Review

Space, Gender, and Social Order: Observing Gendered Interactions in Public Settings

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This field report explores gendered dynamics within a commercial café environment, focusing on how gender influences social interactions and spatial utilization. Conducted at Bakery on O'Connell in Adelaide, the study used ethnographic methodology to observe patrons' behaviors, highlighting gendered patterns such as men's dominance of outdoor seating and assertiveness in decision-making, contrasted with women's more considerate behavior. The study applies feminist theory, particularly West and Zimmerman's (1987) concept of "doing gender," to explain these behaviors as reflections of societal gender expectations. Additionally, it discusses the feminization of hospitality work, with women predominantly employed in customer-facing roles, further reinforcing traditional gender roles and expectations.

Despite evolving societal changes toward greater acceptance of sexual minorities, Australian data shows higher susceptibility to mental health challenges among lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people than among heterosexuals (Lyons et al, 2022:522-531). This research aims to explore why Australian sexual minorities are more susceptible to experiencing mental health challenges.

Previous research indicates a significant correlation between being a sexual minority and heightened risk of mental health issues (Bhugra et al, 2022:171-190). LGB individuals experience higher rates of diagnosed mood and anxiety disorders

Methods

This study was carried out from 5 pm to 7 pm on the 1st of April at Bakery on O'Connell, a popular award-winning 24-hour bakery/cafe in Adelaide. Employing ethnography as a methodology, I, a café patron, went out to observe other patrons' behaviour. I selected Bakery on O'Connell as the observational site because of how popular I'd previously heard it to be. Furthermore, it's located in a very public spot right in the centre of Adelaide city. This makes it a prime location to not only be able to observe from a distance without attracting any attention my way but also to be able to observe as many different interactions with as many people

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as possible as to recognise any potential patterns in behaviour or interactions. I sat down at an inconspicuous corner table to not draw any attention to myself to maintain a complete observer role, in congruence with Kawulich's (2005) method which aims to conceal one's identity and prevent disturbance to typical activities. Initially, I planned to stay for only an hour and take meticulous notes of individual interactions I had observed, however, I found that recording patterns rather than just noting instances to be more effective in revealing how gender interplays in social interactions. I also found that staying 2 hours allowed for more detailed observation. Overall, my observer approach to research allowed for a nuanced exploration of behaviours and interactions within the café setting.

Findings

Upon entering Bakery on O'Connell, I discovered that as predicted it was remarkably busy, filled with people of various ages and backgrounds all occupying tables both indoors and outdoors. Demographically, there was an equal mix of genders and age groups present. Upon further inspection, however, I did observe gendered patterns regarding spatial utilisation and social interaction. For instance, the indoor seating arrangements included a relatively equal number of men and women, many of which engaging in conversation, and others studying or working on their laptops. However, the outdoor seating was primarily dominated by male patrons who often took up more space both physically in that they occupied mostly larger tables and figuratively in that they engaged in significantly louder conversation. I also managed to observe subtle gendered practices and behaviours among customers. For example, I observed how people took to claiming seating areas. Here men often appeared assertive in deciding where to sit, whereas women were more likely to ask whoever

they were with and take more time considering their options first. This depiction of men being more assertive and women being more considerate was reflected in other contexts. For instance, upon observation, women typically took longer to decide what to order compared to men, they also were more likely to ask for staff suggestions. Conversely men rarely consulted others in this decision-making process. Beyond this when observing customers conversations with others, I found that women displayed a lot of active listening cues such as nodding, expressive hand gestures and maintaining direct eye contact appearing to be truly immersed in conversation with one another. Contrariwise, I noted that during conversations men oftentimes had a tendency to look away and glance around the room. Interestingly, the cafe was mostly staffed by female employees, with a 1-5 ratio of men to women, with the one male employee appearing to be in a more managerial role. This reflecting traditional gender roles in the service industry that dictate fields like hospitality to be "feminised labour" suited for women (Chettri, 2023). Overall, interactions between staff and customers seemed very warm and friendly.

Discussion

Feminist theory can be applied to explain the gendered dynamics I observed at the bakery. Concepts such as "doing gender" by West & Zimmerman (1987) shed light on how societal expectations impact individual and group behavior and spatial utilization. Essentially "doing gender" transcribes how men and women perform behavior that aligns with gender expectations (Gordon, 2000). This theory can assist in explaining why men dominated the outside area and engaged more loudly with one another. This behavior could be attributed to societal norms that allow men to take up more space and assert their masculinity through outward expression (Arxer, 2011). Conversely, women may be expected to behave

oppositely and to be more quite as in accordance to female expectations of modesty, diffidence and ultimately subjugation (Pollock, 1989). Men's tendency to occupy larger tables and engage in louder conversations can be seen as a manifestation of dominant masculinity, whereas women not doing this reflects societal pressures for women to take up less space in the public sphere (Tannen, 1994).

The observation of men appearing assertive in deciding where to sit, whereas women asking whoever they were with and taking time to consider their options reflects patriarchal norms that expect men to be dominant, assertive and in control and women to be nurturing, accommodating and considerate of others' preferences. This stems from the socialization women face that teaches them to prioritize others' comfort over their own (Lester, 2008). Overall, these observations revealed complex depictions of gender roles in social interactions. Trivial things that would ordinarily be taken for granted seem to be reflections of a lot more nuanced issues in society.

Furthermore, the majority of employees being women suggests that hospitality is a "feminised" area of labour. Congruently, studies suggest that women in hospitality in 2022 worked 48 per cent of shift work hours, compared to 47.9 per cent in 2020. With the largest increase (four per cent) being women in cafes and coffee shops (Karunanethy, 2022). Comparatively, women make up 38.4 per cent of the full-time workforce (Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2022). This can also be explained by "doing gender" in the sense that hospitality workers are expected to perform "emotional labour" (Grandey, 2003) by maintaining positive emotional expressions at all times. They are also expected to form some level

of a relationship with customers to ensure customer satisfaction, this process is described as "commercial friendship" (Segger-Guttmann, Medler-Liraz, 2018). Women dominate in fields that depend on emotional labour because they are already expected to perform this emotional labour (Skott-Myhre, 2015), due to stereotypes that depict women as nurturers and sympathisers. Despite there being only one male employee and 5 female employees, the one male employee appeared to maintain a higher position. This further reflects how even in feminised fields men remain on top of the workplace food chain.. For example, one report suggests that women maintain 23 per cent of hospitality company board seats, 22 per cent of C-suite positions, and 3.23% per cent of CEO positions (Castell, 2021).

Conclusion

Overall, through employing ethnography, I was able to observe individual and group behaviour in the bakery on O'Connell to effectively investigate how gender affected interactions. Through the implementation of Kawulich's (2005) method, I successfully concealed my identity to prevent any disturbance to patron behaviour. It quickly became evident that gendered patterns regarding spatial utilisation and social interactions were present. Including how the outdoor area was dominated by men who occupied large tables and engaged in boisterous conversation. I also noted that the staff primarily consisted of women who were all particularly cheerful and friendly. Additionally, I observed that when choosing seating men were often a lot more assertive whereas women were more considerate. This can be explained by West and Zimmerman's (1987) "doing gender" which predicates that men and women perform gender coinciding with societal gender expectations. The male patron's behaviour aligned with aspects of dominant masculinity that contend men can and should be assertive, loud and in control.

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Conversely, the women patrons' behaviour aligned with the female expectation of being demure. The amount of female to male employees reinforces how hospitality a field that relies on emotional labour and commercial friendship is associated with women. Overall, these observations revealed complex depictions of gender roles in social interactions.

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