

Becoming a barista

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Skill and the barista

It is a perennial feature of low status jobs like shop assistants, bar staff and café baristas that those who do them tend not to stay very long doing them. There is thus a constant entry and exit from the population of this part of the workforce. Nevertheless, the millions of cafés around the world that make espresso by hand need competent, and in some cases excellent, baristas to make their coffee day in, day out. Without competent baristas making consistent coffee, a café will soon lose its reputation and ultimately its custom. It is clearly a routine requirement of each café that it reproduces the team of workers who are able to make the company's product.

What I want to consider in this chapter is the nature of the ubiquitous skills of making and serving coffees as a barista. Rather than look for general theories of skill that remove it from the particular workplace, tools and contingencies of the job I want instead to try and reveal what the skills are for this particular culture of catering as it is done in a particular place. Doug Harper (D. A. Harper, 1987) meditated in two parts on the skills of a rural mechanic. The first part on just what work of that mechanic was in disassembling, repairing and rebuilding and, in the second part, on how nevertheless that was woven into relationships in the rural community. What I will do here is borrow that structure to consider just what the work of a barista is in making an espresso-based drink and then turning to that task's insertion into the order of service in a café.

There are important aspects of serving coffee that diverge from repairing cars and other machines. As Dant (Dant, 2005) notes automation has not crept into car repair because of the complexity of diagnosis, the 'tasks involved, and particularly the wide range of objects that must be interacted with' p135. Making espresso coffee is the perfect contrast case, automation has run riot with tiny pod-based machines for home production and hefty commercial machines that pump out multiple orders and kinds of coffees. Their buttons are backlit and their coffees are often more consistent than the handmade efforts of baristas at manual espresso machines. My ambition here though is not to examine de-skilling or indeed as Ingold (Ingold, 2000) notes the shift into new skills that is attendant upon automation of earlier routine tasks. What is worth noting though is that the café sector in the USA and the UK is anyway giving birth to a 'third wave' of cafés that both continue a longer tradition of artisan roasting and brewing and converge with customers escaping from global brands and seeking out better quality coffee (Manzo, 2010).

'Skill' as a word carries much less intellectual heft than 'mind', never quite right to join the 'intellectualist legend' identified by Ryle (Ryle, 2009). Livingstone points out that in studying skills all many of us will treat it as 'possessed by individuals rather than belonging to a collectivity of practitioners' (Livingston, 2008) p201. Although what might seem striking about Livingston's investigations into skill is the absence of practitioners from the scenes of skill acquisition in playing draughts and doing mathematics that he describes. Why they are missing is because Livingston is continuing the tradition of ethnomethodological studies of reasoning begun by Garfinkel and others (Garfinkel & Rawls, 2002). These studies are warranted by Garfinkel's complaint about Becker's (1996) sociological studies of jazz concentrating on the their relationships as 'outsiders' to 'squares' and missing the central activity that constitutes the jazz itself, the 'missing what' of jazz (Lynch, 1993). A complaint that Becker, always a fellow traveller with ethnomethodology responded to forty years later with a full scale study of just that (Faulkner & Becker, 2009). Livingston's study of skill is found in a toolic domain of embodied skills that is distinctive and arises from the games, puzzles and mathematics when we are learning them.

Let me depart from discussing arguments over the nature of skill for a while and turn toward what might be distinctive to and about making an espresso in a cafe. What follows is a task you will learn more by replicating but will require the painful expense of buying a domestic espresso machine or begging one off a well-heeled or coffee obsessed friend. For my part it was part of a research project of the then new and booming cafe sector in the UK (Laurier & Philo, 2005) that provided the opportunity to learn the basic of brewing an espresso.

Instructions + following instructions

Commercial coffee machines are built to blast out hundreds of cups a day, consuming litres of water from a mains plumbing supply, having a steam wand at each end, rows of buttons in between levers and dials. They are machines capable of churning out eight single espressos at a time if need be and this does happen in places like Italian railway stations at rush hour. Because it is the size of a toppled drinks cabinet it is all too easy to assume that the espresso machine's operation is central to the creation of a cup of coffee and miss its sister machine: the grinder.

The over-riding fact is that no matter how wonderfully large and matt black the coffee machine, if it does not have properly ground, dosed and tamped coffee, it will never make 'un buon café'. As a trainee I demonstrated that point amply by making runs of substandard espressos even though two of the key variables are sorted out for the trainee in advance by the trainer: the fine-ness of the grind and weight of coffee dispensed (7gm)) by my trainer. As part of the institutional structuring, the calibration of fine-ness and quantity of coffee dispensed is done by experienced staff, generally the manager or their assistant, so in such a situation this is a contingency with which beginner baristas do not have to deal.

Here are the instructions that I was given for you to follow if you have your espresso machine ready (remembering it takes at least half an hour to heat up the machine

evenly). In this short article we will only deal with espresso and not heating milk for cappuccinos, lattes etc.

1. *See if there is enough ground coffee in the doser, if not grind more but not so much that you will leave it sitting in the doser for longer than an hour*
2. *Pinch the lever on the doser to dispense the coffee grounds into the portafilter*
3. *Tap the handle on the counter to settle the grounds*
4. *Press the grounds flat with tamper*
5. *Wipe the top of the portafilter clean*
6. *Insert the portafilter into the espresso machine and twist it until it is tight*
7. *Place cup(s) under it*
8. *Press the 2 cup button, or if doing manual timing, run the hot water through for about 25 seconds and then stop*
9. *Serve immediately*

Reading these instructions is of quite a different nature to following them, and it is very easy to mistake the ease of reading for a similar ease in following.

Ethnomethodological studies have examined the quite different nature of reading instructions as part of following instructions (Bjelić, 1995; 2003). One noticeable thing is that you will inevitably find yourself returning to the instructions to look at them again for what more they might provide in the light of the problems you have encountered trying to make a first cup of coffee. Even once you are able to correctly remember each step of make the espresso, what you will find, it was certainly what I despaired over, was that the espresso was inconsistent. Sometimes thin and bitter, other times thick and barely a dash of it produced. Why?

Troubles + hints

The answer is discovered in returning to the tools and trying again. One thing that helps are of course what we call 'hints' but these hints themselves only gain their relevance as we then see that we did not succeed and thus find ourselves looking for hints that we now have experiences of failure to use to make sense of the hints.

I realised when I was learning that I was not always tapping. It didn't seem all that necessary because the coffee was going to be pressed later with the tamper. My instructor stood at my shoulder explaining that what is needed is a sharp tap on the work surface that rapidly evens out the dispensed coffee in the handle. Without an even spread of coffee, the pressurised hot water makes a channel for itself through the grains taking only a fraction of the flavoursome oils. The sharp tap for the beginner does not work though since it often just ends up knocking the coffee out of the portfilter or into a black snowdrift up against one side (see fig 1).



Fig 1. Uneven heap of coffee grounds

Seeing the uneven spread of the coffee the instructor made me slow down what I was doing and make sure that I created a more balanced heap in the portafilter. When the balanced heap was tapped and then settled into the portafilter it created already a mound that was centralised in the handle, When this mound was compressed then the resulting spread would be more even and less likely to channel the water through the coffee.



Fig 2 A more balanced heap

The experienced gaze of the barista takes in the problem - it is visible in the tilted heap of figure 1. The lop-sided mound of grounds was then something I could also look out for, it becomes part of the way that one sees as a barista (Goodwin, 2000;

Lynch, 2012). 'Seeing as a barista' might still take us a distance from what is happening, the beginner uses the hint to scrutinise their mound of grounds and compares it to the other mounds around them and what they have been shown earlier, the expert inspects their mound, so fast and so routinely that it goes un-noticed (the momentary inspection that is). The visual inspection is part of the process of the making as it progresses in stages, each of which might need some form of repair. When I took the filter out from under the doser I was then tapping the side of the portafilter rather than tapping it onto the work surface. As I looked around the experience baristas I realised that they were from time to time also tapping the sides of their portafilters. Progress, I thought.

With one part of the trouble diagnosed the coffee is still too variable. The other hint I am offered around where to concentrate my attention was on how to tamp the grounds down. Tamp too hard and the water flows too slowly through the granules taking too much out of them; too soft and the water rushes through barely extracting any flavours. The barista has to press the grounds again and again and again, making cup after cup of espresso, gradually finding just the pressure and angle of contact required with the tamper. To become a barista you have to learn to tamp the same each and every time, to feel immediately when you tamped badly¹.

The beginner barista tamps their coffee warily, tamps it slowly, inspecting the lie of the coffee after they have done so. As I watched our trainer and in later days as I watched my mentor in the cafe where I was put to work, and stole glances at other seasoned baristas at work; I noticed how some of them angle their shoulder to find that angle that will give them an even pressure. Some rotate the tamp while it is on the surface, though not all of them. I decide to rotate anyway reckoning it should provide a flatter surface and even out the pressure.

Colour judgements

Meantime at the training centre, our trainer keeps making espressos, we keep making espressos, and each time they are passed from hand to hand and he asks us 'is it the right colour?' We have been told that the crema² on top of the coffee should be 'hazelnut'. Even if we were all native speakers of English we might have difficulty pointing (→) to some sample () and saying 'that is hazelnut'. The nut, after all, comes in several different colours, its shell, its skin, the bare nut and these colours changes with age and cooking. However if we consider the colour 'golden' which is often used to describe the crema on top of an espresso we might begin to realise that it does not help trainees identify with precision when they have hit the right mark. Goodwin (Goodwin, 1997) in describing how a group of lab chemists being trained to make a fiber that is referred to in the scientific literature as 'jet-black' actually used 'gorilla fur' as their descriptor and 'orangutang hair' as the colour indicating it was not

¹ Toolmakers for the coffee industry have tried to intervene here by building spring-loaded tampers that should then create the correct pressure on the grounds when pushed against them.

² Crema is the layer of oily foam that sits on top of a cup of coffee, so called since it should be cream-like.

quite right. Where 'fur' helped highlight fibrousness so 'hazelnut' help us trainees orient toward an uneven, spotty or even stripey surface (see fig 3).



Fig 3. Hazlnuts

Source - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hazelnut>

Our trainer does not show us a diagram like fig. 3 but instead teaches us 'hazelnut' by showing us sample after sample of the espresso crema drawn from the ones he makes and the ones we make. Some are too light, some too dark and, thankfully, more and more are 'hazelnut'. We are hence working out this quite precise shade from its relation to these other shades of golden-brown. They are a colour formed from tiny oily bubbles merging into streaks of dark brown and bright yellow. It is not quite right to say that it is one colour, it is a texture and a combination of colours. Our trainer shows us that the crema should have a duration too. He picks up cups of espresso that have been sitting for five minutes to show us that a good crema lasts a while. We are learning to see this [hazelnut]³ as its relational shade and in its temporal extension. As Goodwin (Goodwin, 1997) puts it, "what will count as valid instances of the color category is established within a public, socially constituted world of relevant activity, rather than in the mental processes of an isolated actor" p116.

For the good barista, by using this [hazelnut] they are thus able to take a last check on their espresso as it travels in its small cup from machine to saucer. As Ignacio makes us repeat as one more mantra: 'no crema, no serva'. Should we, having followed the steps, tamped as best we could, pressed the right button on the machine, still find that there is no crema on our espresso we should throw it away and start again rather than serve it to a customer. There are some sceptical eyebrows raised over this, trainees already imagining the impossibility of doing this during a morning rush. However, Ignacio reiterates the injunction, adding that, although it may seem like something that will annoy the customer, it will instead impress them because starting over shows you really care about the quality of their coffee. This provides him with an occasion to give us a little tip about the inferences that we can make about a customer from a

³ The square brackets are used by phenomenologists to turn around our *accepted* sense of a word and indicate that we will put our understanding on hold until we know what that thing properly consists of. The trainer, as a vernacular phenomenologist, takes his trainees on an investigation into seeing [hazelnut] - the correct shade, texture and duration of the crema on top of the coffee.

certain kind of coffee being ordered. As he says, when a customer orders a *ristretto*,⁴ then this is someone who is serious about their coffee. Few customers will order it and we should think of it as a person at a bar ordering a forty year old single malt whiskey. Make sure you make it correctly, take your time and definitely throw it away if it comes out bad.

We make several other possible coffees, different sizes in different cups, with chocolate, with shots of syrup, blended with ice to make iced coffees. In learning how to make a hot chocolate, Ignacio amuses us by doing it in a flirty way, as if he were serving a woman who comes in every day and making it clear how he gives her extra big scoops of hot chocolate, whilst grinning and making small talk. He is making it clear that we can flirt, that we ought to flirt, that there can be more to this job than mirthlessly making drink after drink to a strictly controlled recipe. Where perhaps the best *ristretto* requires careful adherence to rules and recipes, the hot chocolate can only be gotten wrong by being measly with the chocolate. At another point, as we moved on to role playing, he played at being a customer who states flatly, as a challenge to all that a *ristretto* drinker holds dear: 'I want an ordinary coffee'. In return we learnt how to offer an *Americano* with or without milk as a possible response to this challenging customer. We are hence being taught not just how to make the different kinds of drinks but also how those coffees, chocolates and ice drinks related to kinds of customers, what those kinds of customers expect and how we should handle them.

From the toolic to the servic

Following the training has taken us quite naturally from a toolic world that is produced, after a reasonable amount of training, through the use of particular tools (e.g. the grinder, the tamper and the espresso machine) to a world populated with the other half of the standardised relational pair of the barista - the customer. What is notable about a lot of the studies of skilled tool use is that they are not so much individualised since they are clearly about the socially available methods we have to use tools, it is that they are a little bit anti-social in the ordinary sense of this term. Conforming to the image of the craftsman (Sennett, 2008) these are the loners, dwelling in their quiet toolic places, the sheds, music rooms and attic studies. If there is an intimacy, it is an intimacy with the games, DIY, puzzles or other practices they are learning in and from. David Sudnow (Sudnow, 1983) plays the computer Breakout for weeks and provides an insight into lived work of computer gameplay, towards the end of his book there's an artfully constructed chapter break where we suddenly surface from his small world of gameplay. We realise and remember he is a father spending hours playing the game out of time and place, while his son is in another room.. There is an opponent in the 'game' that Livingston (Livingston, 2008) is puzzling over yet this other member of society is restricted to their moves as part of the game. Early in ethnomethodology Garfinkel (Garfinkel, 1964; Watson, 2009) studied games as well but he disrupted them and turned the attention of a player away

⁴ A *ristretto* is an espresso type coffee with less water pushed through the grounds, thereby making a very short drink which carries only the first and arguably the best parts of the flavours and aromas of the beans.

from the game toward the multifarious courses of actions of the person that they are up against.

From the latter parts of the training described above we are being brought around the fact that barista is from time to time working in a more Goffman-esque trade. Or, in fact, is working in hospitality and that that is the Goffman trade par excellence, bar organised crime and the PR industry, given that his first study was of a hotel serving drinks and food to its guests (Goffman, 1956). It might indeed seem as if we are here in a setting like the restaurant where staff perform for customers and their success is measured by the cash left behind in tips (Crang, 1994). However the order of service for the barista is distinct in that they serve at a counter (or bar) and the order and payment are dealt with as part of the same transaction.

What they do might be closer to the demeanour work of the bank teller (R. Harper, Randall, & Rouncefield, 2000) or responding to service requests in small shops of various kinds (Merritt, 1976; Moore, 2008). What is distinct to the cafe (and the restaurant) is that the product to be consumed is assembled in front of the customer and moreover the product is also usually consumed in the presence of its producer⁵.

Customers as a Workplace Feature

After two days of having a trainer watching over you, and saying what happens next, you build up the expectation: your superior from the cafe tells you what to do. As you step behind the bar and really start becoming a barista in earnest, the small shock is that it is the customers that tell you what to do, or rather they make reasonable requests for drinks and food that you ought to be able to supply. They arrive at the counter and they say 'two regular lattes please, one skinny,' or 'I'd like three regular cappuccinos, one with low fat milk, one large cappuccino, and a hot chocolate to take away, oh, no, actually can you make the large cappuccino a latte instead, ehm a large one too? heh heh.' Sad to say there is no getting around this and the manageress, after asking me whether I could make coffee, then said 'serve a customer.' It's a fundamental shift. Not only do customers not ask you for the same drink each time (which would make your job nice and easy), they just keep coming. There is no time out for reflection, diagnosis or letting someone else have a go while you sit back down to laugh with your trainer at their efforts. They immerse you in the field of action with their orders.

Just learning how to get your beginner's hands on the decaff coffee, the herbal tea, the tongs for moving panini on the toaster and so on, takes repeated searching and reaching for the many things that are used to make customer orders. Your searching and reaching is cumbersome and halting, and sometimes it is done in plainly the wrong place as you search for a tea bag under the counter when it is on a high shelf. The experienced staff keep pointing out where things are to you, but you don't want to overstretch their patience. This frustrating inability to find the ingredients and equipment is combined with having to 'walk through' each coffee recipe, saying to yourself 'now what goes into a small mocha again?' and then asking someone else

⁵ A cup off coffee is of course the end point of a much longer chain of production sites {Lieberman:2011tm}{Cowan:2005wt}.

‘what’s in a small mocha?’ And even while you are running over in your head the measures of coffee, the measures of chocolate, in what order you put them in: chocolate first or coffee first? You forget what other coffee the customer ordered. And you realise that you also forgot to ask them whether they wanted their coffees to take away or have-in. Smiling humbly you ask them ‘ehm I’m sorry, did you want your coffees to have-in?’ To your relief since you’ve already made coffee into mugs, they say ‘yes to have in.’

At the outset, like most beginners, I was trying to make as few mistakes in making each coffee as possible, so I took it slow... And it’s *so* slow. And it feels even slower to you as the barista than it does to the customer – this is the time that you experience where a minute of making a cappuccino stretches to feel like quarter of an hour and you are expecting the customer to be red in the face when you turn around, or to be halfway through writing a letter of complaint to your manager on the saucer that you laid out for them ages ago. Working alongside your *maestro* (as the cafe called your local mentor), they make each order so quickly. It seems possible that with enough practice you will reach the speed at which they make individual orders. What is more intimidating is that your *maestro* serves at least two customers whenever there is a queue and I witnessed staff managing particularly long queues by taking on four orders at a time.

The customers arrive in little rushes which make you realise that you were in a quiet period previously, and as a beginner you have not yet registered what a quiet or a busy period really is, nor, entails (Laurier, 2008). After you have been through a rush then you have a little time for reflection and *post hoc* advice from the other baristas. Because making a cup of coffee or tea is an utterly familiar task for most people, it can be difficult to understand the different criteria around making them for customers for those who have not served at a bar or worked in a restaurant; customers are *not* like friends or family coming around to your place for a cup of tea who do not really mind if you have run out of Early Grey and give them Typhoo instead; friends, who appreciate the gesture and take what they are given with a smile and a thankyou. Customers want whatever it is you have listed as offering and they want it to be the same as, or better than, the one they had last time.

Customers start to pace from foot to foot and mutter if they are waiting more than about two minutes to be served in a short queue (and they know the difference between a short queue where they should be served quick and a long queue at lunch when they will be served slowly). Customers, even without being unfriendly, can cause panic and fear for the beginner barista. Well they did for me, until I came to realise that most were forgiving. When I offered an apology for taking three times the time it took a normal member of staff, they would say things like: ‘don’t worry you’re just starting’, ‘everybody has to learn sometime,’ or even ‘I think you’re very brave’. The experienced baristas differentiated between easy and ‘nightmare’ customers (Manning, 2008), between regulars and the rest (Laurier, 2012). For me, on the first day, each customer seemed wildly unpredictable and hard to fathom. After a fortnight of serving customers I came to understand that the further fathoms of the customer was not my concern and that they shared an orientation to the order of service. So much so that, as (Kuroshima, 2010) notes, the abbreviations of requests and their fulfilment solidified our relationship.

As a barista you stand behind a bar, but the bar is so designed that there are no seats at the bar where customers can sit and expect to make small talk or tell their tragic life story to the bar staff. Nor are the customers becoming intoxicated with alcohol with all the tact that handling drunks requires of bar staff (Cavan, 1966). The barista has time-limited conversations with customers while they take their order, make their order up and then dispense it whilst also dispensing with the customer. My trainer had told his trainees on numerous occasions that they should keep talking to the customer while making their order and try their best never to turn their backs on them. For the beginner barista who is still spelling out recipes, trying to recall orders and trying not to press the wrong buttons on the machine, turning their back on the customer is pretty much inescapable and excusable for the time being.

From the service to the logistic

Having considered the skills of tool use and then the production of order of service, there is still more to the barista's work, there is a practical reasoning and around the the flow of cutlery and crockery. This is part of what ethnomethodologists have described as the workflow from within (Bowers, Button, & Sharrock, 1995) though here turned towards the particulars of the cafe. Those studies like Goffman's the concentrated on the performance then tended to miss the props. Except that the cutlery and crockery are not 'props', they do not have that loose relationship to purpose and function. They really must be clean, unchipped and ready for use.

The cup's configuration as a workplace object for the barista's work is distinct from that of the customer and indeed for the many academics that have paused to contemplate the cup on their desk. The skills of the barista as part of the cafe staff turn upon the surveillance, monitoring and flow the cups (and saucers and spoons and so on).

Doing the dishes

In almost all cafes there are cups piled in rows according to size on top of the espresso machine. They run from the compact espresso cups to the capacious grande mugs, if the cafe goes that far and many of the third wave cafes have declined to supersize their coffee. One of the reasons the cups are there is because there is a heated plate keeping them constantly warm. An espresso is only a thimble measure of coffee and if you put it into a cold cup of solid ceramic then in less than a minute it will be cold as the ceramic it was trickled into.

The piles of warm cups are a shared resource for the baristas working behind the counter. Each of them draws their cups from this same store (although in high throughput cafes the machine is often mirror split to allow two teams on different cash tills to work from each side without crossing over and disrupting the other team's flow). The experienced staff working at speed, barely look to see where they are grabbing a regular cup from – they are sure that it will be there. They are sure that it will be pre-warmed, clean, unchipped and ready to be used. Their certainty is reliant on the baristas' steady and consistent replenishment of these rows of cups from the dishwasher, the ongoing rejection of dirty or chipped cups there. Working behind the

counter I came to monitor the supply of cups like all the other baristas becoming aware of when it needed replenishment. Experienced staff were attuned to the rush hours and would do their best to make sure the machine was groaning with crockery beforehand, since there would be little or no time for collecting dirty cups, rinsing them, loading the dishwasher, waiting ten minutes and then unloading and sorting it to the top of the machine.

At the busiest cafe that I worked in the assistant manageress could often be heard to call out aloud that we needed more cups. All of the working staff hearing this, and ones who were not engaged on an essential task, would start replenishing the cups. The assistant manageress also watched the display units of sandwiches, drinks, cakes and pastries and would allocate staff to start replenishing or re-arranging the units. In busy stores, like that one, replenishment and rearrangement is an urgent business as customers suck the water jugs dry, wolf down sandwiches at lunchtime and make off with the choicest cakes. Whilst senior café staff were in charge and ensured that restocking and tidying of display units occurred, all staff attended to them. I was taken at each store to be shown the importance of facing out sandwiches and cans.

It takes a leader and a team to keep the flow of crockery in circulation, making sure that it doesn't logjam at any point. The circulation has to be maintained even though supply and demand are temporally out of whack – at lunchtime everyone needs crockery but the supply is rapidly running out. Customers take about twenty minutes to finish before their crockery can be retrieved, and collecting the crockery takes time. Rinsing the crockery of persistent lipstick and other magnetic gunk in the sink takes time, loading and unloading the dishwasher takes time, stacking the cups, plates and sorting the cutlery takes time, because it all has to be fitted inbetween the steps of the assembling of further drinks and food orders.

Concluding thoughts

We have moved swiftly between the particular skills of making espresso that are the 'whatness' of the barista. Without that capacity the person behind the counter is just another person behind the counter. That 'what' of each and every job in the world remain an ongoing project for the descriptive enterprises of ethnomethodologists. As we have seen there is more to the 'what' of becoming a barista than making coffee, it is a form of making a volatile and stimulating drink that is accomplished 'while-u-wait'. That phrase catching a collection of jobs where on requesting them to be done the customer can stand and watch them being done. Finally, these central parts of job are reliant upon the monitoring and movement of a workflow that refurbishes the cutlery, crockery and comestibles for each next customer order.

What I have not been able to quite get in describing these early experiences of becoming a barista is how their cafes play part in the production and reproduction of communities (though see (Laurier, 2012; Laurier & Philo, 2006)). As I noted at the outset, Doug Harper's study of a small repair shop brings the mechanic's role in his rural area to the fore. It seems to me though that there was some surprise in realising that such a figure might also be part of how community is replenished as their cars are repaired. Our expectation of the cafe is that it should help us, as Oldenberg

(Oldenburg, 1999) put it, 'get through the day'. What we might overlook are the skills of the barista that underly the sociability.

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