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Imagining Community through Consumption: An autoethnography

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Extended abstract

Identification with, and attachment to place-based community is an intensely personal experience. It has its basis in the experiences we share with a neighbourhood's people and places. Because of this, it is both a subjective and an emotional identification, which is enduring and changeable, and is influenced by the physical environment, social interactions, and cultural cues. This paper investigates the role that quasi-public spaces, such as cafes, bars, and retail shops, can play in the development of this connection.

Ethnographic and in-depth qualitative research from sociologists and consumer researchers has provided important insights into the role of these spaces in developing this sense of belonging. Investigations that focused on specific consumption spaces have described the ways they operate as locations in which individuals establish customer identities, build social support networks and reinforce group identifications, practice and subvert broader cultural roles such as gender or sexuality, and gain clues about cultural identities (e.g., E. Anderson, 1978; Katovich & Reese, 1987; Rosenbaum, 2006, 2007; Sherry, 1998; Spradley & Mann, 1975). More broadly, ethnographies of neighbourhoods have illustrated the importance of quasi-public spaces in communicating neighbourhood identity, and providing 'safe' spaces in which individuals can mix with others with limited risk (e.g., Blokland, 2003; Gans, 1962; Lloyd, 2006)

What is less clear however is the ways the connections between these micro and macro spaces are developed and experienced. That is, how an individual constructs an attachment to an external identity, such as a neighbourhood, through their development of an individual or group identity within a specific consumption space. To do so, one must presumably extrapolate or displace identities from their originating quasi-public space, or consolidate a range of identity-defining experiences from across different spaces. And in doing so, the individual may also, presumably, have to negotiate discontinuities between these identities and the different experiences of belonging they may engender. This implies subjective interpretations of interactions, and reflexive assessments of emotional responses. It also implies some sort of imaginative amalgamation of identities into something broadly representative of the neighbourhood. It is these processes that this paper examines.

Researching these intensely personal, and subjective processes in others can be difficult, even for an in-depth methodology such as ethnography. For this reason then, this research has adopted an autoethnographic approach. This methodology allows the experience of the researcher to be used reflexively to illuminate certain aspects of broader social phenomena, and invite readers to critically reflect on their own experiences (L. Anderson, 2006; Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). In this research it is used to link the personal experience of attempting to learn about and connect with a place-based community through consumption experiences in quasi-public spaces, with broader conceptualisations of what consumption, public space and community represent in the Western gentrified inner city. By accessing the experiences of the researcher, it is possible to more fully explore the emotional aspects of the identity work that occurs within these spaces, and the ways these experiences are imagined as representative of an experience of community.

This project therefore extends the important contribution of ethnography to urban studies by providing a personal window into the author's attempts to use consumption spaces as a means of establishing a connection to a new neighbourhood. It was

conducted in a gentrifying inner city suburb of Melbourne, Australia. I moved there in early 2008 with little knowledge or experience of the area and no social networks within the neighbourhood. This lack of experiences and connections provided a unique opportunity to investigate the claims and potential for consumption spaces in a contemporary inner city neighbourhood from an individual perspective. This paper specifically focuses on the autoethnographic research process, to advance an argument for the important contribution this innovative methodology can make to urban studies.

The data collection took the form of extensive memo writing, as recommended by Ellis (2004). These memos focused on my actions, interactions and my emotional responses to these, within the consumption spaces of my neighbourhood. I also recorded the assumptions and associations I made between the identities of a range of neighbourhood consumption spaces and the people who used them, both as individuals and collectively. This captured the connections I made between specific space-based behaviours and the broader neighbourhood context. The data analysis focused on the interplay between these interactions, my emotional responses, and the identity attributions recorded within my research notes. The data was categorised utilising Richins' (1997) descriptors of emotions experienced through consumption, and Lofland's (1998) differentiation of the types of secondary relations that may occur in public space. This enabled me to structure the data in ways so as to track relational changes and relate them to my emotional responses and overall experiences of identification or belonging. These comparatively rigid analytical structures also provided an important distancing mechanism during the analysis process. This aided the adoption of reflexive stance toward the analysis of my own behaviours, hopes, disappointments and attachments, which is a significant challenge of autoethnographic analysis.

The research has shown how personal and collective identification within consumption spaces works in ways that can cumulatively be imagined as connections to community. This draws on both the potential to anchor oneself within a specific consumption space based group identity, as well as use that identity as a base from which to frame exposure to the identification practices of diverse others (Aubert-Gamet & Cova, 1999). Anchoring sites or third places, have been promoted as offering inclusive, sociable, but non-binding communal gathering (Oldenburg, 1999). However, as the bars studied by Anderson (1978) and Katovich and Reese (1987) highlight, this easy sociality is contingent on gaining acceptance through a complex set of identity defining interactions. This autoethnographic investigation confirms that one must first reinforce their status as an individual, before they can become recognised as a member of the specific cultural group that is anchored there. However, it also emphasises that this is highly emotional work, and that these experiences are not always positive. Indeed my research notes indicate that discontent, embarrassment, and feelings of being ignored or out of place, are as much a feature of my interactions in those consumption spaces that I now identify as anchoring places, as are moments of joy, excitement, or a feeling of connection.

These negative emotional experiences most commonly occurred as a result of an apparent confusion in identity defining aims. That is, on reflection it became apparent that when my actions were more directed toward building intimate secondary relationships with specific others, (rather than a generalised recognition as a member of a collective) then I was also more likely to be disappointed with the outcomes. Instead it was often the spontaneous, enjoyable quasi-primary interactions with non-

regulars that generated an emotional sense of belonging and of identification. Such interactions do less to establish the kind of 'regular' identity that earlier ethnographies see as being fundamental to acceptance. However my experiences suggest that because of the low level emotional investment that is required for a generally high level of positive gain, such interactions are a useful means of remedying the emotional uncertainties of identification with anchored groups.

These brief interactions were also significant in supporting the imaginative process of identity extrapolation. They were able to do this because they drew on the physical and symbolic elements of the broader context in which they occurred to establish shared identifications. Such interactions were also useful for extending my knowledge and experience of the neighbourhood beyond the boundaries of my own consumption practices, essentially creating a realm of exposure within an anchoring site. Thus whilst affirmation of identity from external sources has been recognised as important in reinforcing group identity, that this positive emotional role may also work by shifting the identification focus away from that of the anchored collective is an important contribution of this autoethnography.

Furthermore, this experience of a fleeting but still emotionally significant identification can also be experienced within sites of exposure, such as neighbourhood shopping centres or shopping streets. These more open public and quasi-public spaces are broadly recognised in urban sociology and planning as being an important public focus point for neighbourhood interaction and identification. This autoethnographic exploration has illustrated that one of the reasons for this is that such locations provide a broader canvas upon which one can affirm, or question, the identities constructed within anchoring places. This may occur through interactions with others known from anchoring realms. However my experience shows that it more powerfully stems from a reflexive appreciation of the identity defining processes of others. Thus I watch the old Italian and Greek men of my neighbourhood gather on the benches in the local shopping centre and appreciate this is their version of my favourite bar. Or, when interpreting the interaction of unknown others as 'neighbourhood residents running into each other at the shops', I create an identification with which to frame my own 'running into people' experiences, and in turn establish an additional cue for my own experiences of a sense of belonging.

What this autoethnography has highlighted then is the way that consumption space based identifications can be imaginatively extended to incorporate other spaces and experiences where that identification is confirmed, and challenged. To do so however involves significant cross-referencing between the individual and collective identification afforded by these experiences. It also suggests that this ongoing process of affirmation is as likely to extend from exposure to anchoring, as it is from anchoring to exposure. Indeed in the more mobile and lifestyle focused inner city neighbourhood, establishing a regular identity may be beyond both the temporal and emotional commitment that individuals are willing to make. Instead as this autoethnography suggests, individuals may use the positive emotional experiences of quasi-primary interactions as the basis of a generalised formulation of neighbourhood identity and their emotional relation to it. It is there that the imagining process comes into play; overlooking the mundane, and the moments of uncertainty, to privilege shared practices and positive emotional experiences and elevate these interactions from that of passing consumers, to one of neighbourhood community.

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