Flat Whites: How and why people work in cafés

JANET SAYERS[*]

Introduction

This research note reports on recent research examining people working in cafés in Auckland, with a view to exploring how and why people use cafés to facilitate work and their productivity. Cafés are recognised as an important component of retail districts and cities more generally (Florida, 2004; Hospers & van Dalm, 2005; Jacobs, 1969), but they are rarely taken seriously as workplaces in literature about work. The role of cafés to innovative cities is referred to in this literature with Hospers, for example commenting in relation to Vienna that:

> The most important background to Vienna's creativity around and after 1900 was the 'café factor': the countless Kaffeehäuser open from early in the morning to late at night, served as the meeting place of the local creative minds. In this inspiring environment a number of 'new combinations' emerged while drinking a cup of Weiner mélange, or the local beer" (2003: 151).

In the United Kingdom, ethnographic work on cafés and cities stresses the importance of cafés in facilitating everyday communicative practice (Laurier, Whyte, & Buckner, 2001). There has also been relevant work on 'café culture' in the location of the present study, Auckland, New Zealand (Austin & Whitehead, 1998; Latham, 2000, 2003; Liberty, 1998).

There have also been a number of studies about employees working in cafés, and several of these studies are classics in the employment relations literature (Crang, 1994; Goffman, 1959; Whyte, 1949). But on the subject of customers working in cafés, there is very little research, although there is a developing literature about the 'mobile' worker, using technology to facilitate work in cars, planes, hotels, trains, cybercafés and so on (e.g.Wakeford, 1999). The most directly relevant study to ours has been conducted in the United Kingdom by Felstead, Jewson and Walters (2005a, 2005b) who examined professional and managerial workers working 'on the move' from mobile workplaces like trains, working at home, and working in 'collective' offices in the United Kingdom. Somewhat surprisingly, their research found cafés to be rather insignificant as places of work (Felstead et al., 2005a), finding that in cafés "it may be difficult [for workers] to make expansive and long-term claims for space" (p. 151). On the other hand, geographers in the UK have shown that cafés are central to the lives of city dwellers and to the conduct of commerce (Laurier, 2008; Laurier & Philo, 2006a). Cafés, in their view, are key places in the development of modernity and to commerce conducted in productive cities, and their approach underscores the value in understanding micro-everyday practices of work in order to capture the

* Dr. Janet Sayers is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Management (Albany) at Massey University. j.g.sayers@massey.ac.nz

resilience and inventiveness with which mobile workers create places in which to work, as well as the nuances of organisations' continuous influence over subjectively incorporated self-control strategies and tactics that come into play when people are working away from the formal workplace.

An examination of the literature shows that the present study needs to be cognisant of theoretical developments in social geography, geographical writing about the historical development of cities (and towns), as well as the growing literature on the mobile worker. Our reflections on the disparate literature, our observations and interviews, led us to Pred (1984) as providing a useful framework within which to understand our findings. Pred wrote a very influential article advancing a theoretical foundation for "a different type of place-centred or regional geography" which "rests upon an integration of time-geography and the emerging theory of structuration" (p. 279). Pred's paper is directly concerned with understanding places that emerge where "time-space activities and power relations ceaselessly become one another" in the land-, or city-scape.

The overall purpose of this research is to answer the exploratory research question, how and why do people work in cafés? This research is exploratory as no research currently exists that can frame a large study and so the present project aims to contribute to the framing of a more focused research project to be conducted in 2010.

Method

We first conducted eight preliminary interviews with academic colleagues, all of whom use cafés on a regular basis. Our interviews confirmed to us that academics use cafés to facilitate certain types of work, but that individuals have a range of preferences and reasons for using cafés. For example, one respondent, Fredrick wove cafés into his daily routine primarily in order to read, to write and to facilitate his creativity. For another respondent, Rose, cafés were somewhere she could meet other researchers involved in the large external research grants she managed. She saw cafés as providing environments where networking and team building could take place, and she could provide hospitality. A third respondent, Graeme, mainly used cafés to meet with post-graduate students. Mainly, Graeme chose cafés because of their locality, and he enjoyed the informality that cafés enabled in his relationships with students. He felt students were more confident and articulate when meeting on the 'neutral' ground of the café. Another common academic use of cafés was as a place to conduct interviews and collect research information. Cafés provide the neutral and hospitable territory conducive to interviewing, as long as noise and privacy issues could be managed appropriately.

After collecting these initial interviews, we broadened our sample by interviewing a range of people who we found working in cafés. We incorporated four separate interviews with café owners to provide context for their views on customers who worked in their businesses, and gained their permission to approach people working in cafés and request an interview. Interviews were based on a semi-structured interview schedule, derived from literature, observation and preliminary interviews, and was aimed at eliciting peoples' perceptions of how and why they use cafés.

Overall, we interviewed twenty four people, seven of these in two focus groups (the groups being work groups who regularly met together in cafés). The respondents were all from the wider Auckland region, mainly on the North Shore and in the Rodney District. Several of the interviewees had more than one occupation and they came from a variety of professional and managerial occupations. All interviews were conducted in a café environment, over a cup of coffee, which the interviewer purchased for the interviewee.

The semi-structured interview consisted of a series of mainly open-ended questions aimed at finding out how and why interviewees use cafés for work. From these interviews we then constructed scenarios explaining how and why each subject worked in cafés. We then read and reread each scenario and identified key concepts and themes. We then generated a list of ten reasons how and why people use cafés, based on our analysis of the scenarios, and the literature.

How and why people work in cafés

Our thematic analysis derived ten major themes. From this list of themes we generated an acronym FLAT WHITES to explain why people use cafés for work. These letters stand for F(Formality/Informality), L(Leisure), A(Aesthetic), T(Time), W(Work-station), H(Hospitality), I(Innovate), T(Transaction), E(Escape), S(Social). Other synonyms for meanings ascribed under these ten headings are given below in brackets:

1. Formality/informality (power, hierarchy, control)
2. Leisure (treat, reward, pleasure, non-work time, respite)
3. Aesthetic (marketing, branding, self-identity, status)
4. Transactions (relationship, networking, affiliation, horizontal communication)
5. Work stations (place of work, convenience, temporary work place, technology, table size, table distance, chair comfort)
6. Hospitality (food and drink, inside/outside boundaries, welcome, belonging, rituals around food)
7. Innovate (creativity, idea work, entrepreneurialism, inspiration, synthesis)
8. Time (flexibility, time compression, work intensification, personal time management)
9. Escape (from surveillance, from interruptions, sanctuary, reflection, alone-ness)
10. Social (togetherness, sociality, buzz; social opportunity; serendipitous encounters,)

Each theme is now briefly discussed.

Formality/Informality

Cafés are characterised by 'democratised space', where customers tend to be treated the same no matter their social status. Consequently, in cafés there appears to be a relaxation of the normal formal rules of hierarchy, control and power in organisations. However, hierarchy is by no means abandoned, and theorising how cafés are used for work purposes needs to appreciate the ongoing influence of management and

organisation in these settings. As several seminal work studies have shown, self-surveillance is the new norm, and subjectivities need to be understood in relation to power (Du Gay, 1996; Knights & Willmott, 1989; Sewell & Wilkinson, 1992). Cafés are used instrumentally in a variety of ways to enable certain tasks to be conducted more fluidly and efficiently (e.g. interviews) with subordinates and clients more 'comfortable and relaxed'. Cafés also enable the relaxation of hierarchy necessary for team-building and other 'culture building' activities. In this sense then, cafés are used to mobilise forms of management discourse. However, cafés do provide a place in which rules are relaxed, and a different kind of relationship can be forged in the more ambiguous private/ public/ work space. The informality enabled by a café can also be mobilised in 'projects of the self' (Du Gay, 1996) enabling the building of personal social capital.

Leisure

Along with other researchers that have noted the complex ways that people are managing the interface between work and leisure, or work and non-work, our study shows that cafés are a place where workers combine work and non-work activities for a number of purposes. These primarily involve integrating pleasurable social activities with the less-pleasurable activities of work, or at least with accentuating work's pleasant social aspects. Café meetings can occur to enable time-efficiencies (meet for a coffee to catch up and talk work with colleagues that are also friends), for pleasure (a 'treat'), or as a reward for task completion. Cafés are also simply used as a place of respite for mobile workers who need somewhere to grab something to eat, freshen up, and use the bathroom facilities (see Laurier, 2002 for further examples of this).

Aesthetic

Throughout the social sciences, there has been an ongoing interest in the ways that people manage their self and professional identities through managing aesthetic factors, from Goffman (1959) to the 'aesthetic labour' conducted by hospitality workers (Nickson, Warhurst, & Dutton, 2005; Nickson, Warhurst, & Watt, 2000), through to the self-branding and marketing strategies of workers (Lair, Sullivan, & Cheney, 2005). Workers use cafés to symbolically represent and communicate aspects of themselves that they wish to project to others. Choice of café was conducted very carefully to selectively show aspects of personas, and respondents were articulate about why they chose cafés based on a host of aesthetic factors including style, age profile of the area or café, type of service and so on. Café aesthetic factors were selected to match self-concepts such as status, design preferences, creativity, tolerance for service, and so on. These practices of aestheticisation in relation to place are still poorly understood, although Adkins and Lury (1999) have demonstrated that practices of aestheticisation need to be understood within the contexts of the regimes in which they are articulated.

Transactions

The term transactions relates to workers using cafés as places to meet others in order to conduct business transactions, involving relationship building, networking, and organisational building (an organisation being two or more people engaged in purposeful activity (as defined in Cheney, 1991). In general, we see these

transactional activities as being characterised by horizontal communication aimed at increasing opportunity, and primarily designed to accrue social capital and opportunities to the individual and their economic interests. These activities are common because in contemporary life, organisations have become less loyal to workers, individuals are expected to be self-sufficient and self-directed, and work has become more casualised (Pink, 2001). Consequently, workers are increasingly acting as entrepreneurs-of-the self (Kirchoff, 1994). Following Gartner (1989), and agreeing that an entrepreneur is anyone who creates an organisation, cafés are important sites for organisations to 'happen' and entrepreneurial activity to take place.

Work-stations

Cafés are often referred to, along with other places between home and work, as 'third places' (Liberty, 1998; Oldenburg, 1989). Certainly, people use cafés as work-stations for convenience reasons (close to work, a place to use the facilities) and they choose cafés according to the type of task they wish to carry out, and convenience factors around where that work is located. Although Felstead et al (2005a) found that mobile workers in the United Kingdom did not use cafés a great deal (because workers could not claim the functional space), we found that individuals do create and maintain a functional space to conduct work. As Laurier has shown, even something as mundane as table arrangement has certain rules around them that enable functional use (Laurier et al., 2001). Although the use of mobile technology was not strong in our study (cafés were primarily sites of embodied communication), café work-stations were also used for digital communication. Cell phone use is ubiquitous in cafés, and laptops are regularly used for such tasks as sales presentations, finding information, and even keeping children amused with a DVD so parent/s can work.

Hospitality

Hospitality is crucial to why people use cafés for work purposes. Food and drink have a significant but under-understood role to play in organisational life. Food and drink are central to all aspects of culture, and in organisational hospitality rituals of welcoming and belonging. Our study shows organisational agents performing hospitality work for organisations in their appropriation and use of cafés. In various ways, strangers and 'others' are welcomed into the inside of the organisation through the sharing of food and drink, even though these rituals often do not take place anywhere near the physical premises of a business. Our research suggests that these boundaries of outside and inside are marked thoughtfully and carefully by organisational agents. By engaging in this important ritual outside the organisation, in cafés, the good-will such practices accumulate possibly resides more in the individual agent, as does the relationships enabled through the hospitality rituals. Regarding the cost of hospitality, many of our informants were paying for their use of cafés for work purposes. For the self-employed, this could be claimed as a business expense, and it was sometimes claimable as legitimate business expenses by professional and managerial workers. Overall, however, it appeared that the cost of organisational hospitality was being shouldered by individual workers. We could find no research specifically on the cost of organisational hospitality to workers.

Innovate

The ways that cafés enable innovation and creativity are one of the most intriguing themes to emerge from our study. Although not all respondents specifically identified creativity as a factor for why they frequented cafés, several did, and our observations and reading confirm that cafés provide an environment where innovation 'happens'. Why this should be the case is a question for further investigation, but various explanations suggested include the soothing quality of the babble of voices in a café that 'quiet' the mind, to the historical-social contexts of cafés' nexus as arenas for political and social discourse (as discussed in Haine, 1996; Laurier & Philo, 2006a). Cafés seem to be an important site for 'idea work' to be done. This 'idea work' is a situated practice; the café as a place seems to be essential in the production of synthesis and presumably this is because of the social interactions which are a primary condition for creative process (Hospers, 2003). The 'napkin note' as a record of ideas, epitomises the how and where of creative conversations and ideas.

Time

People use cafés to manage their time more effectively, and more pleasantly. Workers often feel that they can "get more done" in a café away from the distractions of work. Cafés offer an alternative workplace where, although social aspects are clearly evident, people seem to be able to focus, or at least feel that they achieve more in the time available. As managed timing has been a key aspect of control in the workplace, self-management of time is related to a sense of escape from the workplace also. The ways that employees manage their individual time and place orientations are crucial to the way people use cafés. This theme is probably the most central aspect of our investigation, and prompts the need to explore this aspect of the use of cafés, and underline the need for power relations to be integrated into any tendency to overstate the appropriation of space for personal reasons when action is circumscribed by economic and material conditions. So consequently Pred's (1984) paper is useful because it may enable an incorporation of structuration into conceptualisation of fluid work-places that may be appropriated and 'consumed' by workers.

Escape

In a related theme to 'time' we propose that cafés are also places of 'escape'. This escape generally is from traditional workplaces (or home) to the café as a haven of some sort. People escape from constant interruptions from others and the demands of the computer, especially emails and the attendant administrative demands that emanate from it. But it is important not just to see the café as a place of escape in a negative sense of being from these demands to a non-work sphere. The café was seen as place to 'remove oneself too', more of a secluded space, almost like a 'sacred' space for thoughtful reflection, to re-energise, to re-find one's equilibrium. The other escape is from organisational surveillance, although as with the group of teachers in scenario three above, self-surveillance practices remain strong even when the agent/s are not visible.

Social

A social experience in a café is highly variable, but there are at least three types of social interaction we wish to briefly mention here. First, there is the experience of working alone in a café, which is still social. This experience has been articulated by Shapira and Navon (1991) who discuss how a café is both a public and private space and how this enables the experience of being alone, but together with others. Second, there is the experience of working in groups. Creating and maintaining friendship networks that extend beyond one's production-derived relationship, is an important aspect of meeting in cafés. Finally, there is the often unrecognised issue of serendipity, the chance encounter, and the opportunity of the café for the expression of tolerance, which along with diversity is identified by Jacobs as a precondition of creative economies. Frequenting a café, like other 'third place' activities, provides opportunity. Outside of the 'safe' and cocooned haven of the home, work, or even the car, is the opportunity for encountering 'others' in a variety of ways. Conversations with strangers (as discussed in Laurier & Philo, 2006b) can start up, and friendships, acquaintances and connections can be made outside of one's usual work networks. Serendipitous encounters are central to social and organisational functioning, and yet very little research is written about them (one exception that is close to what we mean here is Dixon's (1997) account of hallway conversations, although these are still within organisational walls.

Discussion and Conclusions

From our research, a picture of the Auckland café scene is emerging which echoes the significance accorded cafés in other parts of the world such as Scotland (Scott, 2006), Israel (Shapira & Navon, 1991), and the United States (Rosenbaum, Ward, Walker, & Ostrom, 2007). Cafés have become a vital part of public city life in Auckland, and no doubt in other cities and towns in New Zealand, although the growth of cafés has been regionally specific, showing patterns of exclusion and inclusion depending on local socio-economic and other circumstances. As well as a place to meet friends, family and colleagues, cafés provide a 'third place' (Liberty, 1998) between work and home that are marked by their ambiguity (being neither private nor public space), and providing opportunities for encounters with people who are neither family and friends nor colleagues from work. Café location is important to the ways that many people navigate cities, and clearly cafés have a crucial role for workers who are both mobile and more office or home based, as places for resting and working.

In our discussion of themes we have drawn on previous literature and provided an overview of our research on how and why people work in cafés. What this discussion shows is that 'third places' such as cafés, coffee-houses and other similar hospitality establishments have a role to play in organisational and entrepreneurial activity that is not well-recognised. In order to understand the use of cafés, we need to better understand how and why people create a situated work 'place', and how the everyday practices conducted there-in contribute to economic life and organisational functioning. We have now presented this research at several conferences and gained valuable peer review. We will pursue this research by focusing on one particular profession, academics, a 'creative class' (Jacobs, 1969), in order to come to a better understanding of the relationships between place, time and work in one specific

occupation. We will also develop a stronger focus on the use of technology to discuss the integration of 'virtual' experiences into work (Cascio, 2000), although we remain centrally interested in embodied social experience and material practices.

References

Adkins, L., & Lury, C. (1999). The Labour of Identity: Performing Identities, Performing Economies. *Economy and Society.* 28(4): 598 – 614.

Austin, P., & Whitehead, C. (1998). Auckland: Cappuccino city? *Urban Policy and Research.* 16(3): 233 – 240.

Cascio, W. (2000). Managing the Virtual Workplace. *Academy of Management Journal.* 14(3): 81 – 90.

Cheney, G. (1991). *Rhetoric in an Organizational Society: Managing Multiple Identities*. Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina.

Crang, M. (1994). It's Showtime! On the Workplace Geographies of Display in a Restaurant in South East England. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*. 12: 675 – 704

Dixon, N. (1997). The Hallways of Learning. *Organizational Dynamics*. 25(4): 23 – 34

Du Gay, P. (1996). *Consumption and identity at Work*. London: Sage.

Felstead, A., Jewson, N., & Walters, S. (2005a). *Changing Places of Work*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Felstead, A., Jewson, N., & Walters, S. (2005b). The Shifting Locations of Work: New Statistical Evidence on the Spaces and Place of Employment. *Work, Employment and Society*. 19(2): 415 – 431

Florida, R. (2004). *Cities and the Creative Class*. New York: Routledge.

Gartner, W.B. (1989). 'Who is an Entrepreneur?' is the Wrong Question. *American Journal of Small Business*. 12(4): 11 – 31

Goffman, E. (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. London: Penguin.

Haine, S. W. (1996). *The World of the Paris Café : Sociability Among the French Working Class, 1789-1914*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Hospers, G-J. (2003). Creative Cities: Breeding Places in the Knowledge Economy. *Knowledge, Technology and Policy*. 16(3): 143 – 162

Hospers, G-J., & van Dalm, R. (2005). How to Create a Creative City? The Viewpoints of Richard Florida and Jane Jacobs. *Foresight*. 7(4): 8 – 12

Jacobs, J. (1969). *The Economy of Cities*. New York: Random House.

Kirchoff, B. A. (1994). *Entrepreneurship and Dynamic Capitalism*. Westpost: Praego.

Knights, D., & Willmott, H. (1989). Power and Subjectivity at Work: From Degradation to Subjugation in Social Relations. *Sociology*. 23(4): 535 – 558

Lair, D.J., Sullivan, K., & Cheny, G. (2005). Marketization and the Recasting of the Professional Self : The Rhetoric and Ethics of Personal Branding. *Management Community Quarterly.* 18(3): 307 – 343

Latham, A. (2000). Urban Renewal, Heritage Planning and the Remaking of an Inner-City Suburb: A Case Study of Heritage Planning in Auckland, New Zealand. *Planning, Practice and Research.* 15(4): 285 – 298

Latham, A. (2003). Urbanity, Lifestyle and Making Sense of the New Zealand Cultural Economy: Notes form Auckland, New Zealand. *Urban Studies.* 40(0); 1699 0 1724

Laurier, E. (2002). The Region as a Socio-Technical Accomplishment of Mobile Workers. In B. Brown, N. Green, and R. Harper (eds). *Wireless World, Social Interaction Aspect of the Mobile Age.* (pp. 46 – 60). London: Springer Verglag.

Laurier, E. (2008). How Breakfast Happens in a Café. *Time and Society.* 17(1): 119 – 134

Laurier, E. & Philco, C. (2006a). A Parcel of Muddling Muckworks: Revisiting Habermas and the English Coffee-Houses. *Social and Cultural Geography.* 8(2): 259 – 281

Laurier, E., & Philco, C. (2006b). Possible Geographies: A Passing Encounter in a Café. *Area.* 38(4): 353 – 363

Laurier, R., Whyte, A., & Buckner, K. (2001). An Ethnography of a Neighbourhood Café: Informality, Table Arrangements and Background Noise. *Journal of Mundane Behavior.* 2(2): 195 – 232

Liberty, K. J. (1998). *Esspresso-ing Consumption: A social Geography of Central Auckland's Coffee and Café Culture.* Unpublished PhD, University of Auckland, Auckland.

Nickson, D., Warhurst, C., & Dutton, E. (2005). The Importance of Attitude and Appearance in the Service Encounter in Retail and Hospitality. *Managing Service Quality.* 15(2): 195 – 208

Nickson, D., Warhurts, C. and Watt, A. (2000). Learning to Present Yourself: 'Aesthetic Labour' and the Glasgow Example. *Hospitality Review.* 2(2): 38 – 42

Oldenburg, R. (1989). *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centres, Beauty Palor, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts and How they get you through the Day.* Paragon House.

Pink, D. H. (2001). *Free Agent Nation*. New York: Warner Books Inc.

Pred, A. (1984). Place as Historically Contingent Process: Structuration and the Time-Geography of Becoming Places. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers.* 74(2): 279 – 297

Rosenbaum, M.S., Ward, J., Walker, B.A. & Ostrom, A.L. (2007). A Cup of Coffee with a Dash of Love: An Investigation of Commercial Social Support and Third-Place Attachment. *Journal of Services Research.* 10(1): 43 – 59

Scott, B. (2006). Scottish Café Society: Contemporary Consumption Issues and Lifestyle Identities. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management.* 18(1): 60 – 68

Sewell, G., & Wilkinson, B. (1992). 'Someone to Watch Over Me': Surveillance, Discipline and the Just-in-Time Labour Process. *Sociology.* 26(2): 271 – 289

Shapira, R. & Navon, D. (1991). Alone Together: Public and Private Dimension of a Tel-Aviv Café. *Qualitative Sociology*. 14(2): 107 – 125

Wakedford, N. (1999). Gender and Landscapes of Computing. In M. Crang, P. Crang & J. May. (eds). *Virtual Geographies: Bodies, Spaces and their Relations*. (pp. 178 – 201). London: Routledge.

Whyte, W.F. (1949). The Social Structure of the Restaurant. *American Journal of Sociology*. 54(2): 302 – 310