

Cold shoulders and napkins handed: gestures of responsibility

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Cafes are places in the city in which we have come to expect conviviality between the unacquainted. Goffman is perhaps the most famous analyst of relations between strangers in public space, yet his depiction of society's members points towards a misanthropic form of life. Drawing on video footage shot during ethnographic research, this paper analyses gestures made between strangers in cafés and how they produce cafés as cold, receptive or accommodating places. It considers how we might move on from Goffman's work to an understanding of urban life that includes the possibility of more than the impression of conviviality.

key words cafés gesture public space Goffman ethnomethodology video

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revised manuscript received 23 November 2005

Conviviality

We find ourselves amongst others in the city. We are walking as pedestrians, pushing our way past others, making our excuses: 'I'm running for a train' (Lee and Watson 1993, 184). We are queuing at bus stops, letting others ahead. We are sitting on benches in the park feeding pigeons. We are holding open the doors of shops for others to pass through. We are hailing taxis. We are playing cards. We are eating in restaurants. We are drinking in bars. We are buying newspapers. We are hearing snatches of mobile phone conversations. We are catching one another's eyes. We are waving at friends. We are shrugging our shoulders at *this* and laughing at *that*.

The city remains the place, above all, of living with others. In the collective life of the city little is said between the unacquainted, even though they are involved in making queues together, holding open doors for one another and sharing seats. Notwithstanding certain long-standing interpretations of the city as intrinsically alienating, a terrain of everyday social incivilities and even hostilities, minor counter-currents latch on to such evidence of low-level sociability between strangers. From very different perspectives, recall Yi-Fu Tuan's (1988) depiction of the city as 'moral universe', or

more recently Nigel Thrift's (2005) account of the routine 'friendliness' – precisely *not* some overwrought emotional connectivity – comprising a base-line democracy of urban encounter. Moreover, in geography we all too often assume that such attributes could be built upon, suggesting that there should be *more* interaction, particularly more talk, going on between the unacquainted. On this thinking, the city would be a better place if strangers talked to one another more regularly and at greater length. Various social analysts have responded to this problem, most notably Erving Goffman, who reformulates social science's problem here as a normative rule of conduct in the city's public spaces. As a guide to how we should conduct ourselves, it then becomes a generator of practical problems.

Goffman (1981) would be the first to remind us that we are suspicious of those 'types' who approach us in the street, and that there are only minimal sorts of things that we will allow to be done in the process, such as asking for the time or remarking on the weather. The argument might be a little different, however, with respect to those public *gathering* places that we access, and where we accept the 'invitation' to join with unknown others for the pleasure, excitement or even irritation of being together (Blum 2003). Our research

interest over the last few years has been in one such gathering place that is closely related to expectations of sociability in the city: the café.¹ It is the kind of place where it is possible for the unacquainted to strike up conversations without suspicions that something else is going on. What we do not want to restate here, or try to convince you about, is that cafés are, in fact, as we say they are. Our investigation is not concerned with, as Latour (2004) has recently put it, 'matters of fact' but rather 'matters of concern'. While we would wish, in various ways, to suspend or bracket our natural attitude to what happens in the café so as to reflect on how such events are possible, we do not want to adopt the sceptical attitude of the social sciences toward commonplace understandings (McHugh *et al.* 1974; Sharrock and Anderson 1986).

Thus, where critical geographers or social scientists more generally might be wary about the association between cafés and sociability, we want to let the relation stand and then to examine what constitutes this relation. Schools of research that begin with definitions of conviviality can always find fault with the café for failing to live up to their version of what it ought to be. By way of contrast, we want to examine the paired relationship between the concept and its constitution within and by some setting (say, the café) as indelibly part of that setting's daily affairs. If being academic researchers allows us certain privileges, one of them is to take the time to attend carefully and patiently to spatial phenomena that other professions have little time to examine. The aim of such examinations need not be to define better rules, supply correctives or improve conduct. As Harvey Sacks says:

studies of how cancer does cancer is not intended to build better cancer. And there are all kinds of studies directed to what animals do, in which we're not intending to improve them. . . . We're not intending to improve, say, the course of the planets or the lives of those plants or diseases under study. Though it may well be that things can be done if you have some idea of what you want to do – that's never been a criterion of success. (Sacks 1992, 470)

In the café and what happens there we can learn from conviviality as it happens, rather than having conviviality wrapped up already and merely seeing cafés in need of improvement. Before it is assumed that we are urging a return to a naively inductive approach or a breakfast packet empiricism, what we are essaying in the paper – alongside examining the café as an *occasion* for expressions of conviviality, indifference, animosity and familiarity

– is to do some of the 'respecificatory' work of ethno-methodology. Instead of pursuing some underlying structure of knowing (or knowledge of [*épisteme*]) the city such as panopticism, postmodernism or, of course, conviviality, the point of this inquiry is as 'pronesis' or practical knowledge (Lynch and Bogen 2004).

Rules of conduct, gestures, talk and backdrop

for rules of conduct in streets, parks, restaurants, theaters, shops, dance floors, meeting halls, and other gathering places of any community tell us a great deal about its most diffuse forms of social organisation. (Goffman 1963, 4)

Not only in cultural geography (Bridge 2005; Crang 1994 2000) but in a slew of approaches from cultural history to interaction design to game theory to management studies, Goffman has become one of the most renowned analysts of how people deal with one another at parties, in the street, in bars and in all manner of other public situations. His books *Behaviour in Public Places* (Goffman 1963) and *Relations in Public* (Goffman 1971) are constantly revisited by those who study life amongst the unacquainted. He draws on ethnographies,² newspaper reports, spy stories, memoirs of criminals, interviews with con artists, and he exposes a hard-boiled life of encounters on pavements, foyers, restaurants and park benches.

Though never simply a cybernetic analyst, as Manning (1992) argues, Goffman uncovers a 'machinery of social interaction' while at the same time being amazed by how self-reflexive actors could meddle with the machinery even as they were using it. While appreciating actors' skills, Goffman has a perpetual urge to generalize, to move in the direction of taxonomies, categories, elements of systems and overarching rules. The most notable of these generalizations, the key that supposedly unpicks the code of all interaction, was the wittily titled 'felicity's condition', being a play on J. L. Austin's (1962) term 'felicitous conditions' for achieving success in the performance of speaking and writing with words (Goffman 1983). The ground that bends Goffman's analytic spade is hence as follows: if we do not act normally, if we do not write, speak and act felicitously, we will end up incarcerated.

Despite elegantly formulating rules by which people abide while in public places, and laying out common categories of characters in everyday life, Manning (1992) points out that Goffman is unconcerned by those rules in use, or in the practical aspects of making such categories relevant. As such,

there is important further work to be undertaken on the practical accomplishment of 'acting normally', and on how this necessarily involves people (practically) reasoning with their (practical) knowledge of everyday social situations. More particularly, we are led to an interest in how people in particular places inhabit them *with* others whose responses, including sanctions of various kinds, cannot but reveal the success or failure of someone's efforts at behaving appropriately. Relating to the substantive themes of this paper, we suspect that it is against the background of a locally built and locally historicized organization of normality that something we might conceptualize as sociability or conviviality is enacted in any given setting (Dewsbury *et al.* 2002). Tremendous, ignored achievement though it is, Goffman's normality is not enough.

Given Goffman's fascination with how individuals conduct themselves on city streets, it is unsurprising that he has a great deal to say about their gestural organization. This being said, there are only a few sections in his works where he turns to gesture specifically, since it is normally subsumed in characterizing the presentation of self. His best-known gestural form is what he neologizes as a 'body gloss':

[a] relatively self-conscious gesticulation an individual can perform with his [*sic*] whole body in order to give pointed evidence concerning some passing issue at hand, the evidence to be obtainable by anyone in the situation who cares to perceive him. . . . [B]ehavioural gloss, as here defined, gives the impression that the actor is having to make do. He will use relatively sluggish behaviours to convey something about rapidly changing events, or, for example, use a smile – which can be thought to be an intrinsically fleeting thing – as a transfix, sustaining it over the whole course of a lengthy incident so that a single reading can be applied to all of it. . . . [B]ody gloss, then, is a means by which the individual can try to free himself from what otherwise would be the *undesirable* [our emphasis] characterological implications of what it is he finds himself doing. (Goffman 1971, 128–9)

What Goffman brings out in dealing with gestures amongst the unacquainted is how they handle possible negative inferences that could be made by passers-by about what a person has done or is doing. What has been taken up by ethnomethodologists is not so much the point that, when in public space, we are always worried about people forming undesirable assessments. Rather, the issue is that our gestures are evidentiary, and that they help make apparent what might otherwise be missed. This is the shift in emphasis characteristic

of Sacks as he strips away Goffman's typologies in favour of conversation's methodologies. Where Goffman posits a 'body gloss' as a special kind of miming where speech fails us, Schegloff (1998) and other practitioners of conversation analysis (CA) emphasize gestures as unavoidably part and parcel of conversing with one another (Laurier and Philo 2003). Let us explore and extend this observation.

Charles Goodwin (2003a 2003b) has perhaps gone furthest in developing a Sacksian analysis of gesture, displaying an ethnomethodological sensibility that we wish to echo in our café research. He shares ethnomethodology's concern with the work of gesture in the 'familiar miracles' of ordinary society, delighting in the sheer and unexplicated obviousness of 'it happens like that' (Garfinkel 2002) in playing chess, following instructions and queuing. Displacing Goffman's revelations about our collusion in maintaining normal appearance in public place, ethnomethodology's focus is on the procedural knowledge that is involved in assembling the sense of 'what is going on here?', 'why that now?', 'what is to be done next?' With Goffman there is the constant sense that appearances are *deceptive*, that something else is going on behind our backs, but in ethno-inquiries appearances are *perceptive*; in short, 'this thing we are in the midst of is really what is going on'. For Goodwin, as an ethnomethodologist, bodily gestures are how we on-goingly build, maintain and repair the architectures of our everyday intersubjectivity with others (known and unknown). In smiling, pointing, shaking our heads, leaning over, putting our hands up, stretching a pencil forwards, tapping a screen and all manners of glancings, we are making public displays of minded doings, from which others can infer manifesting intentions, expectations and motives.³

Moreover, Goodwin argues that gestures are 'parasitic' on talk, in that, during most conversations, a great deal of sense can be made of talk without the gestures but *not* the reverse. He and others (Hindmarsh and Heath 2003; Mondada forthcoming) have shown how certain gestures, such as pointing a pencil on to a chart, pre-figure (as requests) turns at talk. Similarly, a smile or a shrug or a point of the finger may replace a turn at talk. In all of this, gestures are not taken to be outside of language; rather, they are indelibly part of our practical reasoning and practical action. As such, the choice is not, when asked 'do you want a cappuccino?' to nod your head *or* to say 'yes'; rather, shrugging is part of the same response. So,

while not suggesting that gestures are outside of language, there is much more to both what gestures are and what they can teach us.

In passing, we might note that such an understanding, which effectively puts talk and gesture on a level, as related and intermingled assemblages of expressing and understanding, marks a certain limit on emerging claims under the rubric of non-representational theory (NRT: see Thrift 2000 2005; also Harrison 2000; Anderson 2004). NRT has deep problems with various forms of 'wordy' engagement in human geography, seeing them as trapped in a representational economy where words are evidence of cognitive activity that is always after the event, struggling to catch up, and thereby lagging after the action. They are 'after-words'. The alternative, so Thrift, Harrison and others insist, is to focus directly on embodied practices – walking, dancing, massaging, craft skills, learned movements of all sorts – that are the 'stuff' of most human being-in-the-world (far more significant in understanding human life than regarding people as relentless symbol and sign interpreting machines). Yet talking together is an embodied practice, not only symbolic or semiotic, one woven through, for example, walking together or dancing together (Lorimer 2004). While inspired and stirred by NRT's critique of much work in cultural geography (and cultural studies more generally), and detecting points of creative contact with ethnomethodology, we worry that NRT goes on to ironize ordinary action in a rush toward a raft of contemporary philosophical worries about, for instance, the *aporía* of language, the ultimate impossibility of its representational ambitions.⁴ Following ethno-inquiries and Foucault's archaeologies, we continually return language to the rough ground of occasions and deep soil such as a witness speaking at a trial (Lynch and Bogen 1996), reading a map with friends on a daytrip (Brown and Laurier 2005) or bidding at an auction (Heath and Luff 2005) as particular practical actions, intimately bound up with the likes of embodied gesture, and woven into the ongoing (procedural) conduct of practical life.

Shifting a classic ethnomethodological and phenomenological concern, that of 'indexicality', to gestures, Goodwin also shows that gestures are almost always made sense of against backdrops while simultaneously making sense of those backdrops. From Adam Kendon's (2004) seminal studies onwards, it has been noted that gestures have temporalities or 'arcs' – from beginning to middle to

end – as well as being contingent upon spatialities – varying from place to place. They occur in the unfolding of action, in the time-spaces of action, and they configure near-to-hand objects yet also use such objects in their production. Goodwin takes up such claims, elaborating on what Kendon introduces as what we might term the occasioned geography of gestures:

Gestures coupled to phenomena in the environment are pervasive in many settings (archaeological field excavations, weather forecasts, pointing to overheads in academic talks, etc. – consider how many computer screens are smeared with fingerprints). Gestures linked to the environment would thus seem to constitute a major class of gesture. However, with a few notable exceptions multi-modal sign complexes that encompass both gesture and phenomena in the world have been largely ignored by students of gesture. This neglect may result from the way in which such gestures slip beyond theoretical frameworks focused on either ties between gesture and psychological processes inside the mind of the individual speaker, or exclusively on the talk and bodies of participants in interaction. In essence, an invisible analytic boundary is drawn at the skin of the participants. (Goodwin 2002, no pagination)

With these preparatory statements in mind, it will be helpful now to turn to some gestures as they happen, and to ask what more there is to gesturing amongst the unacquainted in the public space of a café. What we will consider are some gestures made in a café, in particular gestures with (and at) faces, tables, chairs, napkins, newspapers and other customers. Although our focus is on the café, the variety of furnished place that we have been studying, it is obvious that tables and chairs are basic, commonplace furnishing integral to all manner of places. That said, the café carries with it noteworthy seating *expectations*, in terms of our accessibility to others, distinct from those of other places such as kitchen tables at home or meetings tables in boardrooms.

There have been a handful of serious inquiries into the organization of convivial places by staff (Crang 1994), regulars and familiars (Latham 2003). Here we would like to return briefly to Sheri Cavan's (1966) old but seminal study of sociability in bars in the 1970s, as inspired by Goffman. In the UK, USA and various other Anglophone countries, the division of the alcohol-serving bar from the hot drink serving café is an important one that should be borne in mind as it relates to sociability and conviviality.⁵ Cavan describes how a newcomer's arrival at the counter of the bar carried with it obligations to enter into conversation with others, particularly



regulars, while booths and chairs away from the counter had quite different obligations. Similarly, the sofas, chairs and tables in cafés are a distinct area apart from the counter, although under certain circumstances table-sharing occurs, carrying with it similar obligations to converse with persons with whom we are unacquainted (Laurier *et al.* 2001). Thus, we return to the larger problematic, the city of strangers, with which we commenced this paper.

When customers are unacquainted, they have limited rights to, and resources for, talk to one another (Goffman 1963), and consequently gestures are of particular significance in prefiguring, initiating, avoiding, declining, pacing and ending encounters. Indeed, somewhat at odds with the above-mentioned ethnomethodological analyses of gesture in the midst of, and parasitic upon, talk, we will find ourselves in a more Goffmanesque terrain where gestures are of greater import. The space of unacquainted persons in public space is heavily gestural and lightly conversational. Using four video clips of customer gestures around tables and chairs, we will consider in the next section how members of this café society produce its qualities as convivial, cold, warm or unfriendly.

Open faces and cold shoulders

Two groups of customers sit side by side, we see them in the midst of their sitting at their table (frame 1). While the owner of the café talks to them, someone is walking into its interior (frame 2). The first visible response to the 'arrival' arriving is a wave from the redhead in the far corner (frame 3), and we can look to see whether this wave is reciprocated (which it is). As the 'arrival' continues to walk in toward the counter, the short-haired woman and red-armed man facing into the café look toward her, the woman smiling and the man opening his mouth. Facing away, the man in blue cranes his neck around to look in her direction too (frame 4). As the 'arrival' walks on, the guy with his back to her follows her course with his head, finishing by looking toward her once she is at the counter. Similarly, the other woman with her back to 'arrival' follows her motion and we can see how her gaze (frame 5) follows her right to the counter before finally returning to her companion (frame 6). They are regulars of this café – not something we can find from the video of course – something that we come upon through Laurier having latterly become a regular at this café⁶ also. The two tables of regulars have arranged themselves in a way that sets half of them up for attending to other people in the café, while also having their expressions seen by other customers and staff in the café. During the arrival the two sitters, with their back to what is happening, re-arrange themselves so as jointly to register the arrival. Thus it is that the camcorder records their responses to 'arrival'.⁷



What we would like to notice in this strip of interaction is how these customers are responsive to, and respond to, the comings and goings in the café. The door opens (like the phone rings). It might be for someone here. One of the regulars responds, looking up, waving, smiling and waiting out the arrival's progress. We see not two waving hands but rather a wave that is acknowledged with a wave; as a pair they have these additional gestalt properties. Moreover we have a café where arriving persons are responded to with a look and greetings are done when one recognizes another. For the other customers, they glance at the 'arrival', one smiling at her; the others giving her an overt look. While these gestures are occurring, the two groups of regulars remain arranged at their table in standardized ways of sitting – opposite one another across their tables. Their glancing opens out their closed arrangement to the new arrival in the café. This is not to say that at every moment regulars are surveying the wider café space or are deeply involved in what is happening at other tables and in the aisle, but – nevertheless – they are all exposing their faces to whomsoever arrives in the café.

In the smoking section of a café, a woman in a red jacket sits in a leather armchair, twisted around so she faces the wall (see above and below).

The scene is eye-catching in the contrast it offers with the café chain's photo-mural behind: three smartly-dressed women looking out and laughing at some event together, while behind a leather-jacketed man smiles and looks at them. The mural paints a scene of cosmopolitan conviviality. By contrast, the woman in red, whether to block herself off from other customers or possibly even from the camcorder on its tripod, has turned her back on us. We do not see her starting

this gesture, nor do we see its being brought to an end. We catch the gesture some way through: not displaying either its emergence or beginning an arc toward an ending, it is in its long middle.

To produce her cold shoulder requires the analysis of the furnished space in which she has sat herself. She needed to consider how the tables and chairs were arranged in relation to the walls and the central alleyway of the café, where the camcorder is located. Her gesture is finely assembled given all the potential recipients it might have to handle; for instance, to the perspective of the window tables to her right, she is merely side-on allowing a certain availability to their glances or other more extended looks. As potential recipients of her gesture we, in turn, have to examine our orientation in terms of where we are located in the café, asking ourselves whether someone would be facing away from our perspective for some other reason (perhaps avoiding a cold draft through the door). With these sorts of micro-spatial analyses completed, we find the likely reason for such a gesture in the presence of our camcorder. What she thinks of our activity has a public availability, since, in turning her back to the camcorder, she can register its intrusiveness (not just for us but for other customers and staff in the café).

Giving us a cold shoulder has grammatical affinities with snubbing (McHugh *et al.* 1974, chapter 5), in that the usual relationship supposedly arising for a café customer – that of inclusiveness, with everyone being basically 'welcomed' by but also 'open' to everybody else – is here being denied by this other customer. A snub is about X making a greeting to Y, and Y then refusing to acknowledge or to recognize them in response; indeed, it is 'the risk that some people associate with doing a greeting' (McHugh *et al.* 1974, 127). Intriguingly, the cold shoulder precedes the snub, in that it is preventing a greeting being ventured, yet at the same time it recognizes the member as doing something in their direction. What is so close and so far away is Goffman's 'body gloss' in that, yes, it is temporarily elongated but, no, it does not free individuals from negative characterological inferences.

When we buy a (non take-away) cup of coffee (in a café), we are well aware that we are also buying rights to a seat at a table to drink it. At the very least, the café is a device for allocating temporary possession of seats, tables and some shelter in the city. For many of us, a seat and a table to read, write, use a laptop or whatever while being 'undisturbed' is a scarce resource.⁸ The café, while carrying

expectations of conviviality, provides this form of temporary dwelling for its customers and, with it, some rights to privacy in public. It is also a place where we can be left to our thoughts away from the pressing matters of the workplace or the home. In some senses, therefore, the cold shoulder is a method for making visible the café as a place, alongside producing the woman as a character within it, where we anticipate – or at least some of us might anticipate – a right to be left alone in public. More importantly, her gesture shows that for other customers, their body positioning in the presence of the camera carries with it a kind of limited permission to be recorded (Laurier and Philo forthcoming).

A question we can now begin to answer is whether these gestures in various ways display and make recognizable more than 'selves', as Goffman (1956) would have it, or competence, as ethnomethodology would limit itself to tackling? What we would like to shift from here is the concreteness and intelligibility of specific gestures with place as their backdrop to a greater emphasis on how gestures themselves give us a feel for places. Hence, we can use the setting (a café) to make sense of such gestures and to provide for their intelligibility, but the next step is to shed some further light on gesture's relationship to places. Ethnomethodology, in its traditional form, asks that we restrict ourselves to the customers' competent local organization of socializing in the café. Blum and McHugh's (1984) reflections on ethnomethodology asks whether we might be something more than just the competent members, for might we not also be convivial customers? Their warning is that restricting our concern to competence and intelligibility can lose the phenomenon just as easily as would predefining conviviality before our inquiry begins.



Potentially integrative events

Goffman refers to the bar as part of the *open region* of

physically bounded places where 'any' two persons, acquainted or not, have a right to initiate face engagement with each other for the purpose of extending salutations. (1963, 132)

However, as Watson (1992) warns, and we will revisit later, Goffman ties together quite distinct matters: villages, rural places, sports fields, bars, dining cars on trains, parties, carnivals and natural disasters. As is often the way with Goffman, we have to begin unpicking the logic of what makes a café a café and not a boxing ring. While Goffman limited himself to the bar, Jürgen Habermas and many others have noted that the café might be regarded as a place where strangers and those of different social rank/station can strike up conversations with one another, and at their best can be places of inquiry into public life.

On the basis of historical providence, Habermas (1989) proposes that an openness to political debate with strangers emerged in new sites of public gathering characteristic of the early-modern city – the coffee-houses of London being explicitly mentioned – and then gauges what we have lost by their decline (Laurier and Philo submitted). What he does not really ask is how might such openness have been possible, since in his analysis its very possibility is subsumed beneath both its existence and the theoretically and politically charged value that it holds within a narrative of the rise and fall of the 'public sphere'. With less foundational and more practical concerns, Sacks (1992) writes of 'potentially integrative events', using the example of the shooting of JFK⁹ in relation to which a person could say to a complete stranger in the street, let alone in a café, 'any news?' or 'what a terrible day for us all'. At a more geographically local level, there can be events such as: minor earthquakes, election results, a bus turning up early, and so on that can be utilized in a similar way. On such a basis, we can examine events that occur in a convivial place like the café that, while sometimes spurring political inquiry as in the case of elections or assassinations, offer a way of beginning encounters amongst unacquainted customers.

In the clip a mother with a pram is visibly searching the café's interior. On the far left, a single woman (Polo-neck) is reading a newspaper, and in the middle a single man is reading a newspaper (Shirt). Entering the scene, a single customer searching for seat with pram (the aforementioned

Mum). Shirt glances first before Mum enters our frame, and at the same time Polo-neck is looking as part of returning her coffee cup to its saucer. Shirt does not glance the second time that Mum re-enters; rather, he shows that he is involved in monitoring the pram – he gives it a visible look and flattens down his newspaper. He mouths a phrase to her. There is a three-part arrangement of his response to Mum's arrival: he looks at the pram, shifts his gaze on to Mum, returns to the pram, then produces a smile in this second part of his looking at the arriving pair (Mum and Pram). This locates his smile as about the baby and which is designed for reception by the Mum.

As she passes onward, Mum parks the pram beside the leather armchair, indicating it as her intended chair.

Polo-neck looks across.

The mum then responds 'Is it all right if I come sit here?'

Polo-neck as she looks replies 'Absolutely. Sure thing.'

Then she switches from looking at Mum to looking at the pram and smiling as the buggy is moved and the armchair adjusted,¹⁰ before returning to her reading.

The arriving customer's search does not only involve looking for an empty table that will accommodate herself, her pram and her baby, it displays her search and monitors for responses, if any, from already seated customers. She inquires into the status of the visibly seated, analysing them as 'just arrived', 'in the midst of' or 'finishing'.

Every one of the seated people is, as we noted earlier, only ever in temporary possession of tables. Hers is a problem of finding somewhere to sit, not just as a customer but as a mum with a baby. Let us note that the mother is engaged in her search, she is not an 'observer' nor is she the Goffmanian 'self' facing a crowd of cappuccino-sipping onlookers. Seated customers can and do respond to this sort of looking around by starting to pack away their things or to tidy up their crockery often without even exchanging glances with the seat-seeker.¹¹ And in fact on seeing the mother with a pram visibly searching for a free seat, Shirt drops down his newspaper, showing not only that he has seen her but opening his face up for her. His gestural work with the newspaper makes it easy for Mum to see that, as in our first example, this customer is responding to her presence and that she has been spotted looking for a place to sit. Central to what occurs here is the mutual orientation to and centrality of the customers' faces. As a gestalt of looks waiting to catch glances, smiles paired with looks, their faces display what is going on while their hands remain busy pushing a pram or lifting a

coffee cup. The gestalt does its assembly in the way both the smiles of Suit and of Polo-neck begin in time with the look directed at the mother who is recognizably searching, the smile continuing as the look moves onward to touch upon the pram and then returning again unbroken by frowning, dimming or faltering to the mother.

In response to an arrival (e.g. that of the mother and baby) in 'this sort of place', the smile occupies a slot that can be used for an *evaluation* of the arrival of 'this sort of customer' (Goodwin and Goodwin 2000; Peräklyä 2004). The Goodwins note that the 'participants treat the assessment slot as a place for heightened mutual orientation and action' (2000, 240).¹² As we noted above, the smile is kept going, shifting on to the pram, as both Shirt and Polo-neck hold it while directing their gaze onward to the pram. For Shirt, while his smile is directed at the pram, it remains visible to Mum, allowing her to respond to the smile that encounters the pram without dimming. We can imagine a quite different dialogue of gestures where she had to respond to a smile directed at her that dropped away as its gaze moved on to the baby. Our thinking on this matter is that Shirt and Mum are recognizably accommodating the presence of each without *begrudging* (where a pram is an obstacle, where the baby may start screaming, etc.).

Behind their appearances of accommodation, might the seated customers not still begrudge the mother and baby? Following Jeff Coulter (1989), conduct toward others in public has recognizable appearances by which competent members of society can assess it as begrudging or not. Nevertheless, deception and fakery are entirely possible and though making an impression otherwise, so for instance, here, Suit and Polo-neck may still begrudge the mother and baby's presence. Goffman (1963) argues that this is indeed the dark truth of relations in public: people only want to *appear* happy to have you around, and their concern is more deeply with (their) appearance than with matters such as conviviality or hospitality. But with what does this leave us? As Stanley Raffel (2002) argues, faking enjoyment or acceptance of others, or being an imposter, loses all meaning unless people can *also* appear as they really are. We will develop this point further in the conclusion.

The next clip is akin to the situation where you drop your glove in the street and someone chases after you to return it or, on the other hand, nobody bothers.



At the front, there is a woman (Mum) with a toddler, and a table away there's a couple (man – 'Black' and woman – 'Grey') and as the event is in progress a woman is walking past ('Blue'). The baby spills his drink. The Mum catches it. Then she leaves her table to get something to wipe up the spillage (frame 1). While she is away, Black nods and smiles at the toddler (frame 2). Mum returns with napkins and starts cleaning up the table (frame 3). Black meantime mouths 'hello' at the toddler (frame 4). The toddler starts whacking the table. Black moves on to grinning (note that a grin is an upgrading of his response, in relation to the amusement provided by the toddler whacking table).

Blue walks up at this point, turns around and stops to check out what is going on (frame 4). She walks back and retrieves some more napkins that she hands on to the mum with a smile (frame 5), making some barely decipherable comments (something like 'I've got a grandson who's just like that'). Mum responds with something along the lines 'Yeah they think it's fun'. Blue lingers for a moment and then heads off to her table.

The baby is faced at an unusual angle (for an adult) so that Mum can feed him, one that allows the toddler's gestural engagement with Black. Because of the relations of proximity and distance attendant upon the arrangement of chairs and tables in the café, we find ourselves with neighbours. Being at neighbouring tables in the café, temporal projections are always formed if some form of contact with our neighbouring table has been made. This sort of encounter raises the Goffmanesque 'anxious' question about 'how long we will spend in the company of these others?' What sort of others are they? If a conversation begins, how will it be sustained? Can or should it be sustained? Can or should we back out? Will the baby cry?

But are things always so Goffmanesque? Before the water spillage, Black is looking extendedly at the baby. He glances at the Mum, checking on the character of her response to his smiling at her baby, and talks to Grey in amongst his extended contact with the toddler. Once the water is spilt, Black, Grey and Blue all become onlookers to the incident. Goffman might want to characterize what is occurring with children as unwelcome scrutiny of one's self by others in public. Certainly, Black and Grey stare lengthily at Mum and the toddler, but we need to note that Black upgrades his smiling with the toddler while the Mum is away. If we follow Georg Simmel (1950) on eye contact genuinely being a form of social contact (as in touch), then Black is keeping hold of the toddler's attention while Mum goes for napkins. He is not reprimanding nor judging in his looking, so we deduce;

maybe, instead, he is simply helping her out by amusing her baby.

The main help comes after Mum has collected some napkins and begun to wipe up the water. Blue makes a helpful gesture: she brings napkins. In response to a potentially integrative event, then, a gesture can be made. There is no guarantee here: a gesture might not be made. So the event occasions an inquiry into the civility of this place, prompting us to ask: will a gesture be made? Who will make the gesture? What will it be taken to mean? Will it lead to interaction, or, rather, is it a meaningful strip of interaction in its own right? Is it possibly evidence of conviviality, however minor, but just maybe the 'stuff' of something that we can recognize as sociability?

Let us examine the selectional problem first. The psychologists who warn of apathy say that in the crowded city the answer is always someone else and never me (Darley and Latane 1968). The water spreads, soaking the toddler. Before we ask why the man at the 'next' table (Black) does not leap up to help, we have to realize that he is a wheelchair user (something not immediately obvious in the stills, but discernible from the original video clips). The psychologist, in leaving contingency behind in favour of an explanatory hypothesis, duly loses one of Garfinkel's (2002) 'curious properties' of the event: that, *each* and *every* time, help might not come, or, it might. How does the water woman (Blue) come to find that she's the person who could make a gesture? An onlookable event has happened: Black and Grey are onlooking, while Blue glances ever so quickly to check on what they are doing – nothing so far. Blue is on her feet: there has been an accident and help has not come. Rather than being the help that the Mum really needed, the giving of the paper napkins is only a *gesture* of help. Indeed, it seems to be one that Blue feels the need to justify: 'I've got a grandson who's done that many times'. This begins to provide a relationship as the basis for making this gesture.

If we switch attention from 'gesture' as movements of the arms and limbs, to the making of a 'gesture' as a response to an event, we can begin to think about its limits and something of its value. Like the first part, it can be a wordless action: Blue brings the napkins, and she does not ask 'would you like some help?' Were she to go further and to collect a table-cloth for wiping up the spilt water, she would be going too far. In the café clearing up the mess is (widely understood as) someone else's

job, and so once again we might ask 'what is worthwhile in her bringing paper napkins?' It is, quite literally, as much as a customer ought do to help another customer. It displays that there are customers who will take responsibility for the place which they are occupying *as* customers. The *lovely* gesture knows its limitations, even so, in that the woman who brings napkins should not have leapt to get a mop and bucket: that would definitely be an *odd* gesture, and would potentially be interpreted not as supportive but rather as critical, condemnatory, provoking a sense of embarrassment on the part of the toddler's Mum. The *lovely* gesture, though, ought to display for how much 'it' can be responsible and what are the limits of 'its' responsibility for this place.

Conclusion

The café is a place where the public is made visible to itself, not merely as orderly and intelligible but potentially as 'insane', 'friendly', 'caring', 'indifferent', 'civil' and 'convivial'. Sitting in the cafe is a course of conduct that is concerned with others with whom you are *together* as customers. These others, even in a place so full of mutual inspection as the café, are nevertheless not 'onlookers' but rather people who may or may not 'notice' what is occurring; it is a reciprocal arrangement between everybody in the café because we allow ourselves to be exposed and vulnerable to others when in public and *vice versa* (Raffel 2002). For Goffman, gestures are a continuing problem besetting his impression-managers in public. They are part of the body's work, which in turn becomes something that can escape the control of a manager. When they are not potentially embarrassing us, Goffman's gestures – as they are made by unwitting members of the public in public places such as streets, bars and cafés – give off unintended signals that con-artists and police officers can read as disclosing hidden motives. Yet, what Goffman misses is the involvement of gestures in events, places and other matters that are concerned with giving ourselves away in a more 'positive' sense, affirmative of something more than *just* a self-interested management of impressions.

As we noted at the start, the only notable ethnography of bars is Cavan's (1973) account of bar sociability, which is limited in understanding the café as a place; not only because of the significantly different expectations that apply to these

two categories of places in the UK and USA, but more importantly due to its basis in Goffman's cold calculative version of conviviality. The café, by this token, would be a place where its customers only ever provide the *performance* or a *front* of enjoying the company of others. Their gestures, as the gestures of ordinary customers, would give away other more cold-hearted concerns. In critiquing Goffman, Raffel argues differently, suggesting that we do not only seek to hide our true, and potentially empty, selves behind fronts:

Consistent with his overall perspective, he suggests that it is the information we give off rather than any information we give that is to be taken seriously. He thereby dismisses the whole realm of verbal, intentional speech as just another example of a veneer, a way in which the self protects itself from the attempted incursions of the other. . . . Our feelings-our-selves are not directly available, but can perhaps be represented, made available by a 'statement'. It is probably true that some people limit themselves to using conscious speech in this fashion, but a Levinas-inspired approach could cite the whole idea of anyone who *speaks expressively*. (2002, 17)

When public troubles occur, gestures can be made that express the responsiveness, attentiveness and concern of customers of *this* café. For Goffman, this is merely a 'performance' or 'front' in the endless struggle to manage the situation, to avoid exposure of inner emptiness (or, worse, 'madness'). Hospitable gestures, examples being smiles of acceptance or fetching napkins for a water spill, are hiding the 'insanity' or 'cruelty' of place rather than expressing accommodation, hospitality and responsibility. Goffman's apparent concern with civil life in the city is perhaps more accurately a concern with 'sane' life in the city. That this should be so in his two books on public space is not so surprising, given that he constantly uses his ethnographic study of an asylum (Goffman 1961) as a point of comparison.

Watson, in a trenchant mood when considering whether there is common ground between Goffman's studies of social interaction and ethnomethodology's studies of practical action and practical reasoning, concludes that these two approaches are, 'in terms of their inner reasoning, quite distinct and indeed irreconcilable' (1992, 2). Watson examines how Goffman's brilliantly extended metaphors (theatre, espionage, frames) produce what Kenneth Burke calls a 'perspective by incongruity' (Watson 1992, 5). What Goffman thereby does is to impose *his* order over an existing sensible local order, putting 'in place' terms whose use is ironic

'through "violating" their *conventional* application' (Watson 1992, 5) – and thereby steamrolling over what *would* be their conventional use by inhabitants of the 'place' in question, be it a café or whatever. In collecting together disparate settings, Goffman slowly but firmly bends the grammar of ordinary language to his systematic ends. Thus, the restaurant waiter's work becomes impression management, and perhaps more surprisingly so do a doctor's, a husband's and a criminal's. Indeed, in all manner of situations 'managing' takes over, and in particular managing the impression that we are making on others. No wonder that, within such a lexicon, Goffman has become so popular in management studies, since in effect he is able to reduce all manner of conduct to questions of 'management'.

What Garfinkel (1963) demonstrates, through his breaching experiments, is that social order stubbornly resists its disruption. When his students did their best to break 'felicity's condition', no one was locked up; moreover, while some people were annoyed, bewildered or bemused by his experiments, others easily accommodated them. Most famously in his study of 'Agnes', a man passing as a woman, Garfinkel entirely refutes Goffman's notion of managing impressions. Agnes lives a Goffmanesque life of impression management, yet her life is defined by its exceptionality to what 'normals' experience and do.

To enumerate Agnes' management devices and to treat her 'rationalizations' as though they were directed to the management of impressions and to let it go at that, which one does using Goffman's clinical ideal, euphemizes the phenomenon that her case brings to attention. In the conduct of her everyday affairs she had to choose among alternative courses of action even though the goal she was trying to achieve was most frequently not clear to her prior to her having to take the actions whereby some goal in the end might have been realized. Nor had she any assurances of what the consequences of the choice might be prior to or apart from her having to deal with them. Nor were there clear rules that she could consult to decide the wisdom of the choice before the choice had to be exercised. For Agnes, stable routines of everyday life were 'disengageable' attainments assured by unremitting, momentary, situated courses of improvisation. Throughout these were the inhabiting presence of talk, so that however the action turned out, poorly or well, she would have been required to 'explain' herself, to have furnished 'good reasons' for having acted as she did. (Garfinkel 1967, 184)

To return to Raffel's critique of Goffman, he reminds us that much of our everyday conduct in

public places is more like these 'momentary, situated, courses of improvisation', in the context of which we are thoroughly 'expressive':

An expressive person is one whose self is not some internally existing thing, carefully monitored in an attempt to protect it from the gaze of the world. Rather, this sort of person's self is more something that takes shape by its vulnerability, its sensitivity to what is other than itself. This sort of self is open, exposed, sensitive, reacting rather than just reporting. This level of expressiveness would certainly require speech, it could never just be a matter of signs that one unconsciously gives off. But, at the same time (as should be evident), the forms of speech that would occur would not adequately be seen as simply a report – even an honest report – about the self. Would not people who could be expressive in this way constitute a welcome relief to a field constrained, under Goffman's influence, to treat people (according to Gouldner's memorable imagery) as 'tricky, harassed little devils' (Gouldner 1970, 380)? (Raffel 2002, 195)

In his current work on place, moreover, Raffel (2004) argues that we need to extend such claims, and in so doing to examine further how we take responsibility for situated places (or not). At this point, gestures, set alongside talk but bringing something more to the situation, are taken as intimately bound up with – constituted by, and in certain respects constitutive of – a place such as *this* café (in *this* neighbourhood in *this* city). In this way, while gestures are involved in expressing oneself, expression itself remains too limited a possibility as to how we inhabit cafés. The gestures that we make as customers in the café go beyond expressing feelings and intentions, as Raffel insists, since they help to provide the place with its receptivity, indeed its conviviality. Just as we can imagine Goffmanesque places like theatrical restaurants (Crang 1994) and passenger aircraft (Hochschild 1983), we can imagine places better suited to self-expression such as dancefloors and artists studios (Thrift 2000; McCormack 2002). These sites might not be convivial sites, though, and nor would we visit them feeling entitled to do so simply to be with others. None of these places simplistically determine how their inhabitants will dwell in them, of course; but they do provide scenes for orientating to shared problems, even as they display differences in how such problems can be solved.

The café is not a solution to the loneliness of individual people in the city in that it will always supply them with conviviality, nor a solution to those that need rest and sustenance by always

providing suitable 'accommodation'. One of its remarkable qualities is nonetheless that it is a place where an individual can be left alone in relative comfort by others, even as she is in their presence; and this quality of being left alone by others even becomes part of the enjoyment of the presence of others. Equally, it is a place where strangers to the convivial city ought to be greeted and welcomed, although on each occasion their presence might be begrudged. It is a place where a population can engage their freedoms in clarifying what exactly is happening, what is the common situation here, even when, in dealing with these matters of concern such as enjoying (or not) the presence of others, they find that those concerns change (Blum 2003).

In these stuttering ethnomethodological investigations – ones deliberately left 'undefined' (Laurier and Philo 2004), even by the richness of Goffman's disquisitions on self-management – we begin detecting largely unremarked dimensions of how the work of conviviality is actually accomplished on a momentary, situated and improvised basis. Gently probing the extensive archive of our own empirical evidence, extracting the sorts of materials introduced above and many more, we can begin to speak about cafés as 'light-touch gatherings' (Thrift 2005, after Taylor 2004), 'not enframed by any deeply entrenched if common understanding of structure and counterstructure' (Taylor 2004, 170). Recognizing the great variability in such café spaces (Laurier 2005), and acknowledging their indelibly placed character, we can fathom the interminglings of talk and gesture, moment and situation, and the criss-crossing gazes and conducts of many more-or-less disengaged customers and staff, who duly become objects of mundane inquiry for each other: not to draw the contours of some cosy 'moral universe' (Tuan 1988), but at least to wonder about overlooked 'geographies of kindness and compassion, geographies that might then leak out into the wider world' (Thrift 2005, 147). If this is taken to be a naïve contribution to a new politics and 'ecology of hope' (Amin and Thrift 2005, 236), then so be it.

Acknowledgements

To Stanley Raffel, Allyson Noble, Pauline Watts and Barry Brown for their perceptive comments. This paper arises out of empirical and conceptual materials related to the ESRC project 'Cappuccino

Community: cafes and civic life in the contemporary city' R000239797. The anonymous interviewees and participants in the project are hence those to whom we owe the most thanks.

Notes

- 1 See <http://web.ges.gla.ac.uk/~elaurier/cafesite/>
- 2 See his study of the Shetland Isles in Goffman (1956) and also his study of patients in a psychiatric hospital in Goffman (1961).
- 3 There have been numerous studies examining: establishing objects of concern on display screens in control centres; picking out features in soil during archaeological digs; architects collaborating around diagrams and maps; expressions by deaf-blind children; and joint conduct with humans and animals (Heath 1986; Goode 1994; Heath and Luff 2000; Büscher 2001; Goodwin 2003; Hindmarsh and Heath 2003; Laurier *et al.* forthcoming; Mondada forthcoming).
- 4 An anxiety and distinction dealt with in a different way at the conclusion of Wylie's (2005) recent elegantly worn and footsore essay for this journal.
- 5 Outside of Western cultures, the distinction between the bars/pubs and cafés is not such an important one and can be utilized in different ways. In Italy cafés commonly have a bar, though the customers can select whether to take their coffee at the bar or at a table, the former being cheaper. The bar coffee carries different temporal expectations – a few minutes sipping espresso before leaving; a drink of beer at a UK or US bar lasting longer.
- 6 The ESRC project of which this is part 'R000239797 – The Cappuccino Community: cafes and civic life in the contemporary city' followed ethnomethodological policies of 'becoming the phenomenon' which, in this case, is becoming a *regular* at a café (contra the ethnographer as tourist as criticized in McHugh *et al.* 1974).
- 7 Italicized text is our description of what is occurring in the frames, built up through subsequent close watchings of the clips. For further information on our method: <http://web.ges.gla.ac.uk/~elaurier/cafesite/>
- 8 Several of the project interviewees commented on this. The manager of Spoon Café in Edinburgh pointed out that mothers came to his cafés for some peace and quiet away from their families.
- 9 For a more detailed exposition of Sacks' avoidance of foundational explanatory enterprises, see Lynch (2001).
- 10 From the fieldnotes, there is a preference amongst mothers for the leather chairs situated here. It is a particular area within the café – along with the window seats – that the mums plump for first.
- 11 Indeed, customers would go beyond searching and begin hovering, making still more visible that newly arrived customers were waiting for tables.

- 12 From the Goodwins we learn that: 'despite the differences in . . . settings, a small, quite general activity system for the organization of assessments was found in both. In each a triggering event made relevant a subsequent assessment. [Triggering Event] + [Assessment] The public nature of the assessment makes possible an interactive organization of co-experience. Participants treat the assessment slot as a place for heightened mutual orientation and action' (2000, 254).

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