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**Sociability and The Coffee Shack: Testing
Oldenburg's Concept of the *Third Place***

by

Michael Thomas St. Germain B.A (Hons)

**A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of**

Master of Arts

**Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario
May 9
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**Sociability and the Coffee Shack: Testing
Oldenburg's Conception of the *Third Place***

submitted by Michael Thomas St. Germain, B.A. Hons.

in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts

Department of Sociology and Anthropology

Karen March, Supervisor

Chair, Department of Sociology and Anthropology

Carleton University
May 9, 2001

ABSTRACT

This study examines sociability in a modern, urban, coffee house setting. It draws on the model of a “third place,” developed by sociologist Ray Oldenburg, to test whether this establishment meets his criteria as a haven of community association. This study finds that, although marketed as an opportunity to experience a “home away from home” feeling, The Coffee Shack in reality provides few of Oldenburg’s “third place” conveniences. In contrast, is an environment that has simply streamlined the specialty coffee industry in a way designed to maximize profitability and provide for its customers an experience similar to that which is traditionally associated with a fast food style restaurant. As such, the absence of the opportunity for sociability in The Coffee Shack has led to the conclusion that this setting fails to meet Oldenburg’s criteria and cannot be considered as a “third place.” Rather, it is an example of the creativity of advertising by which people are led to believe that their needs will be met only to find that they must adjust their own expectations once they gain access to the product sold.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acceptance Form.....	i
Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1	
The Study of a Coffee Shop: A Methodological Overview.....	9
Chapter Two	
Public Interaction: A Theoretical Framework.....	34
Chapter Three	
“Try Not to Get too Comfortable.” The Physical Environment and The Coffee Shack.....	53
Chapter Four	
Civil Inattention: Guidelines For Activity in The Coffee Shack.....	76
Chapter Five	
McSpecialty Coffee and The Coffee Shack.....	101
Conclusion.....	114

INTRODUCTION

In the late nineteenth century, the German sociologist Ferdinand Toennies set out to chronicle the social traits emerging in the industrial metropolis. He contrasted rural and urban life using two concepts that have become an established part of sociology's terminology. Toennies used the term "Gemeinschaft" to refer to a type of social organization in which people are bound closely together by kinship and tradition (Toennies, 1961: 193). Rural villagers, Toennies (1961) explained, sustain enduring ties of kinship, neighborhood, and friendship. "Gemeinschaft," then, describes any social setting in which people form what amounts to a single primary group.

Toennies (1961) argues that Gemeinschaft is rarely found in the industrial city. On the contrary, urbanization enhances "Gesellschaft," which is a type of social organization in which people typically have weak social ties and a great deal of self-interest (Toennies, 1961: 197). As part of "Gesellschaft," Toennies (1961) suggests, that an individual is motivated by his or her own needs and desires rather than a desire to advance the well being of everyone in the expanding population. City dwellers, Toennies (1961) submits, have little sense of community and look to others mostly as the means of achieving their individual goals.¹

Modern life, although often impersonal, is not completely devoid of "Gemeinschaft" opportunities. In an atmosphere characterized by a largely impersonal, transitory population, there are occasions for interpersonal involvement with those others who make up the bounds of the diverse communities of industrialized cities. These opportunities

¹ Also see Charles Horton Cooley's (1962) discussion of primary and secondary groups in *Social Organization*.

often take the form of coffee houses. Modern, urban, coffee houses are promoted as community havens of sociability and camaraderie, and as such, attempt to provide opportunities for personal relations and social ties that bind an individual to a community.

This is a study of sociability.² It examines the rules and rituals of participation within a modern, urban, coffeehouse setting. The conclusions drawn as a result of this research project will expose significant characteristics of human activity and greatly contribute to a general understanding of the essence that is everyday life.

The world drinks about 2 billion cups of coffee a day (Dicum & Luttinger, 1999: ix). In fact, it is the second most valuable item of legal international trade (after petroleum) and the largest food import of the United States by value (Dicum & Luttinger, 1999:4). Coffee drinking is a cultural fixture that says as much about us as it does about the bean itself. Basically a habit forming stimulant, coffee is nonetheless associated with relaxation and sociability. In a society that combines increased commodification and an overemphasis on efficiency and predictability, coffee and its associated rituals are, for many of us, the lubricants that make it possible to complete the day.

Perhaps for this reason coffee occupies a distinctive niche in our cultural landscape. Along with alcohol, it is the only beverage to command public arenas devoted to its consumption. Unlike alcohol though, coffee is welcome in almost any situation, from the car to the boardroom, from the breakfast table to the public park, alone or especially in the company of others. There is scarcely any other item of commerce that has made more rapid progress in the world, or gained for itself more general acceptance with all classes.

² Sociability is the purest form of social participation allowing individuals and groups of individuals to interact with each other for no other reason than the simple enjoyment of the interaction itself.

A good cup of coffee can make the worst day tolerable. And yet poetic as its tastes may be, coffee's history has been full of controversy and politics. It has been banned, in the past, as a result of its reputation as an instigator of revolutionary intentions in Arab countries and in Europe. It has been vilified as the worst health destroyer on earth and praised as the generator of good fortunes for all of mankind (Pendergrast, 1999).

Since its adoption as a beverage, coffee has been used as a medicinal drink for societal elites, offered as an antidote to alcohol, become the favored modern stimulant of blue-collar workers during their breaks, the gossip starter in middle-class kitchens, and as always, an excuse for romantic interludes. Coffeehouses have provided places to plan revolutions, write poetry, do business, meet friends, and enjoy moments of personal solitude. Coffee may be viewed as a valuable world economic commodity, but its contributions to day to day existence are recognized as a daily emotional energizer and a catalyst in the culture of sociability.

This study concentrates on the sociability of individuals, and groups of individuals, within a specific coffeehouse. Over a period of six months I observed and participated in the rituals of sociability specific to a coffee house that I will falsely identify, for reasons of subject confidentiality, as "The Coffee Shack." The specific Coffee Shack establishment I selected for observation is located in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.

The sociability I propose to examine in "The Coffee Shack" is not an individual's freedom *to* associate, but rather, his or her freedom *not* to associate. This is the sociability that characterizes "The Coffee Shack."

To guide my research undertaking I will draw on a model of public sociability suggested by sociologist Ray Oldenburg. In 1989 Oldenburg published "The Great Good

Place,” a lament over the passing of community meeting places like the old country store or the soda fountain. Oldenburg (1989) suggests that people need informal public places where they can gather, put aside the concerns of work and home, and simply relax and talk. Germany’s beer gardens, England’s pubs and French cafés created this outlet in people’s lives, providing a neutral ground where all are equal and conversation is the main activity. These homes away from home Oldenburg (1989) has labeled a “third place.”

For Oldenburg (1989), nothing more clearly indicates a “third place” than that the talk there is good; that it is lively, colourful, and engaging. Socializing is clearly most people’s main interest in a “third place” (Oldenburg, 1989:27). Within a “third place,” Oldenburg (1989) suggests, people may come and go when they please, and are obligated to no one. Further, eventually, one meets or otherwise learns about everyone within the social environment (Oldenburg, 1989:xviii).

“The Coffee Shack’s” CEO and chairman has adopted Oldenburg’s (1989) academic term, christening “The Coffee Shack” a “third place,” beyond home or work, an extension of people’s front porch. A place where people can gather informally and discuss the issues of the day. As he observes:

“The Coffee Shack” is an ideal “third place.” We have lots of seating and customers often get to know the people they meet there. Americans, hungry for a community, began gathering in our stores, making appointments with friends, holding meetings, and striking up conversations with other regulars. Once we understood the powerful need for a “third place” we were able to respond by building larger stores with more seating. In some stores we hire a jazz band to play on weekend nights (Schultz, 1997:121).

For the CEO, the common thread that keeps customers coming back to “The Coffee Shack” is that the atmosphere is unwaveringly social. Contrary to what they had first anticipated, customers did not just drop by to pick up a half-pound of decaffeinated beans on their way to the supermarket, rather, they came for the atmosphere and camaraderie (Schultz, 1997:121).

Using Oldenburg’s model of a “third place,” I propose to test the CEO’s claim that “The Coffee Shack” is an environment deserving of such a designation. The question that will serve to guide my research will be – “In terms of Oldenburg’s criteria, can “The Coffee Shack be considered a “third place?” I would respond to this question by suggesting that the reason “The Coffee Shack” does not meet the criteria of a “third place” is that the levels of observed sociability in this setting are too low. Where a “third place” encourages interaction and familiarity among all of its members, the atmosphere of “The Coffee Shack” exists under a blanket of unfamiliarity.

It is this sense of unfamiliarity with co-present others in the surroundings that has led me to label the social setting of this coffee house as a B.Y.O.F (Bring Your Own Friend) environment. The individual entering “The Coffee Shack” alone is almost always certainly doomed to remain that way. By their choice of seating, positioning of their bodies, the contained volume of their voices, and their limited eye contact the patrons indicate very clearly that any invasion of the “space” by strange others is neither expected, nor welcome. As such, this social setting reveals a pattern of sociability that does not support the CEO’s submission that “The Coffee Shack” provides opportunities for “third place” experiences.

The potential for relatively uninhibited sociability among unacquainted others in a public place is what is key to a “third place” designation. It is the absence of these particular elements of sociability that I feel make “The Coffee Shack” worthy of study. As such, this environment offers particular elements of Oldenburg’s conceptualization of a “third place” (i.e. a safe community gathering place) but contrasts his model by discouraging the necessary component of social interaction characteristic of his “third place” criteria.

“The Coffee Shack” is a public drinking place with very specific rules governing activity. Although on the surface “The Coffee Shack” appears to be a modern sanctuary for those seeking community association, such cannot be said to be the case. Not simply a bar without alcohol, “The Coffee Shack” is an environment where “everybody doesn’t know your name,” and it appears that under this blanket of unfamiliarity is exactly how those immediately involved in this setting appear to remain. The rules of activity allow for this environment to maintain its image of adult sophistication, yet not to condone behaviour typical of other “third place” environments. Although promoted as a “third place,” “The Coffee Shack” provides few of the elements that would allow it to garner such a characterization. I would suggest that it is this apparent contrast between corporate theory and operational reality that makes “The Coffee Shack” deserving of examination.

This study will contain five substantive chapters examining elements of sociability particular to “The Coffee Shack” and its designation as a “third place.” Chapter I will describe in detail my research methodology. It will include a review of the literature pertaining to qualitative research as it relates specifically to my work. It will be in this

chapter that such themes will be addressed as – Why I chose to study a coffee shop, getting into the field, learning the ropes, maintaining relationships, and finally, leaving the field.

Chapter II will include a review of the literature regarding public behaviour and stranger interactions. This review provides the foundation for the concepts developed in Chapter II and the theoretical framework used for analyzing and discussing the behaviour I observed. This chapter will also contain an expanded discussion of Oldenburg's (1989) "third place" theory and its applicability for understanding the social interaction patterns characteristic of "The Coffee Shack."

In Chapter III I will present a detailed description of the physical environment that exists within the walls of "The Coffee Shack." This evaluation of the physical characteristics of this environment will also include a review of the literature explaining the communication significance of many of the tangible elements contained within "The Coffee Shack" thereby highlighting how it compares and contrasts with Oldenburg's model. The physical elements of this setting will be organized in terms of their manifest and latent properties. Where manifest elements are clearly designed to encourage a "third place" atmosphere, latent features are subtly designed to dissuade such a designation.

The discussion of my observational data in terms of its significance to my research undertaking will be presented in Chapter IV. Beyond simple description, this chapter will present the opportunity to operationalize the theoretical concepts developed in Chapter II. The nature of my data analysis will allow my research focus to narrow and

highlight those elements in particular that prevent “The Coffee Shack” from retaining its “third place” categorization.

Chapter V will serve as an opportunity to extend the analysis of my observational data. Where in Chapter IV I will have operationalized my theoretical concepts, in Chapter V, I will examine the operational and procedural practices of “The Coffee Shack” and evaluate these elements in terms of their ability to contrast with the CEO’s ideological aspirations of a specialty coffee establishment providing a “third place” atmosphere.

The final segment of my thesis will present the opportunity to conclude the results of my research undertaking. This segment will allow for a discussion of the findings and elaborate on their sociological significance. Further, this chapter will address the overall implications of the research and its contributions to a general understanding of sociability.

CHAPTER I

THE STUDY OF A COFFEE SHOP: A METHODOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

Introduction

My thesis is a report of a six month study of a modern coffee house. The aim of this study was to gain an intimate understanding of the rules of sociability particular to this establishment. I collected data for my research through a series of direct field observations totaling close to one hundred hours of participation. As “The Coffee Shack” is an open, public, setting access to the research subjects consisted of little more than walking in the front door.

I was able to easily maintain my observation position, which was any available table, by posing as a customer. Moreover, I was able to justify my presence in this environment for two hour durations by bringing academic texts, and making it appear as though I was studying. The act of “studying” also served to disguise my note taking of the activities unfolding in this research setting. Rather than a curious observational researcher, I appeared to be nothing more than a student engaging material for a school project.

The first chapter of my thesis will serve to address specific methodological issues in regard to my research undertaking. This chapter describes the data obtained from that process. It is divided into five substantive sections, each addressing prominent themes specific to my research process. Very briefly, these five sections will cover – Why I chose to study “The Coffee Shack,” getting in to the environment, learning the ropes, maintaining relations and finally, leaving the field.

It should be noted here that although this chapter seems to organize the research process as a linear event with a very distinctive operational sequence, such is not the case. Rather, the reality of the methodological procedure I will be describing is one of a complex overlapping and interweaving of the five themes that I will be addressing and not, as presented, a linear process.

It is also worth noting at this point that the pronoun “I” will be appearing with remarkable frequency within the context of my methods chapter. The use of this terminology will serve to document the fact that there really is a person behind the techniques discussed. Further, it will also identify the presence of a most human element to this research process by allowing me to draw not only on examples from methodological literature, but anecdotes and stories from my own work that will serve to lend further support to my observation and research experience.

Why Study a Coffee Shop?

It seems to be the primary motivation of any field work project to contribute to a general theoretical understanding about a culture and overall social life. The best way to gain an understanding of the social world is to study those members who make up its bounds. In order to do this, it is necessary to venture, first hand, into places where the activities of interest are taking place and observe group life. It is through observation directly of “natural” behaviour that one comes to understand fully both the mundane details and the pivotal concerns of subjects’ lives. It is only by participating with the group one wants to study that one can attain the insight necessary to draw conclusions on their subjects’ perspectives of their social world. These conclusions are significant,

according to Junker (1960:142) because it is important for “man” to understand both “himself” and society in general.

What makes coffee shops worthy of study is their overwhelming penetration into both our cultural and urban landscapes. Coffee houses are appearing on almost every street corner, in office buildings, large retail chains, and shopping centers. In fact, comedian Jay Leno thinks the coffee house explosion may expand even further. On one of his shows, he humorously showed his audience a satellite picture of life on Mars where there was already a major coffee house franchise (Pendegrast, 1999:380). Although meant to be funny, Leno’s commentary highlights the rate of penetration of coffee houses into our urban landscape. Truly, they can be found everywhere.

Coffee houses serve as backdrops for many of television’s most popular shows. For example, much of “Frasier” takes place in the mythical Café Nervosa where the neurotic brother psychiatrists sip their lattes and cappuccinos and discuss their daily events. Similarly, the cast of the popular television series “Friends” gather persistently at a fictional coffee house called Central Perk. It is here that the characters often regroup after their “adventures” and it serves as a meeting place for them to plan future activities. Where characters on television shows at one time would be found gathering around a bar or tavern, the emphasis on acceptable public interaction has changed to coffee houses. It is this infusion into popular culture, I would suggest, that contributes to coffee houses’ mass appeal and makes them, therefore, a target for an academic examination.

Finally, I feel that the sociability of a coffee house is worthy of examination as a result of my own personal experience with these environments. One of the characteristics of my personal biography is that I am not a coffee drinker. Because of this, I have relatively

little experience with the coffee house culture. My personal curiosity in regard to the mass appeal of these establishments was certainly a determining factor in deciding where to conduct research.

This unfamiliarity with the coffee house culture actually appears to benefit my research undertaking. According to Adler and Adler (1987), it is better for researchers to study settings with which they are not already familiar. By being familiar with their settings before they adopt the research perspective, they may lose the opportunity to see some of its important analytical features (Adler & Adler, 1987:23). Adler and Adler (1987) continue by suggesting that although not necessarily mandatory, lack of prior membership in the scene is an ideal aspect of the researcher-setting relationship. For this reason, I believe that my study may offer insights that might otherwise go unnoticed by regular coffee house patrons.

In response, then, to the question – Why study a coffee house?—I would share the sentiments of Erving Goffman when he addressed the reasons why society as a whole should be studied: because it is there (Goffman, 1983:16). Or, more appropriately, because they are everywhere. Their penetration into both our urban and pop cultural landscape, along with my personal interest into their mass appeal, I feel makes coffee houses worthy of study.

Getting In

“The Coffee Shack” is an open, public, setting. As such, “getting in” to this environment required nothing more than walking through the front door. All that I had to do to ensure that I would be permitted to remain in this establishment was purchase an

available product (coffee, muffin etc.) and act in a civil manner to both the staff and other customers. I must clarify this observation, however, by suggesting that this is only an assumption based on my previous experience in other similar establishments for, at no time did I actually observe any individual being asked to leave “The Coffee Shack” for not making a purchase. Having said that, at no time did I observe anyone not making a purchase. Therefore, as I have suggested above, although these rules for participation are simply assumptions, they appear to be established in observable fact.

What makes my research method significant is not so much the process of gaining entry for, in open, public, settings observers experience few blockages to data, but rather the role I played once inside. The role I played was that of a covert, or secret, participant observer. In such cases, researchers spend an extended period of time in a particular research setting, concealing the fact that they are a researcher and pretending to play some other role (Bulmer, 1982:4). In terms of my situation, my identity as a researcher and knowledge of my work was kept from those who were being studied.

I was able to disguise my position as a researcher by placing books on my table giving the false impression that I was studying. As this behaviour was not uncommon in “The Coffee Shack,” I was able to blend in quite easily and arouse little suspicion. By appearing as though I was simply doing homework, I was able to record data on activity with little difficulty. This disguise was a significant aid in terms of data recording for, as Lofland and Lofland (1995) have suggested, the general rule of thumb in this area is not to jot conspicuously. Further, they have suggested that it is wise not to flaunt the fact that you are recording so as not to draw undue attention to oneself (Lofland &

Lofland,1995:90). Playing the role of a “student,” I became inconspicuous and faded into the background causing little concern over my presence.

My position as an unknown, covert, researcher allowed me to gather data not only through visual observation, but also through eavesdropping. My close proximity to other tables made this technique of data gathering very simple and served to allow some insight into people’s lives. According to Schatzman and Strauss (1973:70) eavesdropping provides a major source of information. Schatzman and Strauss (1973) suggest that eavesdropping can yield important findings and consider this technique the functional equivalent to observing a scene of activity.

As an unknown observer in a relatively friendly, open, environment I experienced few personal anxieties. I did, however, share a fear common to many covert observers, that is, a fear of being uncovered. As Lofland and Lofland (1995) suggest, unknown observers in open public settings may suffer from a nagging concern that someone will find out what they are really doing in this environment. This fear of discovery wasn’t a fear for my physical safety as much as it was a concern over the possible humiliation and embarrassment associated with being discovered. I played the same situation time and again in my head, that is, of an individual discovering that I was in fact not doing homework, but rather writing about all of “them.” I envisioned having that individual announce to everyone else what I was “really” doing. I believed that the embarrassment associated with such a situation would have been truly more than I could have borne.

My anxiety was heightened when situations arose that involved my gathering of data on children’s activity. There are certain negative attributes (“pervert,” “sexual predator”) associated with strange men observing small children from afar. I could just imagine the

reaction of a parent finding out that I was observing their child and recording notes on its behaviour. This situation, I would assume, had the potential to go so far as to put my physical safety in jeopardy. I was able to overcome these anxieties by simply reassuring myself that my research was strictly academic and in no way would I allow any harm to come to those subjects being observed. This fear continued throughout the project. Happily, no incident of this type occurred.

David Karp (1980) experienced similar anxieties in his research concerning the public sexual scene in the Times Square area of New York City. Karp (1980) spent many hours observing behaviour in both pornographic bookstores and on the street. Karp (1980) began to feel certain anxieties when persons on the street began to recognize his face, and openly question his presence. Karp continues:

The regulars on the street looked askance after seeing me on the street, sometimes for hours at a time. They wanted to know whether I was hustling, whether I was a potential “mark,” or whether I was a cop. I frequently got “what-are-you-up-to” looks from them and was directly approached more than once (1980:90).

Although in the end, unlike Karp (1980), I was never approached the immediate fear of a confrontation was always in the back of my mind. Further, this fear of being “exposed” so to speak, served to strengthen my reliance on my disguise. I acted as much like a student as I could. Luckily, as a graduate student, my age, attire, and mannerisms assisted me in this deception.

Fear of exposure is not the only difficulty specific to covert or unknown research. There is a serious ethical debate that lingers around this research scenario. The debate centers around the deceit associated with this form of investigation because one’s role as

a researcher is hidden, or conveniently omitted, while in the presence of those being examined. For example, Homan and Bulmer (1982) believe covert observational studies violate the principle of informed consent. According to this principle, research subjects must be competent, informed about the purposes of the research, understanding what they are told and give consent voluntarily for their participation. In discussing the principle of informed consent, Homan and Bulmer note:

This principle is now fully established in biomedical research practice and (in The United States at least) is being increasingly extended to social research. There are certainly some difficulties in extending this principle from medical to social research – what, for example, constitutes informed consent on the part of a survey respondent? – but equally covert observation is a complete violation of the principle without any extenuating circumstance (1982:110).

Covert participant observation, when looked at from the point of view of the individual subject, may be seen as a gross invasion of personal privacy. It is precisely this “spy” quality of covert research that according to Lofland and Lofland (1995) raises questions about its propriety in social science. Lofland and Lofland (1995:32) continue by suggesting that it is the element of logging data “on the sly” that clearly raises the issue of the ethical status of covert research itself and its role in an observational science.

The contrasting view of covert research as a necessary, useful, and revealing method, has been argued forcefully by Douglas (1976:xiv) who makes a point of ignoring the ethical judgements and moral arguments traditionally associated against covert methods. His reason for doing so is that – “Anyone who really knows what goes on in American society, and who has any sense of fairness and practicality, will immediately recognize

that all of our research methods are by comparison still genteel and relatively harmless.”

From this perspective, covert research becomes an acceptable method of data collection.

Conventional accounts of participant observation stress the need to cooperate with informants, establish trust, create empathy between researcher and subject, and be relatively open about what one is doing. Such conventional procedures rest upon a consensual view of society in terms of social order. Douglas (1976) holds a contrary opinion to research done in this way. Douglas suggests:

The nature of contemporary society is best described by a conflict model. Profound conflicts of interest, values, feeling and action pervade social life. It's a war of all against all and no one gives anyone anything for nothing, especially the truth (1976:55).

In this vein, the social researcher is entitled and indeed compelled to adopt covert methods. Social actors employ lies, fraud, deceit, deception and blackmail in dealings with each other. Therefore the social scientist is justified in using them where necessary in order to achieve the higher objectives of scientific truth.

Douglas (1976) does not argue that the social researcher should always use such methods; cooperative methods are also sometimes appropriate. Part of the standard repertoire of sociological research practice should, however, be the use of undercover observational methods in some circumstances for some purposes.

Norman Denzin, in discussing the acceptability of covert research, has suggested that sociologists have the right to make observations of anyone in any setting to the extent that they do so with scientific intents and purposes in mind (Denzin & Erikson, 1980:143). Denzin continues by submitting that the goal of any science is not willful harm to subjects but rather the advancement of knowledge and explanation. For Denzin,

any method that moves researchers closer to their goal without unnecessary harm to the subjects is justifiable. Observation of public behaviour in public places is only legitimate if it is noninterventionist. This view is also supported by the Tri Council Ethics Committee statement about naturalistic research. This is the policy statement for social sciences and supports the belief that covert research, if done correctly, is neither abusive or unethical. Article 2.3 reads:

Naturalistic observation that does not allow for the identification of the subjects, and that is not staged should normally be regarded as of minimal risk (1998:2).

I selected covert observation as a means to gather data because it was the most methodologically appropriate technique for participation in this specific environment. Because it is an open and public setting, it would have seemed unreasonable to approach every customer who entered "The Coffee Shack" and explain to them what I was studying and get their permission to observe their activity. As Julius Roth has noted – "When we are observing a crowd welcoming a hero, it is obviously absurd to say that we should warn everyone in the crowd that a sociologist is interpreting their behaviour (1970:279). I did not "let the staff in" on what I was doing because I felt their immediate knowledge of my research would in no way benefit my observational experience. Further, I felt that by reducing the number of individuals who knew my true motivation for participating in this environment, I would diminish the potential curious attention such knowledge of my research may direct to my position.

My fieldwork techniques were motivated purely out of an interest in social scientific data gathering. They were clearly noninterventionist and at all times I took into consideration any harm I might be causing the subjects. It is for these reasons that I feel I

was justified in acting as an unknown observer whose “true” intentions for participating in this public realm remained a mystery to the subjects under evaluation.

“Getting in,” then, in qualitative sociology is more than simply the process used to enter into one’s field of study. It is also more than an investigation of the techniques used to cross the physical and structural boundaries preventing access to research subjects. Rather, I would suggest that “getting in” requires a broader understanding of one’s research techniques as a whole. That is, for researchers to know how it is that they are going to successfully enter the field, they must understand how they are going to behave once they enter that field. It is this broad understanding of the research process, I feel, that will greatly contribute to one’s ability to “get in.”

Learning the Ropes

In analyzing field research, we can separate this second phase from the earlier one of getting in. Whereas getting in is designed to secure access to the setting and its participants and lays the ground work for achieving trust and rapport, learning the ropes involves attaining an “intimate familiarity” with a sector of social life (Lofland, 1976:8). Learning the ropes begins as soon as the researcher sets out to learn about the people and their activities in the research setting and continues until he/she exits the field.

It is important to examine why field researchers emphasize the need to learn the ropes of the research setting. The symbolic interactionist perspective states that peoples’ attitudes and behaviour derive from their perceptions and understandings of their social world. A group’s social life is based on shared definitions of particular situations which are shared through language and symbols. It is precisely this feature of social interaction

that makes human behaviour so unique. The sociologists' principle task is to analyze and capture this interpretive process, which is the basis of human behaviour. Blumer summarizes this position:

Insofar as sociologists are concerned with the behaviour of acting units the student is required to catch the process of interpretation through which they construct their activities. To catch the process, the student must take the role of the acting unit whose behaviour he is studying. Since the interpretation is being made by the acting unit in terms of objects designated and appraised, meanings acquired, and decisions made, the process has to be seen from the standpoint of the acting unit (1969:188).

Field work, then, requires an understanding of the interpretative process that shapes and guides human behaviour. To understand a group of individuals' thoughts and perspectives then, one needs to understand the symbols that give meaning to their worlds. Only through the ongoing, often problematic, process of learning the rules of participation (or ropes) specific to the field can qualitative researchers develop a disciplined and descriptively grounded understanding of the social activity encountered.

In this section of my methods chapter I will draw on my own participatory experiences in the coffee house research setting that illustrate examples of my learning the ropes. It was through these experiences that I was able to acquire a rudimentary understanding of the rules of the social game played out in "The Coffee Shack" setting.

The first example comes from my initial day of field observation. As I entered "The Coffee Shack," I proceeded to the counter to order a hot chocolate from where I thought was the proper place to make such a request. I felt I was safe in this assumption as there was a lone staff member standing behind the counter preparing a beverage for another customer. I approached the counter, made eye contact with the staff member, and

requested my hot chocolate. In a very friendly manner she directed me to the other end of the counter where the “cash” was and suggested to me that all drink orders were to be placed at that point in the service line.

Although seemingly a very simple misunderstanding, very few other behaviours could have more clearly identified me as someone who was new to this specific environment. That is, anyone who had been to this establishment, even once before, would surely know enough not to order products at the wrong end of the counter.

Having found myself now in the proper ordering position, I proceeded with my request for a large hot chocolate. The cashier then informed me that what I wanted was actually a “venti” hot chocolate (venti is the term used by The Coffee Shack to describe a large sized beverage). Of course, unsure of what exactly a “venti” consisted, I requested that the staff explain further what specifically I was ordering. She explained to me what a “venti” was through a visual demonstration, that is, she held up a “venti” cup and allowed me to examine it. It was from that point on, I could comfortably say that I had begun to learn some of the language specific to “The Coffee Shack.”

On my second visit I decided to test my new found knowledge. I was comfortable that I now knew what a “venti” was but I wanted to see if I could elicit a similar response from the cashier if again, I simply ordered a “large” hot chocolate. This appearance of naivete which Douglas (1976:169) refers to as “playing the boob,” is a valuable technique for field researchers to use to gather data. This behaviour allows a researcher to legitimately ask questions about taken for granted features of the setting and the interaction which takes place therein. Learning the ropes of “The Coffee Shack,” as I soon discovered, required more than my own ability to observe activity but also the

assistance and cooperation of the research group. My minor “experiment” was a success as the very cordial staff member again went through with me the “venti” demonstration. From this point on, it was “venti” hot chocolates, not large.

As I became tired of constantly drinking hot chocolate, I decided it may be time to try another selection from “The Coffee Shack’s” vast service menu. On one particular afternoon, I decided that I would try a coffee beverage called a “breakfast blend.” The selection was made very conveniently as this particular brand of coffee was highlighted as the feature of the day. When I asked exactly of what a “breakfast blend” consisted, I was informed that it was a combination of various dark roasted coffee beans emitting a very “rich” coffee flavor. I learned two valuable things on that spring afternoon. The first, of what exactly a breakfast blend consisted, and the second, that the taste was indeed very strong, and I would not be ordering it again.

Learning the ropes in the sense of understanding the social rules of participation is a continuous process in field research. The above examples demonstrate only a fraction of the process I went through to try to learn the language of “The Coffee Shack.” Learning these ropes allowed myself to participate with more confidence in this relatively unfamiliar environment. According to Kleinman (1980) we do not become comfortable in the field until we know how to act with some degree of competency with respondents. As we become acquainted with the life of the group under study and begin to make sociological sense of it, we learn how to act with participants and therefore come to feel comfortable in the setting. To begin to learn the ropes, then, is to begin analysis.

Maintaining Relations

At first, the problems of getting along with the people in the field may appear to be of little scientific interest. Such an outlook however, is hardly correct. The validity of the data hinges in part, on achieving that delicate balance of distance and closeness that characterizes the researcher-subject interaction. The key to success in interacting with subjects is the establishment and maintenance of rapport. Basically, rapport is a blend of the external and internal ingredients of day-to-day involvement (Shaffir, Stebbins & Turowetz, 1980:185). When rapport is established, the subjects show a willingness to cooperate in achieving the goals of the study and trust the researcher to handle personal and often sensitive information with tact and objectivity. When rapport is achieved, the aims of the study are balanced by the human qualities of warmth, and overall harmony of interaction.

Inherent to the nature of the covert observation process is a clear lack of rapport between researchers and their subjects. How is a researcher to maintain a level and quality of interaction with subjects that facilitates research but looks normal in the setting under study? The answer is obviously that this balance is very difficult to maintain. For example, Posner (1980) recounts how she managed, sometimes tenuously, to maintain relations (and her research aims) as her official position changed in the nursing home she was studying. As she moved through these positions, Posner (1980) had to make adjustments to her relationships with both the residents of the home and the staff without revealing that she was a field worker.

Although it is inherently understood that covert fieldwork breeds few researcher-subject relations, I did manage to develop rapport with one of the female staff members

of “The Coffee Shack.” Michelle (a given pseudonym) was a staff member who seemed to always be working while I was conducting my field observations. She began to recognize my face as a result of my repeated appearance and we soon began to develop a friendly relationship.

Our association became strengthened when, one afternoon, she happened to randomly enter my place of work. I say randomly as she had no previous knowledge that I was currently employed at this specific location. She recognized me immediately as one of her regular Coffee Shack customers and, as we always did, we proceeded to casually talk. From this point on, Michelle was able to identify me by more than my face. Now she knew me by name. I had become a real person, not merely a “customer.”

Interactions with Michelle were characterized by brief conversations about each other’s work and school projects. This solidified my covert role as a “student.” At times, Michelle would stop at my table while engaged in her routine maintenance and discuss difficult situations she had been involved with previously that day with customers. As a result of our chance meeting outside of the field setting, Michelle was aware that I too worked in a service industry. As such, I could sympathize with her situations that involved difficult customers as I too have had many of these same experiences. This strengthened our rapport and her level of trust in telling me confidences.

My relationship with Michelle created two problematic situations. The first was that, although I did enjoy talking to her and serving as an outlet to vent her occupational frustrations, her interruptions served often to slow down my data gathering process. If Michelle were to stop and talk to me, I was required out of social courtesy to place on hold my notes and temporarily focus my attention towards her. In response to these

numerous interruptions I was forced to purposely reduce eye contact with her while she was in my immediate presence so as not to encourage an interaction. Although this may sound insensitive, my primary purpose for being in “The Coffee Shack” was for research and to keep the process rolling, this often was the action I was required to take.

The second situation that arose out of my relationship with Michelle was more of a moral dilemma than the operational interference I have suggested above. Michelle, in her capacity as a cashier, would process my requests for products in such a manner that the charge for these services were greatly reduced from the advertised retail price. At times, there was no charge at all for the products I requested. This situation made me feel very uncomfortable as this was not the sort of treatment I would have ever requested or expected. It was difficult for me to respond to this gesture with anything more than a “thank-you” as there were always customers and other staff close by and I did not want to draw undue attention to my preferential treatment. Such public attention, I am afraid, would have caused moments of embarrassment for both Michelle and me, and potentially, expose her to an occupational reprimand.

As this situation started to unfold near the end of my research project my response to it was to cowardly “ride it out.” That is, instead of trying to stop it, I continued to let it unfold knowing that I soon would not be returning to this environment and therefore prevented a possible damaging confrontation. My decision not to actively intervene in this situation, I feel, prevented Michelle from possibly being exposed to a hostile occupational situation. It was for this reason that I was able to justify, to myself, that allowing this situation to continue was actually serving the greater good of our relationship.

This situation, unlike the one previously mentioned, provided no real obstruction to acquiring data in my research field. And, in terms of the types of situations that previous researchers have been exposed to, receiving free hot chocolates and muffins seems almost insignificant. For example, Adler and Adler (1987) while studying drug dealers and smugglers were exposed to far greater morally questionable situations. Adler and Adler explain:

At times we had to loan respondents money, testify in court on their behalf, allow them to conduct drug deals in our house, watch their children for extended periods of time, house them for several months when they were destitute, and several other dangerous activities (1987:15).

But, however mundane my situation was, it did result in feelings of discomfort on my part and generally consisted of a series of events with which I would have preferred not to be directly involved with. For no other reason, I just didn't feel "right" accepting these discounted products from Michelle.

My social relationship with Michelle served to produce little direct data concerning my research objective. Although our conversations did allow Michelle to reveal some information about the backstage workings of "The Coffee Shack" in terms of staff and customer relations, my research focus was directed towards the sociability displayed between the clientele specific to this environment. As such, it is for this reason that I can confidently say, the "inside" information I received from Michelle was of little immediate significance concerning the direction of my research undertaking. I would suggest, though, that the value of my relationship with Michelle served to reaffirm my position in "The Coffee Shack" as a legitimate, safe, member of this community. For

example, Sanders (1980:164) has suggested that the presentation of oneself as nonthreatening is of central importance for the fieldworker.

The value of this association with a Coffee Shack staff member was that it did indeed identify me as a participant of this particular community. My daily banter with Michelle served to remove some of the image of a “mysterious” stranger, sitting alone, pouring over volumes of academia. Thus, developing this relationship served to reaffirm my position as a competent, nonthreatening, participant in this environment and ensured my continued unquestioned access to the research subjects.

Leaving the Field

In this final section of Chapter One, I will be examining the process of disengagement from the qualitative research project, which I will refer to simply as “leaving the field.” The disengagement process has received scant attention in the published discussions of participant observation. The various texts dealing with this mode of research typically focus on problems associated with gaining and maintaining entrée, developing friendly and trusting fieldwork relations, learning how to watch and listen, and data gathering and coding procedures.

Though much attention has been given to the relationship between the researcher’s entrance and presence in a particular research setting and the resulting constraints for data collection, the researcher’s departure from the setting deserves, I feel, the same attention. Erikson (1965:368) has argued that if sociologists do not conduct their work in a responsible manner they are liable to damage the reputation of sociology in the larger society and close off promising areas of research to future investigators. In fact, the

researcher's departure from the field, if misunderstood or viewed unfavorably by the subjects, may strongly affect the efforts of future investigators in the same or similar research settings.

In outlining the stages of the fieldwork process, Denzin (1978,256) suggests that the fieldworker must be prepared to leave the field at the proper time and must have a theoretical grasp of the data so that the exit time is easily discernible. But when is the proper time? And if there is a proper time, what determines its discernibility? Simply, how does the researcher know when to leave the field?

At first glance the answer seems fairly obvious. The researcher leaves the field when enough data have been collected to render an accurate description of the world under study. But, this common sense rationale for closure is no more clear than Denzin's advice for, it too raises the questions about what constitutes a reasonable level of understanding of a group's operational activity. How much data is enough? And, how does the researcher know when a sufficient level of information has been attained?

Overall, the qualitative literature has provided few guidelines with respect to such questions. As Freilich notes:

The field worker who is engaged in a traditional study has few guides for deciding what data are relevant, marginal, or irrelevant for a given subject. Without a formal model, which would set the boundaries for data collection, the typical field study has no logical end (1977:25).

There are, however, a few guidelines that can be drawn on from the literature which may help indicate or signal to a field worker that the end of the data collection stage of the research enterprise is near. The first of these guidelines has to do with the idea of the world becoming taken for granted. From the stand point of the researcher, this means

that the world being investigated is no longer seen as problematic or interesting. Or, to paraphrase Schutz (1964:104), when the culture and behavioural pattern associated with the group or situation under study are perceived as a “matter of course” rather than as a “questionable topic of investigation,” then the world has become taken for granted and the role of the participant observer has disintegrated. The practical advantage of this is of course that the researcher is not likely to “see” anything new and field notes are likely to become repetitive. Hence, there is little point of remaining in the field.

A second possible indicator of informational sufficiency is what Glaser and Strauss (1967:61) call theoretical saturation. Saturation refers to that point in the research process in which no new data are being found that illuminate the properties of the category, group, or situation in question (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:61). As with the idea of taken for grantedness, saturation is signaled by the continued observation of what is already known by repetitive field notes.

But, Glaser and Strauss (1967:61) imply that saturation is a more reliable indicator of informational sufficiency because it is not attained until the researcher has “...gone out of his way to look for groups that stretch diversity of the data as far as possible.” Should the researcher then see “similar instances over and over again,” they can be “empirically confident” that the category in question is saturated (Glaser & Strauss, 1967:61).

Data collection continues until theoretical saturation is reached, at which time closure and perhaps disengagement are indicated. Of course, one can always try to mine the data further, but Glaser and Strauss argue that there is little point in doing this, since little of value is learned once saturation has been attained (1967:225).

An additional guideline or rationale for leaving the field addresses the researcher's confidence with respect to what he/she knows about the world or area of study. Glaser and Strauss (1967:224) allude to this relation between confidence and closure in their discussion of the credibility of grounded theory. They state that the researcher is near the end of his research when he:

...is convinced that his conceptual framework forms a systematic theory, that is a reasonably accurate statement of matters studied, that it is couched in a form possible for others to use in studying a similar area, and that he can publish his results with confidence (Glaser & Strauss, 1967:225).

Thus, the greater the researcher's confidence that the observations and findings are reflective of the world under study, the closer the researcher is to the end of his/her field work.

How one leaves the field depends a great deal on how one entered it. If the data one seeks is accessible through observation and minimal or disguised participation, exiting may be fairly simple. On the other hand, research that depends on trust and friendship between researcher and respondent may be difficult to end in a way that is acceptable to both.

In terms of my research situation, I had little difficulty leaving the field. As I was an unknown, covert researcher, I was able to leave the field by simply walking out of "The Coffee Shack." To the subjects in this environment I was nothing more than another student making use of "The Coffee Shack" as an opportunity to complete school assignments. Leaving was as natural and expected for myself, as it was for any other subject participating in this realm. In "The Coffee Shack" the drifting in and out of participants was the norm.

Where my difficulty came was in determining when I had acquired enough data. As I have suggested earlier there are few guidelines detailing when “enough” data has been gathered. Ultimately, my decision came as a result of a combination of the guidelines suggested earlier. As time progressed I felt I had gained an accurate understanding of the activity particular to “The Coffee Shack.” Further, upon review of my field notes, I soon realized that at times, I was becoming repetitive in what I was recording.

The repetitive nature of my records indicated to me that I was in fact not learning anything new and that it may be time to proceed with the other stages of the research process. I would also suggest that the repetitive nature of my notes was also reflective of the activity that typified this environment. That is, I would suggest that the reason my notes became repetitive was that they simply reflected the nature of the activity associated with this environment and the implicated rules of social behaviour. It is this highly predictable activity that attracts others to this environment as I feel that they are comfortable knowing exactly what to expect when they arrive. And because I could draw this conclusion, after one hundred hours of research, it became clear to me that it was time to leave.

In terms of leaving the field, then, I ultimately agree with Millman (1976:6) who summarizes all of the concerns in this area by suggesting – “Sociologists have to be constantly mindful that they come for a while in order to watch, and not to stay.”

Summary and Discussion

Qualitative field study differs from other research methods in that it features researchers themselves as observers and participants in the lives of the people being

studied. The researcher strives to be a participant in, and witness to, the lives of others. This is quite different from the other kinds of research in which the investigator is not a sustained presence in a naturally occurring situation or setting.

The concern of field work is with the task of observing and recording the behaviour of living people in contemporary situations with no intention of changing them, or their situations, in any way, and with, rather, every intention of avoiding disturbances to their natural activity. As such, field work aims to influence only those committed to the advancement of knowledge in the social sciences. It is assumed that improving such knowledge is of value to society, on the whole, as the general public can only serve to benefit from what social science can learn about the human race.

There are no simple set of do's and don'ts for field workers generally, but there are some useful ways of thinking about particular situations so the field worker can choose the "right approach," or the one that fits most appropriately to both the situation and personal characteristics of the researcher who undertakes to study it. This collection of ideas establishing guidelines for the research process is known as one's qualitative methodology. More simply put, it is the sociological study of sociological work.

Field workers, in order to initiate their observations, first go about learning how to enter the social situation and get along with the people they are intending to observe. They may receive some guidance from a more experienced field worker or some help from the literature on their specific situation, or perhaps may simply generalize from earlier experience in responding to cues from their selected environment. As Hughes has suggested, learning to be successful in one's chosen environment is a matter of making enough good guesses from previous experience so that one can get into a social situation

in which to get more knowledge and experience to enable one to make more good guesses to get into a better situation, *ad infinitum* (1960:xv).

In effect, one learns many of the fundamentals of the social situation as one enters and survives in it. One needs to learn the specifics about a social organization before knowing what has been learned about a given environment. Qualitative methodology, then, is not a recognition of what one has learned about a given environment but rather an understanding of how one was able to get oneself into a position to acquire that information.

The first chapter of my thesis has served as an opportunity to discuss how I was able to put myself in a position to “learn” about the sociability of “The Coffee Shack.” By organizing the fundamental stages of my research into five themes, I was able to highlight the process I used to evaluate this environment.

As I suggested in my introduction to this chapter, although the themes were organized to make the research process appear linear, such was not the case. Rather, the research process was one that overlapped and interweaved these themes in a manner reflective of the day to day necessities of my research undertaking. It was this ability to remain fluid and respond to the changing needs of the environment, I would suggest, that greatly contributed to the overall success of this stage of my research undertaking.

CHAPTER II

PUBLIC INTERACTION: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

Within the context of the introduction I introduced sociologist Ray Oldenburg's (1989) concept of the "third place." I suggested that, although "The Coffee Shack" may indeed promote itself as a "third place" in terms of Oldenburg's criteria, in actuality, this public drinking establishment fails to achieve its aspired status.

The first section of this chapter will present the opportunity for further extrapolation of Oldenburg's theory. As I am arguing that "The Coffee Shack" does not meet the criteria established for a "third place" designation, I believe a more complete description of Oldenburg's work is necessary to provide a stronger understanding of my analysis. For this reason, this chapter also reviews the literature pertaining to behaviour in public. It is significant to explore this body of literature as I am examining public place activity and the ideas and concepts of previous research in this field will provide a theoretical context for discussing and analyzing the behaviour I observed. This body of literature offers a contrasting view of the social environment present within "The Coffee Shack" that counter balances Oldenburg's third place designation.

Oldenburg and Third Place

As I have suggested earlier, Toennies introduced two concepts, "gemeinschaft" and "gesellschaft," to describe the degree of interpersonal relationships in an urbanizing society. Toennies's concern, though, was not urbanization per se, but rather, the loss of

community in a much broader sense – the loss of a sense of identity, meaning and close social relations in a continuously diverse modern world. It is in this vein that I continue my discussion of “third place” with an extended evaluation of Oldenburg’s work.

Oldenburg’s work examines the benefits that accrue from the utilization and personalization of places outside the workplace and the home. He argues that participation in these third places provides people with a large measure of wholeness and distinctiveness. Third places, according to Oldenburg (1989), are characterized in terms of sociability. As Oldenburg observes:

The “fun” function of third places is better seen, perhaps, as the entertainment function. In third places, the entertainment is provided by the people themselves. The sustaining activity is conversation which is variously passionate and light-hearted, serious and witty, informative and silly (1989:xxii).

For Oldenburg (1989), the term “third place” is used to signify the core setting of informal public life. The “third place” is a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work (Oldenburg, 1989:16). The use of the term “third place” has served Oldenburg well, for the connotations immediately conjured up by the term itself are relatively neutral. In contrast, there is often a public disdain surrounding the use of, for example, the designation “hangout.”

“Hangout” conjures up negative images of a “joint” or a “dive.” The meeting places of the lowly are often referred to as “hangouts” (Oldenburg, 1989:15). Further, for Oldenburg (1989), in a world where people feel compelled to justify every occupation of their time and to label all pastimes with some lofty purpose, simply hanging out has

become increasingly unacceptable. The term “third place,” then, removes many of these images of negativity and serves to underscore the significance of the tripod that is life and the importance of its three legs. According to Oldenburg (1989), in order for daily life to be fulfilled individuals must find their balance in three realms of experience. One is domestic, a second is gainful or productive, and the third is inclusively sociable, offering both the basics of community and the celebration of it. From this perspective, the “third place” responds to the individual’s need for sociability.

Oldenburg (1989) views the first place as the home. It is the most important of the three places as it consistently offers the most regular and predictable interactions. It is this region that has the greatest effect on individual development. It will harbour individuals long before the work place is interested in them and well after the world of work has cast them aside (Oldenburg, 1989:16).

The second place is the work setting. It is this environment that structures endless hours of available time for individuals. However, it also provides the means to a living and offers the potential to improve the material quality of life. Similar to home life, the work place offers a small and highly predictable environment and is marked by a constancy in its population. Often the constraints of professionalism in the workplace curtail opportunities for novelty and diversity in the range of acceptable behaviour.

The “third place” provides possibilities for social participation in public places apart from work and home. People frequent third places not simply to escape from domestic and occupational stress, but primarily to enjoy one another’s company. The game is conversation and the “third place” is its home court. Third places offer a forum for play

in a society impoverished by a stubborn over commitment to work and purpose (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1980:84).

In addressing whether a hierarchy exists between the three types of places, Oldenburg submits:

The ranking of the three places corresponds with individual dependence on them. We need a home even though we may not work, and most of us need to work more than we need to gather with our friends and neighbours. The ranking holds, also, with respect to the demands upon the individual's time. Typically the individual spends more time at home than at work and more time at work than in a "third place." In importance, in claims on time and loyalty, in space allocated, and in social recognition, the ranking is appropriate (1989:16).

What attracts the regular visitor to a "third place" is not supplied by management (beverage selection, prices, etc) but rather the fellow customers. It is the regulars who give the place its character, and who assure that on any given visit a familiar face will be there to happily greet entering patrons. It is the regulars, no matter how many of them are there on any given occasion, who feel at home in a place and set the tone of conviviality (Oldenburg, 1989:34). Third places provide, for everyone, opportunities for relationships and experiences unavailable in the other two realms.

The most obvious of these opportunities is the possibility of pure sociability. As George Simmel (1950) commented, both a fondness for association and a sense of its intrinsic worth beyond special and immediate purposes bring people together. Sociability is thus the delight, or the "play-form" of association, as Simmel preferred to call it (1950:45).

Sociability is found in virtually all types, or forms, of association but as Simmel (1950) insisted, people need pure sociability. In this vein, he spoke of the “great problem of association” characteristic of all forms of sociability. The “great problem” is that all other forms of sociability consider individuality in terms of situational importance. In family life, work, commercial relations, organized groups, that is, in all of the associations of the “outside world,” people find themselves in purposive, or situationally mandated, association. Correspondingly, their sense of individuality is judged based on their assigned societal roles, and their personal value is contingent on the anticipation of meeting the organizational criteria of that particular role. In the “outside world” people are assessed by yardsticks of value, merit and performance as these derive from all associations rooted in purposeful intentions.

In situations offering pure sociability, one enters positive association that is not premised on the social qualifications (i.e. education, income, occupational prestige) of the people involved. One thereby enters, as Simmel insisted, the most purely democratic experience that life can offer (1950:48). Here people who are expressing their unique sense of individuality meet as equals. They are truly different but truly equal. Within the context of pure sociability, the surrender of outward status is rewarded by unconditional acceptance of self. Joy, vivacity and relief, to share Simmel’s (1971) terms, are of primary value in this form of association which, unlike all others, accepts individuals simply on the basis of personality merits.

Thus, Simmel (1950, 1971) suggests that a transformation in self identity occurs as one passes through the portal of a “third place.” Claims to status are checked at the door so all participants within may interact as equals. Similarly, those not high on totems of

accomplishment or popularity are accepted, and enjoyed, despite their “failings” in their careers (Oldenburg, 1989:25).

Like Simmel, Oldenburg (1989) views the “third place” as a “leveler.” “Third place” environments are therefore considered to be inclusive places. They are accessible to the general public and do not set formal criteria for entrance. Third places counter the tendency to be restrictive in the enjoyment of others by being open to all and ignoring the typical distinctions used to create social hierarchies (Oldenburg, 1989:24).

The “third place” for Oldenburg has many positive elements. Sociability, leveling and community building are just a few examples of the positive consequences that the “third place” brings to its participants. Third places, however, are not a universal remedy for all of society’s problems or personal ills, nor will the kind of association it offers appeal to everyone (Oldenburg, 1989:84). Individuals who are successful within “third place” environments are those whose fondness for other people extends beyond the confines of their immediate social group and gifts of communication lie in the art of conversation.

Strangers, Interaction, and Public Places

“The Coffee Shack,” among all the other things that it may be, is a world of strangers, that is, a world populated by individuals who are generally unknown to one another on a personal basis. It is this peculiar characteristic of “The Coffee Shack” that is of interest for the analysis of Oldenburg’s model. Associations with unknown others will be the starting point for all that is to follow. The fundamental characteristic of public interaction between strangers is the complex production of social order, that is, the ability

of these individuals, and groups of individuals, to systematically integrate their activity into a pattern of mutually understood cooperation.

The importance of this pattern of social order was noted by Goffman:

Take for example, techniques that pedestrians employ in order to avoid bumping into one another. These seem of little significance. However, they are constantly in use and they cast a pattern on street behaviour. Street traffic would be a shambles without them (1971:6).

The above observations from Goffman regarding pedestrian cooperation, then, raises questions about how this order emerges. Various researchers have attributed it to the existence of an implicit covenant between users of public space. Lyn Lofland (1972) provides one such explanation in her theory of the “bargain.” Lofland (1972) suggests that all users of public places employ a variety of survival skills to protect their “fragile selves.” They extend this protection to copresent others who are also concerned with their own fragile selves (Lofland, 1972: 96). Collective allegiance to this bargain allows strangers to coexist peacefully in public places.

Drawing on Lofland’s work, Karp, Stone, and Yeol (1977) offer their own thoughts on public interaction. For Karp, Stone, and Yeol, pedestrians tacitly cooperate to minimize involvement with others while maximizing social order (1977:110). This cooperation, known as the “mini-max” theory, allows public interaction to function successfully. People maximize situational productivity with minimal interaction with those around them. For example, when meeting on the street, they walk around each other without disruption thereby avoiding a possible collision or territorial confrontation.

Wolfinger (1995) has suggested that there are two social rules upon which pedestrian order essentially depends. The first rule is that people must behave like competent

pedestrians, while the second submits that people must trust copresent others to behave like competent pedestrians (Wolfinger, 1995:324). In other words, for order to be possible, people must behave like competent pedestrians and must expect copresent others to act accordingly. For Wolfinger (1995) our belief, or trust, that other users of public places will behave like pedestrians comes, in large part, from the great deal of public interaction that proceeds without incident. As people successfully “perform” as pedestrians and interactions proceed without incident, the bargain or agreement that creates social order is sustained.

Michael Wolff, (1973) was struck by the orderliness and apparent patternedness with which city dwellers seem to conduct even their most trivial encounters. Wolff observes:

Among the most outstanding characteristics of pedestrians that have emerged from this study are the amount and degree of behaviour on the streets of the city. While at the immediate and superficial level, encounters on the street are hardly noticeable and devoid of pleasantries and warmth, pedestrians do, in fact, communicate and do take into account the qualities and predicaments of others in regulating their behaviour (1973:48).

Wolff described what he observed by using a language that hints of the dance – of choreography:

At higher densities a common behaviour, especially between members of the same sex, was not total detour and avoidance of contact, but a slight angling of the body, a turning of the shoulder and an almost imperceptible side-step – a sort of step-and-slide (1973:48).

If one grants that stranger interaction is in fact a dance or patterned behaviour, as suggested above by Wolff, then the idea that strangers work together to successfully traverse space appears to be a logical conclusion. Most of the time, our movement

through public space is relatively uneventful and it is so because humans are cooperating with one another and allowing this social order to unfold.

“The Coffee Shack” is a world of strangers, albeit not exclusively. As such, the understanding of how these individuals, and groups of individuals, pattern their activity is significant for the direction of my research. It is the implicit trust of the activity patterns that individuals possess of the strangers that surround them that allows for the smooth progression of events within this environment. It is the collective cooperation of strangers in “The Coffee Shack” that typifies the social activity structure of this public realm. Examination of the process by which this social order is created and maintained is, therefore, a necessary component in any discussion of “The Coffee Shack’s” designation as a third place.

Civil Inattention

In Behavior in Public Places, Goffman introduces the concept of “civil inattention.” For Goffman, civil inattention involves one, giving to another, enough visual notice to demonstrate that one appreciates that the other is present (and that one admits openly to having seen the other), while at the next moment withdrawing one’s attention from the copresent other so as to express that one does not constitute a target of special curiosity (1963:84).

There can be no question of the existence of civil inattention, as described by Goffman, when individuals participate in the public realm. This process can be observed easily when watching individuals on buses, in restaurants, park benches and especially on the very symbol of urban solitary interaction, the subway:

When seated [in subway cars], people usually assume inconspicuous behaviour – sitting squarely, at first turning neither left nor right, and maintaining expressionless faces... People without books or papers... may begin to stare at fellow passengers, alternating fleeting or blank stares with an innocent staring off into space. These stares and glances at fellows are quite restricted and concealed and are made so because they are not to be interpreted as invitations to others to begin an encounter (Levine, Vinson, & Wood, 1973: 210).

For those individuals practicing civil inattention often the circumstance of “where to look” becomes relevant. As prolonged eye contact is often a signal for a desired interaction, to not stare then requires looking very pointedly in other directions and indicates a distaste for engagement. An illustration of the “where to look” problem can be seen in Goffman’s description of the situation of waiting for an elevator:

The act of waiting for an elevator brings a suspicious streak in people. Another person comes along and after a glance of mutual appraisal, you both look away and continue to wait. The problem of where to look becomes of paramount significance. To stare the other person in the eye seems forward and usually isn’t warranted. The shoes are a convenient temporary saviour of direct eye contact. The where to look problem diminishes once in the elevator as the passengers traditionally gaze at those little lights flashing the floors (1963: 138).

Because individuals waiting for the elevator are often not acquaintances, direct eye contact is usually undesired, and consequently, may lead to feelings of uneasiness. For this reason, the majority of people redirect their gaze elsewhere, as for example, Goffman notes above, “at those little lights which flash the floors.”

Civil inattention makes possible copresence without commingling, courtesy without conversation. It is the quintessential characteristic of public behaviour. Civil inattention

suggests that when humans in the public arena appear to be ignoring one another, they are doing so not out of social distress or asocial tendencies but rather as a demonstration of social politeness between unacquainted others.

Although Goffman (1963:87) has suggested that civil inattention may be useful in keeping an orderly appearance in public, there are circumstances when this concentrated action may be broken. License to initiate contact comes as a result of activity that suggests that an individual may be disassociated from his/her typical manner of activity. Goffman (1963:128) suggests, for example, that when an individual is visibly intoxicated or dressed in a costume he or she may be approached by others or even joked with. Individuals who find themselves in a momentary peculiar physical position, as when they trip, or fall, lay themselves open for light comment. Often, this gives the highlighted person an opportunity to atone for his or her actions through implications that this apparent momentary lapse was indeed uncharacteristic, rather than a typical pattern of public behaviour (Goffman, 1963: 127).

Civil inattention can also be broken by individuals asking for mundane assistance. Thus, an individual can initiate requests for the time of day, for a light, for directions, or for a coin change (Goffman, 1963: 130). These interruptions of civil inattention Carol Brooks Gardener (1986) has called “public aid” requests. “Can you tell me the time?,” “How do you get to ...?,” are examples of Brooks Gardener’s public aid requests and are a constant feature of life in the public realm. It is these requests for mundane assistance and often restrained responses that compose the everyday life encounters of strangers. Such disruptions are quickly handled, and civil inattention is restored as soon as possible afterward.

As Goffman has made clear in his explanations, civil inattention is not disattention. The principle of civil inattention may require that one not be obviously interested in the affairs of the other, but it does not require that one not be interested at all. As such, civil inattention is fully compatible with the principle that inhabitants of the public realm act primarily as audience to the activities that surround them.

Given this pattern, it is clear to see how descriptions of public space are often associated with images of the theatre. Thus, Suzanne and Henry Lennard note that:

It has long been assumed that public life, just like a theatrical production, requires actors and audience, a stage and a theatre... Public life may take place on center stage where the actors are clearly visible to most of the audience, or in more secluded areas visible only to a few. A public space, however, is at once both stage and theatre, for in public spectators may at any moment chose to become actors themselves... Successful public places accentuate the dramatic qualities of personal and family life. They make visible certain tragic, comic and tender aspects of relationships among friend, neighbours, relatives or lovers. They also provide settings for a gamut of human activities (1984:22).

Goffman has also used the metaphor of the theatre to describe public activity.

Goffman argues:

Each person, in everyday social intercourse, presents themselves and their activities to others, attempts to guide and control the impressions they form of them, and employs certain techniques in order to sustain their performance, in the manner of an actor presenting a character to an audience (Goffman, 1959: Back Cover).

According to Goffman (1959), when individuals appear in front of others they often have many motivations for controlling the impression they present. Further, Goffman (1959) suggests that while appearing in front of others, individuals, using voluntary

actions, will attempt to convey an impression of themselves which is in their best interest to communicate. Referring specifically to an individual's performance, Goffman (1959) introduces the concept of "dramatic realization." Goffman (1959) suggests that if an individual's activity is to become significant to others he/she must immediately modify this behaviour so that, during an interaction, he/she will be able to convey his/her own messages. Individuals make use of dramatic actions, to emphasize messages that may, or may not, be immediately apparent to an intended audience (Goffman, 1959: 30).

The principles of both civil inattention and viewing public behaviour as a theatre demand that there is a strong disincentive towards active involvement in other people's business. Not unexpectedly then, when the public arena generates instances of quite serious need (medical emergencies for example) they may well be met with a failure on the part of the bystander to intervene.

The field experiments of John Darley and Bibb Latane are probably some of the best known explorations of this situation. Their interest in this field was sparked, as they report, by the infamous Kitty Genovese case:

On a March night in 1964, Kitty Genovese was set upon by a maniac as she came home from work at 3 a.m. Thirty eight of her Kew Gardens neighbours came to their windows when she cried out in terror – none came to her assistance. Even though her assailant took over half an hour to murder her, no one even so much as called the police.

This story became the journalistic sensation of the decade. "Apathy," cried the newspapers. "Indifference," said the columnists and commentators. "Moral callousness," "dehumanization," "loss of our fellow man," added preachers, professors, and other sermonizers (Latane & Darley, 1973: 63).

In response to this occurrence, Latane and Darley demonstrated that a bystander's decision to intervene or not was a highly complex and thoroughly social matter:

Intervention...requires choosing a single course of action through a rather complex matrix of possible actions. The failure to intervene may result from failing to notice an event, failing to realize that the event is an emergency, failing to feel personally responsible for dealing with the emergency, or failing to have sufficient skill to intervene (Latane & Darley, 1973: 67).

Latane and Darley believe that individuals are less likely to come to the aid of a victim when others are present because those copresent others often serve as a guide to behaviour. Therefore, if they are inactive, they will lead the other observers to also be inactive (Latane & Darley, 1970: 125). The inattention of others supports the more dominant principle of civil inattention and playing the role of a theatre audience. For an individual to act in such a situation is to be in violation of these principles and to be considered a communication deviant.

Thus, it requires extreme circumstances and social conditions for the rules of civil inattention to be broken and continued social interaction to occur. Examples of this type of situation are provided in Chapter Four through my analysis of the data gathered at "The Coffee Shack" and my discussion of how it meets Oldenburg's "third place" designation.

Lofland and Strangers

Lyn Lofland, in her book A World of Strangers, raises the question – "How is city life possible?" For Lofland (1973) to live in a city is, among many other things, to live surrounded by large numbers of persons whom one does not know. To experience the

city is, among many other things, to experience anonymity. Lofland continues by suggesting that living in a situation of complete anonymity would be intolerable (1973: x).

In response to her question, Lofland (1973) has proposed that living in a city is possible only because a city is not, in fact, a totally anonymous sort of place. Although personal knowledge of the vast majority of others with whom the urbanite shares time and space is impossible, categoric knowledge is well within their grasp. The multitudes of strangers forming the urbanite's public milieu may not be personally knowable, but are most certainly categorically identifiable and as such, capable of being acted toward (Lofland, 1973: 29). In other words, one can live as a stranger in the midst of strangers only because important elements of "strangeness" have been removed.

Categoric knowing refers to knowledge of another based on information about their roles or statuses (Lofland, 1973: 15), that is, one knows who the other is only in the sense that one knows that individuals can be placed in some category or categories. Obtaining information for categoric knowledge can be done both visually and verbally and allows individuals to gain sufficient data to determine surface characteristics of unknown others. Categoric knowing helps remove the element of "strangeness" when meeting strangers in public.

Categoric knowing can be broken down into two quite different principles. The first, Lofland (1973) has called apperential ordering, and the second, spatial ordering. Put simply, apperential ordering allows you to know a great deal about the strangers you are looking at because you can "place" them with some degree of accuracy on the basis of their body presentation, clothing, hair style, special markings and so on (Lofland, 1973:

27). In contrast, spatial ordering allows you to know a great deal about the strangers you are looking at because you know a great deal about “who” is to be found in the particular location in which you would find them (Lofland, 1973: 27). The identification of strangers in public comes as a result of simultaneous utilization of both principles of ordering – appearance and location. In either instance, you know how to act toward this stranger (acting toward of course, may involve either interaction or avoidance) because once having categorized him or her, your previous world experience provides you with a behavioural repertoire.

How then, does the participator in public places know the meaning of the information they have gathered as they move through various public locations? How do they learn to connect certain appearances and locations with certain categories of activity? For Lofland (1973), the answer is both simple and profound, humans are taught these meanings. Lofland submits:

From the moment of birth he is bombarded with instructions. Breasts mean food. Little girls wear dresses. Big people are adults. Black people are poor (or happy or revolutionaries, or whatever). White people are rich (or dishonest or bosses or whatever). Nice people don't go *there*. Nice girls don't do *that*. Only the *best people* come to this place. And so forth and so on. Some of their instruction is explicitly given; a good deal more is merely “picked up” (1973:98 emphasis in the original).

Through their own experiences, individuals not only add to their knowledge of meanings, they also discover that although some of their learned associations are fairly accurate, others require minor modification, while some others are simply incorrect.

When discussing the learning of messages, Lofland (1973) submits that individuals are often not simply the passive recipients of meaning, rather, they are also self taught.

Personal experience may reinforce or correct the teachings of others, but it may also serve as the source of new learning. Thus, individuals who actually go to a certain location know about it from what they have been told, but also from what they have experienced. It is this additional knowledge that helps individuals guide their numerous movements through various public places and contributes to the direction of their interactions with strangers (Lofland, 1973:105).

As the knowledge one has about any particular public space increases, a peculiar alteration begins to take place in the character of the space itself. An environment, that once presented itself under the cover of strangeness, slowly becomes a setting that may be used for private purposes. The more knowledge an individual possesses of the setting, the less the setting is an alien place full of strangers, and the more it begins to seem like home (Lofland, 1973: 122). Further, Lofland (1973) suggests that when the knowledge of a public place reaches a certain level, it allows a patron to consider it, in effect, a home territory. Thus, for example, as individuals become more familiar with "The Coffee Shack," its physical surroundings, and its type of clientele, the more comfortable it will likely become for them.

As a result of this transformation, individuals often develop attitudes of propriety rights toward the setting, similar to that which others may have toward their own home (Lofland, 1973: 124). It is this process of colonization, of creating home territories, that allows the public arena to feel "safer," and further, making a world of strangers appear more predictable. It is this sense of creating a home territory that supports Oldenburg's notion of a "third place."

The ordering of public space, whether appareantial or spatial, is by no means a total solution to the problem of association with strangers, nor does Lofland present it as such. Rather, ordering merely makes it possible for individuals, and groups of individuals, to operate within a relatively predictable environment. It permits a stable basis for making relatively accurate identifications of the strangers who inhabit the public world. Simply put, it serves as a basis for action. “The Coffee Shack” is primarily a world of strangers. Individuals and groups of individuals who participate in this realm are often surrounded by unfamiliar copresent others. As such, the techniques used in these situations to remove some of the elements of strangeness are significant to understand. It is the ability to categorically order those individuals who occupy space in “The Coffee Shack” that not only makes this environment more predictable for those who frequent its bounds, but makes it overall, a more enjoyable environment within which to participate.

Summary and Discussion

The discussion in this chapter has presented an opportunity for a review of some of the relevant literature regarding human behaviour in public places. The early section of this chapter contained a detailed evaluation of Ray Oldenburgs’ work on third places. This concept is significant because I am arguing against the acclaimed “third place” status of “The Coffee Shack.” I am using Oldenburg’s model to test the CEO’s claim that “The Coffee Shack” is indeed a “third place,” as such, a detail description of the model was significant in this chapter.

The remainder of this chapter introduced other researcher’s conceptualizations of specific behaviour techniques used by those individuals participating in public arenas.

Concepts such as civil inattention, categoric knowing and audience role participation were described as ways in which individuals, involved in the public realm, are able to maneuver themselves through the daily social order of stranger based interactions. It is these stranger based interactions, I am arguing, that typify activity in “The Coffee Shack” and therefore nullify any aspirations of a “third place” designation.

CHAPTER III

“TRY NOT TO GET TOO COMFORTABLE:” THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT AND “THE COFFEE SHACK”

Introduction

Chapter Three describes the physical environment of “The Coffee Shack.” More specifically, I discuss those physical elements that both confound and facilitate sociability because the physical elements of “The Coffee Shack” encode information that patrons are able to decode. In effect, as people filter this information and interpret its meanings, the actual physical elements of “The Coffee Shack” guide and channel the customers’ activity.

What I am suggesting then, is that the environment of “The Coffee Shack” can be seen as a series of relationships between things and things, things and people, and people and people. These relationships are orderly, that is, they have a distinct pattern and structure. The environment of “The Coffee Shack”, is not a random assemblage of things and people any more than a culture is a random assemblage of behaviours and beliefs. The physical elements of “The Coffee Shack” act as a template, so to speak, serving the purpose of organizing individuals’ activity in the direction of acceptable sociability.

In this chapter, I have organized my evaluation of the physical elements of “The Coffee Shack” in terms of their manifest and latent functions. The elements discussed will be those items that are very clearly designed to facilitate a “third place” type of atmosphere. In that discussion, I also examine subtle characteristics that, although appearing to have a positive function, actually prevent “The Coffee Shack” from ever

truly attaining its aspired classification as a place of sociability that mirrors Oldenburg's concept of "third place."

I feel that it is important to integrate a discussion of the physical environment that comprises "The Coffee Shack" into my research as I am evaluating elements of sociability in this public realm. The physical elements of "The Coffee Shack" directly control and influence the activities of those individuals participating within this communication environment. Although "The Coffee Shack" clearly markets itself as a community social oasis, or "third place," I feel that an evaluation of its physical elements clearly lends support to my argument that "The Coffee Shack" does not meet Oldenburg's criteria for a "third place" designation.

Manifest and Latent Functions

Robert K Merton (1968b) contributed to our understanding of social function with his introduction of the concepts of manifest and latent. Merton (1968b) notes that people rarely perceive all the functions of a particular social situation. Therefore, he describes as manifest functions the recognized and intended consequence of any social pattern (Merton, 1968b:105). By contrast, latent functions are consequences that are neither intended nor recognized (Merton, 1968b:105).

Merton claims that any social environment or social activity can be categorized in these two basic terms. Following his paradigm, I believe that the physical elements of "The Coffee Shack" contribute to certain levels of sociability in both manifest and latent ways. For example, research has demonstrated (Ritzer 1996, Luxenberg 1985, Kottack 1979) that most food distribution chains make conscious decisions towards a system of

internal design with a specific intent on controlling the length of stay of customers. In this regard all elements of the physical environment may be considered manifest, that is, all conditions are a direct result of the intended actions of the environment facilitators. In contrast, some latent functions from these environmental arrangement patterns also emerge from these designs. Thus, “The Coffee Shack” is also likely to exhibit manifest and latent functions that inhibit or facilitate certain characteristics of sociability in its customers.

In this research study, when I speak of manifest and latent functions, I am referring to the level of recognition of the physical elements by those individuals in “The Coffee Shack” and their appreciation of the immediate effects of those elements on their behaviours. Manifest functions are those that are more easily recognizable by customers, while latent are those not so readily distinguishable. It is the latent functions of many of the physical elements that contribute most directly to “The Coffee Shack” not successfully achieving Oldenburg’s “third place” criteria.

Merton (1968b:122) claims that the discovery of latent functions represents the greatest contribution to sociological knowledge.

It is precisely the latent functions of a practice or belief which are *not* common knowledge, for these are unintended and generally unrecognized social and psychological consequences. As a result, findings concerning latent functions represent a greater increment in knowledge than findings concerning manifest functions. They represent, also, greater departures from “common sense” knowledge about social life (emphasis in original).

To emphasize his point, Merton (1968b) draws on the example provided by Veblen’s analysis of conspicuous consumption. The manifest purpose of buying consumer goods

is, of course, the satisfaction of the needs for which these goods are explicitly designed. Thus, automobiles are intended to provide transportation, food to provide sustenance and rare art to provide aesthetic pleasure (Merton, 1968b:123). Since these products do have these uses, it is assumed that they encompass the full range of socially significant functions. According to Veblen (1968b:123) as sociologists, we must go on and consider the latent functions of acquisition, accumulation and consumption. For Veblen (1968b:123), satisfaction comes not simply from the consumption of superior articles but, more importantly by their ability to heighten or reaffirm social status. Thus, people buy expensive goods not so much because they are superior, but because they are expensive. Where the manifest function is that costliness is equal to the excellence of the goods, the latent function holds that costliness reflects higher social status (Merton, 1968b:124).

In this respect, Veblen's analysis of latent functions departs from the common sense notion that the end product of consumption is the direct satisfaction that it provides. Rather, satisfaction appears to be attained in fulfilling and enhancing one's position within a social hierarchy. Further, Veblen's conclusions demonstrate the significance of examining the latent functions of social structure.

For Merton (1968b), the fact that examining latent functions has entered popular thought so fully creates some what of a paradox. The paradox is that if the examination of latent functions becomes the prevailing pattern of behaviour analysis, then by extension, these social phenomenon can no longer continue to be considered latent (Merton, 1968b:124).

In terms of Merton's paradox, any examination of the functions of a physical environment of a food service industry could only be classified as manifest. This

observation emerges from research completed in this area that identifies techniques in the physical environment used to specifically, and subtly, control patron activity. Because these mechanisms have been recognized, then, they can no longer be considered latent. As such, the study of the physical environment of “The Coffee Shack” would serve little purpose.

In response to this argument, I would suggest that what allows many of the physical elements of “The Coffee Shack” to remain latent, and therefore worthy of study, is their level of conscious recognition by those individuals who frequent this public realm. In “The Coffee Shack” some physical elements are painfully obvious in their attempts to create a warm and comfortable environment. These elements, as Merton observes, deserve minimal notice. Of greater interest are those elements whose direct purpose, although very subtle, is to make customers feel uncomfortable and encourage them to leave. This behaviour is contrary to the message advertised to customers, (i.e. “we are just like home”). It is this message that contravenes Oldenburg’s model of “The Coffee Shack” as a “third place.” It is the unconscious level of recognition, or unfamiliarity, of these particular elements and their purpose by the patron that I suggest continues to make them latent and worthy of study.

A useful starting point for attempting to understand how people interpret the social function, whether manifest or latent, of the environment and how to adjust their behaviour accordingly comes from the sociological perspective known as symbolic interactionism. This approach helps us address the question of how environments help organize people’s perceptions and meanings and how particular environments, which give direction to their occupants, attempt to elicit appropriate behaviours from them.

The symbolic interactionist approach to the definition of the situation can be summarized in three propositions:

1. Human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings which these have for them.
2. The meanings of things are derived from, or arise out of, the social interaction process.
3. These meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by people in dealing with the things which they encounter (Blumer, 1969:2).

It is the position of social interactionism that human groups exist through action; both culture and social structure depend on what people do. As such, we are directed on how to behave through cues existing in our social and physical environment.

Blumer (1969:10) speaks individually of physical, social and abstract objects, but in the physical environment all three elements are combined and interact. Because one acts towards objects in terms of meaning, that is, objects indicate to people how to interpret situations and act appropriately, the physical environment acts on behaviour by providing cues whereby people judge or interpret their social context. In other words, it is the social situation that influences people's behaviour, but it is the physical environment that provides the cues for assessing those social situations. Thus, for example, the sterile, white, cold environment of a doctor's office will elicit very different social interaction or social behaviour than the warm, comforting environment of a family playroom or den. Each physical environment "gives off" clues (i.e. both manifest and latent) directing appropriate or inappropriate action. As such, the physical environment of "The Coffee Shack" also provides such clues to its staff and customers.

Manifest Functions and the Physical Environment of The Coffee Shack

The manifest elements of “The Coffee Shack” are more than those items that are intentionally designed to affect customers’ activity. If such were the case, all of the fixtures that comprise the environment of “The Coffee Shack” would be considered to be manifest. As I have suggested earlier the complete décor has been designed with the express intent of controlling customer’s behaviour. Although some of the elements are manifest, the others are latent.

Thus, the distinction lies in the level of recognition of the purpose of these furnishings. The function of those elements that are more immediately recognizable, for my purposes, will be considered manifest. And, as I have suggested earlier, those less immediately identifiable will be considered latent.

In describing his vision of what the physical elements of “The Coffee Shack” should look like the CEO (1997:314) has suggested:

Our goal was to raise our store design to a higher level, leaping ahead of our competitors. We aimed to create a lyrical and esthetic new design with richness and texture, strong enough to tell “The Coffee Shack” story, going beyond just a revised new colour scheme, another kind of wood, or a new style of chairs, and trying to capture the essence of “The Coffee Shack” experience. We directed our creative team to draw from culture, and mythology to weave a fantastic tale. “The Coffee Shack” should be an authentic coffee experience, an extension of the front porch, an enriching, rewarding environment.

We explored the mythology of the sea, the idea of the “third place” and the art and literature of coffee culture through the ages. We got rid of everything stiff and hard edged, and brought romance and mythology, mellowness and warmth, using contemporary production processes to capture an eclectic, handmade look (Schultz, 1997:314).

The environment the CEO speaks of does exist, in part, within the confines of “The Coffee Shack.” For example when entering the double doors one can’t help but be struck by the overwhelming warmth radiated by the array of colours. Rich browns, deep reds, and cool greens tastefully make up the design patterns of the furnishings and walls in “The Coffee Shack.” As the CEO notes, this colour scheme elicits a feeling of warmth and relaxation.

The colour patterns of “The Coffee Shack” are intentionally designed to create an impression of a comfortable, welcoming environment. This colour scheme stands in direct contrast to decoration patterns typically associated with fast food type restaurants. Where a “third place” encourages a “home away from home” feeling, fast food restaurants emphasize profitability, and as such, discourage patron lingering.

For example, Luxenberg (1985:122) notes that fast food type restaurants use bright colour schemes and combinations to encourage customers to spend as little time as possible while in one of these establishments:

Without a doubt, traditional fast food restaurants use bright, arousing colours to control the length of stay of their customers. The colours are loud and generally unpleasant to stare at for more than a short duration of time. They do more than simply decorate, they clearly deter social loitering.

Where yellows and other bright colours are very arousing, the darker colours used at “The Coffee Shack” are more relaxing (Mehrabian, 1976). This is significant for an establishment attempting to present itself as a legitimate “third place” because the warm, relaxing, colour scheme appears to encourage customers to remain in and enjoy the atmosphere. Where a traditional fast food type restaurant would encourage individuals to

leave, a “third place” in terms of Oldenburg’s criteria would invite them to remain. Thus, upon initial entrance into “The Coffee Shack” it appears to be a “third place,” that is, a home away from home.

To the immediate right of the double entrance doors can be found what I considered to be the most comfortable area within “The Coffee Shack.” This small “oasis” of comfort consists of three paisley coloured, wing back, armchairs. These chairs have a high, and wide, padded back and a comfortable cushion for sitting. Along the side wall of this corner area is a long couch that matches both the style and colour of the paisley arm chairs. This camel backed sofa is designed large enough to comfortably fit three grown adults and provide each of them ample room for such things as reading the newspaper and consuming a coffee.

In the center of this semi-circle of accent chairs and a sofa is a cocktail table. The table top appears to be a dark, oak grain replica, with a smooth finish. The base of the table is a combination of vertical and horizontal wrought iron bars making the table both very sturdy and moderately heavy. The sturdiness of this table provides a sense of permanency and stability for customers’ wishing to place, rather than hold, their cups.

In the front right hand corner of the “comfortable” section is a small rack used for storing newspapers. The rack is similar in styling to the coffee table with a combination of a dark wood grain type finish and a wrought iron base. Customers are free to take from this rack whatever piece(s) of the newspaper they wish to enjoy with their coffees. Again, one gains a sense of permanency envisioning a continued stay of relaxation and drinking coffee over the daily news.

The floor in this area is covered by a carpet. The carpet is beige in colour with paisley half circle type shapes as part of its pattern. The carpet is tightly woven with short fibers and clearly marks where this oasis of comfort starts and finishes. All of the furniture is on this carpet and I would suggest that its function is to add a feeling of warmth to this specific environment.

The area I have just described in “The Coffee Shack” seems to be very similar to the concept of the “beautiful” room used by Maslow and Mintz (1956). These researchers tested the short term effects of three visually aesthetic conditions: “beautiful,” “average,” and “ugly” rooms. Respondents were shown various pictures of individuals’ faces and their reactions to these images were recorded for each room.

Maslow and Mintz describe the “beautiful” room as follows:

The “beautiful” room impressed people as “attractive,” “pretty,” “comfortable,” “pleasant.” It was 11’ x 14’ x 10’ and had two large windows, beige coloured walls, an indirect overhead light, and furnishings to give the impression of an attractive, comfortable study. Furnishings included a soft armchair, a mahogany desk and chair combination, a wooden bookcase, a large Navajo rug, drapes for the windows, paintings on the walls and some sculpture and art objects on the desk (1956:247).

Maslow and Mintz (1956) discovered that the group of subjects interviewed in the “beautiful” room gave significantly higher ratings to the images they were presented with than those respondents in either the “average” or “ugly” room. Subjects in the beautiful room seemed to have more “energy” and an overall higher “well being” than those in the other two rooms (Maslow & Mintz, 1956:253).

The similarities between the “beautiful” room in Maslow and Mintz’s work and the small area of “The Coffee Shack” that I have previously described go beyond physical

similarities. What is common is the way they are intended to make individuals feel.

These rooms are designed to provide individuals with a feeling of warmth and comfort.

This environment encourages a feeling of “well being” and “energy” and openly invites individuals to participate actively in the enjoyment of these sensations.

This area of “The Coffee Shack” is intended to provide customers with the same sensations of warmth and comfort typically experienced in the living areas of their homes. It is the availability of these “homey” sensations that the CEO suggests allows “The Coffee Shack” to provide for customers the experience of – “an extension of their front porches.”

This very small area clearly demonstrates “The Coffee Shack’s” expressed interest in encouraging customers to remain in the store, be comfortable, and eventually return for the same experience. It is the opportunity for this comfort that “The Coffee Shack” promotes in hopes that it will create an impression of a “third place.” As I shall demonstrate later in this chapter however, this very small “oasis” of comfort is representative of a very small commitment on behalf of “The Coffee Shack” to ever truly creating Oldenburg’s “third place” environment.

The final environmental elements that I wish to discuss are the windows of “The Coffee Shack.” The windows occupy three quarters of the vertical wall space of both the front of the store and the side wall that runs the length of the building and faces out onto the street. Half of “The Coffee Shack” wall space is occupied by three quarter length windows. One of the remaining two walls is shared with the store next door, and as such, does not have space available for windows. The fourth wall makes up the back of the store and has limited customer access.

Windows are significant because they are responsible for admitting daylight into an interior environment. In examining the significance of daylight to level of environmental desirability, Cooper, Hardy and Wiltshire (1974) asked the occupants of a number of tower offices to rank the most important physical features of their work setting from a list of twelve options. Cooper, Hardy and Wiltshire (1974) discovered that their respondents placed good natural lighting at the top of their list.

Canter and Stringer (1975) have suggested that people prefer daylight and sunlight to artificial light. Further, conditions of extreme luminance are more acceptable from windows and natural light than is the case from artificial light sources (Canter & Stringer, 1975: 105).

Beyond providing opportunities for natural light, windows are desirable for the contact they provide with the exterior. In this vein, Mehrabian discusses the value of windows to drinking establishments:

Windows suggest an unabashed or social attitude towards drinking – that it is not something to be done in the dark, shielded from the eyes of passersby, the law, or the community at large. Anyone on the street can look in and see who's there and then decide whether to enter (1976:261).

The windows of “The Coffee Shack” provide the physical environment with highly desirable daylight. Of particular interest, the small “comfortable,” area of “The Coffee Shack” is designed in such a way as to have windows running both behind it, and beside it. The strategic placement of this “oasis” of comfort in a position that allows for its access to the maximum available daylight highlights the significant role this area plays in terms of establishing an overall atmosphere of comfort and sociability.

This particular area of “The Coffee Shack” has been flooded with the physical resources that allow it to generate feelings of warmth and comfort for those customers who participate within its bounds. As such, the combination of the colour patterns, the comfortable seating and available daylight are representative of “The Coffee Shack’s” attempt to present its manifest elements in such a fashion as to create an impression of a “third place.”

Latent Functions and The Coffee Shack

Latent functions are those elements of “The Coffee Shack” that are designed to less obviously control the activities of the patrons. Where the manifest functions clearly serve to encourage customers to remain in “The Coffee Shack,” the latent elements are more subtly designed to encourage individuals to leave. These messages are presented in a subtle manner as this clearly is not the type of impression a retailer, who promotes itself as a haven of sociability, would like acknowledged. It is the discrete, yet powerful message these elements convey that discourage sociability, and as such, run contrary to the aspired “third place” agenda.

The first latent element of “The Coffee Shack” I will discuss is the music. “The Coffee Shack” is a world of sounds. Whether it is the banter between the staff as they call out the names of drinks or the hissing of the espresso machine, there are a variety of noises within this environment that attract one’s attention. Of particular interest with respect to the various sounds associated with “The Coffee Shack” is the jazz music that is constantly playing over speakers in the background. The CEO suggests:

We try to create, in our stores, an oasis, a little neighborhood spot where you can take a break, listen to

some jazz and ponder universal or personal or even whimsical questions over a cup of coffee (Schultz, 1997:12).

The function of the jazz music in “The Coffee Shack” is more than simply a mechanism that contributes to the romance of the coffee experience. Rather, music in “The Coffee Shack” is used as a device to control the rate of participation of customers while they consume the available resources of this setting. The selection of jazz music is valuable not only for its association with adult sophistication but its characteristic fast paced beat. Mehrabian (1976:50) has suggested that both the quick tempo and overall beat of jazz music makes it one of the most arousing forms of music. People, according to Mehrabian (1976:51) automatically adjust the tempo and rhythm of their movements to the principle beats of the environments.

A very boring, routine job, such as folding letters or fliers and stuffing them into envelopes, can be facilitated by music. If slow, very regular music is played, the stuffing actions will also be slow and regular (Mehrabian, 1976:134). If the music is lively with a fast tempo, to mirror the rhythm of the music, the stuffing activity will move more quickly (Mehrabian, 1976:136).

Smith and Carrow (1966) reported that an increase in music tempo had shoppers in a supermarket buying the same quantities of food in a shorter period of time. Thus, it is easy to see that music can be planned deliberately to maintain a desired level of arousal or activity in various settings. The up-tempo jazz music of “The Coffee Shack” subtly encourages patrons to remove themselves from the premises as quickly as possible. This response to the up tempo of jazz music satisfies the ideological commerce based objectives of “The Coffee Shack” by encouraging high turnover rates, which by

extension, increases profitability. “The Coffee Shack’s” use of jazz music reduces the length of stay thereby reducing the levels of sociability available in this setting. As such, this organization’s operational objective of a high turnover rate reduces its ability to be considered a “third place” as developed by Oldenburg.

The jazz music of “The Coffee Shack” does more than dictate a pace of participation. The music, along with the available newspapers, serves as a “social involvement.” An involvement is any activity sustained by individuals within a social situation that expresses their apparent purpose in being present (Goffman, 1963:51).

Goffman continues:

The participant in a social gathering may be obligated to sustain at least a certain minimal involvement to avoid the appearance of being utterly disengaged. This is one reason why waiting rooms, club cars and passenger airplanes in our society often are supplied by management with emergency supplies such as magazines and newspapers, which serve as minimal involvement’s that can be given weight (when there is nothing but waiting to do) yet can be immediately discarded when one’s turn or destination arrives. Newspapers in particular play an important role here, providing a portable source of involvement, which can be brought forth whenever an individual feels he ought to have an involvement but does not (Goffman, 1968:51).

The music and available newspapers in this setting may create a comfortable experience for customers but they also encourage individuals not to be social. By allowing access to an easy involvement, or mechanism to occupy one’s purpose for participation in this setting, individuals remaining in “The Coffee Shack” have their social attention consumed not by coffee drinking, or communicating with each other, but rather by listening to the music or engaging with the available reading material. These

involvements have the potential to give a sense of purpose to a lone individual in this setting, and discourage sociability.

As suggested earlier in this chapter, the small “oasis” of comfort at the front of the store is covered with carpet. The remainder of the floor space in “The Coffee Shack” is blanketed with a very cold, antiseptic tile. It is these plain, institutional, tiles and their effects on sociability that I will discuss as the second latent element this section.

The tile of “The Coffee Shack” covers most of the available floor space. The tile flooring, although easily maintainable in terms of cleanability, is institutional looking, and as such, does not promote the elements of warmth and comfort created by the carpeted area at the front of the store.

The significance of this tile flooring, in terms of its affect on sociability, can be seen when examining research done on the effects that this physical element has had on mental hospitals. Before the 1950’s, mental hospitals functioned primarily as places of incarceration rather than therapy. They were extremely monotonous and drab: uniformly painted in serviceable colours, lacking decoration, very stale tile floors, and in general designed with little concern for facilitating social interaction (Mehrabian, 1976:185). According to Mehrabian (1976), psychologists and other professionals visiting such hospitals recommended that they be furnished with colourful carpeting, paintings or posters and reasonably comfortable furniture. This “warming up” of the environment proved to be effective. Many of the patients’ mental health improved dramatically as a result of the changes from a traditionally bleak institution to a more friendlier, warmer, atmosphere (Mehrabian, 1976).

The direction of my evaluation of the physical elements of “The Coffee Shack,” in terms of the tile flooring, is not intended to suggest that the atmosphere of “The Coffee Shack” is similar to that of a pre 1950’s mental institution. Rather, I am trying to highlight the traditional role of tile floors as a physical element that may not give the same impression of warmth as a carpet. Tile flooring tends to be somewhat “cooler” than carpet and often reflects a feeling of a more formal institution. Where the carpeted floor at the front of the store may advance a feeling of warmth and encourage customers to linger, the tile on the remainder of the floor seems very antiseptic and subtly discourages those same emotions. In an environment that supposedly provides an environment conducive to sociability, the use of cool, antiseptic, tile floors is simply another element that works against “The Coffee Shack” receiving a “third place” designation.

The final latent elements I will discuss are the tables and chairs of “The Coffee Shack.” Although I have already addressed the quality of the furniture in the small “oasis” of comfort earlier in this chapter, this area makes up a very small percentage of the available seating. The furniture I will be discussing for the remainder of this section consists of a group of seven tables forming a straight line that runs parallel to the wall of windows at the side of the store.

These tables are separated from the rest of the store by a dividing wall that runs the length of five of these tables. The remaining two tables are at the back of the store, beside the bathrooms. The windows on one side, and the dividing wall on the other, serves to surround this group of tables and create a very narrow passage way for anyone wishing to traverse the corridor running the length of this seating arrangement.

The tables and chairs are in very close proximity to one another. It is not uncommon while occupying a table in this area to be sitting no more than a few inches from the individual positioned directly behind you. In such situations, sitting in close proximity to other customers of “The Coffee Shack” may lead to the bumping of chairs when those around you begin to move about.

The linear arrangement of the tables and chairs does more than make movement in this area difficult. For example, Mehrabian (1976) suggests that a scatter pattern, rather than a linear arrangement, is more conducive to sociability. An irregular arrangement of tables forces a person wanting to walk from one end of the establishment to the other to almost weave their way around tables (Mehrabian, 1976:261). Although this may produce some discomfort in terms of efficient movement, Mehrabian (1976) suggests that in these informal social environments, efficiency is not a prime concern. Rather, what this pattern encourages is considerably more exposure and eye contact in the process of having to walk around others’ tables. Further, tables and chairs arranged in this manner discourage those who might be tempted to simply lean against the wall and encourages them to participate in the social setting (Mehrabian, 1976:261).

In light of Mehrabian’s (1976) analysis, it becomes clear that the linear pattern of the tables and chairs of “The Coffee Shack” serve to limit sociability. Their limited space and close proximity discourages the formation of small informal groups, and as such, reduces contact among persons seated at different tables.

The tables and chairs in the linear pattern are, themselves, worthy of discussion. These fixtures are both a rich brown colour and show signs of wear. The tables are very small, round, and appear at one time to have had some sort of art work drawn on them.

Over time, these patterns have worn off and are now difficult to clearly identify. The table tops are supported by a long, single pedestal style base with a circular bottom.

The wooden chairs found at all of the round tables are small, short backed, and very stiff feeling. In terms of overall sociability, the styling of these chairs is very significant. The chairs are not designed for comfort, but rather, in such a way as to make customers feel uncomfortable and discourage lingering activity.

According to Luxenberg (1985) these types of uncomfortable seats are deliberately designed by the headquarters of franchise type establishments. Having been served, customers sit in seats that are willfully hard. After eleven or twelve minutes, customers' back sides begin to feel uncomfortable and patrons find themselves hurrying out (Luxenberg, 1985: 85).

George Ritzer (1996), in discussing the controlling effect chairs have on customers' activities suggests that fast food restaurants have developed chairs that make customers uncomfortable after about twenty minutes. The design of the chairs is such that it subtly encourages customers to move on quickly (Ritzer, 1996:133). Organizations using these types of chairs to control their clientele, according to Ritzer (1996), are not the type that would encourage extended amounts of socializing.

As chairs become more comfortable, customers are encouraged to remain longer in an establishment. Burger King discovered this when they attempted to change the traditional style and design décor of their restaurant in one particular case. On a corner in Providence, Rhode Island, Burger King renovated a men's clothing store built in 1876 (Luxenberg, 1985:217). Since the unit faced three banks, the company decorated the fast food restaurant to resemble a bank during the 1890's. Instead of plastic seats, there were

imported Italian chairs with velvet seats and the walls were covered in mahogany woodwork. This comfortable seating created problems for Burger King (Luxenberg, 1985). It encouraged customers to linger around longer than normal and longer than desired by management. In response to this, management was required to make formal requests of patrons to sit for only twenty minutes during busy lunch hours (Luxenberg, 1985:217).

As we can see, seating and seating arrangements both encourage and discourage sociability. The linear pattern of the seats in “The Coffee Shack” does little to encourage interaction among individuals occupying tables in this area. The limited physical space also discourages the formation of social groups by not providing enough room for more than two people to sit comfortably at a table.

The tables themselves are very small and make it difficult for more than two people, sometimes even one person, to comfortably occupy what limited space is available. The small, wooden, short back chairs are deliberately uncomfortable and therefore discourage lingering by those customers who may wish to stay and socialize with others. The pattern of the available seating, and physical characteristics of the chairs in this setting, creates an atmosphere that encourages both individual, and short duration participation.

Where Oldenburg’s “third place” celebrates its ability to induce group interaction and extended duration visits, “The Coffee Shack” uses such tactics as uncomfortable seating to reduce the interest that its clients may have in lingering. It is this dichotomy in motivation towards customer sociability that prevents “The Coffee Shack” from achieving its aspired “third place” status.

The ability to control customers in such a way as to discourage sociability comes from “The Coffee Shack’s” latent use of the physical elements particular to this setting. The subtle use of such devices as the music, tile flooring, and chair selection, creates an environment that reduces the customer’s desire for extended participation. These messages become imprinted on the minds of those individuals who participate in this realm, and as such, negatively affect the levels of sociability produced. It is this ideological motivation towards a profitability that stems from a high turnover rate of clientele that I would suggest prohibits “The Coffee Shack” from ever qualifying as a “third place” in terms of Oldenburg’s model.

Summary and Discussion

This chapter of my thesis has served as an opportunity to describe some of the physical elements of “The Coffee Shack.” More specifically, these physical elements have been analyzed in terms of their contributions to the overall levels of sociability characteristic of “The Coffee Shack.” The environmental fixtures that I evaluated, were categorized in terms of their manifest and latent functions. The distinction between manifest and latent, comes not so much in the original intention of the object, but rather its level of recognition as a contributor to sociability. Where manifest elements were more easily recognizable as contributors to an atmosphere of sociability, latent elements were more subtle in their role as detractors.

I submitted in the introduction to this chapter that the physical elements of an environment serve as a template for activity. The interpretations of these environmental indicators serve as directors of behaviour within a particular public realm. In this regard,

the manifest elements of “The Coffee Shack” are designed to project an image of sociability. The warm colours, the “oasis” of comfort and the abundance of natural lighting are all designed to give customers the feeling that “The Coffee Shack” is simply an extension of their front porches.

In contrast, the latent elements of this setting project a very different impression. The functions of these elements are to control the activity of the customers in such a way as to discourage the lingering activity stereotypically associated with coffee houses. The upbeat, fast tempo jazz music does more than set a pace for participation. It also serves as an involvement for individuals’ social attention. Purposively listening to the music, and absorbing oneself in a newspaper gives solitary customers an excuse not to participate socially.

Where the carpet in the “oasis” of comfort creates an impression of warmth, the antiseptic tile floors making up the remainder of “The Coffee Shack” project an image of a very cold, institutional like environment. This effect seems to be the very opposite of the warm, extension of the front porch, image that “The Coffee Shop” strives to project.

Lastly, both the tables and chairs and their arrangement serves to discourage sociability. The linear pattern of the tables is such that it does not allow for interactions between individuals. The tables are very small and therefore do not present themselves as viable facilitators of group interaction. It is the chairs that send the most dominant message in terms of discouraging sociability. Their small frames, and short backs, do not allow an individual to remain comfortable for any extended period of time. Although there are a few comfortable chairs at the front of the store, the majority of the seats are of

this highly uncomfortable nature and clearly project a message that discourages sociability.

It is the latent elements of “The Coffee Shack” that dominate the template of acceptable activity by its patrons. Although very subtle, these elements form in the minds of “The Coffee Shacks” customers and directly confound their behaviour. It is the domination of these latent elements that controls the sociability of “The Coffee Shack.” This domination of latent functions is one of the primary reasons that “The Coffee Shack” can never truly be classified as a “third place.”

CHAPTER IV

CIVIL INATTENTION: GUIDELINES FOR ACTIVITY IN “THE COFFEE SHACK”

Introduction

The goal of any qualitative research project is not to *prove*, beyond a doubt, the existence of particular relationships so much as it is to *describe* a system of distinctive relationships between the individuals and groups of individuals under observation. The primary objective of a qualitative undertaking is to show how associations intermesh together in a web of mutual influence, or support, and to describe the connections between the specifics the researcher has come to know by virtue of his or her “having been there.” Where survey research looks for numerical differences between groups of subjects, qualitative investigation relies on data gathered through direct observation to gain an understanding of certain patterned, social, activity.

This chapter of my thesis will serve as an opportunity to discuss, and review, the observational data gathered during my six months of research in “The Coffee Shack.” The discussion of my data within the context of this chapter will be broken down into five substantive sub sections. The content of these segments will place many of the theoretical concepts introduced in the previous two chapters into a more operational perspective. That is, I will draw on my field work experiences to demonstrate the significance of these concepts in terms of their empirical contributions to my research undertaking.

Civil Inattention and The Coffee Shack

The rule of behaviour that seems to be common to all situations and yet exclusive to each circumstance is the rule obligating participants to “fit in.” According to Goffman, “fitting in” requires:

... the individual must be “good” and not cause a scene or a disturbance; he must not attract undue attention to himself, either by thrusting himself on the assembled company or by attempting to withdraw too much from their presence. He must keep within the spirit or ethos of the situation; he must not be *de trop* or out of place [emphasis in original (1963:11)].

“Fitting in” to “The Coffee Shack” environment requires that individuals and groups of individuals exhibit those behavioural characteristics typically associated with the concept of civil inattention. As previously mentioned, civil inattention occurs when unacquainted persons act socially irrelevant to one another. Although they may be copresent in the physical sense of occupying adjacent space at the same time, they are not copresent in terms of sharing any interest in participating socially with those immediately around them. In “The Coffee Shack,” civil inattention dominates the spectrum of acceptable activity because the participants deliberately ignore those individuals who are unknown to them but who occupy the physical space immediately around them.

I can summarize the rules of civil inattention as they relate to “The Coffee Shack,” in three points:

1. I want my privacy and am not available to be spoken to or encountered in any way.
2. I know you are present and you know I am present but we are, of course, each invisible to each other.
3. I am not intruding and will not intrude into your personal space; in fact, I am going out of my way to avoid doing so.

It is the communication, and understanding, of these three rules that I would suggest allows individuals to successfully participate in this environment. As I have demonstrated with Wolfinger (1995) in Chapter Two, the trust or belief that other users of “The Coffee Shack” will behave according to the rules of civil inattention comes from the great deal of interactions that proceed without incident. As people routinely adhere to the three rules I have suggested above, civil inattention is sustained.

Examples of civil inattention occurred on every occasion that I observed “The Coffee Shack” environment. For example, it was civil inattention that allowed the very common situation of three adults, sitting on an available couch (as described in Chapter Three), all within a few inches of each other, to act as though the others were not there. It was civil inattention that allowed individuals, sitting at tables no more than a few feet away from each other, to stare eye to eye at the person directly across from them and yet behave as though there was no one else around. It is the highly predictable nature of civil inattention and its wide use in “The Coffee Shack” that I would suggest is one of the major attractions of this environment. Conformity to the rules of civil inattention allows customers to comfortably use the resources of this realm because they can safely anticipate the activity of others.

Although routineness and predictability among the subjects in “The Coffee Shack” was the recognized norm, situations often arose that mildly disrupted the consistent flow of activity in this environment. For example, on one particular afternoon a male subject entered “The Coffee Shack:”

Enter Dave (a given pseudonym); from where I am sitting I can sort of see the door. A male has entered, white (30-35), jeans, button up plaid shirt, wind breaker type jacket, slightly open. He is in the door only a few steps and says

very loudly – “Hi everybody.” One of the girls behind the counter responds – “Hi Dave.” I can’t see what is going on at this point as the dividing wall is in between myself and the cash and is blocking my view but I can hear Dave as he is quite loud.

From the way Dave was talking I would estimate that he was developmentally disabled in some way. His words were sort of slurred, he spoke very slowly, and as I have said, he spoke very loudly which from what I can tell so far is unusual for this type of place. Dave was addressed by his first name by all the girls behind the counter. One of the female staff says to him – “Did you hear about Cindy?”

Dave – “No, what?”

Staff -- “She got a new job at a bank”

Dave – “Really, it won’t be the same without her around here.”

Staff – “Yeah, we are really going to miss her.”

All this is going on at a very loud volume, unusual as all the other transactions at the front counter I can’t hear.

Dave is being loud and the girls behind the counter are responding loud. Funny, people around me aren’t really taking any notice to this.

Staff – “So Dave, what are you going to do today?”

Dave – “Relax.”

Staff – “Must be nice.”

Second staff voice – “There you go Dave.”

Dave – “Thanks (pause) see you guys later.”

Staff Collective – “Bye Dave”

Dave leaves and staff go back to talking at a more reasonable volume. (Field notes, March 28,2000).

In an environment that is traditionally subdued and relaxed, having a disruption of this sort I assumed would cause some form of a reaction from the “The Coffee Shack’s” customers. Rather, what I observed was that individuals seemed to hardly react to this distraction. When an individual entered the store and disrupted the stereotypical calm associated with this environment by speaking at a very high volume, I assumed that customers would at least position themselves in such a way as to examine the disturbance. In contrast, the response of the customers was to ignore the situation and

allow it to dissipate away quietly. Therefore, little intervention was required on their part to restore the traditional calm atmosphere once Dave left.

This “ignoring” of the momentary disturbance created by Dave is consistent with the rules of civil inattention. Goffman (1963:87) suggests that in the face of offensiveness or disruption, civil inattention may be used simply as an act of tactfulness to keep an orderly appearance in a situation in spite of what is happening. Although Dave’s loud talking is only a minor interruption to the general activities of “The Coffee Shack” it does serve to demonstrate the application of civil inattention in relation to the group’s collective behaviour. It is this collective commitment to the rules of civil inattention that I would suggest, limits the amount of sociability available to participants in this public realm.

A second example of this collective commitment to civil inattention came when a young boy, probably ten or eleven, roller bladed into “The Coffee Shack.” This young male subject used the bathroom, ordered a drink, and rolled back outside again. I was sure that this would draw a reaction from someone as this was a situation that had a young boy, roller blading semi in control, among adults carrying hot beverages. Yet again, there was no response from anyone in “The Coffee Shack.” Collectively, the patrons ignored this disturbance and again it very shortly disappeared without incident.

Civil Inattention and Individual Response

The above two examples demonstrate the patron’s ability to respond to a disturbance in the usually uneventful, and highly predictable, environment that characterizes “The Coffee Shack.” As I have suggested, in the face of these disruptions, the group was able to respond by collectively subscribing to the rules associated with civil inattention. At

this point, I would like to draw on some examples of disturbances of civil inattention that occurred to individuals, rather than the group, and discuss the individual responses emerging from these situations.

The first example that I will consider unfolded one afternoon when a homeless man entered “The Coffee Shack” and began requesting change from the customers. I did not see him immediately come in or notice him until he was at my table, as I had my head down jotting notes on a previous encounter. He very politely asked if I could spare some change to buy him a coffee, and for lack of available resources, I turned him down with the same degree of politeness with which he had approached me.

This situation unfolded three more times behind me as this individual continued to ask customers for change. Unfortunately for him on that day, the responses he received were all similar to mine and he received no financial remuneration for his requests. What was significant about these encounters was not so much that this individual ignored our “right to civil inattention” but how the customers responded to the disruption. The responses to the homeless person by the customers of “The Coffee Shack” (myself included), were short, directly to the point, and surprisingly polite. In addition, after he “moved on” the approached customers resumed their activity as if nothing had happened and he had never been there.

According to Goffman (1963), these limited responses by “The Coffee Shack” customers are called a “terminal squirm.” Here, unwilling recipients of the overture grudgingly turn their attention to the speaker, give a noncommittal reply, and then as quickly as possible turn away, taking for granted that the other will take this answer as a “signing out” cue (Goffman, 1963:146). The use of a “terminal squirm” serves to signal

to the disturber that one is not interested in an extended encounter and therefore would like to return to one's state of individual solitude as soon as possible. It was this use of a "terminal squirm" that signaled to the homeless man that his disturbance was not welcome and served to encourage his moving along to another individual.

Civil inattention can also be interrupted by individuals asking for small favors or requesting mundane assistance. Carol Brooks Gardener (1986) has called these interruptions of civil inattention "public aid" requests. Such inquiries as – "Can you tell me the time?", "How do you get to...?" are examples of public aid requests. As I was always sitting alone I was often interrupted with requests for the second chair at my table. Or, could I please adjust my table so as to give the person behind me more room. On a few separate occasions, I was approached by various individuals asking to borrow sections of the newspaper that I had on my table. Very ordinary requests such as these typified the interruptions of both my, and others', right to be accorded civil inattention in the public realm.

These interruptions were often prefaced with such ritual disclaimers as – "Excuse me but..." or "I'm sorry to bother you but could I...?" According to Cavan (1973:152), these conventional intrusions (or ones similar) are often used because they carry with them the tacit promise that the newcomer, or intruder, will leave the encounter as it was before they arrived. Thus, the possible threat of disruption is softened by an acknowledgement of the break, and promise of resuming, civil inattention as quickly as possible.

These ritual prefaces are also valuable to the recipients of the intrusions as they indicate to those individuals the degree of response that they are required to direct to this

interruption. For example, when asked by an individual if they could have the second chair at my table I often would simply respond by very abruptly suggesting – “Sure, help yourself,” or “It’s all yours,” and sometimes simply “Yes.” These restrained responses typified the reactions of many individuals in “The Coffee Shack” when approached with such requests for assistance. These restricted responses served also to signal to the intruder that the degree of sociability desired in this situation was limited. In this way, the interrupted person also acknowledged the need to resume social order as quickly as possible.

Momentary Sociability and “The Coffee Shack”

To this point, I have suggested that the rules of sociability specific to “The Coffee Shack” are dictated fundamentally by the rules particular to the concept of civil inattention. I have summarized in three points what I feel to be the essential tenants of civil inattention as it applies to sociability in “The Coffee Shack.” As in many cases, these rules are not absolute in describing the acceptable behaviour in this, or any other, environment. As such, I have addressed situations where it is acceptable to temporarily disregard the rules of civil inattention. For example, requests for mundane assistance are considered acceptable as long as they are very direct and require little activity on the part of the interrupted. Responses to these requests are characterized by a restrained helpfulness so as to ensure that this interruption of one’s solitude will remain minimal.

I would now like to discuss situations in which interruptions of one’s right to civil inattention are not based on a request for mundane assistance but rather acceptable desires for momentary sociability. I introduced this chapter with a discussion of group

interruptions of civil inattention (Dave and youth roller-blader) and group responses, and then, continued by identifying situations where individuals were interrupted and restrainfully responded. I will now progress by introducing situations that involve interruptions of an individual's civil inattention that resulted in acceptable social, rather than restrained, types of reactions.

The relationships I will be discussing are those that are created, however briefly, between strangers as a result of some element of shared commonality. It is this shared element, or ability to categorically know another, that serves to generate moments of brief sociability in this otherwise non-social environment. Where requests for mundane assistance are responded to with restrained helpfulness, interruptions of this nature are met with a greater degree of interactional cooperation.

The best example of this situation unfolding in "The Coffee Shack" comes when one examines the periodic interactions of female customers who are caring for a child. The clientele of "The Coffee Shack" that choose to remain in the facility (rather than purchase a product and immediately leave) in the morning and early afternoon hours is dominated by female caregivers and their young children. I will refer to these individuals as "caregivers" rather than a more biologically appropriate designation (mother, grandmother etc) as from my observation position, there was no way to know for sure that the immediate guardian of the child was indeed a biological relation rather than an individual outside of the family temporarily caring for the child.

Caregivers and their children primarily positioned themselves in the more comfortable area of "The Coffee Shack" which was that section at the front of the store containing a carpeted floor, comfortable arm chairs and a matching couch. This area presented not

only physical comfort for these customers, but I would suggest that its greatest appeal was the available room it offered. This area, as I have suggested in Chapter Three, was very open and allowed for greater mobility for caregivers as they were often required to maneuver such things as oversized carriages and child accessory bags. Further, as this area was carpeted, it presented an opportunity for the caregivers to place their children momentarily on the floor if the situation, or behaviour of the child, necessitated such an action.

In terms of sociability, it appeared that it was acceptable for caregivers, with children, to temporarily break the rules associated with civil inattention and engage one another in an interaction. The common element they shared was very clearly the immediate care for a child. This categoric similarity allowed these individuals to temporarily bypass the rules of civil inattention governing all other's behaviour in this environment. For example:

The lone female on the couch begins to collect her things as if she is preparing to leave. She places her baby in the carriage while she puts on her jacket deposits her book in her shoulder bag. She now has reached into a pocket on the side of her carriage and removes what appears to be an infant's jacket and sweater. She picks up the child, and begins to dress it. At this point, it is hard to say if the child is male or female but if I had to guess I would say female as the clothes he/she is wearing are more "female" type colours.

I don't envy this poor woman as the infant clearly does not want to be dressed as "she" is making some unpleasant noises. Not really crying but rather sort of a whine. The female caregiver appears to be struggling to get the child dressed. (Note to self – dressing a child that does not want to be dressed is like placing a squid in a net and trying not to let any of the tentacles fall out).

Female 2 – in arm chair also with baby in her lap –
 "Looks like someone is not happy about leaving."

Female 1 – “Yeah, she is never like this, I don’ t know what has gotten into her today.”

Female 2 – “My little guy used to do that all the time, but not so much now, I think it is something they grow out of?”

Female 1 – “I hope so I don’t want to deal with this too many more times.”

Female 2 – “You know, one time we were at the Rideau Center and my friend and I were pushing my guy around in a stroller so we took his snow suit off. Well, when it was time to go and we tried to get him dressed again, he threw the biggest fit, we were so embarrassed. I’m sure people passing by must have been thinking – ‘Would you look at that terrible mother, abusing her child right here in public’ (Field Notes, March 31,2000).

These two females banter on about similar situations that they had experienced for close to five more minutes before the first caregiver finally excused herself from the interaction. Where requests for mundane assistance usually last no more than a few short moments, this encounter lasted much longer. This is only one example of many situations that unfolded in a similar manner. Caregivers have an immediate commonality allowing them to engage other similar individuals in interactions and bypass the rules of civil inattention that dominate the lack of sociability of this public realm.

Unlike the other customers of “The Coffee Shack” caregivers are able to remove some of the strangeness associated with this environment through what Lofland (1973) has called, and I introduced in Chapter Two, apparential ordering. Caregivers are able to “know” a great deal about other caregivers on the basis of their individual presentation of self. They both clearly have similar personal characteristics. It is this removal of some of the elements of strangeness and the understanding of a commonality that allows these individuals to momentarily generate sociability in the face of an environment that does little to encourage such behaviour.

Civil Inattention and Requests for Assistance

I would like to redirect the current discussion from situations involving individuals having their right to civil inattention interrupted and their varied responses to such interjections, to circumstances where individuals clearly needed assistance but the rules of civil inattention superceded the standards of common social courtesy. I have alluded to this behaviour in Chapter Two with my discussion of the work of Latane and Darley (1970, 1973) and their examinations of bystander's decisions to intervene in situations of serious need. Although the examples I will be drawing on do not compare to the levels of inhumanity demonstrated in the Kitty Genovese case, the principles of noninvolvement demonstrated in that situation do remain the same for "The Coffee Shack."

The first example I will consider occurred one afternoon, while I was waiting in line to purchase an available product from "The Coffee Shack." It was a very busy afternoon as the line waiting for service was at least ten customers deep. In terms of this line for service, my position was third from the cash. There happened to be a female caregiver and a small female child (3-4 yrs. old approx.) waiting in line directly behind me. She was twenty five to twenty eight years old and was carrying a large bag over her shoulder. In the area of the cash, there are shelves displaying products that one can purchase above and beyond the traditional "venti hot chocolate to go." These products include such things as prebagged coffee, small books, and compact disks. All are available in this area and of course all bear "The Coffee Shack" logo. On the very bottom shelf in this area are displayed plastic, car, coffee cups. Car coffee cups are those cups that are both thermal and have a snap on lid with a small hole in the top for reduced spillage and are

used primarily in one's car. The small female child, who at this point was probably losing interest in waiting in line, got down on her knees and pulled all of these cups out from the shelf and onto the floor. There must have been fifteen cups rolling on the floor among the feet of others waiting in line.

The female caregiver was terribly embarrassed at what her young female responsibility had just done and, quite naturally, she began the difficult task of cleaning up the mess. I say difficult as she was required to bend down, with a large shoulder bag on her arm, pick up the rolling cups, while at the same time hold her place in line and keep her young female responsibility at an arm's length. In addition, few individuals behind her responded so much as to even move their feet to allow this poor embarrassed female easier access to cups that had continued to roll down the service line.

Seeing that she very clearly needed some assistance I bent down and began to help her clean up the rolling cups from the floor of "The Coffee Shack." I too was greeted with the same response as the female cleaning beside me when I was required to retrieve cups from between and around customer's legs. These individuals hardly found it in themselves to move, maybe for fear they would lose their precious "spot " in line, and therefore forced me to work around them and make the whole process that much more difficult.

Between the two of us we were very quickly able to clean up the spill and return all the products to their rightful position on the display shelf. The female customer apologized for allowing this incident to occur and deeply thanked me for my response to her very obvious need for assistance. Once the need for assistance subsided, we both

returned back to the natural practice of civil inattention and continued to wait for our turn at the cash.

In this situation, the inactivity on the part of those waiting in line placed them directly within the confines of civil inattention for, to act in such circumstances would be in direct violation of the principles of civil inattention and therefore their actions would be considered deviant. They very clearly were playing the role of an “audience” watching this situation unfold.

My participation in this event came as a result of a moral conformity to the rules of simple courtesy to others in apparent need of assistance. In this situation, I felt that the rules of general courtesy superceded the rules of civil inattention and therefore felt no inhibitions towards participation. Traditionally in these situations, Latane and Darley (1973) have suggested that individuals are less likely to come to the aid of one in need as others present often serve as a guide to behaviour. I assumed that once I had proactively responded to the situation at hand, I may have been able to break down this model of behavioural inactivity and encourage others to participate. As I was soon to discover, such was not the case.

The second example I wish to draw on is more of a series of events rather than one particular incident. As I suggested earlier in this chapter, the clientele of “The Coffee Shack” in the morning and afternoon hours was dominated by female caregivers and children. This is not to suggest that there were not others in this environment during these times of the day but rather I am suggesting that customers with personal characteristics representative of a caregiver to a child were more often present during these business hours.

As such, I had the opportunity to watch a situation unfold time and again in which a female caregiver struggled with entering the facility as a result of her hands being occupied by a carriage and a baby accessory bag. The entrance of “The Coffee Shack” consisted of a double door system. The first door was on the outside of the building and posed few problems to anyone who entered. Where the difficulty came for female caregivers and all their belongings was when they would enter the zone of transition between the first and second door. This was an area barely large enough for two people to stand side by side. It was an area surrounded by glass that wasn’t really considered to be in the store yet, but at the same time, permitted a customer to take momentary shelter from exposure to the outside elements.

When caregivers entered this elevator shaped area with a baby carriage and other personal belongings, unless they pulled the carriage in behind them through the first door, they were required to reach over the carriage and grab the second door giving them access to “The Coffee Shack.” To make matters worse, the door opened towards the customer so to make it through the opening, the caregiver was required to back up towards the first door. Of course, to complete this successfully, one is required to have very long arms or be incredibly flexible. To reach over the carriage to open the door, and then back up, while at the same time watching for other customers coming both in and out, one is required to maintain a balancing act of all their belongings which can become very difficult.

Where this becomes significant to my discussion of inactivity towards individuals in need of assistance comes in examining the general absence of courtesy based responses to these caregivers and their situation. At no time during my study did I observe anyone

get up or maneuver themselves into a position to offer assistance to these struggling individuals. Mass conformity to the rules of civil inattention resulted in these individuals being left to fend for themselves where only a small gesture of courtesy would have alleviated the discomfort associated with this situation.

What makes these occurrences of inattention even more interesting occurs when we examine the activity of customers towards the periodic appearance of the product delivery personnel. On occasion a large cube van would pull up in front of “The Coffee Shack” and a male would unpack boxes from the back of the van and bring them into the store on a service dolly. Where caregivers had to struggle to get the doors open on their own, the professional delivery personnel was exposed to no shortage of offers from customers to hold open the doors. At times there would be multiple customers holding both the doors open while others would offer to stand close to the action and make sure that other passers by did not inadvertently get in his way.

It seems unusual that a caregiver struggling with a door and her “parcels” received no response whatsoever from the customers at “The Coffee Shack,” while these same individuals couldn’t be helpful enough to the professional package delivery personnel as he completed his rounds of resupplying “valuable” Coffee Shack resources.

I would suggest that this contrast in activity on behalf of “The Coffee Shack” clientele comes as a result of the differences in which both the caregiver and delivery personnel are viewed. The caregiver is viewed by other customers as a member of “The Coffee Shack” community by virtue of simply appearing in this environment. The caregiver is there for no other reason than to consume the available resources that “The Coffee

Shack” has to offer. As such, she is accorded the very same principles of civil inattention, as everyone else, regardless of her struggles.

The delivery personnel, on the other hand, is treated differently because his motivation for participation in this realm is purely occupational. At this moment in time the only reason this individual finds himself in this environment is as a result of the requirements of his given employment. As such he is accorded a “pass” or given “special” status and therefore can be engaged above and beyond the rules of civil inattention that govern all others in this environment.

Lofland and Home Territory

The final concept that I will discuss in this chapter is Lofland’s (1973) notion of “home territory.” As I summarized in Chapter Two, when an individual’s knowledge of a setting reaches a certain level, it allows a patron of this environment to consider it a home territory. As a result of this change in perspective, an environment that once was cloaked in strangeness slowly becomes a setting that may be used for more private purposes.

The overriding principles of one being able to label an environment a “home territory” are trust and predictability. As a result of one’s extended participation in this realm, one trusts that one can safely predict, or anticipate, the activity of those in the immediate environment. In the case of “The Coffee Shack” people trust that through their active participation they will be accorded the same principles of civil inattention as everyone else. As individuals come to understand this pattern of highly predictable non-social behaviour, they become “comfortable” participating in this environment.

The first example of a customer using “The Coffee Shack” as a “home territory” comes from a situation that involved a lone male subject and a lap top computer. One afternoon I observed a male subject, sitting alone on the paisley couch, working on a laptop computer. For no immediate apparent reason, this individual got up from the couch, placed his jacket on, and removed himself from “The Coffee Shack.” Much to my surprise, he had left his computer behind, still plugged in, sitting on the couch.

A period of no less than ten minutes passed before the male subject returned to his place on the couch. I found this behaviour very surprising. For someone to leave a piece of equipment as valuable as a laptop computer unattended for such a long period of time, in a very public setting, demonstrated a blatant disregard for the possible consequences associated with this act of apparent carelessness. Clearly, this male subject had developed an attitude of propriety rights towards “The Coffee Shack,” similar to his own home, and trusted that the rules of civil inattention traditionally accorded to customers, would be extended to his unattended piece of computer equipment.

The actions of this lone male individual demonstrated a degree of propriety rights towards the couch he was occupying. It is in this vein, that Goffman (1971) would suggest that this individual, through his momentary association with propriety rights, has classified the couch as a “stall.” Goffman (1971:32) submits that a “stall” is a well bounded space to which individuals can lay a temporary claim. “Stalls” are most often fixed in a setting, similar to the couch of “The Coffee Shack,” but can be temporarily vacated. Although the possessor of the “stall” may at times be momentarily absent, the individual is able to sustain a continued claim to this “private territory” (Goffman, 1971:33).

The sustained claim to a “stall” is done through the use of “markers.” “Markers, according to Goffman (1971:41) are those objects that announce a territorial claim. The marker itself, Goffman (1971:43) continues is most likely to be some personal effect that can be stolen and may well be worth stealing. As Goffman (1971:43) submits – “To hold a stall, then, one may have to expose a personal possession to theft.

In the case of the lone male subject on the couch, the “marker” used to extend his claim to this area was his laptop computer. By leaving this valuable piece of equipment on the couch in his absence this male subject signaled to the other users of this space that he would be returning momentarily to reclaim his “stall” or area of the couch with which he had laid a temporary claim. Not only did this individual assume that his computer would remain untouched, but he also demonstrated an assumption that the other patrons of this environment would recognize his “marker” as a clear indicator of his temporary possession of a particular space in “The Coffee Shack.”

The male customer was correct in his assumption that his computer would be safe in this environment characterized by inattention. Not a single customer even took a second look at this unattended piece of equipment sitting directly in the middle of the couch, nor did anyone intrude on his “stall” in his absence. This male subject had successfully predicted that no harm would come to his computer as a result of his momentary physical absence and that other passers by would not infringe on his rights of momentary spatial occupation. As such, the ability of this individual to comfortably predict the response of those unknown others sharing this setting has contributed to this male subjects ability to consider “The Coffee Shack” a home territory.

My second example comes from a situation involving four women and their babies.

As I noted in my field observations:

Sitting directly in front of me (I am sitting with my back toward the front of the store and looking towards the washrooms) is a table of four women. All white, late 20's to early 30's and each holding infant babies. Four women, four babies and four carriages. They were taking up a tremendous amount of room – in most cases two people barely fit at the tables – there are four women, four carriages, and four babies. They have totally blocked off the walking path between the wall and the table with all of their stuff (baby bags and carriages).

To get to my table I had to walk all the way around the wall and come at my table from the other side. I am staring right at them – they have taken up too much room so I can't sit with my back to them. From the way they are positioned right now, I could probably reach out and touch the one sitting closest to me – they are that close. They are all casually dressed, some track pants, wind pants, and one pair of stretch pants.

All the babies are out and sitting on caregivers lap. I can't help but listen in to their conversation as I am practically right in the middle of them. Actually, I wish I couldn't hear what they are saying as they are discussing things that I just shouldn't be hearing. They are all taking turns telling war stories about babies – feedings, rashes, up every hour, their husbands, maternity leave, doctors appointments, among other things. Some of the things they are talking about I am too embarrassed to repeat.

The woman sitting the furthest away from me has started breast feeding her baby. Now a second has started. In fact, they are making a joke about it – “Watching you must have made my guy hungry. I haven't been able to get him to eat all day.” They all laugh. Breast feeding in public is okay, it is just that I have seen a little too much of the whole process. They talk and laugh for about another 10 minutes or so after the breast feeding incident (Field notes, April 05, 2000).

What this example demonstrates, again, is a certain level of comfort acquired by customers of “The Coffee Shack.” The fact that these female subjects felt complacent

enough to openly breast feed in this normally subdued environment already suggests a certain level of familiarity with the rules regarding participation. But I would suggest that what more clearly demonstrates the home territory atmosphere felt by these subjects was the candor they expressed in discussing some very private physical consequences of pregnancy. The types of pregnancy related discomforts they were discussing were situations, I would assume, that would be very personal and probably not the types of things one would address in a very public place such as “The Coffee Shack.” Rather, they revealed these physical conditions with the same “matter-of-factness” one would stereotypically associate with discussions of the weather, or a local sports franchise. I would suggest that what allowed them to do this was the association these subjects had with “The Coffee Shack” as being a home territory. They felt comfortable enough in this environment to allow themselves to discuss very personal matters and further, their apparent familiarity with the rules of civil inattention associated with “The Coffee Shack” ensured them that they would not be disturbed during these very “private” moments.

The discussion of activity that suggests that “The Coffee Shack” in some circumstances could be considered a home territory appears to introduce a direct contrast to the main argument of my thesis, for I am arguing that the absence of sociability in “The Coffee Shack” directly works against its aspired social designation of a “third place.” Yet, in this chapter, I have also argued that within this non-social environment there are situations where individuals are able to develop a level of comfort such that they may use this setting for private purposes. My data indicates that people can manipulate the physical surroundings to facilitate their own needs for sociability. In other words,

“The Coffee Shack” can become both depending upon the people who enter it and their definition of the situation at the time.

In response to this apparent contrast I would suggest that acquiring a level of comfort such that one could consider “The Coffee Shack” a home environment does not necessarily mean that they are contributing to the overall level of sociability of this setting. For example, the situation I described initially of the lone male who felt comfortable enough to leave his laptop computer unattended suggests a certain degree of complacency with this setting. Yet, this complacency is only representative of a “lone” individual’s comfort level with this environment, and as such, does not in any way constitute “third place” sociability.

The situation involving the four female caregivers and their infant children also demonstrated a home territory level of comfort with “The Coffee Shack.” These females felt comfortable enough in this setting to discuss very personal matters with one another. Although the interaction between the females appears to suggest sociability, in terms of a “third place” definition, such cannot be said to be the case. These female subjects brought their sociability to this environment rather than having found it once they arrived.

“Third place” sociability is environment induced sociability. The motivation for participation in a “third place” is the sociability that already exists rather than the sociability one has to bring on one’s own. Where the existence of a home territory characterization may ensure a greater degree of comfort in an environment, it does not provide any guarantees of an increased level of sociability

Summary and Discussion

This chapter explores the concept of civil inattention. It was important to address these principles within this section as I have suggested that it is the rules of civil inattention that serve as the prevailing guidelines for acceptable social behaviour in “The Coffee Shack.” As such, strict conformity to these criterion by Coffee Shack customers has manifested itself in such a way as to prevent this setting from achieving a desired “third place” designation.

I was able to summarize the principles of civil inattention as they apply to “The Coffee Shack” with three tangible rules:

1. I want my privacy and am not available to be spoken to or encountered in any way.
2. I know you are present and you know I am present but we are, or course, each invisible to the other.
3. I am not intruding and will not intrude into your personal space; in fact, I am going out of my way to avoid doing so.

I used these rules to examine situations where the civil inattention of the customers of “The Coffee Shack” as a group had their rights to civil inattention interrupted and their group response to such distractions. Moving from group distractions, I then addressed circumstances where individuals had their solitude interrupted with requests for mundane assistance. Such interruptions were typified with requests for the time or an unused chair at a table. Responses to these interferences were often restrained, or very short and direct, so as not to encourage further social interaction.

My discussion continued with an evaluation of situations where it was considered permissible to engage another customer in “The Coffee Shack” for moments of temporary sociability. Such situations involved individuals sharing common element that served to

temporarily circumvent the principles of civil inattention and generate moments of sociability.

My evaluation of civil inattention proceeded with an examination of situations where individuals clearly needed assistance but were left to fend for themselves as Coffee Shack customers emphatically adhered to the principles of noninvolvement. In the face of these circumstances, considerations of common courtesy were clearly superceded by the dominating presence of the parameters associated with civil inattention. Although the situations I encountered paled in comparison to the events surrounding the Kitty Genovese case, I would suggest that the principles of noninvolvement in “The Coffee Shack” remain the same.

Lastly, I discussed Lofland’s (1973) idea of home territories. Drawing on examples from my field notes, I was able to illustrate situations where Coffee Shack customers had developed an increased comfort level with the surroundings presented in their immediate setting. This behaviour was significant because those individuals who developed this home territory attitude towards “The Coffee Shack” and extended its uses to their own private needs were still accorded the principles of civil inattention. It was their clear understanding of this prevailing behaviour guideline, I would suggest, that allowed them to gain this increased comfort level.

It was in this vein that I was quick to respond to any association that home territory had with sociability. How is it that I can argue that the reason “The Coffee Shack” is not a true “third place” is because of the low levels of sociability, yet at the same time, discuss increased comfort levels as a result of one’s complacency with this environment? The creation of home territories only serves as a mechanism to increase one’s comfort or

enjoyment level of a particular setting, and further, removes many of the elements of strangeness associated with a public location. Home territory tendencies alone do not generate sociability and as such do not serve to contradict my main argument that “The Coffee Shack” is not a “third place.”

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CHAPTER V

McSpecialty Coffee and “The Coffee Shack”

Introduction

I am arguing that the “The Coffee Shack” cannot be considered as a “third place” because it is not an environment that supports the levels of sociability characteristic of such a designation. I have furthered this argument in Chapter Three in my description of the many physical elements of this environment that are subtly designed to make customers feel uncomfortable and, as such, encourage them not to remain. It is the use of these elements to confound the activity of “The Coffee Shack’s” customers that I have suggested has resulted in my associating this environment more with a fast food type of environment than a haven of sociability. As Plimmer (1998:46) has suggested when discussing the fast food industry – “Relaxation isn’t the point. Getting the Hell out of there is the point.”

I would like to continue this line of argument by briefly discussing four occupational or procedural components of “The Coffee Shack” that serve to draw further parallels between this environment and a stereotypical fast food type setting. The first of these elements I will discuss addresses the notion of “putting the customer to work.” The second will examine the practice of “fake friendliness” or “pseudo interactions.” Next, I will briefly explore the profitability associated with these methods of commerce. Lastly, I will consider the assembly line service process characteristic of fast food environments and how these are maintained at “The Coffee Shack.”

Putting the Customer to Work

One of the mechanisms that fast food restaurants use to increase overall efficiency is to put customers to work. Fast food customers perform many more unpaid tasks compared with those who dine at full service restaurants. As Ide and Cordell submit:

A few years ago, the fast food chain McDonald's came up with the slogan – "We do it all for you." In reality, at McDonald's, we do it all for them. We stand in line, take the food to the table, dispose of the waste, and stack our trays. As labour costs rise and technology develops, the consumer often does more and more of the work.(1994:68).

The activity required of "The Coffee Shack's" customers mirrors those suggested above by Ide and Cordell. Once customers have received their products, they are required themselves to transport their own purchase to an available seat. Often, though, the majority also make a requisite stop at what I call the "coffee condiment" counter. This is a small counter off to the side of "The Coffee Shack" where one can find such things as milk, cream, chocolate and cinnamon flakes, and all other things that may be put in a coffee beverage. Thus, although the staff of "The Coffee Shack" will prepare a customer's beverage, the availability of the coffee condiment counter makes it the customer's responsibility to personalize its final composition.

The responsibility of having to complete your own beverage is a classic example of putting the customer to work. The principles of this process are similar to other fast food franchises, such as Roy Rogers, where consumers are expected to take a naked burger to the "fixin' bar" to add things such as lettuce, tomatoes and onions (Ritzer, 1996:58). In such cases, they end up logging a few minutes a week as sandwich makers. Ritzer (1996)

suggests that this process of putting the customer to work can also be seen in places such as Burger King where customers now must fill their own cups with ice and soft drinks.

Once customers have finalized their own beverage, they then proceed with their purchase to an available table. It is not uncommon at “The Coffee Shack” to find unattended tables with empty coffee cups and plates remaining from previous customers. I soon discovered that it was an accepted norm at “The Coffee Shack” that once customers are done with their products, rather than returning the used dishes to the front counter, they are left behind for the next customer to address. There were occasions when the staff would make rounds and bus tables but often their responsibilities at the front counter precluded them from such activity. As a result, if customers wanted a clean table, they cleared it themselves.

Although this appears to be the opposite responsibility of a traditional fast food restaurant where customers are required to clean their own garbage before they leave, rather than clean someone else’s before they sit down, the principle is still the same. In other words, as customers enter “The Coffee Shack” they are considered more than simply customers. Rather, I would suggest that they more appropriately assume the roles of “agents” or “quasi” staff members, and as such, are required to contribute to the overall operational efficiency of the retail process.

False Friendliness or Pseudo Interactions

An individual’s interaction with staff members in a traditional fast food restaurant is often influenced by rules controlling operational efficiency. It is these rules that direct interaction and often eliminate any genuine fraternization and leads to situations of false

friendliness or pseudo interactions. False friendliness is created by a very controlled association between a customer and a staff member. In short, the rapport between customer and staff is mandated by operational policy, rather than a genuine interest in each other's well being.

As Ritzer submits:

Rule number 17 for Burger King workers is -- "Smile at all times." The Roy Rogers employees who used to say -- "Happy Trails" to me when I paid for my food really had no interest in what happened "on the trail." (In fact, come to think of it, they were really saying, in a polite way, "Get lost!") This phenomenon has been generalized to the many workers who say "Have a nice day" as customers depart. In fact, of course, they usually have no real interest in, or concern for, how the rest of a customer's day goes. Instead, in a polite and ritualized way, they are saying, "Get lost," or move on so someone else can be served (1996:130).

The principles of false friendliness, or mandated interactions, were observed frequently in "The Coffee Shack. In fact, one afternoon, I had the opportunity to overhear a member of "The Coffee Shack's" management team conduct a performance appraisal of one of the front line service personnel. The performance review consisted of a series of questions relating to the procedures of "The Coffee Shack" and a one-to-ten scale to measure the particular staff member's proficiency in performing these tasks. The staff member was first asked to rate himself (it was a young male being evaluated) and then the representative of the management team responded with what she thought was an appropriate appraisal of his performance.

The questions, for the most part, were very standard dealing with such things as promptness, attitude, and knowledge of product. All were questions one would find in

any similar settings' occupational standards. What caught my attention was a question regarding this staff member's ability to create a continued rapport with "The Coffee Shack's" clients. Although the staff member thought he was doing a good job at creating relationships, the evaluator did not agree. She suggested that this individual needed to work harder to develop continuing relationships with clients at "The Coffee Shack." She suggested that he needed to try harder to recognize the faces of many of the regular customers and get to know their names. This "getting to know their names" would make these clients feel as though they were being treated "special," increase their level of satisfaction with this environment, and therefore encourage them to return (Field Notes, April 19/00).

I found that the evaluation of one's ability to strike up a rapport with repeat clients was the ultimate in the encouragement of "fake" friendliness. As the incident described above demonstrates, in "The Coffee Shack," the staff are courteous not because of a higher belief in providing extended customer service, but rather, as a result of mandated occupational necessity. The staff at "The Coffee Shack" extend a level of friendliness to customers not because they want to, but rather, because they have to.

For a term of six months, I was a regular customer at "The Coffee Shack," and as such, I became a victim of these pseudo interactions mandated by "The Coffee Shop's" operational policy. I alluded to this relationship earlier in Chapter One when I discussed my relationship with Michelle. I was someone who made use of the facilities of "The Coffee Shack" on a regular basis. Michelle began to recognize my face and we soon struck up a rapport. Of course, as I suggested, our relationship was accelerated as a result of a completely random situation involving her entering my place of work. Although at

that time we did not know each other's name, we were familiar enough with each other to engage in a momentary interaction.

The concepts of false friendliness, or pseudo interactions, and their value in a service industry setting, can be examined in terms of Toennies notions of "gemeinschaft" and "gesellschaft." In this environment, the practice of false friendliness is used to turn a traditional secondary relationship (gesellschaft) between a staff member and a customer, into a primary (or pseudo gemeinschaft) experience. In an environment where "gesellschaft" relationships are the norm, the use of such techniques as getting to know a customer's name serves to increase an individual's level of comfort in this setting and transform this realm of solidarity into a pseudo gemeinschaft, or atmosphere of community familiarity.

The use of pseudo interactions in a traditional fast food environment differs slightly than the one used in "The Coffee Shack." In a traditional fast food environment, staff use the concept of fake friendliness to control their interactions with customers for brief periods, that is, they have operational policies, or scripts, that direct the short encounter between the staff and the customer while the customer is ordering an available product.

In "The Coffee Shack," fake friendliness is used to control the customer over the long term. The objective of the staff is to create relationships with regular customers with the hopes that this rapport will increase the customer's level of satisfaction with "The Coffee Shack." Although the use of this concept in both of these environments differs, I would suggest that the overriding principle is still the same; control of customers. It is this shared motivation on behalf of both establishments to control customers with structured

interactions, that I would submit, allows me to clearly establish a parallel between “The Coffee Shack” and a traditional fast food restaurant.

Profitability

The third element I would like to introduce in my discussion of the similarities between “The Coffee Shack” and traditional fast food restaurants is the concept of profitability. A traditional fast food establishment is characterized by its huge profit margin in terms of the sales of its available products. For example, Burger King fries are sold at 400 % of their cost (Ritzer, 1996:76). Drinks at Burger King involve a 600 % markup (Ritzer, 1996:76). Thus, in fast food restaurants, quantity is often more of an illusion than reality. Customers, in these environments, are truly not getting a lot for a little.

The same sort of customer “gouging” that exists in fast food restaurants also is customary practice at “The Coffee Shack.” According to Barefoot (1995:63) the cost of making a three dollar café au lait is roughly twenty seven cents. That translates into an eleven hundred percent profit margin for retailers of such coffee beverages. And when one considers that specialty beans that retail for twelve dollars a pound are actually bought wholesale for two dollars a pound, it becomes clear to anyone that the coffee industry, very much like the fast food burger industry, is nothing more than a license to print money. (Dicum & Luttinger, 1999:163).

In “The Coffee Shack,” for example, a venti hot chocolate will cost a customer three dollars and fifty-seven cents. I thought that seemed a little expensive for a hot chocolate when I considered that I could probably purchase a beer for roughly the same price.

Coffees at “The Coffee Shack” were also priced in and around the three dollar range depending on exactly what sort of coffee drink one desired. Again, this seems very expensive for a drink that, according to Barefoot (1995:15), is ninety-eight and three quarter percent water.

The differences between a fast food restaurant and “The Coffee Shack” in terms of profitability comes when one examines how these establishments justify their pricing systems. In a fast food environment, the emphasis is on quantity, or value for the dollar. Through strategic marketing campaigns fast food restaurants promote the illusion that, by spending relatively very little, customers will receive a large return for their money. Such campaigns create the illusion of value. Ritzer attempts to pull back the curtain, so to speak, on the fast food industry’s mirage of value for a dollar by suggesting:

The big fluffy (and inexpensive) bun that surrounds the meat patty makes the burger seem bigger than it is. To further the illusion, the burger and various fixings are sized to stick out of the bun, as if the bun, as large as it is, cannot contain the “tremendous” portion within. Similarly, special scoops arrange fries in such a way that a portion looks enormous. The bags and boxes seem to bulge at the top, overflowing with french fries. The insides of the boxes for McDonald’s large fries are striped to further the illusion. In fact, each package contains only a few pennies worth of potato (1996:77).

Where value for your dollar is used to justify high profit margins in fast food industries, or a quantity based argument, in “The Coffee Shack” one pays higher prices for specialty coffee because “The Coffee Shack” submits that they use a very high quality of bean in all of their products. In fact, the first doctrine in their published mission statement reads:

Establish “The Coffee Shack” as the premier purveyor of the finest coffee in the world while maintaining our uncompromising principles as we grow (Schultz, 1997:139).

Although the fast food industry bases its marketing on quantity, and the specialty coffee industry bases its pricing system on quality, I would suggest that in both cases the principle remains the same, that is, the production of a very low maintenance, high volume product at a minimal cost to the retailer. It is the very high profit margin camouflaged under an illusion of value common to both the specialty coffee and fast food industries that I would suggest serves to strengthen my contention of the categorical similarity between these two “service” industries.

Assembly Line Service and “The Coffee Shack”

The final element I will discuss in this segment is the assembly line type service characteristic of fast food environments. Whether customers enter into a fast food restaurant or use the drive through window, they enter a kind of conveyor belt system that moves them through the setting in the manner desired by the management. When customers enter the restaurant, they know that they are supposed to line up, move to the counter, order their food, pay, carry the food to an available table, eat, gather their debris, deposit it in the trash receptacle and return to their cars.

Ritzer has highlighted three mechanisms that help control customer activity:

- 1 Customers receive cues (the presence of lots of trash receptacles, for example) that indicate what is expected of them.
- 2 A variety of structural constraints lead customers to behave in certain ways. For example, the drive-through window, as well as the written instructions on the menu

marquee at the entrance (and elsewhere), give customers few, if any, alternatives.

- 3 Customers have internalized taken-for-granted norms and follow them when they enter a fast food restaurant (1996:113).

The discovery of the drive-through window made the entire process of purchasing products at a fast food restaurant more efficient. Instead of requiring diners to undergo the labourious and inefficient process of parking the car, walking to the counter, waiting in line, ordering, paying, carrying the food to a table, eating and disposing of the remnants, the drive through window offered customers the streamlined option of driving to the window and driving off with their meal. Drivers can eat while driving if they want to be even more efficient with their time.

The drive through window is also efficient, according to Ritzer (1996), for the fast food restaurant. As more and more people use the drive through window, fewer parking spaces, tables and employees are needed. Furthermore, customers take their debris with them as they drive away, thereby reducing the need for trash receptacles and employees to empty those receptacles periodically (Ritzer, 1996:44).

The service process in “The Coffee Shack” is similar to the assembly line system of a fast food type restaurant. Customers are required to wait in a single file line until it is their turn to place their order at one of two cash registers. It is at this point in the service line that customers are also required to pay the cashier. Customers then continue down the counter until they reach the coffee preparation area or “coffee bar.” It is at this station that “The Coffee Shack’s” staff prepare the customers’ requested beverage. Once customers have received their product, they continue to the coffee condiment counter where they have the opportunity to personalize their coffee beverage.

Those customers who, after purchasing an available product, complete the assembly line process and immediately leave “The Coffee Shack” are in fact doing a tremendous service to this establishment. As I have suggested before in discussing the value of a drive through window, when customers leave a restaurant with their merchandise, as many do in “The Coffee Shack,” they also take with them their trash and occupy fewer tables thereby reducing the need for more employees. Those customers who choose to remain in “The Coffee Shack” are also valuable, as I have suggested earlier, because they are accorded the status of a quasi staff member and are often required to participate in such activities as bussing their own table. As such, “The Coffee Shack” has access to a valuable unpaid work force.

Both a fast food restaurant and a specialty coffee shop use assembly line like procedures to control the activity of their customers. The value of this production process is that it allows these establishments to maximize efficiency in the distribution of clues that indicate to customers how to appropriately behave. It is this similarity of production processes that I would suggest allows “The Coffee Shack” to be discussed in the same vein as a traditional fast food type industry. Thus, despite the CEO’s claim of creating a “home away from home,” he has created a streamlined operational process that emphasizes the needs of profitability, over those of “third place” sociability.

Summary and Discussion

I have presented in Chapter Five an illustration of the parallels between “The Coffee Shack” and a traditional fast food type industry. I felt it was important to include a discussion of the similarities between these two industries as my main argument has been

that “The Coffee Shack” is not a “third place.” As I am suggesting that “The Coffee Shack” is not a “third place,” I thought it would be significant to identify a more appropriate label in which to identify the type of commerce characteristic of this environment.

After a careful review of my observational data, and the available publications in this field, I have concluded that “The Coffee Shack” is more closely related in terms of occupational and procedural doctrines to a fast food style restaurant than a “third place.” I examined both of these settings in terms of having the customer participate in unpaid work, the development of false relationships, overall profitability and the illusion of value, and lastly, the assembly line type service system allowing for the efficient consumption of available merchandise.

On the basis of this comparison, I would suggest that it becomes very clear to see the parallels between these two service industries. Keeping in line with the earlier part of this chapter, I would further propose that the reason civil inattention dominates the sociability of this realm is that customers who enter “The Coffee Shack,” are not placing themselves in an environment rich in friendly intercourse. Rather, “The Coffee Shack” is simply a fast food style environment whose primary concern is profitability and high volume sales. As such, this environment promotes civil inattention to deter sociability, and further, encourage efficiency in the overall retail process. The main goal of “The Coffee Shack” is profitability, not sociability. This goal under lies all social activity and social intercourse existing in this social environment.

For this reason, it becomes easy to understand the subtle differences, yet overwhelming similarities in operational ideologies when discussing “The Coffee Shack”

and fast food style restaurants. In fast food style establishments, there are few latent messages. The primary concern of this industry is profitability, and as such, they do little in terms of impression management to attempt to redirect this image. As such, I can suggest that there are few hidden messages in these establishments that control patron sociability.

“The Coffee Shack” shares the commerce based motivation of profitability with fast food style restaurants. Where “The Coffee Shack” differs is in the way it attempts to camouflage this motivation under a blanket of sociability. The manifest message of “The Coffee Shack” is to create an environment that provides customers with a “home away from home” feeling, or, more simply put, a “third place.” The latent effect of this environment, and what puts it in line with a fast food style restaurant, is the overwhelming message of profitability. Although “The Coffee Shack” attempts to create a warm, comfortable social environment, the reality of this setting is one that emphasizes a high volume, streamlined process that in actuality directly contradicts the “home away from home” image it attempts to create. It is this connection with the latent messages of operational efficiency, and product predictability that allows “The Coffee Shack” to be discussed in the same vein as a fast food style restaurant, and as such, not truly be considered as a “third place.”

CONCLUSION

This has been a study of sociability. Through my examination of a modern, urban, coffee house I have attempted to contribute to a body of literature that focuses on the understanding of social relations. Coffee houses are an urbanizing environments response at creating “gemeinschaft,” or opportunities for closer knit community based relationships, in an ever increasing “gesellschaft,” or impersonal, modern social environment.

This research undertaking has contributed to a body of knowledge that investigates the rules and rituals of interaction between unknown others in the public realm. As stranger based interactions dominate the social order of the public realm I felt an examination of the guidelines controlling this phenomenon was worth undertaking. As such, the conclusions I was able to draw about a small portion of the stranger based interactions of the public realm will contribute to the overall knowledge base that examines the circumstances surrounding social relations.

For my research project, I have examined the rules and rituals of participation within a modern, urban, coffee house setting. To guide my evaluation of this environment I have drawn on Ray Oldenburg’s (1989) model of a “third place.” Again, Oldenburg has suggested that a “third place” is a community setting that provides opportunities for social relationships and experiences with a diversity of human beings.

The president and CEO of “The Coffee Shack,” has adopted Oldenburg’s academic term of “third place,” and christened his specialty coffee empire as an environment beyond home and work where people can gather informally. He claims that the environment he has created encourages customers to hang out, to idle away the afternoon,

and to do so without paying very much. In a landscape of public spaces designed to entice people to buy things and then leave (including such frankly manipulative devices as fast food restaurants with colours designed to be hard on the eyes and chairs designed to make you feel uncomfortable), a subdued public space, such as “The Coffee Shack,” with couches and newspapers would amount to be a radical revision of the consumer/retailer relationship.

For the purposes of my research project, I have undertaken a study to test the CEO’s claim that “The Coffee Shack” is indeed a “third place.” The primary question, guiding my research has been – Is “The Coffee Shack” a “third place?” In response to this question I have presented five substantive chapters each addressing critical areas of my research endeavor.

The first of these chapters examined the methodological issues surrounding my research project. My study involved six months, and over one hundred hours, of field observation as a participating member of “The Coffee Shack” environment. It was through my participation in this environment that I was able to obtain data, in the form of recorded field notes, on the activity particular to this setting. This chapter addressed such research related themes as – Why I chose to study “The Coffee Shack,” getting in to the environment, learning the ropes, maintaining relationships, and finally, leaving the field. Although I presented my research process as a linear event with a very distinctive operational sequence, such was not the case. The reality of my methodological procedure was one of an overlapping and interweaving of the five themes rather than a linear process.

The second chapter of my project served to provide a theoretical context for discussing and analyzing the behaviour I observed. I introduced this chapter with an expanded explanation of Oldenburg's theory of a "third place." I say extended because in the introductory chapter of my thesis I briefly initiated a discussion of Oldenburg's work. It was in Chapter Two that I described in greater detail the significance of the term "third place" itself and its role in conjuring up images of relatively neutral situations.

The "third place" provides possibilities for acceptable activities beyond both home and work. Taking their place on the bottom rung of the three realms of social experience, third places provide individuals an opportunity for pure sociability. In short, pure sociability is sociability for sociabilities sake. It is this opportunity for pure sociability that Simmel (1950) has suggested is the most purely democratic experience life can offer. It is in a "third place" environment that individuals are considered to be equals, and can participate together for no other reason than the enjoyment of the company of others. This is the standard by which sociability at "The Coffee Shack" is judged in this thesis.

Having discussed Oldenburg's (1989) ideas on third places in extended detail, I directed Chapter Two towards a body of literature addressing stranger interactions and public places. Because "The Coffee Shack" is primarily a world of strangers, this body of literature becomes significant for my examination of the types of social interaction occurring there. The reason that stranger, or pedestrian behaviour appears to have a degree of orderliness or direction to it comes from the idea that individual's trust other individuals to in fact act as competent pedestrians. The reason individual's movement through the public realm is simply uneventful is because humans are cooperating with one another make it so.

Civil inattention was the next concept discussed in Chapter Two. Civil inattention was significant to examine because it was the rules of this noninvolvement principle that primarily dictated the levels of sociability in “The Coffee Shack.” I extended the discussion of civil inattention to address such topics as when it is permissible to break this code of social detachment as well as participants of the public realm using civil inattention to act as an audience to those events that surround them.

I concluded Chapter Two with a discussion of Lofland’s (1973) concept of categoric knowing. This concept suggests that one knows who another is only in the sense that one knows that another can be placed in some category or categories. The ability to obtain categoric knowledge of unknown others serves to remove some of the elements of strangeness associated with the public realm and those individuals who inhabit it. Further, the process of categoric ordering contributes to a participant’s ability to act positively toward strangers and the often unfamiliar environments they occupy.

The elements of categoric knowing were significant to discuss because “The Coffee Shack” consists primarily of a world of strangers. As such, an evaluation of the techniques used by participants to remove some of the elements of strangeness associated with this environment is relevant to my discussion of sociability. Because participants in this environment are able to categorically order the unknown others that surround them, they are able to potentially generate situations of acceptable momentary sociability.

The third chapter of my evaluation describes the physical environment of “The Coffee Shack.” Going beyond a simple physical description of the elements of this environment, I discussed the setting of “The Coffee Shack” in terms of its ability to control and

facilitate sociability. The evaluation of the physical elements was organized in terms of their manifest and latent functions and their roles in controlling customer activity.

Manifest functions were apparent in those fixtures in “The Coffee Shack” that were very clearly designed to advance this settings’ image as a “third place.” For example, such things as the colour scheme used on the walls, the “comfortable” area at the front consisting of couches and arm chairs, and of course, the ample natural lighting provided by the large windows, all served to create an impression of a warm environment encouraging active participation.

Latent functions were apparent in those fixtures in “The Coffee Shack” that are more subtly designed to encourage customers not to remain in this environment. For example, the up tempo jazz music, the antiseptic tile flooring, and the uncomfortable short backed chairs encourage customers not to extend their level of participation, or more specifically, develop a home or “third place” attachment.

The physical elements of “The Coffee Shack” provide a template for activity. As such, this chapter was significant because it very clearly demonstrates the role these physical fixtures play in confounding the acceptable level of sociability experienced by “The Coffee Shack’s” clientele. It is the latent functions of particular physical features that subtly contradict the “at home” feeling consistent with a “third place” atmosphere and, as a result, prevent “The Coffee Shack” from achieving its position as a haven of sociability.

The fourth chapter presented my data analysis. It was in this chapter that I was able to operationalize the theoretical concepts developed earlier in Chapter Two. The focus of my observational analysis was on the concept of civil inattention. Because the

fundamental principles of this concept overwhelmingly govern the rules of sociability particular to “The Coffee Shack.” As such, the unwavering commitment to the principles of civil inattention by the participants of “The Coffee Shack” serves to disqualify it from ever truly being considered as a “third place.”

The progression of my discussion of civil inattention in Chapter Four was such that I began with an evaluation of the rules of noninvolvement in terms of group interruptions and group responses to disturbances. I continued by describing Coffee Shack situations where it was considered acceptable to interrupt all individual’s right to civil inattention for requests for such things as mundane assistance. It was in this vein that restrained responses of the interrupted individual were also considered. The requests for mundane assistance were only momentary interruptions to one’s personal solitude, and as a result, the response given to such disturbances were equally direct.

Drawing on Lofland’s (1973) concept of categic knowing, I continued my discussion of civil inattention with examples of situations where it was considered permissible to momentarily break these rules of social ignoring. These acceptable interruptions in civil inattention resulted in generating moments of sociability rather than traditionally restrained types of responses. What made these interruptions permissible was a shared element of commonality. It was this shared element, or ability to categorically know another, that served to remove some of the strangeness associated with this environment and generate these moments of shared sociability.

I redirected my discussion of civil inattention in Chapter Four from situations where individuals had their rights to individual solitude interrupted to circumstances where individuals clearly needed assistance but the rules of civil inattention superceded the rules

of common courtesy. Although the situations I considered did not compare in terms of severity to the Kitty Genovese case, I felt the principles of non-involvement remained the same. Customers in “The Coffee Shack” were in positions that required minor assistance and yet the staunch commitment to the rules of civil inattention precluded bystanders from casually participating in the situation.

The final concept I evaluated in the first segment of Chapter Four was the notion of a home territory. An individual that transforms a public arena into a home territory begins to feel comfortable enough in that setting to use that environment for more private purposes. The point I would like to restate about home territories is that this enhancement of one’s comfort level with an environment in no way guarantees an increased level of sociability in this realm. The development of a home territory is simply a mechanism to increase the comfort level of an individual or, a group of individuals, in a particular environment. Although a “third place” is a home territory, a home territory is not necessarily a “third place.”

Chapter Five presented the opportunity for further analysis of my data. Where Chapter Four examined the dominance of civil inattention in “The Coffee Shack,” the role of Chapter Five was to examine this environment in terms of both its occupational and procedural practices. It has been my contention throughout this study that “The Coffee Shack” is not a “third place.” As such, if “The Coffee Shack” does not meet the criteria of a “third place,” then, it would be useful to identify the type of setting this environment more appropriately resembles.

Through an examination of such concepts as “putting the customer to work,” “fake friendliness,” “profitability,” and “assembly line service” I was able to draw parallels

between the occupational and procedural practices of “The Coffee Shack” and traditional fast food type restaurants. I alluded to this relationship earlier in Chapter Three by examining the physical elements of this setting and suggesting that, similar to a fast food type restaurant, it was purposely designed to make customers feel comfortable initially but soon after discourage extended visits. It was in Chapter Five that I was able to extend my argument that “The Coffee Shack” should be more appropriately labeled a fast food style restaurant rather than a haven of sociability. “The Coffee Shack,” through its occupational and procedural policies, has managed to streamline the specialty coffee industry, and as a result, reduced its ability for consideration as a legitimate “third place.”

In response to my original question -- Is “The Coffee Shack” a “third place?” -- I can very confidently answer -- “no.” “The Coffee Shack” is an environment where the rules of sociability are dominated by the principles of civil inattention. As such, the staunch commitment to these noninvolvement principles creates an environment that overwhelmingly discourages social interaction among its clientele. Where Oldenburg’s third places celebrate the freedom *to* associate, “The Coffee Shack” clearly encourages customer’s freedom *not* to associate.

In terms of Oldenburg’s criteria, “The Coffee Shack” is not a “third place.” The levels of sociability in this setting are such that it is not possible for it to receive this socially engaging designation. Yet, in the face of this critical evaluation of “The Coffee Shack’s” ideological orientation, I want to be careful not to deliver an entirely negative perspective towards this specialty coffee establishment. Although “The Coffee Shack” is not the haven of community sociability that its CEO would have us believe, I do see some valuable social opportunities available to individuals within this public environment.

For instance, “The Coffee Shack” provides individuals and groups of individuals with the resources to temporarily escape the stresses of modern life. The appeal of this environment, I would suggest, for those customers who regularly frequent its bounds is that it provides the customer with the opportunity for “small indulgences.” A three dollar latte is not, when viewed this way, an absurdly overpriced glass of hot milk. Rather it is a quick and cheap vacation; a break from the modern hectic lifestyle. As Pendergrast suggests – “Specialty Coffee houses gave birth to a generation that, for the price of an espresso, could imagine itself in the Europe that few of its members had ever seen (1999:266).”

Dicum and Luttinger, note that the motive for consumer dollars has always placed a direct emphasis on *want*, rather than *need* (1999:154). Pushing that motivation beyond *want* to *deserve* is a recent, powerful economic transformation (Dicum & Luttinger, 1999:154). The “small indulgences” offered by “The Coffee Shack” are an example of this transformation. Individuals, according to this ideology, *deserve* small breaks in the day, and “The Coffee Shack” has the resources to provide such brief moments.

This study has clearly demonstrated that “The Coffee Shack” does not produce an environment induced sociability. This empirical observation has enabled me to draw the conclusion that “The Coffee Shack” is indeed a B.Y.O.F. (Bring Your Own Friend) environment. Unless you enter “The Coffee Shack” with someone, or plan in advance to meet another there, you are destined to remain alone. In accordance with the rules of civil inattention the strangers that occupy space around you are almost guaranteed to remain as such. The “small indulgences” offered by this environment, are then, often

enjoyed alone. This sense of separation from the surrounding Coffee Shack community may not necessarily be viewed as a negative experience. For example, it is often the character associated with these moments of individual solitude that contribute to the potential romance of experiencing, however briefly, a “small indulgence.” As such, “The Coffee Shack” fulfills a personal need providing individual comfort in the face of an often alienating world.

The appeal of an environment that provides few opportunities for sociability is its potential for momentary escapes from the often stressful monotony of everyday life. Although this is an environment that does not encourage lingering, it may be this setting’s specific characteristic of short duration stays that contributes to the romance of a “small indulgence.” For “The Coffee Shack,” the value of short duration stays is clearly profitability, because in retail higher volume means increased profit margins. But for the customer, these short stays may actually contribute to the momentary illusion that they are in fact “escaping” the humdrum nature of their daily routines.

What I am suggesting is that the degree of enjoyability experienced by Coffee Shack customers in terms of their “small indulgences” is to be measured qualitatively, rather than quantitatively. That is, the romance of a “small indulgence” comes as a result of a short duration stay. It is this short duration stay that allows an individual to momentarily experience the illusion of “Europe” in the bottom of a dark roasted coffee blend. I would suggest that extended visits allow customers to “pull back the curtain” on this fantasy and see “The Coffee Shack” not as a European café experience, but rather a streamlined industry oriented towards profitability.

There is a certain romance associated with the specialty coffee industry. Dark roasted coffee blends conjure up images of European cafés and to small degree, a level of adult sophistication. It is in this vein that I feel “The Coffee Shack” provides a valuable opportunity for its clientele. In short duration stays customers can enjoy their “small indulgences” in a café atmosphere with little consideration for the stresses associated with the grind of their every day lives. Thus, “The Coffee Shack” may not provide opportunities for traditional sociability, but, it does provide the potential for momentary escapes.

Momentary escapes and opportunities for “small indulgences” are not the only value that “The Coffee Shack” provides for its clientele. I would also speculate that what consistently attracts individuals to an environment devoid of sociability is the opportunity to participate in a form of voyeuristic activity. When I speak of “The Coffee Shack” as an environment that potentially encourages voyeurism I am simply suggesting that what may attract individuals to this setting is the opportunity to “see-and-be-seen.”

“The Coffee Shack” is an environment that does not encourage sociability among its members. Yet, in the face of such a dominant social participation characteristic this environment produced a consistent pattern of activity. Lone individuals would come to “The Coffee Shack” every day, and participate in this setting by themselves. In an environment that so clearly dictates the rules of civil inattention, what then is the attraction for lone individuals to participate in this realm? If customers truly wanted to be alone, they could have simply stayed at home.

I would like to extend my argument of the value of “The Coffee Shack” by suggesting that lone individuals participate in this setting because when one is at home one cannot be

surrounded in waves of human voices. There is a certain pleasure to be derived from the sense of “partnership” acquired from the other inhabitants of a particular setting. It is this opportunity to “see” others in action that makes “The Coffee Shack” an environment suitable for those individuals who want to be alone, but need some company for it.

It is this sense of inclusion, or ability to “see,” what is going on outside one’s home that was clearly the motivation for customer’s participation in a Tel Aviv café studied by Shapira and Navon:

A special group atmosphere pervades the café on Israeli Memorial Day. On Memorial Day sirens sounded for the public to rise in silent tribute to the fallen. There are customers who come in Afarcemon especially to be there when the siren sounds. As one of them explained: That’s great, I managed to get here right on time, before the siren is sounded. I come here every year. Here I have a feeling of togetherness. At home I am alone, and the same happens in the street. It’s very important for me to be with other people and to stand with them [when the siren is sounded]. It gives me a feeling of being part of the entire country (Shapira & Navon, 1991:113).

The “seeing” or inclusionary aspect of voyeurism can be extended beyond what participants can visually engage with their eyes. Such activity as unobtrusive eavesdropping also provides opportunities for individuals to often catch a glimpse of an enticing real life drama. The value of this practice comes when individuals attempt to fill in the missing elements of an unfolding situation, and creatively engage their imagination.

The theatre metaphor, as we saw in Chapter Two, is appropriate to use in describing this voyeuristic activity in “The Coffee Shack.” It is in the vein of the theatre metaphor that I would suggest that this environment creates “audiences” and “performers.” Where

the audience is considered to be those lone individuals craving company for these moments of solitude, the performers, are those individuals and groups of individuals (i.e. Dave, roller blading boy, breast feeding women, Michelle) that in some way bring life to this asocial environment.

Although I have suggested that there is some value available to “The Coffee Shack’s” customers in terms of “small indulgences” and the opportunity to inclusively “see-and-be-seen” this setting does not meet Oldenburg’s criteria of a “third place.” It is an environment that is dominated by the rules of civil inattention and thus devoid of the sociability necessary for a “third place” designation in terms of Oldenburg’s criteria. It is though, because I do see available value in “The Coffee Shack” that I would submit that Oldenburg too narrowly defines the characteristics applicable to a “third place” designation.

For Oldenburg (1989) nothing more clearly defines a “third place” than sociability. If this element does not exist, as in the case of “The Coffee Shack,” in terms of Oldenburg’s criteria then this setting seems to have diminished community value. I feel Oldenburg overemphasizes the importance of sociability and its role in creating an atmosphere that encourages the necessary emotions to help individuals complete their days. Although I agree with his assertions that a “third place,” a setting that is not work or home, contributes to the overall well being of a community, I would disagree with his requirement of the element of sociability.

The value of a “third place” lies not so much in the specific resources available to users of these realms but rather what those who participate in these settings individually acquire from it. Where some individuals may need the sociability characteristic of

Oldenburg's "third place," others may find comfort in the solitude available in such places as "The Coffee Shack." The reason Oldenburg laments the disappearance of third places is not that they don't exist anymore, but rather, that he has too narrowly defined the characteristics of such environments. As such, he fails to see the value in settings that, although not accentuated by sociability, provide people with "third place" opportunities.

Rather than merely specifying what a "third place" *is*, Oldenburg needs to also emphasize what these settings *do*. Very simply, third places provide opportunities for individuals to participate in realms that are not home and not work, and as a result, contribute to one's ability to cope with the stresses of modern life. It is too individualistic to suggest that one particular element is paramount in creating an environment that holds value for the overall productivity of one's social participation. What one individual may need from a "third place," is very different from what someone else may require from such a realm of activity. As such, I am not arguing against Oldenburg's contention of the social value of third places but rather his narrow definition of their necessary characteristics.

In terms of Oldenburg's criteria, "The Coffee Shack" is not a "third place." It is not the community oasis its CEO claims to have created. "The Coffee Shack" provides a corporatized, homogenized retail experience with a consistent but not outstanding product. It is an environment that directs its operational ideology towards profitability rather than sociability. Although "The Coffee Shack" may be marketed to its customers as a legitimate "third place," the very clear absence of sociability makes such a designation inappropriate.

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