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## Question your teaspoons: Tea-drinking, coping and commercialisation across three planning organisations

*'Perhaps tea is so woven into the stomach linings of the British that they cannot view it in either a scholarly or an aesthetic manner. It is a fact of British life, like breathing.'*

-- Anthony Burgess

### Abstract

As part of a wider ethnographic project that examines the significance of the Public Interest across two public and one private sector UK planning organisations, this paper uses tea-drinking as a lens to understand structural forces around outsourcing and commercialisation. Reflecting across the three case studies, the analysis supports Burawoy's (2017) recent critique of Desmond's *Relational Ethnography* (2014). Using Perce's (1997[1973]) notion of the 'infra-ordinary' as an anchor, it highlights the insight that arises from an intimate focus on mundane rituals and artefacts.

The data was gathered through participant observation, chronicling the researchers' encounters with tea in each of the sites. A respondent-led photography exercise was successful at two sites. Up to 40 days of ethnographic fieldwork were carried out in each site.

The tea-drinking narratives, while providing an intact description of discrete case study sites, exist in conversation with each other, providing an opportunity for comparison that informs the analysis and helping us to understand the meaning-making process of the planners both in and across these contexts.

The paper contributes to critical planning literature (Murphy and Fox-Rogers, 2015; Raco et al., 2016), illuminating structural forces around outsourcing and commercialisation. It also generates methodological reflection on using an everyday activity to probe organisational culture and promote critical reflection on 'weighty' issues across study sites.

### Introduction

Much has been written in a popular vein about the English art of tea-drinking, and academic scholarship on tea rituals within organisational culture has thrown light on dynamics of work intensification and commercialisation. This paper, which examines tea-drinking across three planning organisations, responds to calls for greater use of ethnography within critical scholarship of the planning profession<sup>1</sup>. Arguing for an inherently relational, comparative,

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<sup>1</sup> In the UK the right to develop land has been nationalised since 1947. As such, spatial planning – or 'town and country planning' – is an activity with a statutory position. A body of professional planners exist, accredited by the Royal Town Planning Institute, to service the planning system. They are educated in accredited planning schools by planning academics, drawing on a wide-ranging body of inherently interdisciplinary scholarship. The precise nature and function of planning work has changed over time, with 57% of planners currently working

deeply reflexive ethnographic practice, the analysis supports Burawoy's (2017) recent critique of Desmond's *Relational Ethnography* (2014). Using Perce's (1997) notion of the 'infra-ordinary' to draw out Burawoy's position, it highlights the ethnographic insight afforded by an intimate focus on mundane rituals and artefacts and the analytical power that arises from comparing these reflexively across case study sites.

George Orwell (1946) called tea one of the "main stays of civilization" noting that it is a "subtilized business" worthy of close attention. The stimulation provided by tea has been theorised as the route by which 19<sup>th</sup> century industrial workers were able to maintain the intense pace of their mechanised routine (Ketabgian, 2011). Tea rituals have played a significant role in working life in Britain and her outposts of empire, giving rise to critical management discourse on the "decline of the tea lady" (Stewart, 2004). In Thatcherite Britain, tea breaks were a battleground where organised labour defended itself against ascendant neoliberalism (McRae, 1981). Existing scholarship explores the symbolic meaning of tea-drinking (Hannam, 1997) and examines, in professions such as nursing, the use of tea as a vehicle for coping, venting and collegiality (Lee, 2001).

Here we contribute to the tea-drinking literature by examining tea rituals in contemporary private and public sector planning organisations. Using tea as a lens to understand structural forces around outsourcing and commercialisation, the paper also points to the potential contribution of ethnography to the critical planning literature (Murphy and Fox-Rogers, 2015; Raco et al., 2016). Data was gathered through participant observation at three sites; at two of these a respondent-led photography exercise was also conducted.

## Literature Review

This section first reviews the extant literature on tea-drinking in the workplace, showing that attention to tea-drinking can help throw light on debates around work intensification and commercialisation in the professions. In this vein, we very briefly review recent critical planning scholarship that highlights tendencies toward privatisation of the planning profession, sparking debates about values and work practices in the public versus private sectors. We note the call, evident in the planning literature, for ethnographic enquiry as a way to develop planning scholarship. We then unpack the intent of this paper as bolstering Burawoy's recent commentary on relationality and the use of comparison in ethnography. Drawing out Burawoy's reflection on the relationship between micro- and macro-levels of analysis, we invoke Perce's notion of the infra-ordinary as a means of playfully attending to seemingly trivial processes in a way that nurtures reflection on wider structural forces.

### *Tea-drinking in the workplace*

By way of introduction, we can divide the existing literature on tea-drinking into three categories. The first has a scientific bent, focusing on the chemical properties of tea and its effect on human physiology and psychology. Studies in this area might look to investigate

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in the public sector and 43% in the private sector (Kenny, 2019a). The pressures currently being faced by the profession, particularly around commercialisation, will be clarified in the empirical section of this paper.

tea's effects on 'work performance' (Bryan et al., 2012) or on mood (Steptoe and Wardle, 1999). A more clinically oriented literature is evident too, which engages with issues around using the making and drinking of tea as both an assessment tool (Fair and Barnitt, 1999) and a therapeutic intervention (Hannam, 1997; Penfold, 2011). Finally, we can discern a culturally focussed literature, which can historicise tea's role in specific societies (Fromer, 2008; Murcott, 2013) or highlight the functions it serves in particular contexts and the meanings that attend these (Lee, 1999; Lee, 2001; Stroeback, 2013).

These preoccupations cut across and bleed into one another. Human productivity and mood, for example, the framing given to the scientific investigations into tea referenced above, are socially constituted concepts that represent interesting topics for investigation principally because of tea's social and historical functions. Reading the studies alongside Fromer's (2008) consideration of tea's economic and social role in Victorian England can infuse them with the flavour of empire or of the labourer's exhaustion. Similarly, writing from the discipline of occupational therapy, Hannam (1997) could be seen to raise the question of how hard the boundaries really are between tea's therapeutic role in clinical settings – which Fair and Barnitt (1999) remind us are culturally inflected – and in non-clinical settings. Indeed, Lee's unpacking of tea-drinking rituals during nurses' morning (2001) and evening (1999) breaks straddles both and uncovers meanings strikingly similar to those identified by Stroeback (2013) in the coffee breaks of Danish family law caseworkers, particularly around 'coping'.

#### *The call for ethnography within planning scholarship*

This paper engages with similar cross-cutting themes, focussing on what the meanings attached to tea-making and drinking across three workplaces within the same profession – town planning – can tell us about how the profession and those workplaces have changed and are changing. The present context of the profession is key here, in particular, work intensification and pressures to commercialise, which we can find reflected back in those same tea-making and drinking practices. Amidst these processes, critical planning scholarship has highlighted the changing relation, in the neoliberal context, between the public and private sectors (Murphy and Fox-Rogers, 2015; Raco et al., 2016). Debate has emerged around differences in values and work practices between consultant and local authority planners, and the implications of this for planning's ability to serve "the public interest" (Linovski, 2018; Loh and Arroyo, 2017; Murphy and Fox-Rogers, 2015). This aim is a foundational and contested justification for planning, in some ways synonymous with the notion of the common good but perhaps even more nebulous, being implicated in shifting configurations of politics, economics, ethics and power (Tait, 2016).

Existing studies have relied almost exclusively on survey or interview-based methodology and there have been long-standing calls for greater use of ethnographic methods within planning scholarship in order to better understand how planning professionals make sense of their world (Greed, 1994). Ethnographic methods are explicitly or implicitly called for in relation to moving beyond organisational narratives and vocabulary (Sartorio et al., 2017); paying attention to the day-to-day activities of foot soldiers (Prince, 2012); to micro-practices and discursive regimes (Brown et al., 2010; Gardner, 2017); and to explore emotional labour (Baum, 2015).

*Debate on ethnography and the relational turn*

Forming part of a sustained ethnographic engagement in consultancies and local authorities, our enquiry into tea-drinking examines the methodological potential of an ethnographic approach that is loosely comparative and works at the micro-level of examining tea artefacts and rituals in place, as a way of revealing and theorising wider structural forces. Our ethnographic approach resonates in two ways with more recent discussion surrounding the relational turn in the social sciences, which has centred on a debate between two high profile ethnographers. The eminent Michael Burawoy, whose classic work *Manufacturing Consent* richly chronicles factory resistance at the point of production, has taken issue with the methodological stance of Matthew Desmond, whose acclaim derives from his intimate portraits of tenant struggles in *Evicted* and wildland firefighting in *On the Fireline*.

Desmond has prominently situated himself as part of a relational turn in social science; he argues that ethnography needs to abandon substantialism and join the ‘quiet revolution’ (Abbott, 1995, p.93) that emphasises connections over bounded places and groups. He critiques as substantialist seminal ethnographic works such as *Street Corner Society* (Whyte, 1943), and argues for a relational practice that, being governed by the network as a unit of analysis, is divorced from theory and does not brook comparison or even reflexivity. In this paper, we are concerned chiefly with two facets of this debate: the use of comparison across study sites and the movement between the micro and macro-level in ethnographic analysis. As explained below, we take the side of Burawoy in defending theoretically informed comparison across study sites. We also join Burawoy in roundly rejecting Desmond’s call for an ‘ethnography’ that excises researcher subjectivity.

The cornerstone of this debate is Burawoy’s (2017) response to Desmond’s (2014) assertion that ethnography needs to catch up with the relational turn in social science. Burawoy asserts that “ethnography is always relational” (p.266) and dismisses Desmond’s hostility to an ethnography that is rooted in comparison and theory (as well as reflexivity<sup>2</sup>). Burawoy thus argues for an “analytical *structural* ethnography that is inherently relational yet relies on prior theoretical framework and comparative logic” (p.266).

While Desmond dismisses comparison as legitimating the bounded group as an entity, Burawoy upholds that comparing field sites “compels the researcher to go beyond the group or place to the relations in the wider context of their determination.” Thus, rather than reifying a bounded group or place, comparative logic “makes it possible to go *beyond* places and groups to the study of fields and to decipher the meaning of boundaries” (p.275).

Desmond’s rejection of an ethnography undergirded by theory and comparison is based on his assertion that such a position privileges “the macro over the micro, seeing the macro as that which is global, causal and historical and the micro as that which is local, descriptive and current” (Desmond, 2014: p.559). By contrast, Burawoy persuasively argues that, through theory and comparison, the ethnographer “seeks out the macro conditions of micro

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<sup>2</sup> Burawoy notes that Desmond ‘studiously removes himself from the pages of *Evicted*’ (p.268)

processes, but those micro processes always remain in focus.” This, he upholds is fundamental to a social scientific project that must: “go beyond lived realities to their determinations” (Burawoy, 2017: p.281).

Burawoy’s framing of an ethnographic practice grounded both in comparison and in an integrated conception of macro-micro is supported by our study. In making loose comparison of tea rituals across different workplaces that are, for the purposes of our analysis treated as bounded entities, we support Burawoy’s contention that comparison is essential to an ethnography that breaks with crude common sense and gains analytical access to wider structural forces. Underscoring a commitment to attending to micro-level processes in a way that nurtures reflection on these wider forces, we invoke the work of Georges Perec, taking rather literally his call to “Question your teaspoons” (1997: p.281).

Perec’s work has been a touchstone in evaluating ethnographic practice and infusing it with a playful, multi-sensory sensibility (Phillips, 2018; Phillips, 2015; Middleton, 2010). His writings resonate with Appadurai’s (1986) contention that “things in motion illuminate their human and social context” (p.5). As a fringe member of the Parisian literary world, contemporary of Sartre, happiest at the pinball table, Perec writes forcefully that we are sleeping through life, missing out on the everyday. He argues for a writing and research practice that captures the “infra-ordinary”, the “endotic rather than the exotic” (p.210), he contemplates how to flush out the ordinary and let it speak. Perec’s mandate legitimises not only scrutiny of micro-level processes but attention to those objects and rituals that might seem too mundane or irrelevant to throw light on a lofty research question. Drawing on Perec’s insight, we argue that in fact such playful scrutiny of the seemingly insignificant (including meta-level insights designed from the role these mundane artefacts and rituals play in access and trust-building in the field) can deeply inform more “serious” aspects of the research.

## Methodology

Our tea research is part of a much larger ethnographic engagement related to the ESRC-funded **Working in the Public Interest** project (WITPI, 2019), which is investigating the implications of privatisation in the town planning sector. The ethnographic research, of which the tea component forms a small part, was conducted over a 9-month period. Up to 40 days was spent in each location. The research comprised participant-observation of office activity as well as attending meetings/events and shadowing or interviewing planners. Access to each site had been negotiated as part of the original grant application but early stages of the fieldwork required delicate negotiation of the level and nature of access.

The tea component of the research (which is the focus of this paper) took a slightly different form at each study site, with researchers combining fieldnotes as well as respondent-led photography. This variation, in itself, prompted reflection on the comfort levels of both researcher and those being researched at each study site. For example, as detailed in the findings below, one of the private sector firms has a culture that is particularly open to respondent-led, quasi-academic engagement; at another site, with a more conservative culture, reliance on researcher fieldnotes was felt to be more appropriate.

Where respondent-led photography was used – at case study sites 1 (**Simpson’s**) & 2 (**Southwell**) -- the project methodology was inspired by recent work on dialogical modes of knowledge production and dissemination (Castleden et al., 2008; Zebracki and Luger, 2018) and the potential of ‘solicited or elicited photography’ (McCarthy, 2013) to penetrate the activities through which ‘place meaning’ is constituted. We were interested in the potential of such approaches to address the power imbalance in researcher-researched relationships, enabling participants to carry out their own representational work. Participants at sites 1 and 2 were asked via an emailed flyer to take a photo of their tea/coffee-drinking rituals at work with a comment about the photo they were submitting. The flyer gave an example of a photo and a brief comment and gave a deadline (approximately two weeks into the future) for emailing submissions back to the researcher. These respondent-produced images and comments were analysed alongside researcher fieldnotes, which sometimes included photos taken by the researchers. Analytically, we were loosely informed by Shortt and Warren’s (2019) Grounded Visual Pattern Analysis (GVPA), attending both to dialogic and archaeological elements of the data (including the way that the images were processed and presented back to participants).

At site 3 (**Bakerdale**) the analysis relied more exclusively on written fieldnotes. As noted above, researcher reticence about introducing visual methods to the data collection also gave us an opportunity for reflexive contemplation of our encounters with particular organisational cultures.

## Findings

The findings are presented below as a synthesis from each case study prepared by Schoneboom (Cases 1 & 2) and Slade (Case 3). As with all ethnography, these findings are the researchers’ deeply subjective interpretation of time spent in the field drawn from impressions gathered during participant observation. They have been prepared with some exchange between the two researchers of ideas on format but leaving some explicit leeway for each researcher to create a write-up that is appropriate to their engagement in the field. We draw together some final reflections on these findings in the Discussion.

### Case 1: Simpson’s

Our first case study is a small planning team at a northern UK office of **Simpson’s**, a multi-disciplinary consultancy. Simpson’s is a values-driven, global organisation known in the UK for positive, non-combative relationships with local authorities. Located in a refurbished Victorian building at the edge of a hip urban district, the planners occupy two to three rows in a stylish, open plan office with a hotdesking arrangement (one of the best features is that all the desks are height-adjustable so you can stand up to work). The kitchen facilities are high-end, including a popular coffee machine that grinds and brews real beans; a cupboard full of clean mugs branded with the company logo; and a dishwasher overseen by a cleaner who visits intermittently to keep things spick and span during the work day.

Simpson’s’ tea rituals, as well as the team’s approach to our tea enquiry, underscore the planning team’s emphasis on using keen social intelligence to forge strong relationships; its project-based approach to work, which drives focused and time-delimited output; and the

private sector distinction that reminds team members of their cosmopolitan, special professional status. These aspects are explored in the fieldnote extracts and analysis below:

1. *Using keen social intelligence to forge strong relationships*

*“When going to get themselves tea or coffee, planners at Simpson’s make a point of asking their colleagues if they’d also like something to drink. Observing this, I remarked to Therese<sup>3</sup> that, in my public sector case study, I’d noticed that planners also made a big deal about offering tea to everyone when they needed a cup themselves. Therese explained that when on secondment in local authorities, she always makes a point of accepting every cup of tea that was offered: ‘It’s a way to get to know people. I’d accept 500 cups of tea to fit in.’ She adds that milk politics are also important; if, on secondment, you make a point of putting money in the milk kitty, you get a big tick. I wonder if some of the Simpson’s competitors, deficient in such social intelligence about local authorities, might get this stuff wrong. It sounds like you need to be pretty anthropological in your line of work, I tell Therese.”*

[Fieldnote extract: 20/11/18]

*“One of the newer planners mentions that he is about to refill his mug and Therese gently pulls him up. “Have you asked if anyone else needs a drink? House rule!” she chimes, wittily but with a note of seriousness. I ask her a bit more about the tea thing and she adds that, during graduate student recruitment, she studies tea-offering habits to detect whether potential placements are team players.”* [Fieldnote extract: 20/11/18]

Therese’s approach to tea is entirely consistent with the team’s focus on building trust-based relationships with clients. Her attention to tea-offering underscores the need to inculcate not only collegiality in her team but also an outward-facing attitude of consideration about others’ needs. Working with clients, Simpson’s consultants are known for their emphasis on a collaborative, capacity-building approach rather than parachuting in and egocentrically prescribing solutions. Using tea to blend in and get to know people is just one aspect of the keen social intelligence that Simpson’s planners need to master in order to do their job effectively.

2. *Project-based, time-delimited work*

*“On the way out at the end of the day, I mention to [three team member names] that I will send something around tomorrow about collecting some photos of tea culture in the office. They catch onto the playful mood and seem genuinely keen. Before I leave, I send Anna<sup>4</sup> a draft version of an activity for the planning team that invites them to take a few photos of what the office/Simpson’s tea-drinking rituals mean to them. I throw in an artsy picture of a teacup and Georges Perec quote on the infra-ordinary, thinking that a little intellectual seasoning will be palatable to the Simpsonians.”* [Fieldnote extract: 6/3/19]

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<sup>3</sup> A pseudonym. Therese is a senior member of the Simpson’s planning team at this location.

<sup>4</sup> Another senior member of the planning team.



*"I was hit by a flurry of photos just before the 5pm deadline... The planners succeeded in triaging the photo assignment alongside many other much more important projects. This in turn, has inculcated an unusual degree of researcher efficiency -- I feel extra committed to returning the findings to the planners in a timely fashion and in an attractive format. Although I am the "client", I don't want to let the team down." [Fieldnote extract: 25/3/19]*

The Simpson's planning team's approach to our ethnographic research showed an openness to playful, open-ended enquiry, which resonates with the value placed by the organisation on innovative, arts-based approaches. This was evident in the team's contribution to the participant-led photography exercise as well as the researcher's level of comfort with assigning the planners such an unusual task. The team's commitment to on-time delivery also resonated with a conversation that occurred later with a staff member from the wider team, who felt that the "gold standard" of delivery that the planners aim for with all clients, big and small, can sometimes lead to intensification of work. Interestingly, a staff member responsible for wellbeing also sent in a photo of her herbal tea and showed interest in the findings, as a possible focus for talking about things like taking breaks and limiting caffeine intake. This pointed not only to the organisation's alertness to ways of making the most out of interactions with "non-billable" clients like myself, but also a keen, problem-solving approach to work-life balance issues in the organisation.

### 3. *The private sector distinction*

*The first photo received was from a peripheral team member who was down in the London office, celebrating the cups: "Love the proper espresso cups at Simpson's London office, makes the drink feel more special."*



*"Rather more caffeine than advisable but at least matched with water. Love the proper espresso cups at London office, makes the drink feel more special."*

*A later photo was submitted from one of the senior members of the team who was spending the week in Boston. Her photo arrived with the caption, "learning all about resilience of cities with colleagues and collaborators at MIT."*



"A morning Boston coffee to start the day. Learning all about resilience of cities with colleagues and collaborators at MIT. A good way to connect with global colleagues and share experiences."

*A photo from one of the early career planners shows a simple cup of tea with the comment, "My Friday afternoon cup of tea made by colleague, ready for the weekend now! Really appreciated them making me this."*



"My Friday afternoon cup of tea made by colleague, ready for the weekend now! Really appreciated them making me this."

Simpson's' beverage culture has a cosmopolitan (think espresso rather than Nescafe), upscale feel that illustrates the global connectedness of the planners and the special feeling that comes from having a place in the organisation. Mirroring the culture, the researcher presented the photos back to the team in a poster that visually unified the images using the format seen above (itself an interesting boost to the researcher-as-client's quality of output). This 'high-quality', finished sensibility was pleasantly balanced by other photos that celebrated a warm spirit of collegiality in the day-to-day life of the team.

Simpson's' tea-drinking culture shows how its denizens celebrate their intense yet rewarding culture. Their punctual, client-centred approach to the 'off-the-wall' tea activity underscores their commercial emphasis on timely throughput of work as well as an openness to exploring creative approaches. It also highlights a broad understanding of value creation for the firm in a climate where forging long-term relationships with local authorities is central to the company's business model. Finally, it points to a nuanced understanding of how to influence, potentially in a progressive direction, local authority planning processes.

## Case 2: Southwell

The second case study site, **Southwell**, is a planning team based within an outsourced local authority. Many of Southwell's planning officers were TUPE<sup>5</sup> over from the Council to **Theta**, a private partner entity. As with all local authorities in the UK, Southwell's planning service operates in a national austerity context;<sup>6</sup> like many others, this authority has adopted lean staffing and an increasingly commercial, pro-development orientation. The planners take pride in their low staff turnover and strong leadership at the team level.



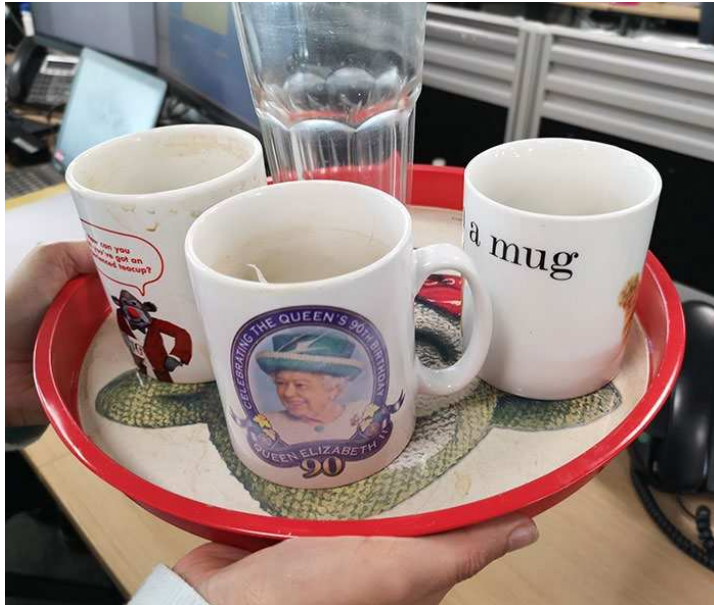
Located in a fairly modern building in a city-edge business park, the planners occupy several rows of a large hotdesking space. The kitchen is functional, with free tea, milk and instant coffee laid on, something that is viewed as fairly fortunate in a context where most local authorities have a tea kitty that workers must contribute to. The mugs in the cupboard are of questionable provenance and most staff bring their own, often distinctive or funny mugs (see the planner's mug in the photo opposite: "Being a Town Planner is easy: It's like riding a bike, except the bike is on fire, everything is on fire and you're in hell"), which are stored in individually labelled drawers underneath the hotdesks. There is an actual kettle rather than a hot water spout.

Southwell's beverage rituals, as well as the team's approach to our tea enquiry, illustrate a warm, collegial spirit in the planning team; and a spirit of healthy resistance to lean organisation, which mirrors a current of topical, witty, and sometimes irreverent office banter that thrives in the interstices of the work day; finally, we note that at this site there is less impetus to satisfy the playful whims of guest researchers than at Simpson's. These aspects are explored in the vignettes below:

### 1: Collegiality in an embattled context

<sup>5</sup> TUPE is an acronym referring to 'Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment)' regulations. Typically, these govern business transfers and service provision changes but also, as in this case, transfers from the public into the private sector.

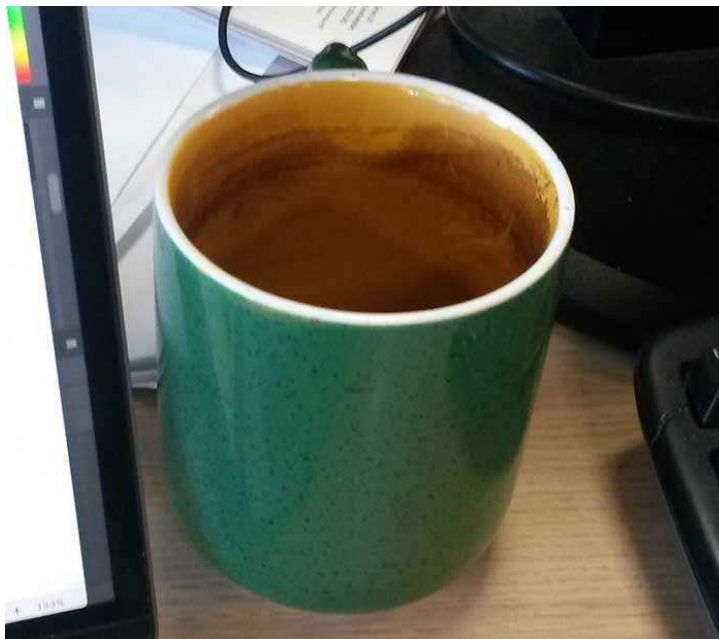
<sup>6</sup> Defined by central government spending cuts, which mean that local government planning (where most public planners work) has seen budget reductions of 42% since 2009/10 (Kenny, 2019b).



*"I see Ella<sup>7</sup> with a tea tray, collecting people's mugs. I've brought my mug and it is freezing cold from the outside chill – I add it to the tray and when she comes back heavily laden, I ask if I can take a photo of the drinks – we laugh that it is not everywhere that people make each other cuppas. One of the planners says, as he picks up his steaming tea, 'this is supposed to be one of the better authorities to work for in that regard'." [Fieldnote extract: 3/4/19]*

Southwell's planners specialise in funny personal mugs some of which have been gifted to one another. Mugs sometimes have a kitschy style or are emblazoned with slogans aimed at adding cheer to the owner's day. The loaded tea tray, with tea (or water) carefully made to suit different tastes, brings a warm, family-style aesthetic to the office, and an opportunity for witty exchange, smattered with local dialect, as mugs are handed out along the row. This occurs against a backdrop of worn-out or frustrating equipment/software and professional planning work that involves dealing with a steady stream of micro-aggressions, whether from frustrated members of the public or developers who are throwing their weight around.

## *2: Marking territory in precarious times*



*Lina<sup>8</sup> needs about an hour before she'll get to that application so she shows me to the empty desk in the second row. The green mug is still there, plonked right in the middle of the desk. I don't want to touch it -- it contains what seem like years of tea deposits, brown rings like you might use to age a tree. Apparently this desk and the one next to it are not actually allocated as hotdesks, even though I am sitting there. I manage to place my laptop on the desk without moving the mug and do my work at an odd angle. [Fieldnote extract: 3/4/19]*

<sup>7</sup> One of the planning officers

<sup>8</sup> One of the planning officers - pseudonym

Resources in the Southwell Council/Theta building have been pared down and space is at a premium, with enforced work-from-home days due to the shortage of desks. For the researcher, the horrible mug, which continued to occupy the desk over a period of months, came to symbolise a spirit of silent but effective resistance to the partnership's profit-maximising drive for leanness. This, in turn, resonated with the tone of office banter – funny, self-effacing and sometimes irreverent -- that prevailed in the interstices of the busy work day.

### 3. Not getting round to the tea activity

*“Karen<sup>9</sup> gets herself a cuppa but says ‘I didn’t offer you one because it is so bad,’ and we laugh at the greyish liquid, which has come out of one of those insulated jugs that is used indiscriminately for both tea and coffee so that the hot liquid acquires the flavour of both. Meanwhile, I have sent around a reminder to the planners about sending me photos for the tea activity – the response is almost total silence” [Fieldnote extract: 12/6/19]*

The Southwell planners were friendly to the researcher, working hard to arrange access to meetings and setting time aside for interviews. However, as embattled public sector workers in an austerity climate, they were more explicitly entitled to overlook the non-urgent needs of visiting researchers, who in turn felt more anxiety about bothering them with what might be perceived as frivolous requests. This reality resonates with an austerity context where planning officers are fighting fires and have virtually no available time for ‘frills’ (something that the tea activity, unlike the meetings and interviews, epitomised). The public sector planners are arguably less open than the Simpson’s planners to the rather unusual request to take photos of office artefacts, perhaps reflecting an organizational culture that is less accustomed than Simpson’s to coming at problems from mildly eccentric, artsy angles. In the Southwell setting, the researcher was treated less as a “client” than at Simpson’s (which in turn made the researcher less ‘fussed’ about feeding the photo activity findings back in an attractive format). It should be noted also that a couple of the planners only drink water so were uncertain about participating which may have influenced the level of participation. The invitation that the researcher sent out inviting planners to participate in the tea activity was more straightforward at Southwell than at Simpson’s, featuring a picture of an office tea lady rather than a quote that, the researcher was afraid, might seem self-important and pretentious to these frontline workers.

Work intensity is evident in the planners’ avoidance of the tea activity and the researcher’s hesitation about bothering public sector workers who are triaging frontline tasks with scarce resources. The office tea tray ritual, with the banter that surrounds the gathering and handing out of mugs, is an opportunity for venting and for coping in an intensified labour process that offers little room for stepping back. While poor IT, worn office furniture and desk shortages resonate on the one hand with a no-frills conception of life in the public sector; the extra squeeze comes here arguably from private sector outsourcing focused on maximising profit. Commercial logic increasingly influences the planners’ day-to-day activity but is sometimes met with everyday acts of resistance.

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<sup>9</sup> One of the planning officers - pseudonym

### Case 3: Bakerdale

Our second public sector case study, **Bakerdale District Council**, has its offices in Bakerdale, a South Eastern commuter town of about 100,000 people that lacks the twee gloss characteristic of some of its neighbours. Seen as a good place to work Bakerdale has a large number of long-standing staff and a strong sense of purpose. Unlike many local authority planning departments, they have been able to maintain a team of in-house specialists who are key to their work. The planners here are proud of what they do and have worked hard to safeguard their department by endeavouring to be at the forefront of change. They are currently going through a change programme that is looking to commercialise their operations, changing their fee structure and offering new services in such a way as to make planning cost neutral. This approach responds to changes and potential changes in planning – particularly the spectre of ‘alternative providers’ being enfranchised to compete in the determination of planning applications – and to the effects of austerity on local authority budgets.

On entering the field for the first time, to negotiate the ethnography, we are shown to a small meeting room:

*Matilda Weaver, Head of Planning, and Nick Alexander, Head of Development Management, arrive together, Matilda with a cafetiere of coffee, mugs and a jug of milk. [Fieldnote extract: 20/11/18]*

This initial encounter can help to orient our understanding of tea-making practices in the institution and of how, as our position changes over the course of the fieldwork, new layers of meaning are revealed. On the one hand the ritual positions us as guests, we are not shown the kitchen or invited to make our own drinks and are certainly not supposed to imagine that milk is always carried around in a jug. On the other, it invites us into a confidence, sending us some messages about the organisation. First, that there is no time for the genteel business of asking whether we would prefer tea, we are busy people with shared understandings and it goes without saying that we need the stronger stuff. Second, that we do not or cannot stand on ceremony here, the head of the department can make the coffee without sending for an underling. Later, asked whether we want more, we are able to confirm that we have got the message – no thank you, let us keep on track.

Re-entering the field several weeks later, we discern that day-to-day practices are different:

*Before we go up for the briefing Nick makes me a cup of tea. I think this is partly because I'm a guest without the necessary stuff to make my own tea but there clearly is something of a culture of making tea for others here. It's hard to ascertain how it works in a big, open-plan office but I should try to get a handle on it and get involved at some point. [Fieldnote extract: 11/12/18]*

As in countless offices across the UK, tea is consumed by planners at their desks throughout the day. At a time of institutional transition, as a new, more commercially focussed culture emerges, the practices of tea-making offer space for both continuity and change. It might not be possible to make tea for everyone in the large, open-plan office where you no longer

even have a designated desk, but you can continue taking turns to make the tea for your closest colleagues:

*Back at the office, as I'm writing up some notes from the visits Liz makes a round of tea for folk in the vicinity, including me. It's by far the strongest cup of tea I've had in the field, nicely reflecting Liz's no-nonsense attitude. [Fieldnote extract: 17/01/19]*

*Mid-morning Gemma makes me a tea – my first of the week! – and I'm glad to say it's very good tea. I notice her mug is Christmas themed and says, 'tis the season to be cosy' on it. [Fieldnote Extract: 14/02/19]*

Solidarity can be established in taking turns or pooling resources to buy tea and coffee, whilst comfort can be found in knowing how others take it, in knowing that they know how you take it, and in the familiar mug, carried with you each day as you move to a vacant space. This mug – 'my mug' – perhaps adorned with a funny slogan or the logo of a favourite sports team, becomes an assertion of self akin to the photographs that would once have been pinned to the desk partitions. The overarching impression, that everything changes but that we can endure, is affirmed when those who can remember relay the stories of the halcyon days when tea was laid on in certain meetings, inviting those who cannot remember into the narrative of us, here in this place:

*Once we are back in the office, Nick makes me a cup of tea before the chairman's briefing. Happily I have been trusted with the special mug again! As we make our way upstairs, Gemma comments that we did well to make a cuppa first. All Nick's work, I say. This leads to a reminiscence about the good old days when tea and coffee was provided at the briefing, and the even gooder old days when lunch was provided on the site visits! Presumably though, the idea these days is that we're back before lunch time. [Fieldnote extract: 02/04/19]*

Just as tea-making helps to constitute and reconfigure relationships between colleagues, it can also help to establish relationships with others. When the members of the council – 'our political masters' – come into the office, for instance, tea can be made for them as an act of hospitality and a performance of deference. When the members accept this they also convey a message; that they are the ultimate bosses, yes, but also that they are guests in the planners' space. The ethnographer too becomes implicated in these processes:

*As the morning progresses, I would quite like a cup of tea but I have not got a mug or any teabags and I am still not 100% sure of the milk protocol. Deep down, I am resigned to probably never getting to make a hot drink on my own initiative at Bakerdale. Perhaps that would be the real test of being 'at home' here. I do feel more so than at the start – not the same sense of nervous anticipation before coming in – but definitely still not of the place. [Fieldnote extract: 07/03/19]*

Being lent a mug as a one off is a gesture of kindness, being lent one for several days or a week a demonstration of trust. Similarly, ethnographers can be invited or invite themselves into the daily rituals of tea-making and drinking:

*At one point Alison makes a cup of tea for everyone and I offer to give her a hand – a great coup! We have a chat around my standard opening question, how long have you been here? 27 years! You must like it then? Well, less than she used to, but for a lot of reasons. She thinks women tend to move less than men do because they have a family and become less career focussed. She was lucky because her husband works in London, this means he would happily live anywhere so long as he could get into town. She could have moved once but they were going to pay her less than she was getting at Bakerdale so there was no point in moving. [Fieldnote extract: 04/04/19]*

The kitchen, we found, is a good place to establish a confidence – becoming party to grumbles, gripes and witty asides – but also to be reminded that nobody here will ever remember how ethnographers take their tea. Having said which, from the kitchen and through the teacups as ethnographers we are able to chart how planners respond to work intensification and commercialisation. On the one hand, tea tends to be taken at the desk as work continues. On the other, it continues to be a site of bonding between distinct individuals – with individual tastes and drinking vessels – and thereby an assertion of solidarity and of collective memory, reinforcing a distinct culture and approach with the potential to endure.

#### Discussion: Ethnographic Courage and the Infra-ordinary

The cases above illustrate the value of ethnographic analysis in providing nuanced insight into planners' values and everyday work practices. Consistent with the broader literature on tea-drinking, our attention to tea and coffee rituals has illuminated aspects of coping, work intensification and commercialisation. Looking *across* the three organisations with attention to researcher subjectivity in moving between case sites, these insights are thrown into sharper relief and the porous interface between public and private sectors, which is central to our broader research project on the privatisation of planning, is illuminated. Looking at the town planning context, our study thus underscores Burawoy's argument for an ethnography that is not only intrinsically relational but is undergirded by comparison and reflexivity (not to mention theory). Adding to this Perce's work on the infra-ordinary, we underscore the productive dialogue between macro and micro that results from an engagement with *mundane* artefacts and rituals, arguing for an ethnographic practice that pays particular attention to these missable or humdrum moments during fieldwork.

The narratives, while providing an intact description of discrete case study sites, exist in conversation with each other, providing an opportunity for constitutive comparison that informs the analysis and helps us to understand the meaning-making process of the planners both in and across these contexts. Taking the narratives together, seeing the case studies with and against one another, gives us insights into the WITPI project's wider goal – which is to obtain a nuanced understanding of how the private and public sectors deliver planning in the contemporary neoliberal context. Importantly, a point that is not adequately underscored in Burawoy's critique, this mode of comparison and of theory-building is itself deeply interpretative in nature, guided by a poetic sensibility that seeks out intriguing patterns, resonances and dissonances, while remaining antithetical to a positivist social science based on spurious notions of systematic, objective enquiry.



In this vein, the collegial tea rituals of the Simpson's planners reflect the social intelligence that they need in order to succeed as capacity-building consultants in their public sector work, where making tea for one's colleagues is the norm. Bolstering this insight, the personalised cups, the full tea tray attended by local banter at Southwell and the culture of making tea to the right specification for others in Bakerdale underscores the refuge in collegiality and local custom that helps embattled public sector planners get through the work day. Moving back to the private sector, the delight of local authority visitors in getting to use the Simpson's coffee machine exists against a backdrop of more humble coffee facilities in an increasingly no-frills public sector. In turn, however, this draws critical attention to the logic of decisions made by the public sector about outlays for consulting, particularly when considered against the poignant image of nomadic public sector planners at Bakerdale whose personal mugs, in an era of precarity and constant change, serve as ballast against hotdesking and the unknown.

Reflexive engagement of the researcher provides particular insight when considered comparatively. At Simpson's, the relative comfort with engaging planners in ludic, visual methods is illustrative of very distinct organisational values around design and playful problem-solving; Southwell's relative lack of engagement in the tea activity signals the public sector planners' right to be openly embattled, it may even signal a certain 'duty' to have no time for frivolity.

Consistent with Burawoy's contention, micro-level engagement at the level of teaspoons leads unavoidably to consideration of the wider structural forces of determination, without losing sight of agency at the level of our cases. At Simpson's, the fancy espresso cups or the cup of coffee sipped at MIT lead us inexorably outwards to the firm's positioning on the global stage, its linkage to world-class academic institutions or its capacity to assume cosmopolitan habits, imparting to its employees a feeling of being 'special'. Similarly, in the outsourced local authority, the immovable green mug with its archaeological deposits of tea connects seamlessly to capitalist forces, to the outsourced partnership with Extor that 'squeezes the pips' out of deskpace. At the same time, spending time with the obstinate mug, the researcher is able to keep the possibility of agency in contesting space keenly in view.

From the perspective of conducting ethnography, Perec's mandate to 'question your teaspoons' offers a playful yet meaningful way to gain meta-level insights from the research process. During initial access to the site, the researcher's attention to the arrival of the milk jug at Bakerdale allowed particular insights into organisational values and culture as well as helping to gauge the level of trust or acceptance that had been achieved. Similarly, profound differences in our readiness to engage planners at the various sites in ludic, rather frivolous research activity informed us, in turn, about the openness of each culture to quirky modes of problem-solving, also helping us to understand our position as 'client' in the private sector. As such the study confirms that infra-ordinary aspects of the field are worthy of researchers' attention.

It should also be noted that, in the process of building trust, an 'innocuous' assignment such as requesting that a planner takes a picture of her coffee mug, can provide a playful and unthreatening means to build trust while potentially serving as a 'can-opener', opening up

conversation about more serious issues such as looming commercialisation or the need to build strong relationships with clients. This is not unlinked to the researchers' use of the kitchen as a safe space in organisations where relatively relaxed conversations might be had with participants.

In summary, attention to tea rituals at each case study site has illuminated the potential of ethnography to throw light on the dynamics of privatisation in contemporary town planning. In keeping with Burawoy's critique of Desmond, the inherent relationality of ethnographic research is here writ large. We have argued that a reflexive, loosely comparative, playful ethnographic engagement reveals structural forces of determination while remaining close to micro-level processes and values. Invoking Perec, we have argued for such an ethnographic practice that formally attends to the mundane and renders it worthy of our attention, not least during the initial moment of access to the field. To ask seemingly trivial or futile questions about tea in a project about planning in the public interest requires courage and it is the seeming triviality of such questions, in Perec's (1997: p.211) estimation, that "makes them just as essential, if not more so, as all the other questions by which we've tried in vain to lay hold on our truth."

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