

Field notes:

Where am I?

At a family run vegetarian café in town. Saturday afternoon. One hour of observation. Busy.

Two storey; wooden floors, benches, mixture of chairs and tables. I am on the first floor, on my own at a table for two, next to the staircase. There are roughly plastered walls which are covered with framed historical black and white photos, notices, certificates, news clippings; these are related to the café, the family and their history. At the top of the stairs, in the corner under the window, there is a number of items which are for sale: bowls, teapots, a lamp made from a reclaimed part of machinery. Just audible when the café is full is classical music which is being coming out of speakers at either end of the room. Every table was full when I entered.

Why did I choose this setting?

"the most important consideration as you narrow your search for a research site is to identify some kind of a connection with the place/space" (Engaging Communities, Chapter 3).

I chose this place as I 'feel part of it'. I come here a lot and have studied here a lot, so the owners are used to seeing me here with my laptop on the table. I could also have lunch(!) I was going to go to the library - another place where I spend a lot of time - but it is closed on a Saturday and this was my window of observation opportunity.

What activities are people undertaking? What interactions are occurring?

Directly in front of me, there is one table for two. A woman - early twenties, was eating and is now on her phone. She is immersed and seemingly abstracted from the surroundings. Occasionally, she'll put down the phone and read some of her book instead. I can't see what book it is. She must be new to the café as she had to ask for instructions about where and how to pay. In the corner to my left, there is a table of four - three women and one man. They have coffee, tea and are engaged in conversation. When they came to leave, one of the women crawled onto the floor. I couldn't see what she was doing but, after a minute or so, a dog appeared with its harness on: I guess she was seeing to that. When they leave, a woman in her fifties took their place. She sits on her own reading a book. Like me, she comes here a lot and she greets a number of the waitresses by name. Next to this table, there is

a table of three. A woman in her thirties, one in her twenties and a teenage boy. The younger woman and the boy might be siblings. They have coffee and cakes/teacakes.

To my left (I can't stare, so I can't be certain) there is a table of six women. They are mixed in age, from forties through to, I'm guessing, seventies/eighties. I can discern some of their conversation. They have discussed playing musical instruments - one is learning the banjo. At some point, the conversation breaks into multiple conversations across and around the table. At the end of their time in the café, time is spent splitting the bill - going through the menu to get the costs of everything they have had. This makes me think that they are not a family group. There is discussion about the new ten and five pound notes and how they look like 'toy money'. One of the women assumes responsibility for managing the negotiations and exchange of coins and notes. When they come to leave, one of the women helps one of the older women down the stairs.

Behind me - I can't look round at them but I saw them enter - there is a table of two women. One of them has a border terrier with her: I also have a border and I've seen her walking her dog on the hill behind our town. As they leave, I stroke the border and say hello.

At one point, one of the owners of the café comes part of the way up the stairs and looks around at the customers. Is he checking that all is well? He says hello to me.

The waiting staff are all young females. Their uniform is black and white: black trousers or skirt and white shirt. Some wear ties, all wear aprons - either full body or around the waist. They move up and down the stairs and between the tables: providing food and drinks and clearing away the detritus. They each have a silver tray and a dark coloured, damp cloth. As they offer food to the patrons, they offer variations of 'I hope everything is okay with your food'.

My tea arrives. It's masala chai. As well as the cup, saucer and teaspoon, there are two silver pots - one filled with hot water and tea leaves, the other with hot water - a jug of milk, a tea strainer and a holder for the tea strainer.

One of the waitresses passes with two of the special children's afternoon teas: these are presented in a red and white polka dot tea set. Without turning round, therefore, I know that there are children behind me. As the café empties, I can hear the children. One of them shifts from giggling to crying. Later in the meal, one of the waitresses goes past me

with a high chair. I can presume from this that one of the groups with children are, perhaps, preparing to leave.

One of the owners comes up and rubs some of the options off the board, chalking in a different option. As she does so, she chats to the woman sitting on her own. As she goes down the stairs, she says hello to me.

The phrase I hear most from both the serving staff and the customers is 'thank you'.

What sparks your curiosity about where you are and what is going on?

My curiosity was sparked by trying to understand the nature of the relationships between those who were at each table. Some tables were easier to guess at than others. Also, sitting in a familiar context but in a different 'guise' I began to think more about this place and its history. How had it stayed in the family? What had convinced the current owners to keep it going?

If you were new to this culture, what might you wonder about?

How to drink the tea. What the silver pots on the table might contain. Where to get information about the food - there is both a menu and a blackboard. Where to pay? How to order? Who owns this place?