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Occupying (dis)ordinary space

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Abstract: This paper starts by outlining some key work in ethnomethodology, which understands everyday, unnoticed social and spatial practices as "problematic accomplishments "(Ryave and Schenkein:1974 65-274). Such practices involve a considerable amount of detailed — usually seen but un-noticed — work in order to maintain the commonplace world where people know what 'anyone' knows and does. We are interested to show how doing 'nothing much' is a socially achieved activity; how such ordinariness has consequence for those who specifically 'cannot be ordinary'; and in the implications for the everyday occupation(s) of built space.

We do this by investigating occupation through the narratives and strategies of diverse disabled people using a tactic that Garfinkel calls breaching. He argues that the underlying practices in commonplace situations are best made visible through their disruption, through 'making trouble' (1967, 37-8). Disabled people are often not perceived as 'anyone' – not because of any particular impairment but because they do not fit the unspoken conventions of what constitutes doing 'being ordinary' (Sacks: 1984 413-429). Here we outline how a disabled-led perspective on occupation can reveal both the amount of work involved in negotiating physical space and how it goes unnoticed as 'nothing much'.

Finally, we look briefly at Milton Keynes Shopping Centre to explore what kinds of descriptions of buildings such an approach might offer. We suggest that rather than simply mirroring what 'anyone' knows or does, the design of a particular built space intersects in complex ways with occupation and doing being ordinary.

Introduction

The everyday act of occupying built space seems so ordinary, that (mostly) we don't even think about it. In this paper we are interested in doing some thinking about what exactly constitutes the ordinary; exploring how it is endlessly replicated and re-produced through our different embodiments, enactments and encounters; and investigating the conditions under which such 'ordinary' occupation is disrupted, challenged and re-shaped. To do this we will start from some key work in ethnomethodology, which understands everyday, unnoticed social and spatial practices as 'problematic accomplishments' (Ryave, and Schenkein:1974). In Harvey Sacks' paper 'On doing being ordinary', for example, he opens up the kind of work ordinariness involves:

> "So one part of the job [doing being ordinary] is that you have to know what anybody/everybody is doing: doing ordinarily. Further, you have to have that available to do. There are people who do not have that available to do, and who specifically cannot be ordinary."[1]

By beginning an investigation of occupation from the narratives and strategies of diverse disabled people, we examine how that 'ordinariness' has consequence for those who specifically 'cannot be ordinary'. This begins to make interesting descriptions of buildings, not just for a particular sub-group labelled as disabled but for all of us as we distractedly enact a particular version of everyday space; and which can open up for attention and inspection our

unspoken assumptions about what 'anyone' does in the built environment.

In our examination we also take from the work of Sacks and others the idea of what is not 'storyable'. Sacks proposes that people work at being ordinary and in discussing it they structure it so that very little happens: 'nothing much'. So when it comes to occupying buildings how do people accomplish being ordinary? And in what ways is this to be contrasted with the experience of disabled people who inhabit a building with plenty of stories to tell, but for whom achieving 'nothing much' is in fact deeply problematic.

Finally, we want to think a little about the relationships between doing being ordinary and the act of creating built spaces. When buildings and interiors are designed how are the everyday practices of occupation articulated? What is 'storyable' and what is not? What can we 'read off' building interiors and spaces about the stories they think they are telling, and what are the intersections between designers' narratives and the everyday acts of doing 'being ordinary' in specific spaces?

Thinking about 'anyone'
We begin with the notion of 'anyone'. In ethnomethodology there is a strong thread of work that focuses on how societal membership works:

> Members as social actors assume that the social work is a factual reality which is there for 'anyone' to see and they regard it as a commonplace, generally taken for granted environment, which no competent member has problems recognizing and acting upon.

Ethnomethodologists are concerned with how this commonplace world is worked by people, by what 'anyone' knows and does. This is really difficult to get at. Not noticing things and making assumptions is often a socially achieved activity. In any environment or situation there are a myriad of behaviours and options that are available to anyone, and are routinely undertaken by anyone and for this reason go un-recognized. One way to focus on this is to use the phrase 'it goes without saying' which is usually used to draw attention to that which 'we all know'. But there are also circumstances in which some actors are re-assigned - not any longer as 'anyone'. Payne [1976, 35] uses a simple example. 'Anyone' knows how to sit down. Generally no-one asks permission to sit down. Anyone does it and knows how to do it. However what anyone also knows is that in some circumstances some people have to wait to be seated, stand in a queue, wait until a table is available, wait until the judge has sat down and so on. In particular cases, people are marked down to acquire an identity, which sets them apart from 'anyone'.[2] And it is often not until routine behaviours are breached that we understand what they are and how 'anyones '.are distinguished. At the same time, because sitting down is something anyone does, someone with a disability for whom sitting down may not be straightforward can find themselves no longer just 'anyone'.

The design of space also assumes an 'anyone', although who this 'anyone' is will vary from context to context. The particular 'anyone' may be explicitly articulated by the designer or just assumed. It may be contested, or ignored or absent-mindedly transformed through actions by the client, contractor or planner. That 'anyone' will be translated (unevenly) both into (predicted) patterns of social and spatial practices and into representations of those practices. Designed spaces based on one sort of 'anyone' can also be disrupted through unexpected patterns of engagement. At the same time buildings can mark out who is not anyone by allocating them specific locations or presumed actions, or by simply designing on the basis that everyone will be doing 'being ordinary', without noticing those who specifically cannot be

ordinary in this particular space. So the problematic accomplishments of doing being ordinary are related to material space, but this is not a simple or transparently obvious relationship.

On breaching

Garfinkel has suggested that the most effective way to make such commonplace situations visible is by 'breaching':

> Procedurally it is my preference to start with familiar scenes and ask what can be done to make trouble. The operations that one would have to perform in order to multiply the senseless features of perceived environments, to produce and sustain bewilderment, consternation and confusion; to produce the socially constructed affects of anxiety, shame, guilt and indignation and to produce dis-organised interaction should tell us something about how the structures of everyday activities are ordinarily and routinely produced and maintained.[3]

Garfinkel developed a series of breaching experiments where he asked students to deliberately perform in unexpected ways, and monitored the results (Garfinkel: 1967, 42). The breaching experiments were quite simple but turned out to be hugely telling. He asked students to act as though they were lodgers in their own households. And he asked people to ask for clarification of commonplace remarks:

> When asked what she meant when she said she had a flat tire [tyre] one subject quite quickly became cross: "What do you mean, 'What do you mean?' A flat tire is a flat tire that's what I meant. Nothing special. What a crazy question!"[4]

Students reported such responses as that they were being too nice and were obviously after something. When they asked if they could have a bite to eat from the fridge a parent noted that this was behaviour that had been going on for a long time and wondered why they had suddenly decided to ask. One parent thought the student was being hostile to his mother and suggested that he leave the house.

A modern day breaching experiment is this: try going into an empty café where only one person who you don't know is sitting at table and sit next to them.

Artists and designers sometimes also use breaching deliberately, for example Gillian Wearing dancing on her own in a shopping mall, or Sophie Calle following people she does not know. The Architecture-InsideOut group (http://www.architecture-insideout.co.uk) which brings together disabled and Deaf artists and architects for shared projects uses simple techniques for 'breaching' the conventions of an assumed so-obvious-as-not-needing-mention disabled/non-disabled divide. These include working with many artists simultaneously so that hidden/visible normal/abnormal differentiations cannot be easily made; of locating disabled artists as active and creative rather than passive or reactive; and of artists not conforming to expectations of how disabled people 'should behave in public (fig.1).

Fig. 1: "How many ways are there to get from A to B?" Temporary installation at Architecture-InsideOut workshop, Turbine Hall Tate Modern, May 2008 by artists Tony Heaton and Chris Ankin with architects Ash Sakula. Photograph by Jos Boys

Garfinkel developed a series of breaching experiments where he asked students to deliberately perform in unexpected ways, and monitored the results. For disabled people, such acts of breaching are not necessarily a choice. This is not merely a matter of the impact of specific impairments, but because disability is persistently located as *out* of the ordinary. Simply doing being ordinary is often not available to disabled people, particularly where they find themselves encountering others. In ethnomethodological terms, they are seen as less than full societal members. Lois Keith reveals what this means when she writes about the impact of becoming disabled and the immediate effect it produced in 'the difference between how I wanted to see myself, as a now visibly different but still competent and private person, and how others saw me and would continue to see me.'[5] She goes on to explore how this shift in relationships is played out from a disabled perspective:

> We are not supposed to understand that non-disabled people feel uncomfortable at our presence in the world and that what they sometimes feel is more than discomfort, it is revulsion. The central confusion of the relationship between us is that on the one hand they are disconcerted by our presence, and are confused about how to behave towards us or even what words they should use to describe us, but on the other hand they have a clear idea that they should be helpful and kind. Our part of the bargain is to ignore their unease and confusion and accept the 'help'. Our gratefulness is part of the lie that everything is really alright between us.[6]

Keith goes on to say that – particularly where a disability is visible – the most immediate problem is that non-disabled people literally cease to see the other 'normal' markers of social

position and identity such as class, gender and social status through which we routinely 'read' each other. All that is seen is the disability, making initial encounters awkward, and framing disabled people in ways that they themselves do not recognise. In everyday social and spatial practices, the 'normal' behaviours of doing being ordinary are breached:

> There are things that it is normally acceptable for strangers to say to each other and things that are not. For example, in the particular section of British society in which I usually mix, it is considered okay, indeed complimentary, to remark that people are thin, but rude to say that they are fat. It is acceptable to tell people that they are tall, but impolite to remark on the fact that they are unusually short. And there are things that people feel that they can say to disabled people which they wouldn't dream of saying to anyone else. [7]

How, then, can we open up ordinary occupation to view it as a problematic and particular accomplishment which centrally not only assumes a non-disabled body, but where the default position marks disabled bodies as inherently a 'breach' to normal, unremarkable, behaviour? First, as Titchkosky reminds us, starting from disability opens up to view the sheer amount of (normally hidden) work we perform in order to be doing 'nothing much':

> …language recommends that we conceive of the able-body as something that just comes along 'naturally' as people go about their daily existence. People just jump into the shower, run to the store, see what others mean while keeping an eye on the kids, or skipping from office to office and, having run through the day whilst managing to keep their noses clean, hop into bed. All of this glosses the body that comes along while, at the same time, brings it along metaphorically. Speaking of 'normal bodies' as movement and metaphor maps them as if they are a natural possession, as if they are not mapped at all. [8]

The invisibility of this work means that the everyday procedures through which free and independent mobility can occur – taking steps, changing level, negotiating corners, identifying visual and aural cues, manipulating objects, understanding instructions, - are all 'nothing much'. The problematic accomplishments of physically getting around; of the everyday organisational undertakings, and of social interaction and maintenance is revealed only when it is breached by needing time, being effortful or 'interfering' with normal, unimpeded, unnoticed mobility.[9] For example, non-disabled people tend to see wheelchairs as an additional impediment, something that gets in the way and adds complications to 'normal' mobility. But wheelchairs are an enabling device, not a negative metaphor of lack – not 'a symbol of need and dependency' Rather, 'people like myself who rely on a wheelchair, for mobility and independence, see it as a piece of liberating equipment'.[10] Or as Slack writes: 'my wheelchair is my best friend – I wheel it with pride and confidence. It takes me into the world'.[11]

Second, starting from taking notice of the narratives and experiences of diverse disabled people disrupts what is conventionally 'storyable' and so opens up to more careful investigation what goes unnoticed in the everyday acts of occupying built space as just what 'anyone' does. This becomes not just about disabled people and their 'special needs', but about exposing the specific social and spatial practices of doing 'being ordinary' and the detailed particularities of differential entitlements and markings that are involved.[12] Sally French, for example, explains the complicated relationships embedded in her white cane:

> White sticks can be used to supplement communication. I use a white stick intermittently as a symbol of visual disability. I use it to influence people's behaviour, for example, to attract their help or to alert them to take care. (…) Despite this, I do not feel that people will believe it if, having used the white stick to cross a busy road, I fold it up and read a book. The feeling of discomfort to which this gives rise in the presence of others is very strong… My feelings about using my white stick are mixed. I regard it as a symbol of independence rather than a symbol of dependency. It is understood throughout the world and has assisted me in traveling with confidence in unfamiliar countries on my own. I constantly feel, however, that others are judging me and thinking I am a fraud…[13]

The objects we use are thus 'also' marked. Here, the mobility aid is not just 'nothing much' but signals a potential breach, where it is not used in an 'ordinary' way – that is, the way non-disabled people assume it should be used. Artists such as Caroline Cardus and Noemi Lakmaier often 'play' in their own work with the complexity of being 'marked' in this way (fig. 2).

Fig. 2: Ruby Slippers by Caroline Cardus (http://www.carolinecardus.com/Welcome.html) and Experiment in losing Control by Noemi Lakmaier (www.noemilakmaier.co.uk/)

The Milton Keynes shopping centre as 'smooth' space
The acts of procuring, developing, and designing a built space involves conscious beliefs as well as unexplored assumptions about what 'anyone' does or needs or wants; and often involves shifting parameters and unintended consequences. A critical investigation of doing 'being ordinary' as everyday occupation and its potential disruptions is thus an intensely situated practice. We chose to think about Milton Keynes Shopping Centre (MKSC), because it is a place we both know well, which seems, at least on the surface, well-designed for disabled people.

In some respects MKSC can be seen as a blank canvas for 'anyone' to engage with. There

are many assumptions made about anyone which range from what size people are to the order in which they do things in their lives. And it is frequently possible to begin to infer what 'anyone' is listening out for and watching for, as a breaching of the ordinary, through the descriptions which set people apart. While it is not exactly breaching to say that someone is very tall or very short it marks them as different (and implies what not very tall is) and sets up a possibility for 'trouble'. To say someone married late or did not marry at all is to imply something about what we can expect 'anyone' to do in terms of marriage. Comments like this have the potential to be storyable.

If we take doing being ordinary as 'just running to the store', that is, as an invisible, non-bodied but free and independent mobility, then MKSC feels like a space which expresses exactly such an apparently transparent 'smoothness' in its built form. The original shopping building is a large box-shaped building with everything at right angles. The long concourses (basically from John Lewis to Marks and Spencer department stores) are all naturally day-lit. The shorter cross cutting concourses have sections which are only day lit from the long concourses. The long public concourses have very high ceilings, with much lower ones in the shorter concourses. The spaces on both sets of concourses are wide and ranged on either side of a central row of seats. It feels spacious and rarely feels overcrowded. Even on a very busy Saturday there is no sense of people having to get out of the way for other shoppers. Because the city centre is custom-made even if people have to get out of the way they get out of the way in the 'same sort' of space. So, for example, as there is no kerb that has to be stepped off, one doesn't wander into a different and less safe arena.

The capability to move about in a sort of space which in some ways can be seen as all the same is a key feature of MKSC. Most shops have double doors to be able to get in two abreast, or at least 1 1/2 width doors. Each major entrance into MKSC consist of two sets of four doors at and one of each set of four doors has a waist height large press a button for automatic opening. All the ways in are level entrances (fig.3).

Fig. 3: Entrances to MKSC showing level entry. Photograph by Pam Shakespeare.

Within shops the majority of shopping is on the ground floor. All the department stores have a large lift with enough space to be able to take three or four wheelchairs or electric buggies. Most of the shops have their doors open during opening hours and some have very large openings through which to get in [20-30 ft wide] so there is little sense of having to negotiate space with others to get in to shops.

We felt that this 'smoothness' of space makes it easy to do 'being ordinary' as a shopper. It is as if the building design acknowledges and supports the seen but unnoticed work of freely moving about. At the same time, aspects of this 'smoothness' have both deliberate exclusions and (perhaps unintended) differential entitlements. For example, whilst the space supports motion, it is takes does not engage so centrally with other aspects of the work involved in negotiating physical space and encountering others. For example, there are long travel distances from one end to the other and seating is both low and hard. It takes less interest in visual and aural cues, the monchrome palette and the large amount of glass reflects light in complex patterns and shadows, with little contrast. Materials are hard, so noise resonates. People who have restricted energy or who are visually impaired or deaf, then, may well be lesser 'anyones' here. (At the same time, MKSC is famously disorienting for everyone as the grid makes it confusing to know which way you are facing). In addition, MKSC is closed at nighttime and is patrolled by security guards during the day, quite explicitly controlling who is 'anyone' here and who is at risk of removal.

'Anyone', signs, marking and identity
If the overall space of the MK is smooth and enabling a freely mobile 'anyone' to encompass walkers, buggies, people in wheelchairs and shopping trolleys, are there ways in which specific identities are marked as not ordinary? Signs in MKSC offer an instruction for what to be in certain circumstances: and imply something about the identity of the recipient of such instructions. The obverse of this is that there are things that anyone knows what to do in MK that are not signed (do not have sex on the concourse, do not thump someone who walks into you, queue if required, walk on your feet not your hands). In this context the majority of public signs are about specifying identity in such a way as to refine the concept of 'anyone'.

Thinking about this particular presentation of identity it occurred to us that some of the signs about disability ask people to redefine themselves out of the category of 'anyone'. The way the signs do this is patchy. For example there are a number of places where the sign on sliding doors is 'automatic door'. This sign designates material objects in a particular way for 'anyone'. However, this is not a universal designation in the city centre. And many doors (one in every four of the external doors) are designated, through the press button devices to open them which have on them the disability icon, as specifying a redefined identity i.e. not 'anyone'. However, as mentioned above, watching people walk around the city centre it is clear that most people do use the disability icon buttons to open doors. So that disabled button is part of the way 'anyone' gets in and out and becomes normalised.

There are also other instances of icons and signage which re-specify people in some way as other than 'anyone'. Several shops have signs of re-specification. For example there is a notice in John Lewis asking people to ask for help if they are disabled shoppers. So being disabled in John Lewis's (unlike getting into the city centre) is not normalised. The implication here is that the shopper may be unable for some reason to shop effectively because of their

disability and thus re-specify their identity as not 'anyone, i.e. not someone who can negotiate the entire length and breadth of John Lewis with an appropriate identity and without assistance. In fact hundreds of people a day don't know what to buy or what they are looking for but there are no signs offering them assistance. So being disabled is not a predictor of needing help to be an effective shopper (the dominant identity required of anyone in MK). In seeking assistance disabled people and shoppers unsure of the items they wish to purchase are putting themselves into the same category as less than full members unable to do what 'anyone' can do.

In terms of the signs there is considerable emphasis on the city centre as a hazardous place (fig. 4). There are two sets of portable yellow triangles one of which indicates that the pavement is wet, and the other of which indicates that cleaning is taking place. These are frequently scattered around the city centre. Maybe portable signs indicate transient identities, that is 'anyone' does not need to consider an identity change except some occasional moment in a specific place. Or maybe, the celebration of freedom of mobility demands that potential impediments to it must be visibly marked.

Fig. 4: Example of signs in MKSC marking what is not 'everyday'. Photograph by Pam Shakespeare.

In our investigations we went to MKSC as two women not defined as disabled and walked around trying to work out what was assumed about the people who come here. Our overall feeling was that one particular form of disability has been normalised, that of the wheelchair user, where our guess is that the environment is fairly wheelchair friendly and offers a possibility of users being 'anyone' in parts of the city centre. Less so we thought for other

possible disabilities, as also indicated through what signage marked and what was an absence. There is very little signage for visually disabled and deaf people, and very little indication that the environment might be altered. A small minority of shops mention induction loops, which is a specification of environmental change so that the 'someone' can as much as possible maintain an 'anyone' identity, but no mentions of offers of specialist lighting, signing facilities, offers to switch off the musak etc.

Conclusion

This paper began by outlining how occupation can be examined from an ethnomethodological standpoint so as to unravel the amount of work involved in doing being ordinary, in just doing 'nothing much'. It then explored how, from the perspective of many disabled people, just doing being ordinary is often not available – not because of having a specific impairment but because they are not included in what being just 'anyone' is or does. Some of the ways in which reduced membership is reinforced were briefly outlined, and the suggestion made that when doing being ordinary is embodied – just running to the store – it also makes invisible the amount of work required, and problematic accomplishments involved, in negotiating physical space for *everyone*.

We then went on to consider how built space intersects with these everyday seen but unnoticed social practices –both in their 'ordinariness' and their (dis)ordinariness - in the hope of beginning to make interesting descriptions of buildings. This is not about just describing the 'special needs' of a particular sub-group labeled as disabled but about opening up for careful attention and detailed inspection our unspoken and commonplace assumptions about what 'anyone' does in 'any' particular place; about what is nothing much and what is 'making trouble'.

The authors of this paper have very different backgrounds (architecture and sociology) but were united in our interest in how unspoken assumptions, routine 'goings on' and commonplace understandings are incredibly powerful determinants of how we live in the world (and how we design it). We all shape the world as ordinary people, by making shortcuts, by drawing graffiti, by modifying our personal settings. Shop designers, architects and interior designers also have their own commonplace assumptions as they design. One part of everyone's job (doing being ordinary) is unthinkingly knowing what anybody/everybody is doing: doing ordinarily in the occupation of material space. But these 'jobs' are not necessarily in concert across users and designers, or may shift in different situations, or across different participants. What we found was that penetrating some of the routine assumptions of 'doing nothing much' was really hard work, both precisely because it is so everyday, and because where ordinariness intersects with material space, even more complex patterns begin to emerge. But whilst we have hardly touched the surface of how buildings might be usefully described using ethnomethodology we hope we have done enough to suggest the kinds of insights that such an approach offers to understanding occupation as an unnoticed, detailed, everyday and situated practice.

Endnotes

[1] Sacks:1984, 415
[2] Payne: 1976, 33

[3] Garfinkel: 1967, 37-8

[4] Garfinkel: 1967, 37-8

[5] Keith in Morris:1996, 70

[6] Keith in Morris 1996, 81 + ref other narratives

[7] Keith in Morris:1996. 72

[8] Titchkosky in Corker and Shakespeare 2002, 103

[9] Keith in Morris: 1996, 71

[10] Keith in Morris: 1996, 75-76

[11] Sandy Slack 'in Corker and French: 1999, 34

[12] Disabled artists-led group Architecture-InsideOut (AIO) undertake events which explore how such disruptive 'breaching' can generate creative and constructive effects in re-thinking architectural design: see http://www.architecture-insideout.co.uk

[13] Sally French in Corker and French: 1999, 24

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