value

For customers who wish to remain solitary during potentially busy periods in the café, the two smaller 2-seater tables could be chosen in preference to the larger 4-seater tables since table-sharing was less easy to accomplish at the 2-seater tables. At a 2-seater, a pair of unacquainted customers would sit directly opposite one another, and managing to avoid catching one another's gaze whilst dining required greater skill. By contrast with the 2-seater arrangement a single person occupying a 4-seater at a busy period was thereby opening themselves to the possibility of having to share. (This was the situation that led to the 'wedding photo' encounter described below.)

As Wieder (1974, pp78-79) notes in his ethnography of a halfway house, seating patterns at the six seater tables in their dining room could result in a resident 'getting stuck' when surrounded by five members of staff. In the halfway house where residents' maintenance of distance from staff was part of their code of conduct then this would lead to the 'stuck' resident getting up and moving to another table. Maintaining a boundary between staff and inmates was clearly not a central part of the code of behaviour at the 'Flaming Cup'; those sharing the seating were all, by one salient categorisation, customers.²⁰ For the purposes of eating or drinking in the café what was of import, aside from distinctions between regulars, irregulars and unknowns, was whether table-sharing was necessary at all. To this end, recently arrived customers could be seen to 'hover', visibly scanning the tables and their occupants to assess when they might be free and whether table sharing could be avoided and if not which table was sharable. From our fieldwork we were both witness to and part of table sharing (see below) and can assert its regularity as a feature of busy lunchtimes. As a common occurrence table sharing was, then, one of the ways in which the (passing) customers of the Flaming Cup were 'doing informality'. More than that it is also one significant manner of situation in which previously unacquainted residents and workers in a neighbourhood could be introduced to one another for the first time and just how that happens we will deal with subsequently.

The tabletop as a sequential phenomenon



Figure 4. A tabletop at the Flaming Cup with glasses ready to be cleared and soup and bread newly arrived (there is cutlery still wrapped in paper napkins behind the vertical card in the middle of the table)

So what does happen at tables in cafes? Clearly we are not going to provide an exhaustive list but we are, once again, going to turn to some of the day-in-day-out patterns of interaction which related to the arrangement of artefacts on the tabletop as relevant to the doing of informality. Fig. 4 is a typical picture of a table recently laid for two people to have lunch at the Flaming Cup. In other more formal eating places, the tables are often laid in advance, and part of the formality of such places is that the use of the tables for purposes other than eating is strictly limited.²¹ In more informal places, like the Flaming Cup, customers read newspapers, do paperwork, and play games on and off the tabletop whilst also consuming food and drink (see figs. 5, 6 & 7). Some parts of the table are nevertheless laid in advance by the staff of the Flaming Cup: at the beginning of each day a sugar bowl, a salt & a pepper shaker, a jug of milk and a small vase of flowers are placed in the centre of each table. In figure 4 there is also a piece of laminated paper with

brightly coloured illustrations standing upright in a menu holder which was part of the promotional material for a community website and newsletter run by our research project. These items fit into the middle of the table leaving the majority of the horizontal space free and in figure 4 that space is being occupied by some empty glasses, a bowl of soup and bread and butter. Much of the cutlery and crockery in the Flaming Cup was mismatched. There were no expensive delicate items, the assembled dining ware was instead a mish-mash of heavy-weight durable ceramics in either plain colours (moss green, peaty brown or white) with either a plain strip, woven pattern or the odd one with a light brown 'harvest pattern' of a wheat sheaf, fruit bowl and leaves. There was no franchise branding on any of the items (in contrast to the Starbucks mug just visible in figure 5). Cutlery was left at the counter in baskets and paper napkins were often hard to find.



Figure 5. Small coffee table at Starbucks, with closed book, pen, muffin, tall cappuccino, spectacles, sugar and writing on tabletop. We, from a customer's perspective, can see by the spatial arrangement of these things and by the unconsumed status of the food and drink that its occupant will not be leaving soon. For the staff of the cafe it does not appear to be ready for clearing.

For customers 'hovering' and the staff 'waiting' at the Flaming Cup, the visible status of the glasses in figure 4 as empty is an indication of the current position of the table's occupation relative to commencement and a possible completion of the meal.²² As the dining progresses the people at the table will be seen to be eating and, ultimately, when they are finished the cups, bowls, plates and sundries will be left in positions which indicate they are finished (i.e. noticeably empty and no longer being touched with fingers or cutlery, with napkins on top or beside them). Customers in Britain have been trained from being children in ways of indicating they are finished their meal such as arranging their cutlery in a certain fashion, saying "I'm finished thank you", or /and demanding the bill. At the Flaming Cup customers pay at the counter, and such local rules are further local knowledges to be acquired as part of being a regular. The collection by the staff of finished-with crockery and cutlery is relatively prompt, though not necessarily or excessively so, which is as one might expect from a more informal place. It may seem banal but the clearing away of artefacts from the table is important for customers and staff in finishing interactions appropriately in a café. For a recently arrived customer searching for a free table, seeing a full cup of coffee on a tabletop even though there are no other apparent signs of the table being occupied can prove problematic. Has the person that ordered the coffee nipped out to buy a parking ticket or to the toilet? Has the cup been delivered to the wrong table or moved from another one? Has the full cup been abandoned entirely by a previous customer and simply not been cleared away by the staff?²³

Discovering the status of a lone full coffee cup without other clues is thus in part reliant on the activities of the staff who clear the traces of the previous customers and can be expected to know the cup's biography. Whilst 'lipstick traces' were amongst the kind of ephemeral and informal memory that Living Memory as an electronic interaction recording mechanism aimed to sustain (Marcus 1989), a previous customer's 'lipstick traces' are the last thing that a diner wants to find on the glass that they are drinking out of. Clearing the table is not as mechanical as we may have implied so far, since the tabletop has to be wiped, the pre-laid items in the centre of the table are tidied and anything left behind is dealt with as is appropriate. During busy lunch-hours at the Flaming Cup this is often once the new customers have arrived and deposited further items on the tabletop. Sometime customers considerably wait standing beside the table, with perhaps one hand on the back of one of the chairs signalling their reservation of the table. However by standing and thereby making their waiting apparent they can also further pressurise staff to clear the table faster so that the customer's inconvenience is lessened.

Whilst clearing, if there is rubbish on the table then it has to be *found to be rubbish*, since if someone has accidentally left behind a letter, spectacles or their wallet, then the staff or the arriving occupants of the table have to assign these items to the category 'lost' (and not 'rubbish'). An example of this during our fieldwork was a bus ticket left on the table which had to be inspected for its expiry date to make sure it had been left behind because it was out of date rather than left by accident. At the point of clearing the table the leaving-customer may still be pursued to attempt to return their items to them, or if this is not convenient then the items will be kept with other lost property at the café. Items at the table are thus, in part, categorised and done with by their relation to members (as we hinted earlier in our description of the tactics of 'ignorants'). 'Things' cannot be left as 'traces' since they belong to various members (they are someone's things) and have certain functions for those members which they should serve. Who is allowed to leave traces on them is regulated by who they belong to and 'traces' themselves are not all of a kind. 'Madonna's lipstick traces' on a glass are not the same as an anonymous previous customer's lipstick traces or a friend's lipstick traces. A signature on a petition signed on the tabletop is not the same as a signature signed (as graffiti) on the tabletop. Each trace is dependent on the occasion out of which it arises and the occasion on which it will be recognised as a trace of some kind.

Reading and writing at the table



Figure 6. Large Coffee Table at Starbucks, note newspaper reading is done *off* the tabletop, facing toward an acquaintance (who is currently away from the table), and away from the empty chairs opposite. These large coffee tables by the windows were by far the most popular for sharing.

Beyond the organisation of crockery and cutlery for table clearing, setting and dining we would like to describe what else was happening on and off the tabletops since it is these other activities that are both traded upon by social theorists such as Habermas (1989) and Msztal (2000) or cultural analysts (Marcus 1989) and were the kinds of interactions that our engineering and design partners wished to augment.

Newspapers, magazines and children's books are kept centrally by the Flaming Cup on a small stand near the entrance as material that customers can borrow to read at their tables whilst eating. They are existing items closest in nature to our electronic coffee table prototype which carried a local electronic publication and information service. The paper and electronic forms of the publication and information could be read on the prototype table, but

the electronic reading materials were contained in a touchscreen which also formed part of the table's supportive surface as well as being the surface which had to be read. The practical implications of merging the supporting surface and the reading surface we will move on to shortly, beforehand we can briefly consider what happens to newspapers and magazines during and after use. At the Flaming Cup these publications are put back by customers or staff on to the central stand to indicate they are available to other customers whilst also clearing the table at the same time. In other words this is so that for each time a customer comes to a table, the table is visibly unoccupied and ready for them to use.

From the methodical ways in which tables, chairs and their related paraphernalia are actually used we can learn how social status is 'suspended' (Habermas 1989) in café environments. In figure 6, the reader at the table is reading his paper off the tabletop and using it to turn away from the other customers in the café. Minutes before the picture was taken he was sharing the large (8 seater) table with another group of customers and he used the newspaper to civilly disattend their conversation by facing away from them. His performance of disattention goes beyond looking away from the other customers at his table, since he appears to be engrossed in reading the paper. His engrossment is, if not an actual focus of his attention, certainly a display to his neighbours that he is not focussing his visual attention on them nor eavesdropping on their conversation.²⁴ How then might unacquainted table-sharers be entitled to strike up a conversation?²⁵

As we noted earlier there are certain situations where a single person joining a table of members sets themselves up as potentially available for engaging in an interaction with other diners. An instance from our fieldwork of two unacquainted customers striking up a conversation at the Flaming Cup was when Eric Laurier shared a table with a customer who had been given a set of wedding photos by the manageress.



Clip 1. Two customers sharing a table and looking at wedding photos

Extract from journal (23rd July 1999): I had seen a small white wedding photo folder lying on the counter for the last couple of days that I had been taking my lunch at the Flaming Cup. Seeing it lying there had made me a little curious as to whether it had been left behind by someone or whether there was some promotional literature inside it or something similar. On this day Ewan had come along for the first time to sample the Flaming Cup's 'fine homebaking' and was 'holding' the window seat for us while I ordered food. This, despite the hand-written notice on the door requesting that 'customers not reserve seats before ordering their food'. And this happening precisely because the cafe gets very busy each lunchtime, with its customers arriving around 1pm. While I was ordering food, a middle-aged woman joined Ewan at the table. From where I was at the counter they seemed to be getting on fine and I could overhear occasional remarks from Ewan about the research project and he pointed toward some of our material on the café wall.

When I returned to the table Ewan explained, for her benefit as much as mine, that he had been talking to her about the research project, 'and I was the man' to ask more about it to. We talked for a while, the woman explaining that she had been coming to the Flaming Cup for 3 years and that she liked to come there to read: 'just trashy magazines you know'. She had brought one with her to the table. The Flaming Cup was far away from her work by foot and if she was in a hurry she would go to the other local cafe because it was closer and the service was faster there, (I am learning that the service, though always friendly, is indeed pretty slow), though we did agree on the excellence of the homebaking at the Flaming Cup.

After talking about the differences between the 'Coffee & Cream' and the 'Flaming Cup' cafés the conversation between the 3 of us broke down into just Ewan and myself having a side-conversation. Anne (the manageress) brought over the white wedding photo folder at this point and handed it to the woman. Not much was said, since Anne is too busy at lunchtime to have any kind of extended conversation. So the woman began to leaf through the photos and I asked if I could see as well (though of course I could see fine well already but I was also asking permission to become involved in her act of looking). Once this was agreed, the implications were then that we could talk through the photos as we went through them. The photos became 'tellable' - the woman used them to give me an impression of her relationship with the manageress, and who she knew in each of the photos. We commented on things like who looked like who, who was with who, what people's ages were, what they were wearing. And in an 'ironic' manner, on the weather - since they did actually 'have lovely day for a wedding' with the sun shining.

Apart from Eric Laurier's failed attempt at illicit table reservation in the Flaming Cup what we have here is an actual instance of two previously unacquainted sets of customers getting to know one another. Several things are worth commenting on. Firstly Ewan and Eric had reserved the 'prime' table in the café, being the window seat, and had in part risked pejorative assessment and/or table sharing because this 'best' table was still free. Though equally it may not be considered the 'best' by some customers since it is also the most likely to be shared (note also that the large window table in the Starbucks in figure 5 is the most commonly shared in that café). Secondly that the woman came to the table with a 'trashy magazine' as an artefact that would be useful in managing the table sharing should Ewan and Eric not engage her in polite conversation. During the half an hour or so that the table was shared the conversation between all three did indeed run dry and it was the manager's timely intervention with her wedding photos that restarted the conversation on a new, 'rich' topic (Sacks 1992) and thus with a further basis for the table sharers to build their acquaintance-ship. As part of the staff's attention to the sharing of tables by people they know to be 'regulars' or strangers, the wedding album was dropped off by the manager as she cleared the sandwich plates. Her timely dropping off of the album accomplishes several things: makes sure that the album lands on the tabletop when there is space available and less chance of it getting spattered by random soup or sandwich fillings, allows it to arrive when one of her 'trapped' customers (i.e. a lone table sharer) is looking as if she is being excluded from the other's interaction and perhaps most significantly is marking out this woman's status as known, to at least one of the Flaming Cup's staff, as a 'regular'. Indeed Eric's position at the table was also known to the staff as a regular, since he had been going to the Flaming Cup for about three months before this event as part of doing his ethnographic work. So for Anne, the manageress, she was dropping off a conversational token at a table where there were two people whom she knew as regulars even if these two people did not know each other as regulars.²⁶

In Wieder's (1974) description of the 'convict code' of a halfway house he brings out how his 'documentary method' (Garfinkel 1967, p78) as an ethnographer who sees and hears pieces of the 'code' is a mutually elaborating process. Each event he sees or piece of talk he overhears is made sense of through his developing understanding of the code while at the same time being 'more evidence of that code' (Wieder 1974, p186).²⁷ Clearly there are differences between a halfway house and a neighbourhood café and to give an adequate description of the Flaming Cup means teasing out what its specifics are. A basic distinction being that the Flaming Cup, as with most cafés, does not have a 'convict code' which its customers share and are obliged to orient to in the same way. Nevertheless as we have brought out so far,

there is a looser sense nevertheless of the proper conduct of a café customer and even more so of being a 'regular'. Also the acquiring of the code in the halfway house bears some parallels to that of becoming a regular at the Flaming Cup since 'regulars' do build up a loose code which guides their behaviour in relation to the staff and equally the staff in their behaviour toward regulars.

Regulars can be expected to share certain local knowledges of the Flaming Cup such as²⁸:

- The seat reserving rule
- That their status as a *regular* may allow for a bending of the rule since as we noted earlier part of being a regular may be being known to have a favourite table (as well as favourite food or drink orders, i.e. 'the usual'). Their status as regulars is also likely to have a repeated timing to it which makes their appearance relatively predictable and correspondingly enforceable ("we always have this table at 11am")
- Who some of the other regulars are, what their names are and potentially some biographical details (as produced by encounters like the one just described)
- Who some of the staff are, what their names are and their reputations.
- Where the toilets are.
- What's good to eat or drink at the Flaming Cup.

What we are trying to show by listing these commonly known-to-regulars bits of information is that there are a number of parts to learning what any ordinary regular customer knows and that they are assembled and articulated over time. To put it a little differently: regulars acquire these items and numerous other ones partially and their assembly is done as part of their assembling of the café as a place and as a place for assembling these items and their accountability for their status. The incident involving the wedding album was added as another 'happening' at the Flaming Cup which I added to my collection of related 'happenings', such as reading the hand-written notice on the café door (see also below 'Anne's loud talk').

As Wieder puts it with reference to convict's code:

Since the use-of-the-code-as-a-schema was the procedure, the code was self- and setting-elaborative. In this sense, it is much more appropriate to think of the code as a continuous ongoing process, rather than as a set of stable elements of culture which endure through time. (Wieder, p.186)

Another key difference is that unlike inhabitants of a halfway house, customers of the Flaming Cup are also likely to use other cafes, and learn about its organisation through comparison with other cafes. Certainly as part of Eric Laurier's ethnographic fieldwork he spent time observing the organisation of other café settings. His observations of those places were not just comparative since many of the same furnishings and techniques were found in the Flaming Cup. Given that one of the foci of our investigations was the use of tables in cafes then such additional observations were an important part of our corpus.

Background Noise

The sound of church-bells in an English village on a Sunday, silences during play at an international tennis tournament, the acceptable volume of a conversation in a railway carriage, someone audibly talking above everyone else, or just being 'too loud'. Background sounds are not just white noise above which 'talk' or other human communication is heard. Many of the commentaries made on the availability of visual scenes 'at a glance' (Sudnow 1972) to members can equally apply to soundscapes. Just as, through a quick glance whilst crossing the roads, we can see cars *as* cars parked and cars in motion, and find which ones are most likely knock us over, so it is that we can hear certain beeps as car horns almost instantly in a pre-theoretical manner, and, by its reflexive relation to our location and action (i.e. running across the middle of the road), whether the horn is directed at us or not. Background noise is thus a mighty broad brush stroke over the pre-reflectively audible and orientational phenomena of social and spatial life.

The manageress of the Flaming Cup knows a considerable number of her customers as 'regulars', some of whom, like Eric, she will greet by name, often fairly loudly. In one sense this is about doing a greeting and in another sense it is also about her production of the Flaming Cup as a neighbourhood café, a 'place where everybody knows your name'.

To do her greetings *audibly* louder makes other customers aware of this form of intimacy occurring in the Flaming Cup.²⁹ This production of intimacy is further emphasised by the fairly loud talk between the staff behind the counter as they prepare orders for taking to the customers where they mention customers' names loudly amongst themselves and also swap some piece of news that a customer has given them such as; 'Mrs McLeod's daughter has had a baby', 'that's Jenny back from her holidays' etc. We can thus add another element to the attributes of a regular: they are likely to be greeted by name as they enter the café and mentioned as 'newsworthy' items by the staff. Just as significantly we find another way in which the Flaming Cup locally produces its 'ambience' of being a neighbourhood café.

Unlike many cafés and shops, the Flaming Cup plays no music, nor

radio, nor does it have a television in a corner. By way of contrast, in the Bulldog Pub, not far from the Flaming Cup, there is a music jukebox, a gambling machine and two television sets. The control of music via the jukeboxes, and the control of the television sets within the pubs, is comparable to the background chatter of the staff in terms of assembling an 'ambience'.³⁰ In the brief period that we had our electronic coffee table installed in the Flaming Cup, one of the chief ways it attracted customers' attention was in fact by the various bleeping, chirping and other standardised computer noises it made. To avoid disrupting the café setting each day when the prototype was started up its volume level had to be carefully set to merge it into the level of background noise in the café. This 'level' and making noises at this level, be they talking, tapping fingers, dialling numbers on a mobile phone was key in the ongoing establishment of customers as equals by the informal codes of the café. To be too loud was to be rude, potentially arrogant and too show disrespect for other customers.³¹

Our visit to the Flaming Cup has almost come to an end, and we return to its doorway again. Latour (1992) has written a great deal on the social organisation performed by doors and their hinges, particularly self-closing hinges. As it happens the Flaming Cup Café does indeed have a self-closing door since customers cannot be relied upon to always close the door and keep the cold Scottish winds from blowing around the tables. As we noted at the outset of this section the pink sign posted on the door displays an instruction on how customers ought to behave. Added to the instructions of engineers and staff translated into the door as it has been described by us and by Latour (1992), the Flaming Cup's door also has a tinkling bell attached to it which rings whenever the door is opened. It is a sequenced sound which gains it meaning from the events which it acts as a primer for. A key one of these being as we noted earlier that it is a summons for the staff's attention to the entering customer(s) to look up from their busy food preparation and see if they recognise anyone entering and ought to greet them. Equally the staff's glance provides for a quick check on whether the incoming customers are going to illicitly reserve a seat. And of course the bell makes a little tinkle when customers at the café finally take their leave.

Closing remarks

'The café, in short, was preeminently the theater of neighbourhood life.'

Haine 1996, p163

Returning to the questions raised by and for the Living Memory project: firstly, whether cafés were less rule bound and looser arenas of action

than workplaces and secondly, whether people had greater freedom to 'play' with their social roles in such places. It is worth noting firstly that recent work on organisations in action has observed that they run in an informal mode most of the time (Boden 1994), and reflexive play with social roles is actively encouraged in many workplaces (Adkins 1998; Crang 1997). Further, although customers in cafes do not have to do the kinds of complex *articulation and coordination* work to do which typically characterises the organisational settings investigated by ethnographers (Schmidt 1994; Harper 2000), customers attending cafes are still required to engage in the socio-material ordering of the places of which they are (passing) members (i.e. by not reserving tables when it is busy, carrying their drinks to their tables, making their plates & cutlery look ready for collection by the staff, sharing tables graciously when the café is busy etc.). 'Informality' comes with categorial expectations and finely nuanced methods for its production as much as formality does, and to ignore them is to invite assessments of one's social competence, status as a local, lack of manners, character, sanity and so on. In 'open regions' according to Goffman (1963), such as cafes and bars, many of the changed norms are to do with behaviour towards strangers in terms of deference and status, whereby hierarchies are played down to some extent. Each person in a café or bar is ideally the social equal of one another. The common knowledge that we have underlined in this article is that we are not all 'strangers' to one another in public spaces and in a place such as a café organise ourselves into staff, regulars, new customers, single customers, groups and table sharers. As incumbents of these categories we also shift between them according to sequenced actions, at a later stage other social categories (such as age, race, class and gender) may or may not be made relevant (see also the remarks on social categories in queuing in Lee & Watson 1993). It is not only human role players that shift categories since we have also underlined the changing significance of artefacts such as tables, doors, cutlery and coats.

Even without doing comparative studies of other cafes we can say that by the same means that the Flaming Cup was assembled as a neighbourhood café or Wakeford's (1999) 'NetCafe' as a cybercafé not all cafes are the same. They display themselves in various ways to allow them to be recognised as neighbourhood, designer, artistic, family cafes etc. and to be found and inhabited as such by their potential customers. At this point a social critique could be launched of these informal places part in securing the *status quo* by reinforcing exclusionary practices and reproducing dominant ideologies of class. Since in ordinary terms: *there are cafes that are for the rich and cafes for the poor*, and this is noticeable from more than just the cost of a cup of coffee. Indeed objections may be raised by theorists of the public sphere (Habermas 1989) or informality and trust (Fukuyama 1995; Misztal 2000) that this article has detailed located "micro" practices and their artefacts rather

than building theories or models which show "macro" factors. Our ambition in treating public spaces in this way is to show that such theories are the objects of debates in the social sciences and are as "macro" as those debate, rather than the very stuff of café life, except of course in situations where someone like Habermas is sharing a table with some other social theorists.³²

The observable differences between cafes become accountable matters to café socialites on a place-by-place basis through the scenic details of cafes; background noise, seating arrangements around tables, crockery and a loose articulation of many other 'foolish things'. We have foregrounded the craft production of our study café's ambience and the mundane, tiring and yet *reasoned* work of table clearing to contrast this unfinished ordinary business with the top-down imposition or bottom-up rise of 'Western ideology' or the prevailing 'spirit of the times'. It is just the kind of queuing, reading door-signs, table-setting, table clearing, chattering and sharing that make it a gathering place for its suburban neighbourhood. We are not arguing that the small things of life, like coffee cups, need 'celebrating', though we would argue that they are often overlooked in the attempt to ground (or even 'embed') social order in suitably big objects, like all the cafes in France or 'the public sphere' or 'globalism' or even 'context'. Our argument is that places are massively ordered, or as Sacks (1992) put it, there is 'order at all points'. It is a heterogeneous order, a finely grained and lived accomplishment which is spatially distributed and distributive of space (Crabtree 2000; Latour 1997). As such particular places like the Flaming Cup should be visited by researchers with an interest in informality and social order, to sample the ambience, its fine home-baking and to learn from vernacular experts *just* how informality and an open-ness to others is done.

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Notes

¹ Our approach to the web of communities of practice occurring in our suburb was similar to an old, and now often ignored, body of community studies carried out in the early 20th century by sociologists and geographers (Lynd and Lynd 1929; Stacey 1960; Whyte 1943, and for a recent review see Travers 1999). One of the few later 20th century studies being the popular book 'The Organization Man' (Whyte 1957)

² One of the LiMe prototypes which can be found at <http://www.design.philips.com/> and then choose 'visions', then 'lime'.

³ In fact they had many links with the temperance movement and were seen as a sober alternative to bawdy bars where alcohol was served. Not only that they also provided a public gathering place more open to women as both servers and customers (Kinchin 1991).

⁴ And as Habermas (1989) might point out make them 'customers' rather than say 'citizens', and thus involved in the marketplace to some extent.

⁵ An exemplary ethnomethodological study of learning to play jazz piano being (Sudnow 1978)

⁶ For an evocative narration of this movement from panoptic views from above to street level see chapter 7 of (De Certeau 1984), though De Certeau's move ultimately ends up with a lyrical theorising of which steals walking away again from its actuality for walkers (for an on the ground and less poetic treatment - Livingston 1987)

⁷ The actions of seeing and displaying are parts of a tied pair, since it is not simply that we see a security guard, a security guard also displays themselves as such (unless they are working undercover of course).

⁸ This move suggests that we are doing something slightly different from what has been called 'classic ethnomethodological studies of work', yet we would remain wary of claiming that we have tuned into or fully grasped the later radical studies in ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1992).

⁹ Already we find a proliferation of categories of places.

¹⁰ We have examined elsewhere some of the ways in which people in a city find the kinds of cafes and bars which match their interests (Laurier and Whyte 2000)

¹¹ In contrast, for instance, to the bye-laws posted at the entrance to the neighbourhood park which are lengthy, numbered from 1-15, type-written, laminated, observed by accident and seldom enforced. Or to the street sign outside the Flaming Cup which lists the parking restrictions which is read very carefully by people parking there

since it is frequently enforced by motor-scooter-riding parking wardens who write and apply sticky-backed plastic-wrapped tickets to car windshields.

² See (Lee and Watson 1993) for their breakdown of the queue into its minimal units.

³ Ged Murtagh reminded us that this kind of rule breaking appears harder to contest in the UK than in the case that he cites which occurred in Athens. There, it is much more common that customers will speak up about someone reserving a café or bar seat without entitlement, and equally that for an 'ignorant' so challenged, they will quietly accept their ignorance as such and not as an insult or injury (which we would suggest is how such remarks might be taken by the locals in the UK).

⁴ An extreme example being the use of a car to hold on to a parking space in a city street. Such an object is both materially and more importantly legally hard to move without the owner's assistance and it is only actors with special dispensations that are allowed to move cars, most significantly the Police (Sacks).

⁵ More could be said about the enforcement of local codes by inhabitants of a place and how they can be expected to know who and what belongs to who (see Laurier, Whyte & Buckner, forthcoming)

⁶ Sharrock & Button (1999) in their work detail how Wittgenstein and Garfinkel's explication of rules and how they are used remain frequently misunderstood.

⁷ It is not simply that a person has to look at a scene and work out 'inferentially' what is occurring in that scene (i.e. 2 people sitting at a table who do not know each other), as (Sudnow 1972) demonstrates actors in that scene struggle to make their appearances intelligible to an observer who looks, even very briefly, at a scene.

⁸ In contrast to brief encounters whilst paying the bill at the counter or selecting a magazine or newspaper from the café's store of reading material.

⁹ It is still common in many village British and Irish pubs for 'regulars' to have their own seat and for newcomers to the pub to make the mistake of sitting in a regular's seat and later finding themselves the subject of mockery when the regular arrives and demands their seat back, while the other regulars look on and possibly laugh at the newcomer for their unwitting but not witless 'mistake'.

²⁰ The visually displayed 'space' that is a café is used as a membership categorisation device to produce the ensuing/attending categories of customer, waiter, regular etc.

²¹ In opposition to a place such as a library where eating at a table is strictly prohibited.

²² Our use of the term 'possible completion' is a reference to an elementary systematic of spatial ordering derived from Sacks (1992) work on 'closing' sequences in tele-

phone calls as used by Lee and Watson (1993) to examine the organisation of public space.

²³ Whilst discussing 'priming' for remedial interchanges in public places, (Goffman 1971, p73) provides an example of the current status of a tabletop in terms of its displayed objects and the possible misunderstanding of a newly arrived diner:

At lunchtime in a busy cafeteria a man brings his tray of food to a four-person table that has dirty dishes on it, apparently assuming that no one "has" the table. He clears a place for his own dishes, takes them to a tray, and sits down. At this point two young men come up carrying dishes of dessert and coffee:

Youths: (They place themselves directly in front of the table, both leaning into it a little, and, dishes in hand, look at the man in the eye as if to give him the first move.)

Man: (Gathers up his plates, puts them on his tray, rises, and says), "Sorry, I thought no one was here."

Youths: "Sorry it's our table." (They sit down.)

²⁴ In Goffman's (1970) book on spies and spying he describes how such shows of ignoring conversations in restaurants and railway carriages can be used to purposefully overhear conversations and at the same time he brings out the painstaking theatrical skill needed to do so and not be detected as a spy.

²⁵ An issue that Sacks (1992) has dealt with in terms of 'tickets' for initiating and maintaining conversations amongst the unacquainted.

²⁶ Our conversation previous to the arrival of the photo album had been of the 'do you come here often' type, which established as both as 'regulars' of the café.

²⁷ A key difference in the reflexive argument Wieder (1974) is advancing here is that such reflexivity is inherent in the social life of this and every place. Like many other ethnomethodologists he is thereby avoiding treating participants in the situation as unwitting of their action's reflexivity to its 'place' and avoiding positing the social researcher as more knowing for having pointed toward their reflexivity.

²⁸ This list is in no way exhaustive and the reader will be able to compare it with their own habitual public eating and drinking places to check that there are items on the list which are locally produced elsewhere.

²⁹ 'Loudness' in this case is not some absolute; it is heard in comparison to the audibility of other conversations occurring in the café, including some of the staff's confidential conversations which are *not* to be overheard.

³⁰ Professional journals in the shop, bar and café interior-design business are filled with detailed instructions on the use of colour, lighting, music and even smell to create different kinds of ambience.

³¹ See also Ged Murtagh's (2000) work on the ways in which the noisy disruption of mobile phones is a morally accountable matter in public places.

³² Ordinary actors do not 'ground' their actions in the rules or criteria of the public sphere of Modernity as formalised *a priori* and the basis of our ethnomethodological investigation of spatial practice is that we are trying to recover the located rationalities of ordinary activities by signposting the features of spaces which are made relevant and displayed by and for participants. For a similar clarification of ethnomethodology's relationship to Habermas' theory of communicative action, see Bogen (1989).

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Sitting There: Discourses on the Embodiment of Agency, Belonging, and Deference in the Classroom

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Abstract: University classes involve students sitting. This unremarkable activity gains importance through how students incorporate discussions of sitting into their representations of their classes. Examining discourses of sitting provides insight into how students represent issues of agency and belonging in the classroom, and in so doing, an understanding of how the institution's efforts to impose its own image of students' agency and belonging are discursively and physically manifested. This study is based on students' discourse of sitting at Queens College, where the institution's ideas of self and agency in relationship to education meet multiple ideas brought to college by an extremely diverse student population.

In discussing West Indian politics, C. L. R. James made a cogent point that applies to all endeavors at social analysis: "always you have to watch what the people do, not what *you* think they ought to do" (emphasis in original, 1984 [1962]: xviii). Much educational policy is based on what administrators think faculty, students, and staff "ought to do." Even a great deal of scholarship is devoted to time-honored categories of thought such as "pedagogy" or "critical thinking" and not to a close examination of what people do. This article goes to the absurd end of the opposite extreme to see what can be learned from a very mundane, frequently unaddressed component of education that is very much what students do, namely, sitting. I shall argue that because sitting is a common experience for students, it becomes a shared reference in students' discourse of belonging and agency even in a highly culturally diverse student population.

In a very cursory survey of the literature, sitting does not seem to be important as a topic, except in kinesics where relative position and posture, such as sitting versus standing, indicates relative power (see Goffman 1979). Those inspired by the literature on embodiment do not address sitting, and neither do those who emphasize discourse analysis. Yet, sitting is clearly a common activity. While it sounds silly to say, in an informal survey of my own "Introduction to Cultural Anthropology" with 154 students, in every