**The Importance and Power of Ethnography**

Ethnography is what got me into sociology. It is a powerful research method that is widely used in urban studies. It is “a systematic approach to learning about the social and cultural life of communities, institutions, and other settings” (LeCompte and Schensul, 2010). The end product of an ethnography is usually a story or narrative, generally that is “theoretically informed interpretation of the culture of the community, group, or setting” (LeCompte and Schensul, 2010). More than just story tell, in a good ethnography must carefully consider its research design, its research paradigm, it’s sampling procedure, how it will systematically analyze its data, and how it will carefully interpret those data points. In this way, ethnography is an invaluable research method in the toolkit of an urban sociologist.

Good ethnography is an art. Not everyone can tell a powerful story that not only resonates with readers, but also accurately represents the data and the findings. The best ones move us to empathy with the research subjects. The ethnographies that I read for this orals section are all powerful stories that advance specific narratives about social issues. However, as with much quantitative work, the sociologist must if their findings are representative of the data, their conclusions valid, and their argument sound. In some cases, a reader is convinced on the power of author’s storytelling abilities, not necessarily the strength of their argument or their analysis of the data. This was the case for me with Mitch Duneier’s *Sidewalks*, Elijah Anderson’s *Code of the Street,* and Eric Klinenberg’s *Heatwave.* I have mixed feelings about Mary Paitillo’s *Black on the Block,* but was thoroughly convinced by Matthew Desmond’s *Eviction*, which was a powerful example of how storytelling can be leveraged to amplify the story contained in the data.

**What Gave Me Strong Feelings**

Desmond’s *Evicted* was a masterpiece and has proven to be a very powerful piece that has foregrounded housing issues in the public’s consciousness. First, I think that it brings to light one of the most important socio-political issues of our current day—housing stability, security, and affordability, and the public’s reception of his work has helped to spark important conversations about housing policy. While Desmond’s focus on eviction is “new,” the focus on the low-income poor isn’t. But it is the power of the stories that makes his work so compelling and has renewed interest in old solutions to current housing policy. Second, his argument is strengthened because he looks at both sides of the argument, the tenant and the landlord. This humanized both sets of social actors, as he peeled back the social, political, and structural constraints that motivated each group of actors. He documented the professionalization of housing management, the socially contagious elements of eviction, the legislative policies that allowed mothers like Arlene to fall through the cracks, the structural inequality of legal representations, and the social and political mechanisms that incentive landlords to take tenants to housing court and victims of domestic abuse to keep their mouths shut for fear of eviction. While Desmond did not suggest a new theoretical mechanism to understand evictions more broadly, he carefully and meticulously painted a picture of the socioeconomic, political, and structural conditions that shape eviction for low-income tenants. He convincingly upends our assumptions that poverty causes eviction and suggests that in many cases eviction (or housing insecurity) causes or at least keeps people in poverty.

That all said, some important critiques have been levied against what seems to be a universally lauded work. First, he focuses on the market power of tenants as a transaction between them and the landlord (Flores, 2017). He therefore fundamentally misses the role of investors and developers, the political will of landlord lobbies, and how the segmentation of housing markets work together to maintain these structural inequalities between landlord and tenants. He’s writing directly after the foreclosure crisis and talks too little about how blacks, Hispanics, and the elderly were disproportionately targeted for subprime mortgages, which was very likely to have landed many of his research subjects in the predicaments he finds them. Moreover, his solutions are more focused on balancing the market interactions rather than decommodifying housing—he never talks about decommodifying a rental industry, which he notes nets one landlord nearly half a million dollars. Moreover, he does little work to analyze the political power of these groups. Specifically, he doesn’t look carefully at the ways that landlords and the real estate lobbies oppose local changes to housing regulation.

Second, in terms of policy suggestions, he argues for a near quadrupling of the Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program, universal legal assistance for tenants facing eviction, and the creation of federal income-source discrimination protections. These are all great suggests that have been suggested before. Perhaps his research’s success will bring a renewed momentum to their implementation. A few things: he neglects to deal with the implications of the expanding of the HCV program. If the program is quadrupled, what could be the implications of developers creating housing solely to reap the guaranteed money from HCV? Also, he misses how the lack of resources, time, and social or cultural capital could prevent housing voucher tenants form taking advantage of the newly expanding program. Say that due to the voluminous increase of voucher-holds the social stigma that they are bad tenants and neighbors, voucher-holds will still encounter other obstacles, such as:

* + are limited by the neighborhood they already know
  + find it difficult to get information on potential housing options
  + have generally moved already in response to housing emergency, which limits their ability to make full use of it
  + are usually tied to their current neighborhoods via social and familial networks
  + will be hard for them to identify neighborhoods that meet their needs
  + many believe voucher
  + tenants have bad records that make landlords decide not to go ahead anyways
  + landlords often demand security deposits that are expensive
  + much of the housing they could find will fail inspections
  + they could be kicked out to make room for market rate tenant (Been and Bozorg, 2017)

Finally, I worry about the framing of this book’s core issues. Evictions and housing insecurity create or keep many households in poverty. While this is mostly certainly true, I wonder if this is the biggest issue concerning housing in our country. My thought is that housing affordability (which could be considered as housing security in another light) is a bigger issue facing the poor, the working, and the middle class. While the poorest are the most vulnerable to housing affordability issues, lumping in the working and middle classes greatly raises the stakes and can hopefully more readily impact housing policy.

After reading Wacquant’s critiques of both Anderson and Duneier, it is hard to continue seeing their value. In short, his problems with them are methodological (and theoretical according to Anderson (2002)). While both are skilled storytellers and adept at describing the scene, their methodological process is flawed, their data often contradicts the thrust of their arguments, their conclusions are examples of a conservative’s wet dreams. First, Wacquant eloquently demonstrates how Duneier disconnects, censors, and skews his data. For example, he *disconnects* the illegal from worthy actions of street vendors, he always exists the scene when they or anyone associated with them becomes violent or aggressive, and he generally only shows the virtuous actions of his respondent’s actions. In so doing, he removes these men from the social contexts and mechanisms that are shaping their actions so as to strength his point—they make the neighborhood safer. For Anderson, Wacquant points that even in the last chapter when Anderson himself serves as the exemplar “decent daddy,” John cannot extradite himself from the ghetto—directly contradicting Anderson’s thesis that community old heads that serve as role models help the youth navigate their own self-hatred and interpersonal brutality. Finally, each of the conclusions of each of these books seem to be reductive and conservative. Duneier is desperately seeks to valorize these men as important street agents that contribute to social order and actually reduce crime. Anderson’s old heads reflect patriarchal and middle-class values and of hard work, respectability, and endurance in the face of many obstacles. As Wacquant asserts, Duneier ultimately argues that if left to fend for themselves, these street vendors learn self-direction, morality, respectability,  social solidarity, and increased in civility—it’s an conservative’s argument to maintain the status quo of “urban abandonment, social disinvestment, workfare, and prisonfare” that have molded these men’s life (Wacquant, 2002). With Anderson, I can’t get away from the idea that he seems himself as an “old head” who laments the disrespectful and ungrateful ghetto kids who are too consumed with “street culture” to be able to leave the ghetto behind. It’s a rehashing of Wilson’s old argument that tries to overlay arguments about changes to occupational structure and institutional racism with a side of a “culture of poverty.” Yet, again his argument falls flat as he is unable to help John escape the ghetto and does little to interrogate the social and institutional mechanisms that keep them in.

Eric Klinenberg’s Heatwave, was methodologically, an interesting application of ethnography. He conducts what he calls a “social autopsy” so as to better understand the social, economic and political causes of the deaths of so many during a weeklong heatwave in the summer of 1995. He conceives of the “social autopsy” as a technique for “opening up the skin of the city and determining which of its institutional organs had broken down during the heat wave.” It’s an ethnographic technique to look at the social elements of a city or community—in this case Chicago—to determine what failed. He concludes that the social isolation of elderly, their disproportionate likelihood of being poor and not owning an air conditioner, and their economic reticence to turn it on if they do were a confluence of factors that led to their deaths.

However, I think *Heatwave* was yet another example of poor data collection, faulty analysis, and readers being all too willing to accept the book’s conclusion because of preconceived notions and ideas about social ties. First, as Duneier (2006) points out, how can you do a social autopsy trying to explain the social shortcomings of a community that allowed so many to die, when you don’t actually know how those individuals died? Duneier shows how easy it was to get those death certificates and follow up with people who actually knew them. It’s one thing if those data weren’t available, it’s another if he was just too lazy to get them. Second, analytically, I completely agree with Duneier’s argument that *Heatwave* falls victim to ecological fallacy—Klinenberg inferred characteristics about individuals from aggregate data. He looked at statistics of the neighborhoods and concluded that the people that died were represented by those statistics—they were elderly, minorities, and lived alone. While those that died were black and older, he presents very little information on how they compare to the city’s population and fails to compare where they are located. Duneier’s data questions how valid these neighborhoods were as comparative case studies. If over 739 people died in the city, how is it that less than 20 lived in the neighborhoods he examined? Moreover, he failed to control for variations across groups—how did black-middle class elderly stay alive? What happened to the shut-ins in the white neighborhood Archer Heights next door? Also, why would we be surprised by the increased likelihood of the elderly dying from heat? From Duneier’s work, it’s not clear that those who died, actually fit the demographic characteristics around which he wraps his argument. Finally, with these glaring data inconsistencies, it’s hard to not to conclude that the arguments made by Klinenberg was easily accepted because they were in vogue—there has been plenty of pop literature like *Bowling Alone* that has popularized the idea that America’s social ties are weakening, and *Heatwave* research confirms that.

**What I Still Have Mixed Feelings About**

At face value, I found Mary Pattillo’s *Black on the Block* refreshing as it serves as a direct rebuttal to Wilson’s *Truly Disadvantaged.* Contrary to Wilson’s claims that the black middle class has abandoned the ghetto, Pattillo finds herself living in a gentrifying black, middle-class neighborhood where the black middlemen/women are working to bridge the gap between the poor and the middle class (often white) decision makers. Her thesis that the urban black community is so economically diverse that there is no “unitary black political agenda” is refreshing and empirically verifiable that they persistently enter into conflict over what constitutes the proper resources, beliefs, lifestyles, and attitudes. Moreover, this directly relates to the work of Hwang and Sampson (2014), Bostic and Martin (2003), and Timberlake and Johns-Wolfe (2017), who all argue that gentrification can and does proceed along racial lines. However, I wonder to the extent that the neighborhoods is gentrifying, since she defines gentrification as “a general upward trend in land, housing, and rental prices and the influx of people who can afford them,” while clearly arguing that she does not talk about displacement (Pattillo, 2008: 8). I find this narrow, since gentrification is the *key* facet of gentrification—otherwise it’s upgrading. Also, I am continually struck by how much sociological research on poor communities longs to compare them to the more morally upright middle-class and search for ways in which their values overlap. It is tiresome to hear how middle-class people bring resources, values, and social connections to poor people in the hood and to reiterate the extent to which the middleZ class renter has the best interests of the poor blacks in mind.

**Conclusion**

Together these readings were illustrative and forced me to think critically about methodological consistency, the power of storytelling, and the role of skewing data in my analyses. While I am critical of Pattillo, I recognize that Lance Freeman’s and my own practice of identifying potentially gentrifying and gentrifying neighborhoods does not include displacement measures—because there are none in census data. So, I am guilty of the same methodological missteps of which I accuse her in how she identifies her neighborhood of study. Similarly, while I am in agreement with much of Wacquant’s methodological critiques of Anderson’s work, I am hazy on the theoretical implications outlined in Anderson’s rebuttal. I’m not sure that a critical theorist’s paradigm is more appropriate than a social constructionist’s for Anderson’s data. Finally, I fear that my own reticence to hearing how young, poor people need guidance from old heads or black middle class gentrifier predisposes me to ignore the valid work done by great researchers.

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