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Working out Douglas' aphorism: discarded objects, categorisation practices, and moral inquiries

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This article aims to reconsider Mary Douglas' (1984[1966]) well-known aphorism – that, ‘where there is dirt there is system’ – through the work of street-cleaning in and the handling of detritus in the Upper Town district of Gibraltar. In ‘working out’ the aphorism, we do not theorise urban detritus as waste and dirt, as ‘matter out of place’ indexing a wider cultural system or cosmology. Instead, we adopt an ethnomethodological sensibility (Garfinkel and Sacks, 1970), in recovering the practical work of seeing and categorising objects as an occasioned activity and members’ concern¹. The article is, then, interested in the ‘practical objectivity’ of objects as they are handled in the everyday work of street-cleaning. In addition to concerns with the categorisation of objects as disposable or not, the analysis also describes how this work includes treating objects as a resource for doing moral judgements and the allocation of blame. So, rather than explaining the practices of street-cleaners via recourse to a notion of ‘system’, we, instead, describe the methods through which objects come to be treated, in a situated sense, as a potential ‘inference-rich’ resource for moral reasoning relating to residual categorisations and predicates of people and places.

There has, of course, been much academic research devoted to matters of dirt, waste, and pollution. Recent work has understood ‘dirt’ and ‘waste’ as relational constructs, and develops Mary Douglas’ discussion of dirt as ‘matter out of place’ (see for example, Pickering, 2010, 2019 (this collection); Hughes, et al. 2017). We briefly review some of this work before describing our study and the ways in which it differs from this existing literature. The bulk of the article describes the work of a single street-cleaner, Stephen, across three substantive sections. These sections are concerned with describing overlooked local practices, in: 1) encounters with objects as occasioning street-cleaning work; 2) the categorisation of objects as ‘disposables’ or not; and 3) the availability of membership categories through these objects. We conclude by outlining a sociological treatment of waste, dirt, litter, and other debris, that finds such detritus less ‘matter out of place’, than socially and practically accomplished in and through the way that matter and objects are handled methodically by members.

Working out Douglas' aphorism: waste theory and waste practice

An immediate touchstone for considerations of dirt is the work of Mary Douglas and, specifically, her discussion of the ritual order of pollution and taboo. In introducing her analysis, Douglas (1984[1966], p. 36–37) notes that in ‘our own’ notions of what constitutes ‘dirt’ we operate with an “omnibus compendium which includes all the rejected elements of ordered systems.” Here, then, dirt and pollution are the remnants of ordering practices and

¹ We use ‘member’ and ‘membership’ in the ethnomethodological sense. Not simply meaning ‘belonging’, ‘membership’ refers to the “natural mastery” of language and practical reasoning displayed and used in the accomplishment of local autochthonous social order by ‘members’ of that setting (see Garfinkel and Sacks, 1970; Garfinkel, 2002). The import is that that which is seemingly trivial and handled through the ‘natural attitude’ of members can, through careful description, be shown to be an ongoing ‘no time-out’ accomplishment.

"confuse and contradict cherished classifications". Dirt, writes Douglas, is "a relative idea". In this way, the very same physical substance, moved from one location to another, can radically change in meaning: profane in one setting, polluting in another. Dirt, then, is 'matter out of place'² and is produced as such through the existence of a cultural, psychological, grid that provides for responses such as disgust and repulsion. The perception of 'dirt' is "schematically determined from the start. As perceivers, we select from all the stimuli falling on our senses only those which interest us, and our interests are governed by a pattern-making tendency, sometimes called *schema* (Bartlett, 1932)" (Douglas (1984[1966], p. 37). The teachings of Leviticus are taken as instructive in the regard that they are organised, structurally, in relational pairings through which each category or class is made sense of in relation to and through another. Each object has its correct place within a taxonomic order, a cosmology, of material, action, and experience that is seen to 'reinforce' a social and moral order through a whole series of teachings that have to do with purity and hygiene, danger and contamination, order and disorder. Such 'rules', and associated rule-governed behaviours, are seen to be concerned with translocation and the sensibility of matter in different ways, in different contexts. The resultant position is the suggestion that we can learn a good deal about a whole society's way of understanding and ordering the world through attending to these relations. As Douglas (1984[1966], p. 36) writes: "Dirt, then, is never a unique isolated event. Where there is dirt, there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter."

So, for Douglas and those that follow, dirt is a by-product of the negotiation of order, as anomalous or ambiguous matter that must be dealt with, either by exclusion or by resolution in relation to the taxonomic system. Douglas (1984[1966], p. 39) refers to 'ambiguity' and 'anomaly' as categorial problems resolved through certain ideals and rituals of culturalism. 'Culture' rigidifies and structuralises categories which, in turn, are 'public matters' insofar as they form the foundations of a shared moral and social system and are thus stubborn in their resistance to revision (p. 41). In this sense, 'culture' maintains order. Indeed, "...if uncleanness is matter out of place, we must approach it through order. Uncleanness or dirt is that which must not be included if a pattern is to be maintained" (p. 42). And, so, the 'maintenance' of social patterning is understood in terms of the provision for the objective order of the world, as well as for the values of a community and the experience of individuals; against which, ambiguity, anomaly and, thus, 'dirt' appear.

To be clear, we are not saying that Douglas simplistically offers a rigid conceptualisation of what is or is not dirt. It is, as we have already noted, a relational approach in which such understandings of categorisation and boundary are recognised to be fluid, negotiated, and contested in locally and culturally specific ways. This relational approach has been fruitful for a range of work discussing different forms of waste and disposal. Indeed, as noted by Evans (2014; see also, Munro, 2013) the social sciences have long been concerned with various kinds of residual categories and identities and, indeed, 'rubbish theory' (Thompson, 1979). Humans, too have, been considered as 'waste' in various contexts (e.g. Latimer, 1999). Pickering (2010), for example, develops the relational approach to dirt in and through a discussion of defecation and toilet practices in which, she suggests, we might consider dirt not as 'matter out of place' but as *relations* out of place. In a convincing analysis, she suggests that toilet practices and the technologies thereof (for

² This quote is sometimes attributed to Douglas herself. Douglas attributes it to Lord Chesterfield but this is also contested (see Fardon, 2013)

example, those described in Oakley's (1983) study of Gypsies) are best understood not as bounded cultural systems but as producing boundary relations in and through which toilets can produce 'wrong' connections between people and State or their more immediate surroundings (p. 52).

Moving from the general discussion of dirt and waste, to the treatment and presence of 'waste' in public space, 'waste', although not necessarily 'dirt', is similarly conceived of as leftover or unwanted or discarded matter from a whole range of practices and consumptive activities. For example, waste in public has been theorised as indicative of systems of status, of power, and stable categories of private and public space (e.g. Lagae, Çelik, Cuyvers, 2006, p. 34, Campkin, 2013; Bearman, 2005). Such work has also considered other forms of urban 'pollution'; for example, 'sound out of place' discussed and developed further into a 'theory of noise' (Pickering and Rice, 2017). In regard to street-cleaning, we note that 'dirt' in Douglas' sense does not straightforwardly translate to a consideration of the whole range of objects encountered in street-cleaning – all waste is not dirty, and all objects encountered are not 'out of place' – but our concern is not with conceptual definition in the usual sense. In a way that runs counter to this literature and, indeed, the recent work of Hughes, et al. (2017) – who employ the (formal analytic) taxonomy of Hardy and Thomas (2005) in discussing 'dirty work' – what we *are* concerned with is categorisation-practices-in-action (Hester and Eglin, 1997).

The analysis thus describes what might be called the situated practical and occasioned taxonomy of street-cleaners. As described above, it is also concerned with the occasioned availability of categories through encounters with objects. There exists a small body of literature concerned with the categorisation of detritus as making available 'residual categories', for example in crime scene investigation (Williams, 2003). A recent example that overlaps, at least in substance, with our case is the discussion of the residual categorisation of departed hotel guests through the state of the room and the objects left behind (Schneider and Turner, 2017). Unfortunately – and in a way that is indicative of the kinds of ways of studying waste and doing sociology that we propose to move away from here – the analysis results in the construction of an ideal typical taxonomy that provides for the 'types' of individual that leave their hotel rooms in particular ways. This gets done quite without consideration of how said rooms and guests are categorised in action by the cleaning staff of the hotel.

To re-emphasise our aims, we do not offer the case of street-cleaning as a means through which the theoretical framing of dirt and waste might be challenged, amended, or corrected. Our intentions are not remedial in that sense. We are, however, critical of a more general attitude in the social sciences that leaves a good deal of the heavy analytic lifting to concepts like 'system' and 'culture' and 'norms' in explaining, rather than describing, how it is that people come to be doing the things they observably do. As Harvey Sacks (1995[!], p. 260) had it:

in the sociological and anthropological literature the focus on norms is on the conditions under which, and the extent to which, they govern – or can be seen by social scientists to govern – the relevant actions of those Members whose actions they ought to control.

In leaving behind the notion of ‘norms’ as controlling action in, insteading, recovering them as local occasioned resources for ‘doing’ order in context (see also Housley and Fitzgerald, 2009), we aim to respecify the perception of dirt and waste and detritus. In particular, we ‘work out’ how, in just any context, the categorisation of and categorisation through ‘waste’, ‘dirt’ and ‘disposables’ is a local, contingent, emergent, practical accomplishment of members’ methodical means of producing and participating in social order.

Working out the aphorism

As promised by the title of the article, we aim to (begin to) work out Douglas’ aphorism. Some readers will recognise the adaptation of the subtitle of Harold Garfinkel’s (2002) *Ethnomethodology’s Programme*; a book in which Garfinkel describes ethnomethodology as concerned with working out Durkheim’s aphorism. The aphorism (as stated by Garfinkel) is “the objective reality of social facts is sociology’s most fundamental principle” (later, ‘principle’ is substituted with ‘phenomenon’). In other words, sociology proceeds by treating social facts as things. The ethnomethodological working out of this aphorism is to treat social facts as the continual, no-time-out, local, practical, situated accomplishment of members; as the ‘vulgar work of the streets’ (Garfinkel, 2002). To return to Douglas’ words and her sense that ‘dirt is never an isolated event’, we might begin to work out the aphorism by asking what if we *were* to treat ‘dirt’ as an event? Not isolated, perhaps, but as *occasioned*. This reorientation returns us to the ‘practical objectivity’ of dirt and waste, and to members’ methods for the handling of objects more generally. The words of Garfinkel and Sacks (1970, p. 347)³ are useful here;

If, whenever housewives were let into 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.

In our case, we ask what it is about a particular spot or object, and what it is about street-cleaners, that provides for an occasion for street-cleaning?

Not all discarded objects are categorisable as ‘waste’ or, indeed, ‘dirt’. Not all objects found in the street will be removed and disposed of. The ambiguity in the handling of ‘waste’ is produced and resolved in activities that provide for an object’s ‘practical objectivity’ as waste. Something of this issue is at stake in “Sacks’ gloss” (Garfinkel, 2002, p. 182). Sacks became interested in the distinction between ‘possessables’ and ‘possessitives’; the former being things that one could have if one wanted, and the latter being things that were witnessably the possession of someone else. Sacks, however, did not want to settle the matter theoretically by deciding the conditions in which objects would fall into one category or the other. Instead, he headed out to find some work crew whose daily work was concerned with that distinction in practice: a team attached to the LAPD whose job it was to

³ The language and example is, of course, dated. But it is also carefully chosen in the sense ‘housewife’ is a category for which ‘cleaning’ can be heard as a ‘category-bound activity’ (Sacks, 1995[I]: 169-174).

deal with ‘abandoned’ cars. Clearly this involved the determination of cars that had been abandoned and were no longer ‘owned’ by anybody (possessables), from those that had simply been left temporarily and were, thus, still owned and wanted by their owner (possessitives). This distinction is developed in a lecture by Sacks in which he focuses, primarily, on possessives as a “large class of objects which when seen, or when talked of, are recognised as somebody’s, or some unit’s, and whose they are need not be known to know that.” (Sacks, 1995[1], p. 387).

As discussed by Spelman (2011, p. 314) “...trash talks to us, or certainly speaks of us.” In what follows we, following Sacks, aim to ‘construct the machinery’ through which trash comes to ‘talk’ in the way it does. As we will demonstrate, the handling of waste in the work of street-cleaning points to the ways in which objects can be treated as documenting particular membership categories and predicates (Hester and Eglin, 1997). We develop Sacks’ (1995[1], p. 182) early discussions of objects in talk in the context of street-cleaning and what we might call moral ethno-inquiries. In this sense, objects found can be treated in and through the ‘Membership Inference-rich Representative (MIR) device’. This device, described by Sacks (1995[1], p. 40–41), provides for the organisation of knowledge bound to person or population categories from limited informational resources; for example, by asking someone ‘what do you do?’ when meeting them for the first time, the asker can feel they know a good deal about what type of person they are speaking to. What we suggest here, then, is that objects may also be similarly handled treated by members in something like Sacks’ description of how members’ see a possessives; that is, that on encountering an object the viewer may feel they know something about the category of person to whom the object ‘belongs’ or whom discarded it.

In what follows we aim to show how encountered objects evidence categorial reasoning relating to the category of person engaged in the activity of ‘dropping litter’ or ‘disposing of waste inappropriately’. We also discuss how ‘place’, too, can be constructed through this device; that is to say, that objects can index the activities of a population category in and through a category of place. And, again, these practices are possible not because of some cultural system or immanent property of the discarded objects themselves, but rather, as those properties are ‘objectivated’ (see, Liberman, 2013) and categorised in encounters with street-cleaners.

Remarks on field site, data and method

The remainder of the article draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the Upper Town district of Gibraltar; the old cultural hub of the city, built on the lower slopes of its famous Rock. The area is veined by narrow, labyrinthine streets and alleys, lined by terraced townhouses, many of which have long since been abandoned – their doors and windows broken, if not bricked or boarded up. The dense architecture casts a semi-permanent shadow over the space, making the streets dark as well as quiet. The exodus of younger people to new affordable and accessible housing elsewhere, emptied the old buildings of Upper Town, resulting in locals describing the area as a ‘ghost town’. Impressively low rent caps on pre-war houses (of which the entire area is comprised) mean that landlords often have little financial incentive to maintain their buildings – the buildings, in most cases, are worth less than the plot of land they were built on. Many of the buildings in this ‘urban sore’ (see Andersen, 2003) are empty and falling into disrepair. Of those remaining occupants, many are living in relative poverty; some are illegally ‘squatting’. The haphazard

architectural layout is testament to the old town's organic growth from humble beginnings, but also an inevitable result of building on a slope – these 'wasteful' streets (Jacobs, 1961, p. 18) resemble gaps between buildings rather than purpose-built thoroughfares. The gaps between them – along streets too narrow for mechanised sweepers and vehicles – are regularly maintained by a team of street-cleaners.

(Insert Fig. 1 here)

Fig. 1: An Upper Town street.

(Insert Fig.2 (map) here)

Fig. 2: Stephen's Upper Town route.

The analysis presented below draws on fieldnotes produced during the summer of 2016 in the course of around 30 hours spent following a team of street-cleaners on their rounds. We focus, in particular, on shifts with just one worker, 'Stephen' (a pseudonym)⁴. The excerpts should be read as the best available representations of what happened and what was said between Stephen, members of the public, and the observer. These materials do not capture the exact details of what was said and thus some may point to an incompatibility between these materials and the concepts we draw from the work of Harvey Sacks. Work following Sacks has, by and large, privileged video or audio-recorded and transcribed materials. Indeed Sacks himself was highly critical of the ethnographic use and construction of the cultural 'commentator machine'. This critique was, however, more a question of what was done with the materials in analysis, rather than the method of fieldwork observation itself. As Sacks (1995[I], p. 28) says:

...social activities are observable, you can see them all around you, and you can write them down. The tape recorder is important, but a lot of this can be done without a tape recorder. If you think you can see it, that means we can build an observational study.

In adopting an ethnomethodological approach to both materials and the available observability of everyday practices, we take these instances as 'good enough' materials (Sacks, 1995[I], p. 622) for inquiry into the methodical ways in which people *can* and do handle 'waste' and disposable objects. We also assume and trust that the practices described here are, in some ways, familiar and recognisable by readers – any readers – and not only professional social scientists. It is also worth noting that the analysis we apply to the fieldnotes is of a different order than that usually done by ethnographers. We are interested here in the organisation of the extracts as (professional) texts, and how they make sense (Watson, 2009). Practices and methods for organisation, seeing, and describing the world are embedded within one another, and so we also suggest, following Hester and Francis (2003), that the organisation of categories in talk and in texts may well bear a similarity to the ways in which members observe scenes in the first instance. It is the seeing of objects that is at stake in our first empirical section.

The categorisational troubles of seeing waste

⁴ The decision to anonymise was taken in consultation with the informant, although he was happy enough for his real name to be used. Ethical approval for the project was granted by the authors' institutional Social Research Ethics Committee.

Street-cleaning, and other forms of public work that deal with public space, display an ambiguous and shifting relationship between the visibility of this work, its taken for granted and lowly status, and the accountability of such workers to the public (Nagle, 2013; Hall, 2017). Stephen's responsibility, in terms of his official work remit, is for the maintenance of the orderly appearance of the public realm, through the removal of objects viewable as 'obstructions' or 'out of place'. Disposables. How such objects *are* viewable as such, remains to be seen.

Objects found in the street are viewed through the 'professional vision' (Goodwin, 1994) of street-cleaning, or rather, through their situated and practical observations. Much like the practical procedures through which scientists discover a thing called a 'pulsar' (Garfinkel et al, 1981), street-cleaning work involves methods for the classification of objects as a 'disposable', or not. In practice these matters are complex and not easily handled through binary distinctions. Even objects more readily and obviously a 'disposable' – animal faeces, for example – are subjected to finer series of categorisations from the perspective of the work of street-cleaning. Our first example demonstrates exactly this – the handling, categorially and manually, of dog faeces – and Stephen's daily round more generally. We then consider two further instances of organic matter encountered by Stephen: cherry-tree blossoms and dead seagulls. We show here how, blossom and dead seagulls are differently responded to by different viewers and thus differently constituted in terms of their practical objectivity. In the eye of the public, blossoms are inconsequential, dead seagulls are disgusting. Yet for Stephen, both are simply waste material to be removed. In this sense – howsoever social science might theorise the difference – from the perspective and practicalities of the work of street-cleaning, the distinction is moot.

"I am with shit all day. I'm not disgusted anymore – I used to [be disgusted], but that has passed now. It's my job. For me it's normal to clean dog shit, and sometimes monkey shit – I can tell when it's dry enough to sweep up, just from looking ... and tomorrow it will be here again!"

The stool is clearly of suitable sweeping consistency; however, it is impressive to see the casual way Stephen flicks the faecal matter with the end of his stiff-bristled brush into the back of his long-handled plastic pan. The gathered flies disperse, and he tips the contents of the pan into the black bin-bag that he carries with him. There is a routine skill to his actions. He comments that the ground will need to be flushed (jet washed with salt water – an exercise carried out every two to three weeks in this area), to get rid of the stains and smell.

So, there is something about the shit and something about Stephen that creates an occasion for cleaning. That is to say – to return to the instructive proposed phenomenology of the cleaning practices of 'housewives' – that, for street-cleaners, the removal of objects that do not 'belong' in the street, or are 'polluting' of public space can be considered a category-bound activity (Sacks, 1995[i]). The encounter of shit *occasions* cleaning by incumbents of the 'street-cleaner' category for whom that activity, and the responsibility for doing so, is accountably 'theirs'. Members of the public may see but walk past waste on the pavement. A street-cleaner as a category of public worker is neither permitted to not see the waste nor to walk on by (as, presumably, in Garfinkel and Sacks' example, a 'husband' might be permitted not to see dirt, but a 'housewife' not...). Street-cleaning, then, belongs to a class of work bound-up with public order. As observed, the public also treat Stephen as someone identifiable as responsible for the removal of waste and individuals will, on occasion,

approach Stephen to dispose of their dog's waste in to his bin (note that the bin remains 'his', and that individuals will ask permission for doing so).

The shit that remains on the street stands out in the phenomenal field through Stephen's particular practical engagement with the street, its amenability to be swept up with causing further mess on the pavement, and the species of origin. The distinction between 'dog shit' and 'monkey shit' points both to Stephen's identificatory expertise in this field, but also, it seems, to a distinction in moral consequentiality. Monkey shit is annoying for Stephen and 'polluting', but where monkeys might be considered 'possessables' dogs are, in this context, 'possessitives'; dogs have owners and, therefore, *people*, not dogs, leave dog shit on pavements.

Whilst the encounter of dog and monkey faeces by Stephen occasions cleaning in a relatively straightforward manner, the encounter of other natural objects that do not 'belong' on the pavement poses different questions for the public in terms of the responsibility for their removal.

The narrow streets of Stephen's route create a wind tunnel along which, during the late summer months, a single cherry-tree's pink blossoms scatter almost uniformly across the space. Aside from picking up shit and litter, the bulk of Stephen's routine work in Upper Town involves battling the wind; sweeping the blossoms up into piles and disposing of them in bin liners. Whilst neighbours would often complain about waste and other inappropriately discarded matter in their neighbourhood ('wrongly' positioned bin bags, litter, remnants from 'deviant' activities – empty alcohol bottles, and so on), they do not, according to Stephen, complain about, or even comment on, the blossoms. Blossoms pose a practical problem for Stephen, but their presence is not a source of complaint for residents. Blossom is, apparently, viewed as an expectable and tolerated element of the street scene, where other natural deposits are not. Regardless of the public's indifference, the encounter of *this* organic biodegradable matter by Stephen is an occasion for cleaning in and through which the blossoms are made 'waste'. The apparent public acceptance of, or lack of concern for, the presence of blossoms can be juxtaposed with an event in which Stephen received several reports of a dead seagull further along the route.

Seagull corpses are not uncommon in the area (they are culled on the top of the Rock and drop out of the sky onto the lower slopes). Despite the relatively frequency of the appearance of the corpses, residents expressed revulsion at the decaying body, punctuated with surface melancholia for the dead animal, and identified Stephen as the kind of agent who might expectedly deal with it. The different treatment by the public of blossoms and of dead seagulls might be explained in any number of ways, perhaps taking us back to Mary Douglas and matters of purity and pollution or to Kevin Lynch (1990, p. 12) who considers how waste is differently dirty; "...living matter in fresh decay is far more disgusting than rags, although both are abandoned organic matter". Whatever the reason given by the neighbours for their suggested urgency for disposing of the corpse, and whatever we might make of that here, Stephen (at least insofar as his interaction with the corpse is concerned), treats the ex-seagull in exactly the same way as the blossoms – scooped up with his brush and pan, and tipped into the bin liner. So, whilst it may be tempting to take this instance as opportunity for theorising about flesh and death and decay and stickiness and abjection and disgust (see Miller, 1997), we resist and remain with *how* it is that such objects *are* handled

by members. We think, that there is something more basic (as in foundational) going on here in terms of available visual order that takes us back to *members'* uses of norms.

Dead seagulls, despite literally dropping from the sky, are not an unaccountable occurrence in this context. Members of the public were more concerned with the removal of the corpse, than with how it came to be there. In this way, a dead seagull becomes distinguishable from blossoms in terms of the 'disgust' voiced by residents. Seen from the perspective of the work of street-cleaning, however, the dead seagull is indistinguishable in its treatment from the blossom or, say, a pile of black bin bags dumped on the pavement. And so, we might consider how what 'stands out' in a commonplace scene for some categories of observer and practice, does not stand out for others and, as such, indicates alternate procedural consequentialities. Dead seagulls and animal faeces become 'problematic' elements of a scene in the course of someone casually walking through it, whereas blossoms may not snag the attention at all. This, we might speculate, is bound up with the relationship between perception and activity in context, and so things that might be stepped in or tripped over, or are 'unusual', stand out from the background contexture. Walking through the same scene as a street-cleaner finds that same scene differently visually and perceptually available. What these examples demonstrate is how 'waste' is not only a category applicable to some objects, in some places, but, also, when viewed by particular categories of person in the course of particular category-bound activities.

Possessives and possessables, obstacles and disposables

As we have discussed thus far, Stephen's work is – in his words – officially concerned with a class of objects that might be considered 'obstacles to the public highway', of which 'waste' might form a device for the organisation of various incumbent classes of discarded objects. Particular practical issues for street-cleaners, already introduced through Sacks' discussion of possessives and possessables, can arise when members place possessives in public spaces. Indeed:

If you have a possessive you can be much more casual about it – drop it in the street, leave it in front of your house – and people will not thereby take it that if they want it they can just pick it up. Or if they do, then you can well claim that they are thieves.

(Sacks, 1995[I],

p. 385)

The job of street-cleaning is backgrounded by formal legal definitions. Street-cleaners are responsible for the maintenance of the public highway that is, legally at least, rigidly demarcated along lines of private and public ownership. Such matters, however, are often complicated in and by practice. Blomley (2005), for example, provides a discussion of the 'boundary-crossing' practices of private residents whose gardening activities extend onto (and thus encroach upon) the public boulevard outside the legally defined territory of their homes. Street-cleaners, therefore, must also negotiate the 'interstitial activities' of residents – who place planters or statues on streets outside their properties – that find private possessions positioned in public spaces. This produces ambiguity for the street-cleaners, which must be negotiated *in situ*, on each occasion and provides one of the senses in which such workers might be thought of as 'street-level bureaucrats' (Lipsky, 2010[1980]).

A further consideration in the work of street-cleaning is, then, how an encountered object, beyond being ‘out of place’, also documents a relationship to non-present persons as discarded, disposed of, or no longer belonging to someone. We go on to show how waste can and is treated as bound to particular persons and categories. For now, we can consider a vignette in which the formal requirements of the street cleaning job are juxtaposed with the indexical accountability of an object as a possessive:

Today on Crutchett’s Ramp, Stephen finds an unusual obstacle: a green plastic carrier bag with cans of bronze spray-paint and bronze-coloured props in it. It is tucked up against the wall near the corner that meets Main Street, and all the cans are standing up, as though they had been placed there carefully and purposefully. Across the road, outside the Venture Inn pub, is a street performer who is styled as a bronze statue. It is clear that he had used the contents of the carrier bag to prepare for his performance, and its position next to the wall (as well as the ‘neat’ orientation of the cans within the bag) indicated that he was storing it, rather than throwing it away. Stephen bends down and moves to dispose of it in the bin liner that he is carrying, only for the owner of the pet salon (smoking outside her premises) to interrupt him by shouting across the street to him that the cans belong to the street performer.

The plastic bag containing spray-paint and its ‘out-of-placeness’ provides, for Stephen, an occasion for disposal, the objects are ‘waste’, despite their availability to be seen and described by the observer as a possessive of the nearby street performer (by virtue of his bronze appearance). Again, objects are viewed and constituted differently in and through different course of action. Whether the paints and props are to be removed or not is decided in and through their treatment, rather than something that exists *a priori* or immanently. In other words, objects are occasioned by context in radically emergent ways, as we see in and through the ‘intervention’ by the pet salon owner in reinstating the object as a possessive.

The intervention relied upon the objects’ availability as potentially bound to a member of a category whose actions ‘went with’ them. In other instances, possessive objects found in the street – private possessions in public space – are understood as such, not through the presence of an individual, but through their relational alignment with the predicates of membership in a particular context; that is, a specific neighbourhood street in Upper Town.

Residential buildings in Upper Town, particularly those occupied by older local (and largely Catholic) residents, are occasionally decorated with religious statues and shrines. The religious statues and planters are time-honoured staples that hark back to an era when these Upper Town streets were busy regularly-used community areas. The local communitarian ‘patio culture’ in which residents had a stake in the street (by claiming the street as *de facto* front yard space) has since given way to a more individualised ‘puerta y p’adentro’ attitude (a concern with only ‘the door and inside’ their property).

(Insert Fig.3 here)

Fig. 3: A ‘private’ Roman Catholic shrine in public space

Stephen is aware of the technical illegality of these objects, which obstruct the public highway (sometimes in a very real sense, protruding far enough into the narrow thoroughfares to restrict movement, particularly of pushchairs and wheelchairs), but will

simply work around them. We might suppose that the statues are not removed due to their them being ‘possessitives’. Indeed, they are. Someone taking one of the statues could rightly be called a thief (Sacks, 1995[1], p. 385). Yet, on other occasions – as with the encounter of the spray-paint cans, and, on in other instances, children’s toys and drawings – an object’s theoretical status as a possessive did not deter Stephen from disposing of it. So, something else might be going on with the statues in a way that goes beyond the physical difficulties of clearing them away from resident’s patio areas. And this could be viewed in two ways.

The first way of the viewing the phenomenon is a cultural understanding, in which the viewing of the statues as belonging is explainable through reference to a perceived permanence and durability and what they represent, religiously and in terms community identity. A historical and cultural permanence, rather than a material permanence – the statues and planters will have suffered chips, scuffs, and damage, and will have been replaced throughout the passage of time by other similar objects. These objects thus ‘belong’ on these streets (although arguably less now than historically, which raises notions of sentimentally), which is something that cannot be said of plastic toys, aluminium spray cans, or pieces of paper marked with crayon.

The second way of viewing the situation, is in considering further how ‘waste’ is constituted through the practical concerns of the observer/handler. If one is categorisable as ‘street-cleaner’ there is a procedurally concomitant public responsibility for the removal of things that ‘do not belong’ on the street. If we return to Sacks’ gloss, and the distinction between possessables and possessives, our examples have shown that this is not a theoretical answer either, just as Sacks knew: ‘possessed’ objects on one hand, and ‘disposable’ ones on the other. Rather, what might be considered ‘waste’ is a contingent matter; *social* in a rather different sense than is normally understood. So, another way of practically distinguishing between ‘owned’ statues and spray-paint cans, is their status within a locally assembled ‘neighbourhood collective’. What we mean here, is that, for this neighbourhood, the statues can be understood and are viewable by residents, visitors, street-cleaners, as belonging to a class of objects that in turn signal ‘proper’ membership of that neighbourhood for the owners, the properties that they stand outside, as a feature of that context. This issue is further developed in our next, and final, empirical section.

Seeing categories through discarded objects

We, now, arrive at what was offered as the main contribution of the article. We aim to show how waste is available, in just these occasions, to be handled as a resource of the membership inference-rich (MIR) device; that is to say that, a given class of discarded/found object can be treated both as a predicate (Hester and Eglin, 1997) of a population category, but also as invoking further actions and non-actions. It is in this sense that such categorial reasoning both locally invokes and displays moral order (Jayyusi, 1984). For example, faeces found on the street is ‘matter out of place’. The encounter, however, can also occasion reasoning relating to categories of dogs, categories of dog owners, dog owners’ moral responsibilities and the non-picking-up of dog shit, the degree to which certain categories of people ‘care’ about their neighbourhood, the degree to which the leaving of dog shit appears as ‘normal’ in that context, and so on.

In describing something of this moral work, we begin with an example that – in terms of the seeing of category predicates through objects – demonstrates, simply enough, the Sacksian principle that actions are never seen as being done by individuals but by a

representative of some category. Moreover, actions and objects are also seeable as bound to, or ‘going together with’ those categories

“Did you see that Moroccan guy with the beard?” Stephen asks, referring to a middle-aged man taking his daughter to school, who, by now, was just out of earshot. “Every day that guy leaves food on the ground where the underpass is. You’ll see now.”

As we carry on down the route, we turn the corner by the underpass. There is an audible fluttering of wings – hundreds of pigeons have found a home in the support beams of the structure. On the ground is an impressive spattering of bird droppings, and, lo and behold, a generous pile of leftover couscous.

“What did I say? Every day the same. He says the birds eat it – that it’s not there when he comes back later. I tell him yeah the birds eat it, but not all of it – I clean it every day!”

In its most basic components, we have here a description of observed littering by an identified individual. We can note, however, reading as members, that the account immediately provides a categorial formulation in which the food was not only dropped by an individual, but by “a Moroccan guy with a beard”. Here, then, we hear how the action gets done by a representative of a category. But we also hear, through the viewers’ maxim⁵, and as Sacks (1995[!], p. 40–48) discusses, that this action is thus available as a predicate of ‘Moroccans’. Whether or not this is what Stephen ‘really thinks’ and whether or not this is ‘true’ is not the question here. In seeing and describing an action being done one finds, as in this case, that members routinely put some category in that is of relevance for the seeing of that action in a particular way. The seeing of the dropped food (indeed, the couscous) being bound to someone describable as ‘Moroccan’ displays and is tied to the context of Gibraltar in that the use of a national category, at the least, can be heard as designedly concerned with ‘us’ (the speaker and the hearer – both of whom are Gibraltarian) and the ‘other’ or, in this instance, the ‘non-local’. We want to tread carefully here, perhaps particularly in relation to Schegloff’s (1995) admonishment regarding the ‘politics’ of Sacks’ early work on categories, but do want to note that the guy *is* seeable and reportable as Moroccan *in that context* in such a way that *does* bear a relevance for the status of the speaker and hearer.

There were other occasions in which incidents of littering and low level social nuisance, such as a barbecue burning a hole through a bench, was accounted for through categorial work that found that action to be representative of what some class of population do, and, in this sense, led to further moral accounting regarding the ways in which this ‘other’ category did actions that went against formulations of ‘properly caring’ for the neighbourhood. In these relatively simple examples we thus find category use providing for the commonsense understandings that a predicate of ‘neighbourhood resident’ is to not engage in actions that cause damage to or ‘pollute’ the space. Consequently, those seen to do these actions can thus be seen as not properly incumbent of that category. These matters, it seems, are of more consequence than national or ethnic categories but the reporting of ‘non-neighbourly’ actions appears a particularly effective way of circulating prejudice and stigma.

⁵ The viewer’s maxim is: “If a Member sees a category-bound activity being done, then, if one can see it being done by a Member of a category to which it is bound, then: see it that way.”

As we have indicated above, objects found discarded in the street are also available as being read through and as something like a ‘commonsense topography’ (Smith, 2013) of the area. For example:

On Castle Ramp, a middle-aged woman comes out of her house in a red dressing gown and trainers; she is carrying a full bin liner over her shoulder and is panting theatrically. She catches Stephen’s eye and knowingly gestures towards the load on her shoulder.

“Me voy pa’l bin store, eh!” (“I’m going to the bin store!”) She says anxiously from her front door.

“Muy bien, asin me gusta … it’s right there!” (“Very good, that’s how I like it … it’s right there!”) Stephen reassures her, condescendingly.

“Si, si. ‘Just’ there. But with my back it’s hard!” She calls out as she continues to lumber down the steps onto the street.

Once she is out of earshot, Stephen fills me in: “That woman is Martinez – I told her once to not throw the rubbish on the street, and then her husband comes out of the house to hit me.” He carries on, “Only crazy people live here – they aren’t like the people you meet down there. En serio, they’re like children. I know how they think; you have to get inside their heads. These people don’t want the Government near them. She’s afraid of the police. The squatters as well, you never see them, only the mess they leave.”

In this extract, the appearance of the woman as Stephen makes his round occasions category work relating to the wider neighbourhood in which the encounter takes place. This begins with the provision of a name and a second, previous, encounter in which the “husband comes out of the house to hit” him. Already, then, via what we might gloss as the ‘inference machine’ (Sacks, 1995[1], p. 113–125), the hearer/reader has the sense that something is ‘up’ with this situation. It turns out, through the account, that this action – despite its apparent unreasonableness – is accountably normal in and can be heard as representative of the setting in which it is being told. The story of the threatening incident is not furnished by saying more about the Martinezs but by saying more about the area itself. Again, actions – whether seen or reported – can be bound to population categories not only as something that was done by that category of person, but as a thing that that category of person does. The report occasions an account through which the incident is to be understood as a predicating the device ‘people who live here’ of which ‘crazy’ and ‘children’ are further categories. Note also that the account also invokes a local spatial formulation (Schegloff, 1997) to construct a contrast between the ‘people who live here’ and the ‘people you meet down there’ (in the more affluent, central areas of the city). On another occasion, Stephen encounters a used condom in the street and remarks that the area “is a very romantic place”. The discovery of the condom thus occasions a sarcastic remark, hearable as sarcastic due to the ‘non-romantic’ actions – have sex in public – that the discarded condom documents. Again, we find that this action can be taken as representative not of what someone who lives here did, but of what people who live here do.

As Stephen himself suggests in the previous extract, the seeing of perpetrators of such actions, and their ‘residual identity’ (Williams, 2003), is also organised through category work.

We come across a white bin liner that has seemingly been fly-tipped. It would have originally been propped up in nook between two perpendicular walls and a fire hydrant, but it has since

been knocked over and torn into by either seagulls or monkeys. Refuse (mostly food waste and packaging) is strewn across a radius approximately a metre and a half wide, with some waxy flecks of potato peel stretching out further still. "This is new! ... Do you think this is my job? Que no!" Stephen exclaims, visibly irate, as he moves towards the bag with malice aforethought, ripping it further along one of the pre-existing tears. He proceeds to go through the rubbish frantically; his pace and vigour suggests to me that he has done this before, or that he is looking for something in particular. Before long, he pulls out a small cardboard cuboid – a discarded medication packet. It is a prescription drug, Diazepam, and the patient's (and assumedly the fly-tipper's) name is on the label on the packet:

"Ryan Perera. Valium, el cabron. Bastard. Este es un squatter. They come here and live in houses without paying, and they don't even bother to take the rubbish to the bin store. He just leaves it here. Pues, you'll see, I'm going to find out who he is and the shit is going to hit the fan."

A first point of interest is that the inappropriately dumped bag can be viewed as belonging to a class of objects that fall outside of Stephen's remit. Bin bags are an obstacle on the public highway, but are not simply dropped by a passer-by. They can be viewed as being 'dumped' by a resident; bin bags, in this context, document domestic waste. On discovering the bag, Stephen proceeds to attempt to identify the individual responsible and make 'the trash talk' (Spelman, 2011). This is not a theoretical matter.

Stephen knew (and as the reader of the extract can see), that the 'something in particular' is some identifying material – a bill, a letter, and so on. A prescription does the trick in this instance, revealing the name of the 'suspect'. More significant, however, is the organisation of the category-sequence (Fitzgerald and Housley, 2002) that the object invokes. Beyond the revealing of the name, the discovery of the valium prescription invokes an insult category and, in this instance, the population category 'squatters'. In this sense, the reader of the extract, 'learns' that squatters are commonsensically bound to the use of prescription drugs. No further elaboration of this 'rule' is required. Thus 'Ryan Perera' is available as a 'squatter' due to the class of discovered object and the residual actions it documents (the taking of drugs). The category 'squatter' is then furnished with a further series of predicates provided for by the shift to the pronoun 'they' and an account that builds further moral work. 'Squatters' 'come here' (a formulation hearable as indexing the category as geographically 'not local'), do not pay for their accommodation, and "do not bother to take rubbish to the bin store". Through this contrast device – that is, heard against the people who 'come from here', pay for their homes themselves, *and* take their rubbish to the bin store – we hear these actions as predicates of a 'proper' member of the neighbourhood; a category device of which 'squatters' are non-incumbent.

There were other occasions when, much like Williams' (2003) crime scene investigators, Stephen's work was concerned with identifying and pursuing individuals responsible for discarding objects or inappropriately disposing of bin bags. A culprit (identified using the same named prescription method) was located after Stephen enrolled the help of a postman to triangulate the name and address. Before proceeding to leave the rubbish bag he had recovered from the street on the perpetrator's doorstep, Stephen peeled off the prescription label and stuck it to the individual's front door, in order to 'send him a message'⁶. Stephen's inquiries in to the identity of the individuals named on the

⁶ See Nagle (2013: 76) for a similar case of sanitation workers 'teaching a lesson' to disposally deviant residents.

prescriptions also enrolled other residents of the neighbourhood, occasioning further category work in which Stephen's description of the action (fly tipping), found that such actions were also predicates of 'chorizo' (local slang for 'lazy' or 'unprincipled') or 'sinvergüenza' (someone without shame). Those enrolled in these moral inquiries and the speakers of these categorisations were, consequently, able to display their 'proper' status against the 'others' reported by Stephen.

Conclusion

For Durkheim 'the objective reality of social facts is sociology's most fundamental principle' (or, apparently elsewhere, 'fundamental phenomena'). Yet, as Garfinkel (2002, p. 65) writes, "Sociology's fundamental principle? There's the rub." In working out Durkheim's aphorism, Garfinkel goes on to describe a programme of ethnomethodologically oriented studies that, instead of treating social facts as 'things', proceed to treat social facts as the accomplishment of members. In working out Douglas' aphorism, we have proceeded in similar fashion and, instead, of finding dirt to be a resource for the professional theorisation of social structure and culture, have demonstrated the ways in which 'dirt' and 'waste' are locally and practically assembled and negotiated *in situ*.

In this sense, we began with the appearances of the world and considered how the place of objects in the world, and the seeing of those objects as 'dirt' and 'waste' in particular contexts and through particular practices, is a dynamic accomplishment. In this way, we hope to have moved beyond the problem of 'culturalism' (see Francis and Hester, 2017) that pervades much of the work on 'waste' in which 'culture' and commonsense knowledge of the world are answers rather than the beginnings of inquiry. Through an ethnographic discussion of the handling of waste by Stephen, and in describing that work – as concerning the 'seeing of waste', the handling of 'possessives and possessables' and, thus, 'disposables', and categorisational reasoning relating to left objects – we have demonstrated how the appeared 'systemness' of the world, as available to Members and analysts alike, is accomplished through and documents forms of practical categorial and moral reasoning.

We suggest that in addition to 'waste' being seeable through a relational contexture of visually available elements in a given street scene there is also a demonstrably possibility for a class of object to be 'seen' *in that instance and context* as bound to associated categories of person – 'squatters', 'chorizos', 'crazy'. We want to stress that we are not suggesting, in a simple sense, that some objects 'belong', structurally, with particular groups (discarded tinfoil as bound to the street homeless, for example (see Hall and Smith, 2017)) but that, as Sacks might say, this is something that has to be, and routinely is, discovered by Members as something available to be seen. Moreover, such discoveries do not come after the fact of seeing 'waste', but, instead, enable the very business of seeing in the first instance (Sacks, 1995[1], p. 87). Waste is never simply matter out of place, but can be shown to be accomplished as an inference-rich resource for Members' accomplishments of the specific 'sense' and social order of a given context. It turns out that it is not so much that dirt evidences system but, rather, that members' encounters with objects occasion categorial reasoning.

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