Lingering in Public
Interactive Practices on Urban Squares in Zurich

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Research Interest

This project examines the interactive practice of lingering in public squares, which has become increasingly important in Swiss cities over recent years. For one part, lingering can be said to consist of verbal interaction (mostly between acquaintances). More often, however, lingering is constituted to a large degree by fleeting and barely conscious multimodal interactions comprising eye movements, the coordination of hearing and the physical positions of people to each other. Thus, not only focused interaction but mainly unfocused interaction (according to Goffman). Based on this, I will discuss other concepts which question the boundaries of what has been described as *inter*action.

Data

The primary field of research is the centrally located Sechseläutenplatz in Zurich. Its architectural design leaves users plenty of freedom of action and, thus, is a great field to observe the interactional needs of users. As a contrasting example, data is collected on the Werdmühleplatz in Zurich. This square is also located centrally in the city but is much less frequented. Data is collected as

a) static/long shot recordings of the whole square or a larger part of it; single individuals unrecognizable (goal: corpus of 30 hours)
b) dynamic/close-up recordings of informed participants as individuals, in pairs and in larger groups (goal: corpus of 20 sequences)

Analysis

The data analysis focuses on detailed qualitative sequence analysis using the methods of multimodal interaction analysis (cf. Bohnsack 2011; Hausendorf et al. 2012; Heidtmann & Föh 2007; Knoblauch et al. 2015; Mondada 2009; Mondada & Schmitt 2010; Reichertz & Englert 2011, Schmitt 2007). However, the collected data cannot be analysed exhaustively by exclusively employing established methods and terminology. Therefore, a methodological reflexion will accompany the project.

How do people interactively produce a place where it is pleasurable rather than uncomfortable to linger in the midst of unknown others?

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to join
being in public as inevitable participation
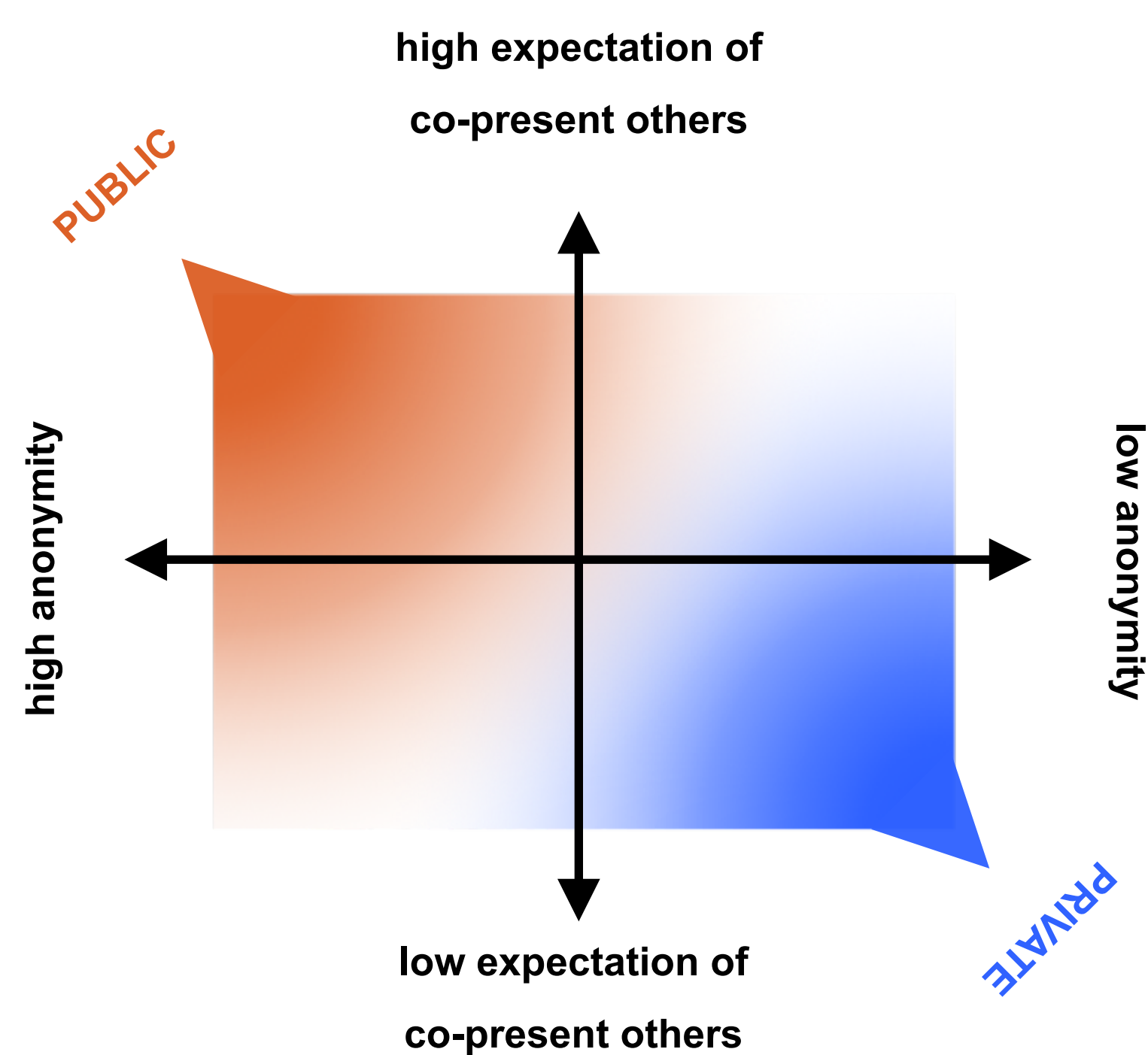
- public space as a condition for interaction

The interactive conditions of being in public differ fundamentally from the ones of being in private. I will characterize these interactive conditions of public space as a high expectation of co-present people on the one hand, and as a high degree of anonymity towards those potentially co-present people on the other hand. Thus, regardless of whether a person lingers by him*herself in a square or together with known others, within the public realm s*he is never completely alone but always potentially perceived by strangers with whom s*he has no choice but to relate in some way.

- public space as a product of interactions

Public space is not only a *condition for* but also a *product of* interactions. In the latter perspective, I will focus on two important interactive processes which I will call „to limit" and „to unlimit".

How can being in public be understood as a *condition for* as well as a *product of* interaction?

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to limit
legitimizing public distance

Public distance can be achieved by spatial separation as well as by creating certain bodily-spatial arrangements (F-Formations) which produce togetherness of the participants by spatially linking them together, centering towards an „inside", and excluding an „outside".

If spatial separation is not possible or not desired, public distance can also be achieved by turning one's perception away from certain others through body posture and positioning.

Under which (architectural and interactive) circumstances can people legitimize not talking to unknown others?

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to unlimit
enabling public closeness

By focussing on a „common third" (above: performing musicians, watching a fountain), strangers often linger in astonishingly close spatial proximity and thus participate in a social group. Moveable chairs also lead to bodily arrangements in which strangers linger in close spatial proximity to each other, sometimes even in arrangements originally put up for a talk between close friends.

It is only on the basis of establishing public distance towards the people who are spatially close to someone that they can engage in socially constructed 'closeness' with spatially more distant unknown others. For example, public distance allows people to roam their gaze over the square and watch other people

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What are the prototypical (inter)actions with unknown others in public squares? How can they be conceptualized?