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Observing places: using space and material culture in qualitative research

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ABSTRACT A significant amount of qualitative research takes place in the field. Yet the notion of analysing the place and material objects that contribute to the interactions and *in situ* behaviour of the participants is often overlooked. This article shows how an analysis of space and material culture contributes to an understanding of social and structural relationships in qualitative research. We use examples from a study of a technology company to demonstrate how an analysis of space and material culture added insights into power, identity and status. We conclude that the tacit insights derived from space and material culture analysis, when synthesized with analysis of other data enable researchers to gain new perspectives on the social world.

KEYWORDS: *identity, material culture, organizations, power, space*

Introduction

'We know more than we can tell.' (Michael Polanyi, 1967: 4)

Qualitative research involves investigation beyond the superficial. Researchers routinely probe beyond the explicit and the known to try to understand the worlds of research participants of which the participants themselves may be unconscious. Part of this exploration involves the context surrounding the areas of research. The importance of situating theory, and locating theory within a context is frequently stressed. In contrast, the physical layout, or spatial arrangement, and the material objects within that environment, and the integration of these two corporeal constructs, that sense of 'place' that forms the context in which research is conducted, is largely unacknowledged as a source of qualitative research data, except for highly specialized (Atkinson, 2005) and some ethnomethodological studies (for example, Heath and Hindmarsh, 2002). Generally speaking, space is seen simply as a location 'where people do things' (Pellow, 2001; Rodman, 1992: 640)

In terms of research conducted in contemporary settings, the analysis of the physical environment adds richness and depth to the data collected. Textual representations can be overly representative of the views of the privileged. Hodder (2000: 705) argues that the use of space and material culture analysis can enable the exploration of 'multiple voices', particularly those that are less privileged. Material culture analyses have enabled the study of past native Americans (Peers, 2003), the mentally ill (Parrot, 2005) and other groups that have had little voice in the written historical record.

In this article we explore theories relating to space and material culture, and give examples relating to the analysis of space and material culture. Examples from previous studies will be presented and the formulation of concepts illustrated. Issues relating to the trustworthiness of the methods will also be discussed. Finally, we argue that space and material culture analysis needs to have a higher prominence in qualitative research studies as a valuable and viable method of qualitative research.

The next section explores theoretical constructs that provide insights into space and material culture analysis.

Theoretical foundations of material culture and space

Material culture and space are terms that are seldom seen in qualitative research articles. The definitions of these concepts, by their nature, show a need to determine a scope, a defined conceptual framework, from which higher order conceptualizations relating to cultural and societal constructs can be drawn.

Material culture refers to the corporeal, tangible object constructed by humans. Ferguson (1977: 5–8) describes material culture as 'all of the things people leave behind All of the things people make from the physical world – farm tools, ceramics, houses, furniture, toys, buttons, roads and cities'. Material culture refers to objects that are used, lived in, displayed and experienced. Human beings interact with material culture as a normal part of their daily lives. Because of this interaction, material culture and human living is strongly influenced by each other, and thus studying material culture gives us important clues about the way humans live and have lived in the past.

Schlereth (1982) outlines the importance of the study of material culture, arguing that through material culture we can learn about the 'belief systems – the values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions – of a particular community or society, usually across time'.

'Space' includes the interior and exterior spatial arrangements that make up our world. 'Space' refers to the quantities, qualities and geometric relationships, such as distance and juxtaposition (Gieryn, 2000: 465). Massey (1994) and other cultural geographers have amply demonstrated that space is imbued with cultural and political implications. Space encompasses proximity and distance, which can have dramatic effects on communication and cultural understanding or lack of it (Doz et al., 2001; O'Toole, 2003).

A place is the nexus of things and space within a given boundary, and has imputed values and interpretations (Gagliardi, 1990; Gieryn, 2000; Van Maanen and Barley, 1985). Van Maanen and Barley (1985) maintained that a group's physical territory and material world are a primary catalyst for the group's cultural formation. Proshansky et al. (1995) saw a group's 'place-identity' as a merging of 'place-identities' of the individuals, who developed these understandings through their experiences. Thus the individual's place-identity meets the place-identities of others, which may converge into a shared place-identity as the group develops shared sensemaking and perspectives about their immediate world (Weick, 1995). In this article, a place has physicality and is bounded by the perceptions of the observer. Thus, according to Gieryn (2000: 464):

a place could be your favourite armchair, a room, building, neighbourhood, district, village, city, county, metropolitan area, region (Entrikin 1989; 1991), state, province, nation, continent, planet – or forest glade, the seaside, mountaintop.

Gaffin (1996) summarizes this notion of the interaction between the physical environment and people as '[p]eople make spaces into places' (p. 76).

In this article, 'objects' refer to the corporeal elements of place and material culture. An object could be a building, the wall of a building, the picture on a wall or a vase on a table – as well as the table.

People may erect buildings and monuments that reinforce cultural messages, which are perceived and interpreted, albeit often implicitly, by others (Assmann, 1995); on the other hand, they may tear the buildings down and build a mall (Brand, 1994). Material objects and places are ostensibly constructed and possessed for an operational purpose, but also create and communicate meaning.

SPACE AND MATERIAL CULTURE – PURPOSE,

OPERATION AND POWER

Objects, whether tools used by individuals or partitions that separate workers, are constructed for a purpose. The use of an object by the user may be that determined by the maker of the object or may be something entirely different. The acquisition may be made by an individual or a group. The way the user(s) interact with objects will be affected by the nature of the object. Gibson's (1979) theory of physical affordance sheds light on how the physical environment can shape human behaviour, and how human behaviour can change the physical environment. An affordance is what is offered to someone, and what it provides or furnishes, either for good or for ill. A chair affords seating or a storage area, for example. As Gibson pointed out, human beings alter the environment and thus change the affordances offered. Gibson posits that 'what we see when we look at objects are their affordance' (1979: 134). According to Gaver (1996: 114) '[a]ffordances are primarily facts about action and interaction, not perception'. Physical layout and artefacts can evolve or

change according to what is and what needs to be afforded (Gibson, 1979). If an organization is short of accommodation for its members, it will build or otherwise acquire more space. If an individual needs and lacks a pencil, a lipstick or stick of charcoal may be used instead. Space and material culture, however, have a more significant place in human society than the operational. Glassie (1991: 256) illustrates how there is more to objects than simply their ostensible purpose and use.

Seeing a composition of wood and steel and naming it an axe, we draw it into our concept of axeness; we make it imaginatively into a thing for hewing of wood and cease pondering it. A tool, we say. But for the man who forged and helved it, the axe was something different, the realization of his tradition and skill, and for the man who used it, the axe may have been a token of status, not to be lowered into wood and mere usefulness.

Objects within or at a place have meanings based on culture, function and power (see, for example, Kingery, 1993; Lawrence, 1998; O'Toole, 2004). The role of objects has been positioned as 'a framework in which action takes place' while in the practice of ethnomethodology, context, including objects, is treated as the 'product of participants' actions and activities' (Heath and Hindmarsh, 2002: 111). In this article, it is suggested that space and material objects are both a framework for situated action and the result of such situated action. Giddens, in his theory of structuration, outlined how social structures and individuals served to influence each other; individuals may reproduce social structures or they may choose to transform them (Giddens, 1984; Turner, 1986).

Social structures relating to power, status and authority are reflected in the places that we live in. Foucault cited Jeremy Bentham's architectural invention of the panopticon as a reflection of power and authority in organizations, where the powerless could be seen but could not see the powerful in return (Foucault, 1977; McKinlay and Starkey, 1998). Technological objects are also manifestations of culture, both of the organization and of the broader social system. Mumford (cited in Kingery, 1993: 215) suggested that 'the machine cannot be divorced from its larger social pattern; for it is this pattern that gives it meaning and purpose'. In a factory, for example, there is a system of discipline, of rules, of politics in the traditional sense. The forms of machines help enforce these rules: they suggest the easiest possibilities to those who use them. They mediate between the people who make the rules and the people who have to follow them. The social structures that influence and are influenced by the material culture and space are in juxtaposition to the human need to protect personal space and maintain identity.

The power of individual will determine their capacity to protect their personal space from intrusion by others. Schwartz (1968, cited in Altman, 1975) noted that while people with high status often have the right to intrude on others of lower status, the reverse is usually not the case. According to Altman (1975: 37), personal space is 'the individual boundary surrounding the self;

intrusion into this space creates tension or discomfort'. Territorial behaviour is defined by Altman as 'a self/other boundary-regulation mechanism that involves personalization of or marking of a place or object and communication that it is "owned" by a person or group.... Defense [sic] responses may sometimes occur when territorial boundaries are violated.' The markers used to define an area or object may be fences, signs, or other objects.

Altman noted how personal space (or the lack of it) is associated with wealth, status and power. Altman (1975: 41) argued that:

children or low-status persons are entitled to few privacy mechanisms than a higher-status person. Thus the higher the person's rank in an organization, the more private his or her office and the more barriers (passageways, secretaries) between the person and others.

It should be noted here that although the distance inherent in personal space may change from culture to culture, Altman maintained that every culture has privacy mechanisms. Each culture, however, places a different emphasis on psychological mechanisms, physical mechanisms, and behavioural mechanisms. Altman described a dialectic relationship for the individual, a dialectic occurring in terms of the need for human contact, which requires access, and the desire for privacy. With reference to the individual and their place in social structures such as workplaces, this desire for privacy and personal space is in conflict with the needs and requirements of collective living. The more power that an individual has, however, the greater their ability to meet their own needs for privacy and personal space.

Naturally, a researcher would need to gain an understanding of the specific context before drawing conclusions based on physical evidence. Further discussion regarding power and identity will form part of the succeeding examples from a research site.

Conceptualizing analysis in a research site

In order to use the physical as data in a research study, it becomes necessary to problematize the physical. In the research site described in the next section, photographs were taken, floor plans sketched,¹ and descriptions of the physical world were captured to add richness to the study. Glaser (1978) has advised in his explanations of Grounded Theory Method to continually ask the question 'what is going on with this data?'; taking this advice leads the researcher into asking questions concerning why people congregate in one area and leave another abandoned, why entries are placed where they are, how objects are used, why objects are displayed or not displayed and so on.

Studies that deal with the physical world can range from studies of one object (for example, Spector, 1993) or a class of objects (for example, Dupont, 1991); or, as shown in this article, to objects within a space, culture, structure and practice. The former will usually involve in-depth investigation of manufacture

and materials, as well as function, usage and place in a social and historical order. The latter views objects from a perspective of data assemblage, where other data sources are investigated that can give insights into a broader picture of life and human activity. In this type of the analysis, the objects are data that resolve a broader question. In the former, on the other hand, the object itself is the question.

In an attempt to outline a theory of material culture, Hodder (2000) isolated two approaches by which material culture can be interpreted. These approaches were based on two areas of material meaning. The first category of material culture is that which is 'designed specifically to be communicative and representation' (p. 706). For this type of material culture, Hodder gave an example of written texts, but pointed out that this category also extended to such symbols as badges and uniforms of certain professions; and signals, such as traffic lights.

The second category, which is more relevant to this article and on which this study was anchored, is the type of material culture that is 'embedded in a set of practices and whose meanings can only be deciphered through practice and evocation – through networking, interconnection, and mutual implication of materials and non-materials' (Hodder, 2000: 708). This category of material culture represents social and symbolic meaning that is tacit in nature and is embedded in the culture and practices of the group. The interpretation of this type of material culture should therefore be done within the context of the culture in which it is practiced.

According to Hodder (2000: 712) 'the interpretation is based on the simultaneous evaluation of similarities and differences, context and theory'. For the researcher, the perspectives of the participants that are part of the research site are sources of significant insights. These insights, however, need to be viewed cautiously, as sometimes the actions and knowledge related to the objects may be tacit. Zuboff (1988: 58–60), in her account of workers in the older pulp and paper mills of Piney Wood and Tiger Creek, gave this account:

There are operators who can operate the paper machine with tremendous efficiency, but they cannot describe to you how they do it. They have built-in action and senses that they are not aware of. One operation required pulling two levers simultaneously, and they are not conscious of the fact that they were pulling two levers. They said that they were pulling one.

This account shows the interaction between the operators and the machines. Depending on the nature of the study being undertaken, this lack of consciousness means that to simply interview participants in a research setting may result in flawed data, and points to the need to analyse the material culture and the interaction among the material culture and the involved participants.

In ethnomethodological studies, an in-depth understanding of the activities, tools, roles and functions used by the participants in the research setting enable researchers to investigate the nature and practice of everyday activity

(Heath and Hindmarsh, 2002; ten Have, 2004). In Heath and Hindmarsh's study of a medical consultation, video recordings in conjunction with other field methods are used to capture the interaction of the participants with each other and with physical objects to discern resources and strategies used by the participants as part of the interaction. In this study, in contrast, space and objects are examined to investigate the relationships between participants and the organization in terms of power, control and identity.

THE RESEARCH SITE

Examples of space and material culture analysis are now presented that were undertaken when one of the authors (Paddy O'Toole) conducted research in a technology company, thus the account of the research site uses the first person singular in terms of researcher action.

This company commenced in 1985 and had operations in Australia, Ireland and the USA. This company had been lauded by government and won awards for its achievements from peak business councils. I chose this organization as a case study for an investigation concerning the structure of knowledge in innovative organizations. During the data collection period of 10 months, participant observation and interviews were conducted, documents scrutinized and the floor plans and physical layouts were recorded. The data was analysed using Grounded Theory Method techniques, with codes emerging through a comparison of event with event, operation with operation and the research site with the literature.

The organization is located in a quiet, semi-industrial suburb in Adelaide, Australia. The entrance, through a slightly twisted security gate, leads to the L-shaped main building, which partially surrounds a car park. This building appears to be comprised of predominantly warehouse facilities: the warehouse door, which is often obscured by loading and unloading trucks, dominated the external frontage of the main building. The short arm of the L was comprised of two floors, housing the Accounts and Management departments on the top floor, and the Research and Development (R&D) department on the ground floor. Other buildings are within the grounds and are periodically used for product testing and as workshops. The main building has a neat, if uninspired corporate garden in front and tall eucalypt trees can be seen behind. The grounds are surrounded by a chainlink fence.

The company had experienced dramatic growth in the preceding three years, and approximately 70 per cent of the approximately 110 staff had been employed during this period. This accounted for the somewhat jury-rigged feeling of the warehouse side of the main building. A mezzanine had been built on one side of the warehouse to accommodate the marketing people and the engineers, and I could feel the floor shake when walking over it. The warehouse itself, beside crates of components, housed a production section. The people employed in production endured very cold winter temperatures and torturing heat in summer, due to the improvised facilities. Despite the dramatic growth in

employee numbers, the organization had retained something of a 'family' feel that sometimes occurs in small organizations. The conversation style was informal, and the most humble workers called the Managing Director by his first name. Staff congregated at lunchtime, and social gatherings were common.

During the data collection phase of the research study, several weeks were spent with each department of the organization. These departments were organized on functional lines, for example, the Accounting Department and the R&D Department. At a broad level, the predominant occupational subculture seemed to be reflected in the material culture of the department. Walking into the Accounting Department was to walk into a haven of neatness and order. Most of the accounting staff sat in an open plan space, with shoulder-height carrels protruding from one wall, desks positioned in tidy parallels in the centre of the floor, and glass-faced offices for the Accounting Manager and other managers lining the other wall. The Accounting Department worked with paper, and tidy piles of paper would be placed on desks, with the edge of the piles parallel to the edge of the desk. Sometimes Accounting staff would have to reconcile figures, and the printouts would be turned so that the folds stayed true to the original creases. Lever arch files were tidily lined up on bookshelves, and pens and pencils were kept either in the drawers or in a small cup or other receptacle. The Accounting Department was comprised mainly of young to middle-aged women who had learnt that to keep the printouts, balance sheets and revenue statements in any sort of order, neatness and system had to prevail.

The R&D Department, on the other hand, was chaotic, with equipment, components and people in various states and in various positions. The material culture reflected the *work habits and character* of the occupational group represented. The R&D Department, however, had a mixed population that had been hired for the ability to create and innovate, often in short time frames, and their workplace reflected this. The quotation below, created for a research manuscript, was based on my first experience of the environment of this R&D Department. The names, of course, have been changed, and the 'new recruit' takes the place of the researcher. Otherwise this is an accurate representation.

The new recruit knocks on the door as instructed. It opens to a face she has seen in the tearoom. The new recruit asks the whereabouts of Thommo's desk. 'Walk straight down this aisle and then turn left. Don't take a shortcut through that work area. Doug is working on something there that's a bit sensitive'. 'Yeah, like the Hiroshima bomb was sensitive!' interjects a passerby. The new recruit edges past a contraption made of balsa wood that takes up most of the aisle space. A leg swings out from under the contraption missing her narrowly. 'Sorry!' The body belonging to the leg crawls out. The new recruit picks up a battery that had rolled away from two women sitting on the floor and returns it. They smile and thank her and go on counting. Snatches of conversations about the Osmonds, how water arrived on Earth, the death of Princess Di and the production date of the new release fill the air. A man strides by alternatively clutching his head and swinging his arms. She has fallen down the rabbit hole and arrived in R&D. (O'Toole, 2004: 28)

As indicated by the quotation above, the space of the R&D department tended to be crowded, untidy and bestrewn with objects and components that the R&D people happened to be working with. It is to be expected, perhaps, that the composition of the material culture would change according to the operational nature of the department in the organization. It is not surprising that paper should be prominent in an accounting department and printed circuit boards and other components prominent in a R&D department in a technology company. It can be seen, however, that not only the composition, but the disposition, of the material objects were affected by the culture of the operational department. In the Accounting Department, objects were disposed in a neat and orderly way, but in the R&D Department, the objects were dispersed chaotically.

The vignettes below give more specific examples of how both space and material culture can contribute to qualitative data. It should be noted that these data sources are not analysed in isolation. Instead they are analysed in conjunction with interviews and participant observation. It is undeniable, however, that the interrogation of material culture and space in this research study brings to light issues of power, identity and status that may well have been otherwise unexplored.

The first vignette gives an example of how blocking off a door indicated changes in the company's political structure.

The blocked door One of the departments observed was involved in the repair of faulty units. If a customer bought a product that was later seen to be defective, the customer would return the unit for repair under warranty. The work of this department employed two men. Karl was an extrovert who cared about his customers. Although he was employed to fix faulty products, much of his time was taken up soothing and reassuring frustrated customers via the telephone. The other man, Adrian, was happy to let Karl placate customers while he pried casings from products and tinkered with (to my untutored eye) the tangle of wires, nodes and mass that make up electronics.

The physical location of the department was a room on the ground floor of the building approximately 3 m wide by 4 m long. Walking into the room for the first time, I was struck by the lack of light, which was apparently compensated for by the lamps on each of the two draughting tables. The men perched on draughting stools while they pored over the units, trying to ascertain the cause of the machine's recalcitrance. The room, to the untutored eye, appeared a jumble of components, tools and products. The units under repair were hung on the walls of the carrels, provided there was room. If not, they were placed against available walls. Coils and cords were festooned around the desks and the shelves.

The repair area itself consisted of two desks and a series of shelves that stored the components needed to repair the units. These shelves were placed

against the wall, and were positioned by insertion into slotted supports that had been screwed to the walls. After spending a few days in the repair unit with the men, I noticed that, behind the shelving that shared a wall with the warehouse, was a door. Entry was prevented, however, by the shelving. When I asked Karl why the door was blocked off, he answered that the R&D people had caused too many problems by entering that door and helping themselves to components.

Reynolds (1987: 157) used the term *material system* to denote the 'complex interacting unity of behaviour, idea and objects that is polarized around each individual element of a material culture'. In this case, the door and shelving were parts of a material system that was both a symbol and symptomatic of a change in the power relations within the organization.

When the organization commenced, the technology that enabled the operation of the products was the key strength for the organization. The R&D people provided the core expertise that made the company a success. The R&D people were creative free thinkers – a group of physicists, technicians and others who invented new technologies through, it seemed to me as an observer, a playful group dialogue and disregard for rules. As the company became successful, however, the demand for the products grew. To keep up with demand, production had to become more efficient and standardized. This caused the entry to the organization of more people to work in or with the production area, and managers to oversee the supply of products to markets around the world. They in turn influenced the company with their previous experience and expertise in production process and engineering, and introduced a discipline that the R&D people lacked. The number of people entering the company, some of them at a senior level, with similar experience and values, meant a change in the way organizational operations were conducted, and a change in the power relations of the organization. The free, *laissez faire*, inventive culture of R&D clashed with the discipline of Production. People from R&D could no longer 'forage' for the parts they needed, and the physical work place was altered to enforce these rules. Schein (1996) illustrated how different occupational groups within organizations could exert political domination over other groups. The blocked door is a physical manifestation of a change in political dominance and signals the decline of a group that the organization formerly privileged. The blocked door denied access to everyone, but the block was aimed at the people in R&D. In this research study, the blocked door acts as an indicator or signpost that warrants further enquiry. Making sense of the blocked door in terms of the organization's culture and political structure, and piecing together the data provided by interviews, conversations and observations, as well as the door, resulted in a picture of the political development of the organization.

The door, however, is an object that is sited within the working operations of the organization. Objects that are personal possessions of people working within the organization also have meaning for the researcher.

PERSONAL SPACE AND OBJECTS

Concepts regarding personal space and privacy have been outlined in a previous section. It was noted that people may place objects in their personal space to denote their territory.

In the research site, the employees of the organization had placed objects around their desks that related to previous employment, relationships both within and outside the organization, comic strips and various decorative knick-knacks. In a large number of cases, the objects held some meaning for the individual in matters such as their roles and relationships outside the workplace, former careers and unfulfilled aspirations, in other words, the personal objects acted to manifest the individual's knowledge and perception of themselves, that is, their identity. Campbell (1996) warned of validity issues where academics made assumptions about symbolic meanings without asking the people involved. This caution may be a little simplistic – as Hodder (2000) pointed out 'what people say' is often very different from 'what people do'. In the research site, it became clear that people often had only a vague or no idea why they displayed various objects. After I experienced this type of reaction on multiple occasions, I concluded that the symbolic meanings of material culture can be both complex and tacit, although it is possible through questioning and observation to arrive at conclusions that are acceptable to both researcher and respondent. The next two examples, 'the receptionist's desk' and 'the temp and the photographs', show how objects can serve not only to mark a personal space, but to connect an individual to their life outside the workplace and to maintain a treasured identity while within the workplace.

The receptionist's desk In western corporate organizations, the front entrance is often the site for the Reception Desk. The role of the receptionist ostensibly is usually to greet and direct visitors, answer the telephone and manage the switchboard, receive and register deliveries and generally act as the 'face' of the organization. The reception desk is generally between the world and the 'back office' functions of the company. The receptionist is responsible for ensuring that visitors are directed to where they are supposed to go. The receptionist is also generally expected to conform to the projected image of the company. The receptionist should blend in with the corporate furniture to present a consistent message to visitors about the values of the company. The persona of many companies is also at least partially reliant on the appearance and display provided by meeting rooms and offices of the senior and middle managers. Important visitors, at least, are directed to these more palatial settings by the receptionist, while visitors of lesser status are directed to areas of lesser status within the company.

When visitors to the technology company arrive in the car park of the building, they are directed by a sign to mount the stairs to the reception area. As the visitors mount the stairs, the reception area comes into view; carpeted in neutral colours, with a montage of pictures of the staff and the products that

draws the eye. Some comfortable chairs line one side of the area, and the visitors see the neatly dressed receptionist sitting at a desk. The impression is one of clean lines and polish. Behind the receptionist is an opaque wall of black glass. The receptionist, Jenny, is looking at them from behind the clear bench, smiling and ready to help them with their enquiries. Jenny confided to me several times that she hated her job. She wouldn't be able to stand it if it wasn't for the people with whom she worked.

Jenny's situation was a story of power, or rather, lack of power. The role of the receptionist is comparatively low-status. As the face of the company, she was constantly on view while at her desk. And the role of receptionist necessitated that Jenny stayed at her desk. When she went to lunch or the washrooms, she had to arrange for some-one to temporarily fulfil her function, depending on the length of time she would be absent. If a person covered for her, they would sit on her chair in her workspace. Others in the workplace could visit Jenny for a chat, she could not visit them. Her relief, Angela, was sheltered behind the black glass wall, which meant that Angela could see if Jenny was speaking on the telephone if another call came through. Thus Jenny had little control over her own movements and was subject to constant surveillance. A fairly obvious theoretical construct is supplied by Foucault (1977) in terms of power and visibility. Jenny could be seen by many people but could not see them in return. Jenny had little power in the company, she could not leave the reception desk, the reception desk was periodically 'invaded' by others. Jenny was essentially at the mercy of any garrulous visitor or co-worker. The other tasks that she was obliged to undertake were generally routine because her primary role was to be the face of the company and the conduit through which visitors passed.

It is interesting to note that Jenny's desk was called the 'reception' desk rather than the 'receptionist's desk', although people did refer to 'Jenny's desk'. The terminology used in the company indicated that although Jenny herself had gained an identity and recognition of her personal space, her role was one without any allocated space; only the function mattered. In contrast, within the company there were references made, for example, to the 'Engineers' desks' and the 'Production Controller's desks'. The roles had higher status and space was tacitly allocated to the role as well as to the function.

Although to the visitor, the reception desk was professional and uncluttered, walking around the desk to Jenny's space showed a different picture. Jenny displayed a great deal of bric-a-brac as well as some photographs of her dog and her partner in what seemed a cluttered and haphazard way. When I asked Jenny about the objects, she laughed and shook her head. She said that 'it had just happened that way'.

The workspace of an individual is a significant indication of their power in an organization. Physically separated offices insulate each member and give a measure of autonomy to those within them, and the size and appointments of an office serves as a powerful indication of hierarchy (Fischer, 1997; Giddens,



FIGURE 1. *The receptionist's desk*

1984; Rosen et al., 1990). The physical layout of workplaces can also affect the behaviour of organizational members (Oldham and Rotchford, 1983; Strati, 1990) and show the structure of an organization (Giddens, 1984; Rosen et al., 1990). Jenny's space was part of the open space. It confirmed the low status of the role. Jenny responded to that status by establishing an area that was overwhelmingly hers, even though that space was regularly invaded. The photographs in particular connected her to her other identity, as partner and besotted dog owner. These objects were a strategy to help her cope with disadvantages of her role, and to maintain a preferred identity while having to cope with her workplace role and can be seen as an act of resistance to control mechanisms.

The 'temp' and the photographs This second example involved photographs that were not displayed. During my time in the organization, a temporary worker was employed for a couple of weeks to replace Jenny who went on leave. Temporary workers ('temps') are employed to fill a gap. Many temporary employees come to organizations through temporary work agencies who screen and hire employees, and in turn contract these employees out to other organizations. Work places often need temps to take over for staff who are ill, on vacation, or when the work is subject to periodic and dramatic increases (Kalleberg, 2000). Temps are often employed for no more than a few months,

and sometimes for only a day or a week. Because of the nature of their employment, temps generally occupy the space that belongs to the absent workers they are replacing, and may use other people's equipment. Rodman (1992: 650) noted that '[t]he most powerless people have no place at all'. In the case of temps, their allocated place within an organization is not really their own. They are there to fulfil a function, and although their co-workers may be pleasant, it is generally understood that there is not much point in forming close relationships, as the temp may be gone tomorrow. Although many high status roles may have people who work on short contracts, or be employed by specialist temporary help agencies, the class of worker known as the 'temp' tends to fill low status roles in organizations, where skills such as typing and work processing and the ability to direct telephone calls are required. According to Kalleberg (2000), most temps have no career path and tend not to receive any training or career development, and for the temps themselves, 'having temporary work is often better than not having a job at all' (p. 350).

The temp in this case, Sarah, was engaged to take over the role of the receptionist while the receptionist was on leave. While I was chatting to Sarah, I asked her if she had any personal things that she liked to bring with her on her various jobs. She brought out of her handbag an envelope of about 10 photographs. The photographs pictured her partner, her parents and other members of her family. When asked if she had ever accidentally left them at home, she replied that she had. When I asked her how that had felt, she replied that it was 'terrible'; she couldn't get 'settled' and when she went home she immediately found the photographs and put them in her bag. Her conversation at this time was punctuated by grimaces and some shivering. It seemed clear that she did not enjoy the memory of that event.

It is suggested that in this case, the photographs represented the stability and warm relationships and her identity as a mother, sister and friend in Sarah's other life. They were the unchanging happy things in her life; they were effectively manifestations of her stable identity grasped throughout her life as a temp in changing workplaces. The photographs were thus an objectification of a life outside of working hours where Sarah was valued and respected as a significant part of a happy family unit, and helped her maintain this identity in the face of the disadvantages of being a temp. Miller (1994, cited in Parrot, 2005: 247–8) distinguished between two sets of values that may be expressed through material domains. One set of values relates to a sense of the past, stability and permanence; the other set of values to 'the retention of a sense of freedom'. The possession of the photographs by Sarah points to a wish to remain connected to the happy stability and permanence of her family. She kept, however, these photographs in her handbag. There was no folder or frames, no display on her desk, which is reminiscent of the situation in Parrot's study of psychiatric patients. Parrot found that many of the patients were reluctant to decorate their rooms. According to Parrott (2005:

250), “‘It’s not forever’” was the ‘inevitable mantra of every conversation on the transformation of individual bedrooms’. A similarity between Parrot’s respondents and Sarah is that of time. In each case, there was an issue of lack of permanency in their continued occupancy of a place. The difference between the participants in Parrott’s study and Sarah is that the participants were involuntary occupants of the psychiatric wards. Sarah, on the other hand, had voluntarily entered this workplace, and had embarked on life as a temp worker for her own reasons. She did not, however, claim possession of the space assigned to her by displaying her treasured photographs. Her time in the organization was short, and to establish possession of space by marking territory with photographs when she would shortly go on to another place was pointless. Her borrowed space was Jenny’s (see Figure 1) who had already aggressively marked the reception desk as hers by a variety of objects and photographs. Instead Sarah’s photographs were kept in the only private space that was unquestionably hers – her handbag. Thus the temp carried the manifestations of her identity with her, from workplace to workplace, and maintained her preferred identity of her home life.

In the examples of the receptionist’s desk and the temporary worker’s photographs, the material objects hark to another life outside the office. Assman (1995: 127, 130) reminds us that individuals are members of many groups and therefore have numerous self-images and memories. On a larger scale, Assman propounds that the objectivization of culture through monuments, texts and rites serves to maintain the ‘concretion of identity’ (p. 130), which preserves the identity of the culture with a minimal sully through intervening events. In the two examples above, the material objects that relate to their lives outside the office point to an identity where they ‘own’ their own space and form a group in which they are valued as girlfriend, mother, daughter and so on. The photographs in particular are a window to a world peopled by friends and family who value them. The material objects in the form of bric-a-brac and photographs anchor them to this more positive self-identity and enables them to cope with the lack of power and status that is manifested by the lack of personal space.

Concluding remarks

The examples above are brief vignettes taken from a much larger study. They illustrate how simple, taken for granted things – a blocked door, bric-a-brac and photographs – can give insights into life. In the study above, conclusions drawn were based on multiple data sources. Because the research site was a corporate organization, conversations and interviews with research participants contributed to the data. If a particular entrance to a building, for example, is locked, the researcher can check whether the door is locked continually for a particular reason, or whether the door is opened for any reason at any time. The ability to ask questions – ‘Why is this office larger than that?’ ‘Where do you talk to other

people?' – can either contribute to the understanding of the context under investigation, or, alternatively, raise dilemmas and queries, the resolution of which can add significantly to theoretical insights. The ethnographer, in particular, can engage in the interaction of the research participants and their material world. Space and material culture deal with the implicit and unspoken and with shifting realities, which means that the researcher needs to deal thoughtfully with the data. According to Rodman (1992: 643):

It is time to recognize that places, like voices, are local and multiple. For each inhabitant, a place has a unique reality, one in which meaning is shared with other people and places. The links in these chains of experienced places are forged of culture and history.

In Hodder's (1987: 19) exposition on the symbolic representation of bow ties in a pet food factory, he noted that '[i]t is not easy to *say* [italics in text] what the bow ties, the plants and the white coats mean. But in practice they evoke particular images, perhaps interpreted differently by different people, but nevertheless effective if competently displayed'. This engagement with space and material culture engenders a tacit understanding as well as the explicit collection and analysis of data. The challenge for the researcher is to explicate an integration of the tacit and explicit into a trustworthy account and defensible conceptual framework.

The tacit nature of space and material culture data means that other data sources can and should be interrogated. A consistency found in the analysis of differing data sources will mean that the researcher can have confidence in conclusions drawn from the analysis. Inconsistencies, however, can lead to new questions requiring resolution that ultimately lead to richer understanding.

Space and material culture is a pervading facet of human life. It is both a manifestation and influence on our cultures, social structures, sense of agency, identity and power structures. To include space and material culture in our data collection and analysis is to include a rich source of insight that gives the researcher a deeper perception of the intangible and tacit through an examination of the corporeal and present.

NOTE

1. Floor plans were requested but not forthcoming.

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