When The Self Generates the Whole: A Mini-Ethnography about Continuity, Community, Home, and Identity

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Abstract

In the eyes of the customers, there is a "mystified" obscurity which constructs the store as a locus of functional, yet impersonal (financial) transactions. Nonetheless, this study aims to challenge this portrayal. In turn, it explores the interplay between the workers' values and their role in the way a market is perceived. This mini-ethnography follows the story of an ethnic shop owner and his way of navigating through his established life in Amsterdam while keeping the memory of his father's ambition alive through his family and the store itself.

Keywords

Ethnographic research, Ethnic shop, Identity, Community, Diaspora, Home

Positionality

This study was originally an assignment for the qualitative part of a methodology course. Therefore, while it was initially steered by the desire to successfully complete it, I ended up being fully immersed in my field work. I operated with an open-mind and allowed for the people, as well as the environments in which I was situated, to construct my perspectives. Despite its seemingly prosaic contextuality, the chosen topic was not coincidental; it stemmed from my curiosity to find out how other people navigate through their lives while being far away from their native country. Being an international student allowed me to use this part of my identity to uncover a *shared* sense of vulnerability and a need for community, which is common for migrants, and make use of it to have fruitful and touching conversations. In other words, nuances of my own homesickness have painted the rationale for conducting my research.

Notwithstanding, there are some important details which need to be considered. Firstly, it is important to note that the interviewee is not proficient in English. Therefore, I acknowledge the presence of a language barrier which might have hindered my understating of the points he was trying to get across. Moreover, presenting myself as a student conducting research might have altered the usual behaviour of the workers due to the social desirability bias (on their part). This last assertion was heavily considered when conducting the analysis.

Ethics

Before conducting the interview and the two sessions of participant observation, the owner of the shop and its workers were informed about the scope of the research and offered their consent to participate in the study.

Moreover, for ethical reasons, the name shop and of its employees will not be publicly shared. Because of this, the article instead uses the pseudonym of "Leo" to refer to its owner and does not disclose any further information that has not been consented to be used.

Introduction

For many, going grocery shopping entails another mundane errand vital to one's existence. In the eyes of the customers, there is a "mystified" obscurity, which envisages the store as a locus of functional, yet impersonal (financial) transactions. More precisely, it is commonly deemed a place that solely provides products vital for one's subsistence. Nonetheless, this study aims to challenge this portrayal. In turn, by answering the question "In what ways do the workers' values shape the ways a store is conceived?", it shows how beyond its mainstream understanding, a store emerges as an extension of the workers' spirits and as a haven for community.

These findings are particularly relevant, as they illustrate the significant relationship between the self and the environment in which it is situated; they also reveal the way the shop, as a part of the public sphere, is domesticated (Kumar & Makarova, 2008, p. 25). Furthermore, this article sheds light on one of the contexts in which this phenomenon occurs: when the workers transform the store into a site of "meaning and identity" (ibid) to preserve and upkeep their aspirations.

These relevant insights emerged from six hours of participant observation, split into two different sessions, in an ethnic Turkish store in Amsterdam East. These hours entailed me walking around the store with the workers and some customers, noting their practices and interactions with other people. Besides observations, I also conducted a semi-structured interview with the store owner, based on topics and issues that emerged in the aforementioned sessions. The concatenation of these two sources of data paved the way for the thematic framework, explored in the next sections.

A Store With Some "Extra"

Besides the classic variety of products one would find in mainstream stores, here the Turkish, Dutch, Asian, and African cuisines are intertwined in a place that seems to promise to have everything. Because of its ethnic inflexions, the store encourages cultural curiosity. As Leo, the owner of the shop explains it, even those who know nothing about the cuisine can buy under the guidance of the workers- "the specialists", as he phrased it. Upon reflecting on how he would describe his shop, he painted his business as being a complete locus of shopping. Accordingly, inside the store, a poster affirms that there, customers can find anything, and if they do not, it is because they have not asked the owner (yet). There is a lot to unpack: first, because it faces the inside of the store, it moulds the shopping experience and employees' assistance as being exclusive to the interested customers:

"*To get them inside, they must come by themselves. I am not a street market.*"

Secondly, this consequential affirmation of confidence illustrates the openness of this business to diversify its goods if requested, to reach completeness: "*They say- you are complete"*. Therefore, the shop appears as an amalgamation of customers' requests under the workers' expertise. Finally, it can leave a new customer wondering

about what could this store really provide. During my first couple of hours of observing, I thought it functioned as a simple, local shop. Yet upon further exploration, I found that it was also a parcel point and offered printing services, which makes it truly multifunctional.

Furthermore, the "extra" Leo attached to the store also entails specialty. He calls himself "the specialist of grocery", which he defines as a person who has specialised knowledge about fresh produce. This variety, in which the owner takes great pride, complements the desire for inclusion and for building a friendly atmosphere through the "domestication of the store", further explored in the following two sections.

An Extension of Self

There is academic consensus that one's outside is a projection of their inside (Baumeister, 1986; Christiansen, 2000). More specifically, the sense of self is formed via interactions with other people and vice versa (Baumeister, 1986). Therefore, as one navigates through life, his or her identity is under permanent construction. This continuous refinement of the self has as its ultimate aim becoming a satisfactory version which can be carried through life as an accomplishment (ibid). Following this line of reasoning, it should be obvious that workers' spirits have an important constructive impact on how the shop is constituted. Here, the owner follows his father's way, with whom he previously had another business. He attached a good feeling about this life path, which he says is more than just a source of living. It complements his extrovert nature and his desire to have an active lifestyle, filled with social interactions. Henceforth, it was intriguing that throughout my discussion with him, he kept referring to the store as "*I*" instead of "*it*".

*"Because they say "**you** are complete". **I** am complete."*

As an addendum, it is important to note the presence of a language barrier that might have hindered my understanding of the points he was trying to get across. This means that this noted self-identification with the store could be a mistake, yet I argue against this prospect, for several reasons. Firstly, he proudly went at length to talk about how he taught his three sons their way around the store- the art of business.

"My other son, the oldest son [...] he knows everything about this. I said "You don't have to do it, just learn it, just like my father did by me". He learnt everything and I said "Ok, you go do what you want to do.""

He sees this kind of knowledge, inherited from his father, and passed down to his sons, as insurance. The shop, then, appears as a legacy and a source of security. These two instances combined signal the desire to preserve and perpetuate the sentiment of hope with which this shop was opened. Therefore, the motif of continuity appears to emphasise the desire and attempt to keep the family bond alive within the store. This ambition, then, is bound to transcend the personal and spill into the atmosphere of the shop itself. This is what is meant by *the self* generating *the whole*: the store is built upon personal values, in this context, on resilience and aspiration. Thus, even though the observed friendly ambience and dynamic between people in the store seemed to me, at first, a performative act employed by the workers because of my presence, I now realize that it is a continuous attempt to maintain the equilibrium which keeps both the store and his dreams "alive". There are no dreams without the store though; the shop is a metonymy, which encapsulates and projects his inside world into the public.

Home

"Home" bears heavy and complex connotations, which makes it a multi-dimensional concept (Sixsmith, 1986). Its meaning is contingent on one's experiences and environment, yet specific commonalities between them have allowed to categorise the notion. Here, two main facets of home prevail: as either a physical, or spiritual setting (Després, 1991; Mordike, 2021).

To start, some call "home" the place where spatial control can be exerted- a manifestation of ownership (Després, 1991). It is a material asset that denotes one's socio-economic standing. It circumscribes a feeling of autonomy where one is free to do what she or he wants, with whomever (Mordike, 2021). For instance, one can express their identity by deciding the layout of the furniture, or the decorations the home has (Després, 1991). Besides this, it can be a medium which provides physical security; a safe place to get away from external pressures (ibid). Beyond that, its purposive functions can transform it into a centre of activities, where one works and performs leisure activities (ibid).

Nonetheless, as Mordike (2021) contends, while the physical environment influences one's well-being, it is never the sole dimension which transforms a place into a home; there is also a spiritual aspect. "To feel at home" is more of a temporal process that develops over time, when the environment instills familiarity (Després, 1991). It is the locus where one experiences the strengthening of emotional experiences with their loved ones; where memories and legacies can be rooted. It can also be the place where aspirations arise and often materialise (ibid). All in all, it is about where one can foster the sentiment of belonging.

In this context, Leo intertwines several features from both dimensions to explain what home means to him. More specifically, he defines it as work and family. It is work because he is confined to the same place, every day, in order to get by, and his life is built around it. As he mentioned, he is "24/7" busy with it. What I thought perfectly illustrated this instance was finding on two different occasions, an empty cup of coffee on top of some boxes. Although I left it as an unexplored topic in the interview, which I acknowledge as a drawback of this study, I believe it could signal a life embedded in the store. More specifically, the cups left there could suggest the increased familiarity of the workers with the store, which in turn, generates an illusion of freedom to accommodate the place according to their needs, even though to an outsider, it could look like a negligent move.

Another captivating observation I made is that even though he acknowledges his appartenance to the Turkish culture, he localizes his home in accordance with his experiences. His children and wisdom all lie in the Netherlands, thus rooting his identity and goals there.

Beyond that, when asked about what his store could mean for the customers, he used the same label: home. This is more than just a title though; it is indicative of the owner's strategy to domesticate the shop (Kumar & Makarova, 2008, p. 325). As a public space, he purposefully organised its layout as an area where private, intimate emotions such as gratitude, nostalgia and kinship can be safely expressed (ibid). I was able to discern these sentiments while looking at the store's walls. Over time, Leo collected many grocery lists that people wrote before shopping at particularly his store. He felt honoured to have people design lists specifically for his shop. Besides those, on

another wall I found pictures of two children and a letter where it was written about how much they would miss the store (as they were moving away). These imprints of the customers, to most of whom the workers have personal attachments, establish the welcoming and cherished, home-like ethos. There, it is safe for each customer to embellish the store with their presence in some way: either by leaving a list, with a smile, wave, or chuckle.

Even more, throughout my participant observation, I witnessed people singing and dancing to music on the radio, making recommendations to each other not only products, but of music as well, and helping one another. Here, the impersonality attached to the shopping experience in mainstream stores is replaced by an environment where the longing for community and familiarity can be safely expressed (Duyvnedak, 2011, p. 17). The construction of "home", then, is a reciprocal process between the customers and the employees of the shop. They are the fundamental pillars that allow the sense of belonging to emerge.

In order for this sentiment to flourish though, as Leo also highlighted, inclusiveness and respect are needed. In this case, the customers are described as acknowledging the hard work that goes into this business:

"Yeah, but it's also the people who come here is also people who respect you. [...] Because the work that we do is not easy work for many people."

Besides community, home also entails safety. Leo paints himself as a guardian when he talks about feeling responsible for making customers feel safe when shopping there. Armed with previous working experiences as a cop and cab driver, he has garnered an understanding of how to navigate through the shop's social network and the art of business. Accordingly, this allows him to provide another dimension of "home", which can be found in the diversity of products. He explains that some people find shelter in this kind of diversity, while others, in a personal connection with the employees, mostly carried out through dialogue. Nonetheless, this aspect reinforces both the first theme but also his ability to discern the variety of needs customers have and adapt to them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study aimed to show how the external projection of the owner's values has a constructive function in the way the shop emerges. Here, I argued that a store can be more than a provider of goods needed for people's subsistence; it can also be seen as a means for self-realisation. This study extracted the "impersonal" from the mainstream understanding of stores, and instead, explored how the shop becomes the physical crystallisation of the owner's aspirations; it is now a projection of his inner universe which he shares with his customers. The vulnerability which underlies this depiction brings to the fore how the public space is domesticated (Kumar & Makarova, 2008, p. 325), and consequently transformed to establish a welcoming, home-like atmosphere, where customers can safely express their longing for community and familiarity.

While owning a business requires inside knowledge, the process of acquiring expertise was paved by previous working experiences and people encountered, which in turn, moulded the self. The self, subsequently, has the capacity to shape the ethos of the store. All these three elements, presented here as themes, are complementary and reinforce each other.

As a result, removing the hazy, mystified border from the customer-shop relationship could have further implications in the field of ethical consumerism scholarship: we can extrapolate this thematic structure to assess, for instance, the vital role of the store in cultivating conscious shopping in an era of over-consumerism. Despite everything, this mini ethnography offers valuable insight into some of the forces that steer the constructing dynamics within the store.

Conflict of Interests

No potential conflict of interests was noted.

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