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Working Paper 135: Whose Method is it Anyway?
Researching space, setting, and practice

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Whose Method is it Anyway? Researching space, setting, and practice

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Abstract

This paper was presented at the NCRM Oxford Methods Festival (2010) and considers some analytical problems observed within recent innovations in qualitative research; specifically, the use of GPS technology and the various ways in which such spatial data may be represented. The paper is intended as a reminder of the critique of the social sciences posed by Ethnomethodology and, in particular, applies these observations to the recent focus upon matters of space, place, and practice. It is argued below that in mapping and representing spatial practice the analyst runs the risk of obscuring the *just what* and *just how* of the practice they claim to gain access to. The paper draws on the three examples, outreach work in Cardiff, housewives' cleaning, and people crossing the road, to demonstrate the form of reduction that can be observed operating in what we may call 'formal spatial analysis'.

Keywords: Space, Practice, Ethnomethodology, GPS, GIS, Qualitative methods, Mapping

Introduction

In the course of this paper, I consider a number of ways in which we might go about researching the social organisation of space and place and, further, what doing this from a perspective which pays attention to ordinary actions might entail. In doing so I connect to a number of wider themes that are central to what has been dubbed 'the spatial turn' in the social sciences. In this paper, I want to specifically reflect on contemporary innovations in approaches to researching space, place and practice in the context of the 'post-disciplinary era', the 'mixed-methods' agenda, and the emergence of advances in mapping technologies and Qualitative GIS.

This paper is about a whole load of stuff getting done, including housewives cleaning and people crossing the road and, essentially, is concerned with the everyday and practical organisation of spatial practices and social settings. Drawing from the work of Ethnomethodology, and Interactionist sociology more broadly (Atkinson and Housley, 2003), I consider the way in which a key task of social science – namely, addressing the question of the possibility and accomplishment of situated social organisation – is perhaps reduced or lost within certain innovative methodologies. It is suggested, as I have done elsewhere (Housley and Smith, 2010), that the reductionist moment encapsulated in contemporary qualitative innovations is especially evident within research concerned with the documentation and formal analysis of members' spatial practices. Put more simply, I will consider what we miss or (mis)represent in the analysis of spatial matters getting done by people in their everyday lives when we approach these practices in a manner that obscures the practical, lived-work, involved in their accomplishment.

To get us underway, I'd like to consider a key question in relation to methodological developments under the auspices of the much heralded 'spatial turn'; namely, what are we doing when we map movement and spatial practice?

Mapping Spatial Practice

This paper is not simply concerned with the methods of the professional social scientist. It is informed by an analysis of the routine methods employed by a team of professionals whose job it is to patrol the city centre, mainly on foot, seeking out and providing immediate welfare services and longer term support to the city's small but significant population of street homeless. The work of urban outreach demands a close knowledge of the city centre – one that cannot be gained by any other method than being there, in the middle of things, on the streets of Cardiff. I too have been making these regular daily patrols with the team and recording the movements across the city that I make with them by carrying a small GPS device in my pocket; the GPS unit reliably (well most of the time anyway) keeps track of where I am (or was) at specified points in time by triangulating data from satellites, thus the effect is a constant and regular production of dots on a map. When one uploads this string of dots (a digital breadcrumb trail) the software joins the dots and, when you combine three months worth of patrol in the early evening, you get a mapping of movement (or rather, a collection of points in space which the software has joined) which look something like this:

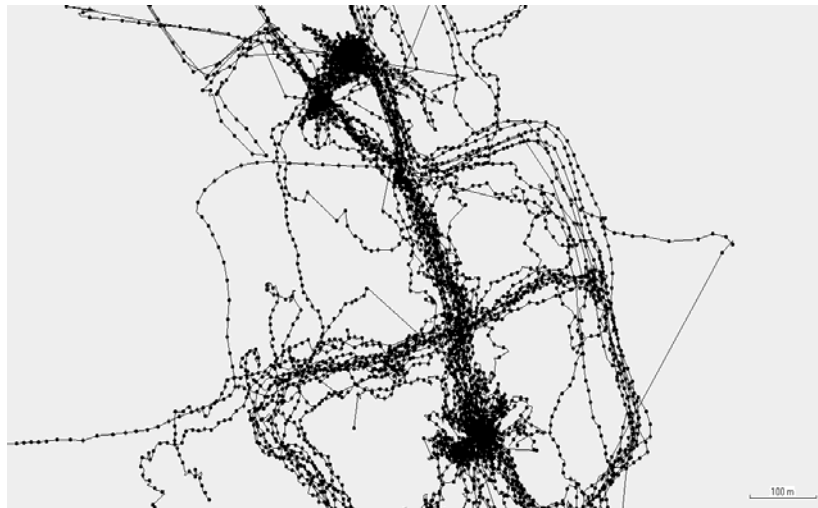


Fig 1: Palimpsest of Urban Patrol in Cardiff

Here, in Figure 1, you have a palimpsest of 35 patrols undertaken by the team of outreach workers with me tagging along and the GPS recording our movements. What you are looking at is spatial data at its most quantitative, stripped of context and meaning. And of course, these dots mean nothing by themselves; at a very basic level of mixed methods we at least need fieldnotes to give meaning to, or 'flesh out', these quantitative data (a phrase one hears often in similar regard to integrating survey data with interview materials, for example; 'the big picture' filled out with 'interesting cases'). Even with a base map of Cardiff underneath, unless you happened to be one of the outreach workers, or me, this doesn't say much at all about the context, interactions, and settings in which the trace was produced. And is it not these aspects, surely, that makes a spatial practice worth mapping in the first instance?

Without any context, however, we can still perform a spatial analysis of a kind and say something about outreach in Cardiff as a spatially distributed professional practice. We can make observations about the clustering of the data (the GPS coordinates as dots), about the time of day when dots appear in which patterns, about how they change over weeks months and years, and perhaps, about how they intersect with the dots and lines produced by other groups doing other stuff in the same space. In this

palimpsest two things are, hopefully, immediately apparent: the first is that there is a clustering of dots in two areas to the north and the south – something is going on, and regularly, at these points; the GPS continues marking location, producing data, when the carrier is stood still. We also see the clustering of dots and a thickening of lines between these two points along a central axis of the map, not signifying a stop this time but a regular and repeated movement creating a cruciform demonstrating the path most travelled; there are outliers but the clustering is clear. Other observations one may want to make will depend on your understanding of the practice that you are looking and your position on spatial analysis. For some the salient feature becomes the repetition the repeating and retracing of the route over time. Since this is outreach work, however, and a mobile spatial practice it is more significant that not a single trace is the same as the next; there is an identifiable pattern, sure, but the data are also striking in their variation.

On Mapping Ordinary Action

With a descriptive knowledge of the practice behind the dots (urban outreach) we may want to make statements about their distribution across this grey flat terrain; or perhaps do clever things like represent them on Google Earth or various other available base maps which show line of sight, density of buildings, pedestrian flow and so on and so forth. All of which would produce different insights, renderings, and representations of the spatial distribution of the practice of outreach in Cardiff. In this paper, however, I want to consider what this mapping of practice might mean for an analysis of the practical organisation of spatial practice, place, and setting and peoples' mundane knowledges of the world they inhabit; and for this we need a different point of orientation.

Here's a quote from Harold Garfinkel and Harvey Sacks (1970: 347):

If, whenever housewives were let in to a room, each one on her own went to the same spot and started to clean it, one might conclude that the spot surely needed cleaning. On the other hand, one might conclude that there is something about the spot and about the housewives that makes the encounter of one by the other an occasion for cleaning, in which case the fact of the cleaning, instead of being evidence of dirt would itself be a phenomenon.

So what are they getting at in their usual, esoteric, fashion? Well, they are putting forward a respecification of 'what-everyone-knows-about-practical-actions' and insisting upon a way of looking at the social world which treats phenomena, and the observation and reporting of phenomena by members via the use of natural language, as a *topic* of investigation rather than a *resource* with which to make social scientific, professional, claims about the world. This line of argument is also found in Eric Laurier's more recent criticism of the way in which people's everyday practices and knowledges of spatial matters are seized upon and 'professionalised' in ever proliferating theories of socio-spatial organisation. Laurier (2000) argues for an alternative orientation to the world, coupled with an analytical patience, which just might help us to 'give theory a rest' (Laurier, 2010). As most of you will know we have experienced in the social sciences in the past decade or so, 'the spatial turn'. This has seen a dual increase in focus upon spatial matters but also an emergence of spatial explanatory frameworks and theories which span disciplinary boundaries; Foucault's heterotopic space, Soja's Thirdspace, Lefebvre's Dialectical Space, Massey's Relational Space, Harvey's Accumulative Space, Auge's Non-Place, Entrikin's Reflexive Space, and so on. Tied to this turn, its impact on qualitative sociology has seen the development of 'innovative' methods at its disposal for gaining access to the way in which places come to mean something for people – the walking interview being a key example in which we still see 'experience' as a focus of

analysis and the continued assertion that a good elicitation device will give the sociologist some kind of privileged access to experience. Indeed, we might say that ‘the interview society’ (Atkinson and Silverman, 1997) has spawned ‘the elicitation society’.

In terms of linking movement and account, consider the GPS routes that might be produced in walking interviews. We must ask a question which raises a potential critique similar to that levied against the interview; namely what is the status of the data produced in a walk where the participant has been instructed or invited to lead a researcher round ‘their place’? Data are clearly of a different order than the outreach workers who are *already* walking and have let me tag along and will continue to do so whether I am there or not. This is not to say that we should dismiss data produced in walking tours but, rather, that we should be careful of the claims that we may be able to make about spatial practice and place as a result (Housley and Smith, 2010).

So, the question remains: in terms of research space, place, and social settings what would it look like if we *were* to concern ourselves less with accessing second order accounts (what-people-say-they-do) and, instead, proceed from an interest in social action? What would it look like if we *were* to give theory a rest and focus on practice? Well, let’s go back to our housewives again and conduct some methodological innovation by giving them a GPS unit as they enter the room. If matters proceeded as in Garfinkel and Sacks’ example then, from the GPS data, we would expect a representation that looked something like this:

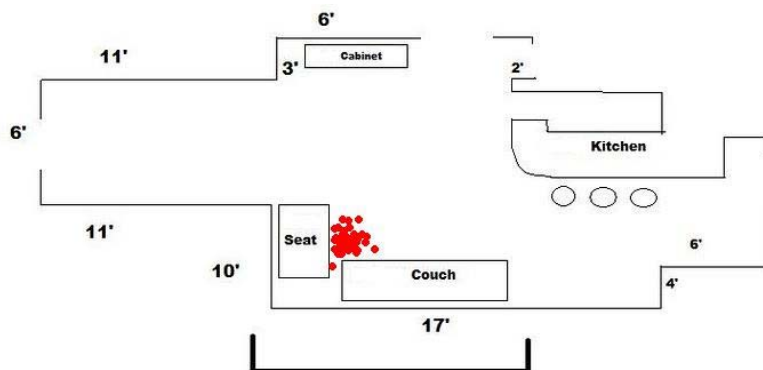


Fig 2: The Distribution of Housewives and Cleaning

So here, from the data produced by the movement of the housewives and the sites of their cleaning, we have positively identified the dirty spot in the room.

One can already find the use of GPS technology by various agencies and institutions, such as the Police, to track and record the movements of their patrols, to assist with resource allocation, and to identify various ‘hotspots’. We can also use the GPS tracks in our data set, documenting the spatial distribution of the work of professionals such as outreach workers, street sweepers, and Police Community Support Officers, to make various claims relating to the relationship between local knowledge, mobility, and practice.

Yet, before we get carried away with our success, I would want to suggest that when we map mobile spatial practice, when we render actions as objective features of the analysis, and when we interpret the data in this manner, the consequence is the obscuring of the

'just what' of the practice, knowledge, and competencies involved in the accomplishment of the situation. In short, what we might call 'formal spatial analysis' represents and reports spatial distribution at the cost of accessing the practical organisation, and the orders of production, of these patterns.

To proceed along this line of inquiry let's consider something else getting done and ask a rather trivial, yet tricky, question: how is it that people cross the road?



Figure 3: The Intersection

Here are some people doing just that. So, from this image, what can we say?

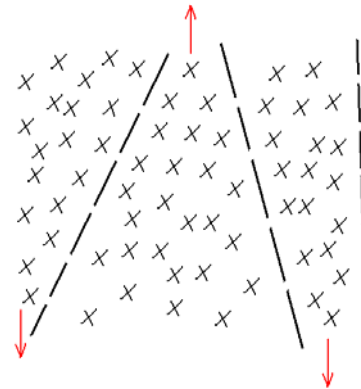
Well, we can say that most people are crossing between the white painted lines, but not all. We can say that the oncoming streams of people are passing through each other in an organised fashion. Most people are walking, although it is worth noting that it is the woman who is 'disobeying' the white lines and the right angled spatial organisation of the intersection is running. What we cannot claim, however, is that we are observing the playing out of fixed 'rules' here. We cannot, for example, observe the playing out of a rule such as 'keep to the left' as seen in subway stations and heard shouted down school corridors; there is no, human, marshalling agent ensuring people cross in an orderly fashion. So, in the absence of formal rules (with the exception, perhaps, of the lights at the crossing) how is it, then, that the two groups of people standing opposite each other waiting for the signalled time to cross the road are able to do so in a coordinated fashion?

I have borrowed this example from Eric Livingstone (1987) who considered the actions of a social scientist, when challenged with the organisational problem of the intersection, climbs to the top of a high building and looks down at the two groups involved in the business of crossing the intersection. From this lofty vantage point the sociologist can now make out the patterns of the people as they cross the road. Through the use of video and still frame sequence analysis the sociologist identifies patterns in the crossing of the intersection in which people arrange themselves. The sociologists decides to call

these patterns ‘wedges’ and ‘fronts’, which form behind ‘point’ people. Thus the organisational structure that allows people to navigate through each other is observable, coherent and there, and looks something like this:



Fig 4: Fronts, Wedges, and Point People



This diagrammatic representation of the social scientist’s finding becomes a proof of analysis, a record of what they witnessed and a case to test against other groups crossing other intersections. Here is, at once, the analysis and the proof for the sociologist. They would be, undoubtedly, even more certain that they’d nailed it when the analysis is repeated in different places and times with the same results.

So, wedges, fronts, and point people. Our scientist has done well. This then is a finding in relation to an everyday spatial practice. From the God’s eye position we witnessed the ordered crossing of the road and can go to other crossings in other places to see if this finding still holds. But, ultimately and unfortunately for our sociologist, the important question is not whether this analysis is correct or not and whether there might be some generalisable ‘intersection order’, but whether or not people actually employ ‘wedges’, ‘fronts’ and ‘point people’ in order to cross the road? The answer, of course, is no they don’t. In Livingstone’s (1987:22) words

pedestrians do not use these documented, geometrically described alignments of physical bodies; they are engaged in a much more dynamic forging of their paths. They are engaged in locally building, together, the developing organisation of their mutual passage.

The resultant order is visible to the sociologist at the expense of access to the ‘local building’ practices of members and is, as Livingstone notes, ‘at best a documented residue of the naturally organised, lived-work of getting through traffic’.

If we move from the top of our building to street level, where the business of crossing the road is getting done we see a different picture – one in which the oncoming wall of pedestrians adjusts to the initial movements of the wall of pedestrians they themselves are facing. Together the ‘front runners’ away from the pavement produce and negotiate gaps in the pedestrian traffic allowing for an interface of participants where all concerned will get to the other side of the road in the allotted time with a minimum of physical contact – an achievement of the persons involved which produces the witnessable phenomenon and order observed by the sociologist but whose analysis, unfortunately, misses the ‘just what’ or ‘just how’ of the situation and instead simply recognises,

captures, and represents the order that is the product of practical work of people crossing the road.

Despite the seemingly trivial analysis of the crossing of the intersection this has a deep significance in terms of the qualitative analysis of space and place. In the words of Andy Crabtree (2000):

Common sense understandings of space and place are objectified such that spaces and places are construed as external structures containing and constraining action. The phenomenal elements – practical actions, equipment, embodied practices, and interactional competences – in and through which spaces and places are observably organised and made available as objective structures...pass by unnoticed on such accounts.

What does he mean? Well, he's saying that social science approaches to space and place act to objectify space and place in such a way that position them as 'out there' and existing *a priori* to the practical methods which we may have for their discovery. Further, there is a danger that this problem is exacerbated with the current drive to map, represent, and mix methods. Husserl wrote that there was within the social sciences a 'forgotten genealogy' of the practical and phenomenal elements such as practical actions, talk, interaction, arrangements, equipment and so on which give space and place an objective existence, which renders it a matter of mundane reason and reality, whether that be for social scientists or people going about their day to day lives. As noted by Crabtree (2000) being a competent spatial member of a given setting is not comprised of 'deep mysteries only open to adepts', but are mutually intelligible and shared and form part of a 'natural (spatial) attitude' (Husserl, 1999) in which we all, on a daily and routine basis, display practical spatial competency.

To move toward a conclusion of sorts, the key point is that we must acknowledge the fact that our methods shape the world in particular ways and this takes us to the issue of disciplinary questions and traditions. For the sociology of the sort I've been describing in this paper, the focus remains upon the possibility and realisation of social organisation; a question to which, of course, qualitative traditions can provide particularly powerful insights. Despite maps, mapping, and spatial data being analytically powerful, with the increased emphasis on the 'spatial turn' in the social sciences, we must ensure that as qualitative sociologists we remain sensitive to the ordinary actions and practical assemblages through which spatial practice and organisation is realised.

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