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Being One's Own Honoured Guest: Eating Out Alone as Gendered Sociality in Public Spaces

Jackie Goode
Loughborough University, UK

Abstract
For a woman, eating and drinking alone in public is apparently seen as anomalous behaviour. Depending on location and time, there are attendant risks of being subject to negative moral discourses, surveillance, and unwelcome sexual attention. This article uses an autoethnographic account to examine an instance of 'eating out' alone as constitutive of the gendered nature of sociality in public spaces. It supplements emerging analyses of lone female dining in a context of 'single' women being an increasingly significant demographic category by offering further differentiation in terms of age and venue type.

Keywords
ageing, autoethnography, hospitality, single women, 'the pub'

Introduction

Eating out alone 'is not a topic about which one finds a large amount of research or theorising' because it is considered 'anomalous behaviour' (Pliner and Bell, 2009: 169). Nevertheless, people who approach their scholarship from a 'singles perspective' may have a different way of seeing the world that offers something that is missing from dominant narratives of marriage and family (Depaulo, 2017). It is certainly the case that sociological approaches to food and eating have traditionally focussed on *domestic* consumption, conceptualising the provision of meals as part of the caring work of 'doing family' (Devault, 1991), documenting the decline of the 'family meal' and growing individualisation of eating (Davis, 1995), investigating the financial constraints on family food provisioning (Goode, 2012), and analysing different forms of home-based

Corresponding author:
Jackie Goode, Loughborough University, Epinal Way, Loughborough LE11 3TU, UK.
Email: j.e.goode@lboro.ac.uk

commensality (Julier, 2013). As eating *out* increased in frequency, studies of this aspect of social life mapped its development as differentiated consumption (e.g. Warde and Martens, 2000), aesthetic production (e.g. Fine, 1992), or sociality/civility (Finkelstein, 1998).

In organisational studies, public consumption of food and drink has also been a focus of attention (Lugosi, 2014), while cultural geographers have focussed on 'places and spaces' in relation to both providers and consumers of meal 'events'. Bitner (1992), for example, conceptualises eating places as purposeful 'servicescapes', designed environments aimed at creating particular ambient conditions, using layout and functionality, signs, symbols, and artefacts, as well as institutional strategies to guide the interactions between customers and between customers and employees. Such strategies are not uniform, however. Seymour and Sandiford (2005) showed how staff in smaller catering units felt able to develop more 'authentic' ways of relating to customers, in contrast to learning prescribed rules of emotion management more typical of larger corporate chains. Bar workers and managers alike reported being more empowered to exercise their own judgement when dealing with customers in pub bars, for example, than restaurants.

Other studies consider locations implicated in constructions of identities (Bell and Valentine, 1997)–masculinity, femininity, community–dominant notions of which are based on normalisation of the idealised nuclear family (Donzelot, 1979). Sulkunen et al.'s (1985) study of an urban pub in Finland and Glen's (2014) ethnography of a pub and a club in Scotland illuminate the dynamics through which their (male) clienteles preserve a sense of traditional masculinity, community, and continuity. Eating outside the home *alone* is a much less studied phenomenon, however. The norms of social behaviour lead to expectations that such a meal will be a shared experience with more than one customer per table (Jonsson and Ekström, 2009), raising the question of how what is seen as an essential element of eating out–conviviality–can occur for someone dining alone.

The issue of gender is more or less explicit in many of these studies. But it is *female* lone dining that seems to pose a specific challenge to long-standing conventions around what is 'proper'. It seems to be when they are exerting agency through leisure activities outside the home, especially in the evening, that women attract particular kinds of attention (e.g. Scraton and Watson, 1998) and become subject to particular kinds of public moral discourse. The more visible they are, the more 'problematic' and subject to surveillance they seem to be (Lahad, 2013; Lahad and May, 2017; Skeggs, 2005), although this varies according to place and time (lunchtimes and café locations being less stressful; Jonsson and Ekström, 2009), and those dining 'collectively' are not always having much fun either (Heimtun, 2010).

My experience provides some contrasts. Most studies (Skeggs' working-class 'hens' aside) document the experiences of middle-class women, a status I share, but most (apart from Heimtun's 'mid-life' women) are concerned with younger women, whereas I am of post-retirement age; most studies of sociality have been predominantly concerned with urban spaces (Scraton and Watson, 1998), whereas I was in a rural setting, and most evening solo dining was in a hotel/high-status restaurant as opposed to the pub I visited. In Britain, the pub has been a traditionally masculine space. Westwood (1984) suggests that women alone in such venues are assumed to be 'available' and therefore encounter

high levels of sexual harassment so that many avoid it (Valentine, 1993). Indeed, Hey (1986) asserts that pubs have never really been public for women, but does this apply to the village pub? Maye et al. (2005) see these as part of an idealised rural package that may still be accompanied by a degree of sex segregation (Hunt and Satterlee, 1986). Whatever their imagined or real community function, many are in a state of decline (Jones et al., 2000), encouraging the survivors to diversify into food (Pratten, 2003) and 'guest beers' (Mason and McNally, 1997), which may affect the customer-base.

A methodological note

My evening eating out at a village pub was part of a 'short break' rather than 'fieldwork'. Going alone to a pub for an evening meal is not something I had done before nor would usually do at home, but my 'orientation' to the evening as I set out was that I was happy to be solo and 'private', to enjoy a glass of wine with my meal and then go 'home' if that was how the evening developed. But as a sociable person happy to engage in light-hearted or 'serious' conversations, including with 'strangers', I was also open to the possibility of a level of sociality that might extend my stay into the kind of evening that men alone at the pub typically expect and enjoy. My account of it was written the day after I got home as the most recent example of diary/journal-keeping that has for years functioned as what Richardon (1994) refers to as 'writing as inquiry', most of which has remained 'private' but some of which has been published (e.g. Goode, 2016). Coincidentally, I then read Lahad and May's (2017) study which sent me off on the trail of further theorising around the phenomenon.

Autoethnography is an approach to research/writing that seeks not only to describe but also systematically analyse personal experience to understand social and cultural phenomena, acknowledging and accommodating subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on enquiry and knowledge production. As Ellis et al. (2011) explain,

> When researchers do autoethnography, they retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity … (they) must not only use their methodological tools and research literature to analyze experience, but also must consider ways others may experience similar epiphanies; they must use personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience, and, in so doing, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders. (p. 4)

Autoethnographers seek to produce aesthetic, evocative, thick descriptions of (inter) personal experience. As protagonist in this story, I present a 'personal narrative' and subject it to an analysis/interpretation that illuminates the dynamics of place, space, biography, and social interaction in the gendered construction of sociality in a rural pub(lic) arena. I am therefore regarding this example of 'eating out alone' as a collaboratively constructed ethnographic event consisting not just of the consumption of a meal but of a series of chronological episodes constituted by human–space–material/aesthetic artefact–cultural interactions.

My career as a full-time qualitative researcher having officially ended, the often (for the reflexive practitioner) shifting barrier between the 'personal' and 'professional'

researcher has dissolved. The professionally legitimised curiosity about the social organisation of everyday life that was carefully managed within the prescribed boundaries of funded projects with fully specified designs conducted in compliance with formulaic ethical guidelines has given way to less constrained social interactions post-retirement. In using social life/relations as research 'data' in this autoethnographic account, however, ethical responsibilities around 'informed consent' (an intrinsically contested notion even in institutionally authorised research) still dictated the removal of identifying features.

Dining solo at the village pub

I was greeted by a young barmaid when I walked in. I told her I had a table booked. She asked my name and took me through the front area of the pub into a small dining room at the back. This was a small relatively informal setting–six uncovered pine tables of various sizes and side access to the bar. There were only two other people dining–a middle-aged couple who didn't speak to each other throughout their meal. She showed me to a small table tucked away in a little alcove under the stairs at the back of the room. I could sit facing into the dining room but would still be set apart. As she disappeared behind the bar to serve a customer in the front, I moved to a more centrally placed table. When she walked back through a moment later, I smiled and told her I'd prefer to sit here–was that ok? Of course, she said–wherever I liked!

Janey and Richard, my B&B hosts at the 17th-century farmhouse where I was staying in the little village within easy reach of a number of popular coastal towns in the middle of 'Brexit-country', were retired public service professionals who now enjoyed devoting themselves to their sheep and chickens. They had sent me advance information on places to eat locally and asked whether I'd like them to book me in somewhere–probably necessary in early summer, they advised. The larger venues in the nearby towns might afford greater 'anonymity', but I'd have to drive so I'd opted for their 'local', within walking distance, so that I could have a drink with my meal. Richard enquired that evening whether I was intending to walk there. His question raised a small doubt. I confirmed this was my intention, but would I in fact be safe to do so? Oh yes–once I got to the road, I'd see a path through some trees that ran parallel to it and I could follow that. I realised he'd thought I had been wondering about traffic and had another go: but would I be safe walking up to the pub–and more importantly, back, as a woman on her own? Oh, absolutely fine, he said. But he primed me, only half-jokingly, about another 'danger': it was a friendly place, but the landlord was a 'character' who made few concessions towards his customers. I would be better not to ask for the famous local beer because he saw the well-known brewery as the corporate enemy and had stocked a small selection of carefully chosen craft beers. They served 'plain and simple good food', but he'd made it very clear when he bought the place that it was a pub-with-food, not a restaurant-with-beer. I smiled in recognition of this type of pub and said that I'd probably be drinking wine–would that attract his ire? He thought I'd be ok. He called to confirm the booking and was pointing the way over the fields to the road when Janey arrived. I saw her note my light footwear and she expressed slight concern about the intended route, but Richard assured me it would be fine. He gave me a torch for the walk back and wished me an enjoyable evening.

As it turned out, the landlord wasn't around and the barmaid made no demur when I'd settled myself at the new table and gone up to the dining-room side of the bar to order food and a glass of wine. Did I want 'the red' or 'the white'? What size would I like? I thought the 250 ml would probably see me through the evening, so I asked for that but she didn't stop at the mark on the large glass.

'Whoah!' I said, 'I've got to stagger back!'

'Never mind', she said, stopping just short of the rim, 'you've not got far to stagger'.

The middle-aged couple studiously avoided eye contact with me, but when an older man appeared through French doors from the garden, he caught my eye and nodded at the baby he was carrying.

'Found it outside!' he said, grinning.

'Ooooh, lovely! Can you find me one?' I (half)-joked, not yet having grandchildren of my own.

'Are you mad?!' he replied.

We laughed. He was followed in by others I took to be his wife, daughter, and a little girl of about 3 years wearing one of those fabulous mismatched collections of garments that suggest a child has been allowed to choose their own attire. He asked whether I was a visitor, and we talked briefly about the area. Then my food arrived (quality: good; portion size: enormous), and I left them to their own conversation. The other couple had observed our interactions but hadn't joined in. They finished their meal shortly afterwards and left without speaking to anyone. I had almost finished eating when the extended family prepared to leave, and there was another brief exchange between the man and me as he wished me a pleasant stay. I still had three-quarters of my wine left, so when the barmaid reappeared to clear my plate, I asked her whether I could move through to the bar to finish it rather than sit in splendid isolation.

'Of course', she said, 'Come on, I'll put you with the rabble'. She put me at the only table there, in the window, on the built-in faux-leather bench seat which had been repaired with gaffer tape. It was still quite early. There was only one young man sitting on a stool at the bar. I could hear but not see families eating at tables on the other side of the front door. If I'd not left my mobile in my room, I could have spent some time checking it, as the young man on the stool was doing, but as it was I amused myself by reading some of the signs on the bar ('On 4 February 2015, James Tyler bought Sarah Dawson a drink') and trying to work out what the proprietor's interests were from the display of a bizarre assortment of objects adorning the walls, that no corporate pub designer had had a hand in–car parts, metal instruments of indecipherable function, timetables, and, over the mantelpiece in the room on the other side, a newspaper cutting. As the barmaid reappeared, I asked her about the sign behind the bar. It was such a rare occurrence for the said James Tyler to buy his girlfriend a drink, apparently, that it had been publicly commemorated. And no, she said in answer to my question, it hadn't shamed him into repeating the exercise. I went over to look at the newspaper cutting. The photograph, from the *Guardian*, was of David Cameron's visit to a Primary School when he announced Conservative plans to introduce re-sits for children who fail their 'SATs' tests. Intended to show him reading to the children, it had backfired and gone viral [http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election-2015-32223486].

More men arrived to cluster round the bar. They all knew each other, and the usual kind of male banter and exchange of local news began. They totally ignored me but not in a 'hostile' way. Nevertheless, I surmised that if I hadn't been there, they would have been occupying the bench seat, which proved to be the case because when one of the tables on the other side became free and I moved to sit there, joining a remaining couple and a family of parents-plus-teenage-son, the men at the bar immediately took the seat I had vacated. A few minutes later, another small group of men arrived to stand at the bar. An older couple arrived and asked whether they could join me. The barmaid came over to clear glasses and they asked her how her 'A' levels were going. Not bad but she wasn't planning on going to university because she didn't know what she wanted to do. She wanted to leave here because not much ever happened. She'd get a job while she worked out her next move. The couple asked me whether I was a visitor and we struck up a conversation. They had moved to the area a couple of years ago from Yorkshire to be close to their son, who lived nearby but had an architect's practice in London. She was a 'joiner' of community activities so had settled quickly. This was a great pub, they said–a genuine 'local', the place to come if you needed a builder, plumber, electrician–they were all standing round the bar now–including the young barmaid's dad. There was always something going on—the landlord made sure of that: like barbeques in the marquee in the garden, like a go-kart race down the hill with the locals closing off the road to traffic and acting as marshals without any thought of consulting the authorities, like deciding he didn't want to do 'Sunday dinner' any more but giving notice that people could bring their own food on Sunday lunchtimes from now on if they wanted. The place had filled up, another barmaid had come on duty, and there was an air of warmth and jollity. I decided on a re-fill. As I approached the bar, the cluster of men parted for me with smiles that invited an exchange of pleasantries. I commented that I'd just been informed that this was the place to come if in need of a builder, plumber, or electrician and the young barmaid's father informed me that that was quite true–he was the builder if I was looking for one. I chatted some more with the Yorkshire couple. They noted the arrival of the new barmaid–told me her name–and that she worked 'peripatetically' at a number of local establishments. They repeated my hosts' observation that the landlord was a bit of character and added that his wife was absolutely lovely. Their own grandson attended a private school nearby, the woman told me. She had got roped into making the costumes and props for school drama productions (although I felt sure as she talked there had been very little roping needed). She hadn't known what to do with some of the 'props' she'd made afterwards but had found a home for one of them–she pointed to a giant ice cream cone suspended from the ceiling in the corner of the room, that I'd somehow missed earlier.

The front door opened. Heavy rain blew in, followed by the landlord and his wife, back from their evening out. The wife came over to say hello to the retired couple and stood chatting to them briefly before disappearing. The landlord came to join us and sat down. He was a bit gruff. Not 'smiley' but not unfriendly either. And with an air of authority. He spoke to the retired couple but not to me. They were obviously pleased. They used his first name a lot. There was a slight suggestion about the interaction of local 'celebrity' and admiring 'fans'. Another barmaid came over and spoke to me. 'Are you Jackie?' she asked. My hosts at the farm had telephoned. They were worried about my getting back in the torrential rain. If I gave them a ring 10 minutes before I was ready to

leave, one of them would come and collect me in the car. Everyone agreed how lovely that was. As I didn't have my phone, I asked the barmaid to thank them but say that I'd be fine as I'd brought a mac and umbrella. With that the retired couple decided to leave and said their farewells. I thought the landlord would do the same but instead he turned towards me. 'So you're the Table for One', he said. I smiled to myself at this evidence that the booking had rendered me an object of curiosity. 'Yes', I said, 'and a very nice evening I've had too. Of course, I did have advance warning not to order [local beer]–but as it turned out I was safe'. No smile, but 'Another?' he asked, picking up my glass. I said I'd have a small one, told him I'd got a tab open, but he poo-pooed that. On his return, I told him I'd been trying to identify a theme in the collection of objects around the place but had been unable to do so. There wasn't one–if he liked something, he bought it. I observed that there weren't many pubs that displayed cuttings from the *Guardian*. He said he'd just found it amusing. I asked how long he'd been there and he explained that it had been a career change from years in the food-processing business. It had taken him all over the world. It had been very demanding. He had hated it–the people, the corporate ethos, the hours–it had been all-consuming and he'd had to get out. Leaving an earlier marriage behind perhaps, I mused. He nodded assent. And why a pub, I wondered? He had asked himself, when he'd made the change, where he had done most of his socialising. The answer was the pub, so he'd decided to turn his social and work life into one, which perhaps accounted for the 'having-no-truck-with customers'-whims' approach (clearly a successful tactic, business-wise, in these parts); it also accounted, I suspected, for the cancelling of Sunday lunch (because after all, running a pub, with or without food, is actually extremely hard work) but still keeping his customers happy by allowing them to bring their own food if they wished. That motivation might have been his thinking at the time, I suggested to him, but I wondered how in reality he managed to keep private and public life separate. He said he didn't–didn't need to. I told him I'd recently moved into a village and while people were friendly to me and I to them, I had very consciously maintained boundaries. There was no going in and out of each other's houses all the time for me. What enabled me to be friendly to my neighbours was maintaining a degree of privacy–a home that was essentially a haven. It shouldn't be like that, he said. It was a shame to maintain boundaries in that way. He insisted again that he had none. I was sceptical. I had a strong feeling that there was much more of a story to tell but suddenly noticed that the barmaids were beginning to put stools on tables and realised that I was the only customer left. I had lost track of time. It was late. I thanked him for the drink and told him I'd enjoyed talking to him. He returned the compliment, and I settled my tab and went out into the torrential rain.

I walked back along the middle of the road rather than through the fields. It was a good job I'd got the torch to light my way because it was pitch black. I was suddenly conscious of the fact that I was alone late at night in an unfamiliar place and that no-one I 'knew' knew where I was. The farmhouse was in darkness when I got back and I was locked out. Richard eventually opened the door to my gentle knocking, in his dressing gown. They hadn't got the message that I'd be ok to get back under my own steam but may have thought that I'd returned unseen and gone to bed. He was too keen to get back to bed for explanations or apologies. Those had to wait till the morning, but I was extremely uncomfortable that they might think me churlish when they had been so kind.

At breakfast, they were both very gracious about the failure of communication. 'We feel very protective towards our guests', Janey said. When they had waved me off the previous evening I'd been wearing light trousers, a blouse, and sandals. They hadn't seen me turn back to my car as I had noted gathering clouds, to change into stout shoes and grab a mac and umbrella. I told them I was really very appreciative of their concerns and just so sorry that my message hadn't got through. All was repaired.

The following evening–my last–I was on my way to their cosy 'guest lounge' with beautiful antiques and books, with a glass of wine in my hand from a bottle I'd bought from the local Co-op on my first day, when they invited me to join them at the big dining table in the central kitchen where guests breakfasted. They'd just finished their evening meal, and Richard had a glass of red on the go too. No, no, they assured me, I definitely wouldn't be intruding–they were planning a holiday of their own, a walking holiday abroad, and were just bemoaning the trouble they were having trying to download maps. We talked of this for a while before the conversation turned to how my evening had gone. 'You know more about the locals than we do!' they laughed after I recounted the proceedings. Janey was equally sceptical about the landlord's claim not to have any personal boundaries, but Richard was more credulous. Janey thought that that was rather a male view. She and I agreed that there was much more to the landlord than met the eye. Despite Richard's view, they were both astounded that he had talked to me for so long and so personally. Janey thought it may have been because he didn't usually meet people like me locally. I wasn't sure what the 'like me' indicated and decided not to ask. In the online 'feedback' the booking site asks hosts and guests alike to complete, Janey and I said complimentary things about each other–including, somewhat unusually, in among the other descriptions of what might be taken to constitute a good 'guest', that I am 'independent'.

Discussion

For interpretative purposes, the story is divided into 'episodes': getting to the venue, placement in the dining room, interactions with the dining-room customers, placement in the bar, interactions in the bar, interaction with the landlord, 'post-mortem' with B&B hosts, and host 'feedback'.

I saw Richard's advice-giving on getting to the pub as illustrative of a male perspective. He interpreted my query about safety in relation to walking to the pub alone in terms of terrain (a path through woods being more pleasant and safer from traffic than the road) rather than the 'personal safety' concerns that had prompted my question. But he was thoughtful enough to give me a torch to light my path back when I hadn't thought about it being unlit. In a similarly gendered way, it was Janey whom I noticed spotting my dress/footwear and expressing doubts about Richard's recommended route, although she didn't specify why, so that he simply reasserted that going across the field was the way to go.

On arrival, my placement by the barmaid at the table in the alcove under the stairs accorded with the documented experiences of other solo female diners who are seated 'out of the way'. Her markedly 'affirmative' response to my moving tables to the main body of the room, however, suggested to me that she had thought she was being helpful and that I would be more comfortable being inconspicuous. As for the conviviality seen as an essential element of eating out, the lack of interaction between the couple dining together echoed

the recognition by Heimtun's (2010) interviewees that those dining together should not be assumed always to be 'having more fun', while the conversation between the older man coming in from the garden and myself *was* convivial. One might also speculate about the significance of age in this interaction, specifically whether the fact that we were 'peers' in this sense facilitated his initiating an exchange of pleasantries in contrast to a possible inhibition had I been a *young* 'lone' female. Of course, it may also be the fact that he was accompanied by the rest of his extended family that negated (both for him and me) any risk of reading sexual connotations into his conversational 'overture'. Alternatively, the fact that none of the other members of his family engaged with me may suggest that he was just a friendly sort of guy who liked chatting to all and sundry (apart from those like the couple who avoided eye contact with everyone including each other).

The barmaid's response to my suggestion that I move through to the bar after I'd finished eating indicated to me a change in status from when she first took me through to the dining room. I would cite two possible factors in accounting for this. The first is the interaction between us when I ordered. Perhaps because the dining room wasn't a formal restaurant, it didn't occur to me that table service operated. My ordering at the bar may have led her, in line with Seymour and Sandiford (2005) findings, to dispense with a 'deferential' approach in favour of a more informal/friendly one. Her comment about my not having too far to stagger 'home' also revealed that she knew (presumably from Richard's having made the booking) where I was staying and this may also have allowed her, after assessing that I wasn't seeking formality, to afford me honorary status as a 'local' who would be perfectly happy mixing with the 'rabble'. Certainly, her placing me on the 'drinking' side of the bar suggested to me that she had stopped seeing me as needing any kind of 'protection' as a lone diner/drinker. I must admit that once there, I did feel slightly more 'exposed' in my 'lone' status when an exclusively male group gathered at the bar. Had I not forgotten my phone, I may have used browsing social media as a way of creating a 'privatised' space, as the young man at the bar did before his mates arrived. As it was, I briefly engaged the barmaid in conversation again and then spent time happily looking at the 'décor'. Going over to read the *Guardian* article enabled me to see the layout of that side of the room and when some people there left, to move to the table they had vacated. The fact that the group around the bar immediately took my place at the bench table confirmed to me that I had been occupying their usual space. At the same time, I registered to myself, they could, with looks or body language, have made me feel uncomfortable where I had been sitting, but had not done so.

My conversation with the retired couple who joined me at my 'new' table confirmed the impressions that I had been given by my B&B hosts, of the pub as a friendly 'local' and the landlord as a popular 'character'. What they told me about the pub and its customers had enabled me to engage the new group of men at the bar in 'banter' when I went up for a second drink–but even before I had spoken to them, I was struck by their friendliness and 'inclusivity' in creating a space for me to actually get to the bar (in contrast to experiences I have had in other pubs when trying to 'get a round in' for friends I was with). I saw the woman's story about the landlord hanging her 'prop' on the wall and their interaction with him and his wife on their return as 'identity work' they were performing in order to confirm their own status as known 'locals'.

As for the landlord's opening remark to me when the couple left, perhaps it was the message from my hosts that reminded him of my dinner booking; but his observation that

I was the 'Table for One' definitely signalled a degree of 'extra-visibility'. It may have been the positive review I gave him of my evening thus far that prompted him to offer me another drink and it may have been that offer that in turn encouraged me to co-construct the conversation which followed as a 'social' one rather than one strictly determined by the conventions of landlord and (female) customer. Furthermore, I would account for the level of 'intimacy' in our conversation in several ways. First, there was a mutual curiosity–on his part, indicated by his comment about my lone status and on mine about the 'idiosyncratic' persona he had evidently created for himself as landlord. Second, I think age was operating to substitute friendly intimacy for sexual overtones. Although he was perhaps a decade younger than me, there was still a sense that we were 'peers'–but this operated not to open up any potential for a more sexualised encounter but rather an unspoken understanding that we had both accrued 'life experience' which allowed us to 'compare notes', to speak with a degree of 'personal authority' and also to politely disagree each other (I still saw his 'professional identity' as 'constructed' despite his claim to maintain no barriers between a private and public self–my scepticism later being matched by Janey's, but disputed by Richard's–another gendered difference?).

I should say that I did not experience any of my interactions with men in the pub that evening as having any sexual overtones, and I hypothesise that my age was significant in each of these encounters, functioning in two ways: as a combination of personal agency and perception. My 'accrued life experience' allows me to offer a 'presentation of self' as confident and friendly when this is genuinely felt and/or needed and it raises questions about the interrelations between neoliberal cultures and the forms of subjectivity they produce, whereby people are not defined through fixed/essential qualities but come to see themselves as shape-shifting portfolio individuals prepared to rearrange their skills and achievements in a creative manner. Usually applied to the governing of 'working' selves, Brown (2003) argues that initiative, self-governance, and flexibility are also required for 'success' in personal relationships. As an older woman, I was probably 'counted out' as being 'sexually available' and so not subject to the sexual stereotyping younger lone women dining out experience, and this, combined with my relative self-confidence, may have contributed to the fact that I was treated as an individual (albeit a female one) rather than as a 'sex object'. I wonder, too, whether my projection of a confident persona at ease with myself may also account for Janey's description of me in her online feedback as 'independent'.

I should add a cautionary note about my identification of age as of significance, however. It is not only (older) age that is missing from the analyses of lone dining cited earlier. Valentine (1993) points out that heterosexuality is the dominant sexuality in most everyday environments, with all interactions taking place between sexed actors. But such is the strength of the assumption of the 'naturalness' of heterosexual hegemony that most people are oblivious to the way it operates as a process of power relations in *all* spaces. As she reports, being lesbian or gay in public spaces such as hotels and restaurants is to attract negative attention. Although her study is not of *lone* female dining, her interviewees reported being stared at, talked about, and verbally abused by fellow guests and intimidated by aggressive staff, responses they attributed to being identified as lesbians due to their presentations. I suggested that it was partly my being an older woman that accounted for my being exempted from unwanted sexual attention, but Valentine's study highlights the way in which (as the studies of lone female dining cited earlier also do) this ignores

how (in this case, my own) heterosexual orientation/identity becomes taken for granted. Ethnicity, meanwhile, is completely omitted from current analyses.

Other observations by both Janey and Richard might also be explanatory of the 'personal' nature of my conversation with the landlord. The day before, Richard had expressed the opinion that there was a degree of insularity about local families, whose children, even as they approached adulthood, had little interest in moving away; this, together with Janey's comment the next day about the landlord not usually meeting 'people like me' locally, may suggest that I was ascribed an aura of 'exoticism'. Or perhaps it was the 'train journey' phenomenon–that experience of having an intimate conversation characterised by mutual disclosures with others you know you're never going to see again. If this, as well as my earlier analysis of 'honorary local' identity, is accurate, the fact that I could be seen/treated at one and same time as 'local' and 'stranger' raises interesting questions about how 'insider-outsider' status is dynamically constructed within interactions. This, together with the kind of pub/lic space this was, encourages me to call upon another concept not cited in earlier analyses of gendered sociality in public spaces. The fact is that I was made to feel welcome, 'at home'. The 'hospitableness' I experienced meant that I enjoyed my solo dining more than I had anticipated.

Nouwen (1998) defines hospitality as 'primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend' (p. 49). It involves generous giving without concern for return, allowing people to be themselves, giving them room to

> sing their own songs, speak their own languages, dance their own dances […] not a subtle invitation to adopt the lifestyle of the host, but the gift of a chance to find their own … inviting guests into our world on their terms. (Nouwen, 1998: 78)

For Lashley et al. (2007), however, it is 'hospitableness' that is offered without the prospect of reciprocity or reward, motivated by general benevolence, affection, compassion, or sense of a duty, while Lugosi (2014) suggests that the former can masquerade as the latter–mobilizing hospitality and establishing host–guest relations which facilitate interdependency, generate affective relationships, and invite reciprocities–can be seen as a form of 'strategic enchantment'.

The landlord, it seems to me, had created a space in which he could straddle both ends of the spectrum, a space which ostensibly blurred the boundaries between public and private, commercial and domestic. It *was* a commercial enterprise, but one in which to a large extent guests were invited in on *his* rather than their terms (his choice of beers; cancelling Sunday lunch). His 'terms' were also illustrated by a space which imitated/shaded into a domestic one, the décor being a visual representation of his personal style/identity (although he was also happy to incorporate customers' 'quirks' into his 'interior design'). What of his interactions with me? I did not experience our interchange as strategic on his part but rather as 'hospitableness'. Of relevance here also, it seems to me, is that the pub was a *village* pub characterised by community relationships (the go-kart race; the notice about the hapless James Tyler) which contrast with more anonymous metropolitan sites. Maye et al. (2005) argue that each village pub has its own unique *cultural terrain*, a kind of 'spaghetti junction' that includes commercial links with suppliers/customers and cultural resources such as village networks. Its terrain may have

certain aesthetic qualities, traditions (e.g. events, games), or stories that connect it to the area, as well as modern facilities (car parking, restaurant). The village too includes aesthetic qualities as well as local-resident cultures and services. There is a need, they conclude, for more culturally informed geographical work on the changing place of village pubs, including, for example, a consideration of how consumers culturally make sense of village pubs. Studdert (2016) goes further. He sees us all as communal beings created by common actions of sociality. How then do we investigate the social of which we are both observer and act-or? He proposes that the 'who' we are, our being-ness/identity, is the outcome of constant sociality enacted in common and created and sustained in common through the inter-relational linking of action, materiality, subjectivity, speech, and the world of meanings. My solo dining experience seems to support this.

Conclusion

While autoethnographies may take the form of presentations of aesthetic projects through poetry, prose, film, dance, and other kinds of performance–all privileging the subjective, what lies beneath the surface of 'everyday life', and the need to communicate effectively with and 'interactively' engage the reader with a 'crafted' narrative–I tend towards the 'analytic' end of the spectrum (Anderson, 2006). I have used analysis/interpretation of an autoethnographic account of solo female dining to expand the theorising of earlier studies in a number of ways. Some aspects of my experience accorded with those of others (the paradox of 'extra-visibility' combined with assumptions about the appropriate positioning 'out of the way' of the lone female diner) and with organisational analyses (the shifting ground of service staff's responses to customers according to the degree of flexibility afforded them by the in/formal nature of the space in which they are working), but despite me having actively to 'manage' my occupying of the different spaces within the pub and my encounters therein, in ways that (heterosexual) men rarely need to do, this experience of solo female dining was, in contrast to other analyses, a predominantly positive one, affording me an enjoyable evening in congenial company. In accounting for this, I have suggested that analyses need to be differentiated by age; and also to make the function of sexual orientation explicit, including, perhaps especially, when heterosexuality is being taken for granted. Accounts which are able to illuminate the significance of different ethnicities would also be invaluable. I have also 'problematised' the notion of the pub as a necessarily masculine space that either excludes women or makes them subject to negative moralising, disciplinary surveillance, or unwanted male attention. The village pub it seems to me is a markedly different kind of space to the urban/city-centre one that has hitherto been the main focus of attention. Village pubs are having to adapt to survive in terms of what they offer, but in contrast to city-centre pubs they perform a central role within their local community, and part of this is that they need to be 'inclusive' and offer not only 'hospitality' but also the 'hospitableness' that I was afforded as both an 'honorary local' and an 'exotic outsider'.

Finally, I have highlighted an element of personal agency in the constitution of gendered sociality. While in no way negating the disciplining of the female body which dares to venture out independently, this supports a conceptualisation of gendered sociality in public spaces as mutually created, enacted, and sustained through the inter-relationship of a matrix

of elements. For me, the sociality that was enacted in the public space of the pub where I dined one evening as a lone female was indeed accomplished through gendered practices, relationships, and interactions between myself; my B&B hosts; service staff; fellow customers; local and universal knowledge(s), customs, and practices, including communicative resources; and material, spatial, and symbolic artefacts within the designed environment of a particular 'servicescape'. But it demonstrated to me that despite being 'anomalous' and requiring active 'management', it is nevertheless possible as a woman to dine out alone in comfort. In this it contributes to the somewhat limited literature on the topic. As with all autoethnographies, it is for the reader to judge how far it keeps the conversation going.

Funding

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Author biography

Jackie Goode is a Sociologist and Visiting Fellow in Qualitative Research at Loughborough University. She uses qualitative methods, including visual ethnography and autoethnography, to examine various aspects of everyday social life, institutional organisation, and visual and material culture(s).