# From How to Why: On Luminous Description and Causal Inference in Ethnography (part 2)

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# From how to why

## On luminous description and causal inference in ethnography (Part 2)

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**ABSTRACT** ■ Ethnographers often start fieldwork by focusing on descriptive tasks that will enable them to answer questions about how social life proceeds, and then they work toward explaining more formally why patterns appear in their data. Making the transition from 'how?' to 'why?' can be a dilemma, but the ethnographer's folk culture provides especially useful clues. By dwelling on their appreciation of especially luminous data, ethnographers can light the path to causal inference. In this, the second of a two-part article, four of seven forms for characterizing the rhetorical effectiveness of ethnographic data are illustrated and the distinctive resources they offer for causal explanation are analyzed.

**KEY WORDS** ■ ethnography, methodology, analytic induction, reading practices, science studies, history of social sciences, fieldwork, sociology of knowledge

Ethnographers seem reluctant to frame their analytical objectives in the terms of causal explanation. The first task in a field project is commonly a preoccupation with getting an accurate account of how social life works, not a search for answers why. And some notable statements (Geertz, 1973; Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Becker, 1994) suggest that the traditional search for causal explanation need never be taken up, that it is unnecessary, given

the possibilities for essentially descriptive and interpretive objectives. Things happen, and even without bothering to explain why, we can offer significant description or commentary by revealing their social meanings.

Yet ethnography's own folk culture continues to belie postures of indifference to causal ambitions. Informal discourse about ethnography often praises passages that argue effectively for one among competing hypotheses, that specify explanations by detailing causal conditions or by qualifying the range of the phenomena explained, or that demonstrate causal forces by capturing them descriptively as they shape theoretically significant behavior. In short, many of the criteria used casually to praise ethnography point implicitly to structural features of data sets that promote causal explanation.

I would suggest that, as a matter of fact, in the field and in their private readings, ethnographers share a culture of evaluation which is masked by the fractious, even righteously indignant commentary that characterizes rhetoric about ethnographic writing. I highlight seven sets of qualities that are often informally used to evaluate the data in ethnographic texts. The first three, which I discussed in the first part of this article, find data compelling because they present 'enigmas,' 'mysteries' or 'paradoxes' that guide causal inquiry; because they offer 'strategic' resources for ruling out competing explanations; or because, being 'rich and varied' in quality, they are especially useful for qualifying the definition of causes or effects. This second installment analyzes the utility for causal explanation of data that are regarded as 'revealing,' that describe how conduct is 'socially situated,' that describe how behavior is 'crafted,' and that show subjects in 'poignant' moments.

These seven categories of evaluative terms are not offered as exhaustive. Nor are they to be considered mutually exclusive. There is not enough discipline in ethnographic communities to make any such framework feasible. And even if I am wrong on the empirical proposition that these categories in fact structure the commonsense appreciation of ethnographic writing, I will propose that they should.

The emphasis in ethnography on describing 'how' social life works, or what people are doing and how they are doing it, is what distinguishes ethnography from research featuring positivist theory, deterministic background conditions, quantified data, and formally prescribed procedures for gathering data. As a practical matter, the ethnographer's initial emphasis on data collection often produces a wealth of descriptions that have been created at great pain. With these riches comes the emergent dilemma of how to organize the steaming mass into a coherent narrative before time either drains it of life or forces the researcher to take up more mundane responsibilities. Causal explanation is an appealing objective if for no other reason than that it is a useful narrative device: causal theory is a form that organizes data by implying not only what fits a text and what does not but also

what is more and less significant to include. But where can one find the path from data that show 'how' to accounts that explain 'why'? My argument is that ethnographers are wise to focus on their most luminous descriptions: when data passages are especially compelling, it is because they contain leads to why social life takes the forms we observe.

## 4. 'Revealing' phenomena

Ethnographic data can be especially useful for developing explanations by being 'revealing.' As exemplified in the case of angry drivers (discussed in Part 1 of this article), temporally short, dramatic shifts in experience, or moments when strong emotions are suddenly revealed, are likely to provide valuable resources for explanatory analysis. Where there is a sharp change in the thing to be explained, we have reason to suspect that there is a sudden change in significant causal conditions. When social interaction leads to abrupt turning points in peoples' behavior, it is a good bet that the scene crystallizes sensibilities, interaction techniques, and social pressures that, being generally diffused throughout the subjects' lives, are usually less readily detected. Moments of subjective transformation are compelling without any 'professional' or 'scientific' curiosity, but there is good reason to expect that when subjects suddenly find their emotions revealed to them, a researcher can find analytically revealing data. An aesthetic sensibility serves explanatory goals, whether wittingly or not.

A second sort of revelation occurs when the ethnographer appreciates the emotional meaning of phenomena that subjects experience without dramatic attentions but which summarize broadly relevant themes that structure their life worlds. When Arlie Hochschild (1997) studied how men and women workers manage time pressures of work and home life, she came across an unobtrusive measure pointing to matters of central relevance. In their offices, men with positions high in the organizational hierarchy had photos showing their families posed in studios, at ceremonial occasions, or on adventurous trips. The formally framed photos were displayed from behind the men's chairs where visitors could see their happy families, but where the 'men at the top' could easily disattend these ritualistic indicators of their attentions to family life. Women working in positions of service to managers grouped their family photos, which were often unframed snapshots, with children's drawings and personal mementos, and they often placed them literally close at hand near phones or keyboards, where they could easily and regularly see them. One informant noted that when women come into her office, they often responded to the photos and mementos by making inquiries about children; the glances of male visitors would not initiate comments (Hochschild, 1997: 85–8).

This is as neat a demonstration of our theme as it is of Hochschild's. The current question is the linkage of 'how' and 'why' questions in ethnography. The argument is that there are good leads to causal explanation in readers' appreciations of good or effective descriptions of how social life proceeds. Here, by memorably describing how photos are arranged and used in office interaction, Hochschild seizes on a revelation of her central point, that gender and status make a difference for how people negotiate the demands of work and home life.

Revelation implies that something had been hidden, and another way that ethnographic description becomes luminous with explanatory leads is when it captures hiding practices. In her studies of Malagasy speakers in Madagascar, Elinor Ochs found a pattern of vagueness in their talk. In her text she quickly establishes a broad pattern of hiding known meanings through richly detailed and situationally diverse data. First, without referring to a particular incident, she notes that if A asks B where B's mother is, and B says that her mother is either in the market or the house, A does not assume that B does not know which of the alternatives is correct, because A does not assume that B is trying to be as informative as she can be. She next reports her own experience in a specific incident.

> When I once asked an elderly woman when I might find her brother at home, she gave me this answer, 'If you don't come after five, you won't find him'. She was not willing to guarantee that if I did come after five, I would find him.

Ochs asserts that speakers generally avoid referring to individuals by the personal name given to them at birth, bolstering the claim by noting that parents give children second, generic names which could fit any of several people (e.g. 'dwarf'), and that there is a strong interest in changing names again and again, as if to insure the maintenance of confusion. A national law limited the number of name changes per person to three (Ochs Keenan, 1976).

Ochs' point in this writing is not to explain the institutionalization of ambiguity in Malagasy culture, but she offers several explanatory ideas in passing, including the belief that drawing attention to individuals is dangerous. (If one clearly names a child so that all could easily identify him, this can lead to malevolent ancestral forces taking the child . . .) My point is not to evaluate her explanations but to note how a richly varied and contextualized description of *how* subjects *go about hiding* part of their social reality irresistibly stimulates a quest to reveal *why*.

Indeed, many sociological ethnographers know this particular connection between how and why all too well. It is a common experience among domestic fieldworkers to find oneself making special, often nerve-wrackingly devious efforts to document some part of the field site that one imagines to be hidden. Entering a study without a clear and significant explanatory

question in mind, it often seems obvious that if one can find what people have gone out of their way to hide, revealing it will explain some otherwise mysterious matters in social life. More often than not, what is found was never as hidden as the researcher imagined; much nervous energy is wasted, and great risks of ruining access to the site are run, all in the implicit hope that a moral willingness to be devious in the field can shortcut the effort to make a notable contribution by amassing a database rich in explanatory possibilities. For an example of eavesdropping and the surreptitious writing of fieldnotes provoking anxiety to the point of vomiting, see Johnson (1975: 155–6) who studied child welfare caseworkers in their offices and on home visits.

A fourth way in which revealing descriptions offer pointers from the how to the why occurs when the people studied organize their social lives around the understanding that important matters are naturally hidden. From Evans-Pritchard's (1937) research on Azande witchcraft to Tom Csordas's studies of pentecostal midwestern Catholics, ethnographic descriptions have been compelling when they describe how people practice their understandings of invisible, mystical spirits.

The explanatory issue takes an interesting turn in these studies. The debunking question, one that commonly leads to a reductionist answer, would be, why are these beliefs sustained? Instead, by closely describing how members enact their beliefs in hidden forces, the ethnographers treat spiritual practices not as effects but as causes: the explanatory question becomes, what do these practices create? For Evans-Pritchard, whose study we will review briefly in the next section, the answer was, a way of responding to death.

Csordas studied the 'routinization of charisma' among Catholic pentecostals by documenting such diverse practices as:

- 'gender discipline' at home (how patriarchal family relations are made vehicles for the communal religious spirit);
- the ('post-modern') incorporation into the Catholic religious spirit of bizarrely diverse cultural currents such as Maslow's psychology; other groups' patterns of speaking in tongues; ideas from the 'codependency' and 'inner child' movements; Sufi Enneagrams; healing techniques traditional with native peoples; and movies such as *The Exorcist* and *Ghostbuster*;
- the evolution, over the 20-year period he studied the movement, of such interpersonal rituals as 'the holy hug,' which moved in a series of steps from a horizontal to a vertical arm posture;
- tight scheduling of daily activities and restrictions in choice of clothing;
- the negotiation of distance from movements seen as antagonistic and competitive, such as the 12-step movement;
- the innovation of rituals of begging pardon that evoke a new order of

interactional consequences (instead of saying 'I'm sorry' and routinely ending an interaction, one learns to ask, 'Will you forgive me?', a spiritual questioning that elicits a response);

- the evolution of spiritual practices such as 'loud praise,' glossolalia, hopping in place gingerly when doing loud praise, prostration and foot washing; a joking culture; a pattern of 'authentic laughs' that emerge without the provocation of jokes when devotees are organized in prayerful circles; etc.

Csordas offers this wide-ranging description of distinctive practices and social interactions as specifying the contingent conditions of a 'sacred self' on the individual level (1994), and an energetic social movement on the collective level (1997).

Following Bourdieu's theoretical perspective, Csordas produces an exceptionally comprehensive explanation of a distinctive religious habitus. As with any use of habitus as an explanation, Csordas takes on the challenge of showing how conduct and its social arrangements produce a unique sensibility that itself sustains the practices. This is quite a challenge because, as with Evans-Pritchard's analysis of witchcraft, what is revealed can never be described by the ethnographer; for what is revealed of the people studied, whether the power of witches or Christ's love, never shows up in the data in any conventional sense. Why the subjects do these unusual things – and why the movement grows – is because by doing them, they create qualities of experience that they do not otherwise know. In this special case, where revelation is the subject's motivation as well as the ethnographer's objective, the how is the why.

Another example of something causally powerful that is naturally hidden is love, a force that must stretch beyond visible exchanges to exist. Consider Douglas Harper's (1992) study of Willy, an auto mechanic and farm tool repairman. Willy repairs Saabs and tractors at a shop next to his home, which is located in an area of rural poverty in upstate New York, close to the Canadian border. What is revealed by Harper's description is a workmanlike form of comradely caring in which geographically dispersed, poor rural men develop interpersonal sentiments that border on love. It might be years before a client will appreciate how, in putting special care into repairing a farm tool, Willy had long-before anticipated the tests that the tool would face when put to work in an unusually demanding terrain. The affection with which he is regarded is no less real for the fact that it is almost never overtly celebrated by his hard-living and customarily taciturn clientele.

But are such explanations – about practices that create forces that sustain the practices – false explanations, or circular reasoning? Although it deals with a causal force that is hidden because of legal restrictions rather than naturally, it is instructive to recall David Matza's (1969) phenomenology of the marijuana 'high' as explaining why people use marijuana. Matza

substantively filled in one of Becker's (1953) causally formulated but hollow explanatory conditions, learning to enjoy use. Note that it is not necessarily tautological to explain a practice with the argument that it sustains itself, not if one documents the distinctive qualities of experience for which the practices are the necessary and sufficient conditions. Nor is it necessary to get high, become a Catholic pentecostal, or use Azande witchcraft in order to assess ethnographic claims about members' experiences as convincing. They only have to be more consistent with the evidence than any alternative explanations.

## 5. Data that are 'situated'

Situated is one of the vaguer of the terms of appreciation that float in the cultures surrounding ethnography. As represented by such writers as Charles Taylor (1989), moral philosophy, in a revival of an earlier American commitment to pragmatism, has called for situational ethics. A tradition running back to the origins of American sociology has insisted, in terms echoing W.I. Thomas, that researchers document the 'definition of the situation' in which people act. With a memorable phrase, Harold Garfinkel ridiculed social theories that presume that people, like cultural dopes, absorb perspectives through socialization and then apply them mechanically. The ethnomethodological call was to study not just how pre-existing values or interests are tailored to fit real life settings for action, but, more fundamentally, how the sense of situations is constructed in the first place.

Ethnography has made some of its most professionally accomplished contributions to explanation by noting the situated character of social life. Egon Bittner's studies of the police dealing with the mentally ill and on skid row took off from Garfinkel's provocations. Bittner's (1967) findings make much argumentation about the police appear to be so much cant. Psychological profiling, the effects of management organizational strategies (community policing v. the military model, etc.), even ethnic tensions are all marginally relevant to explaining variation in the massive everyday reality of policing, as compared to situational factors. The police are primarily engaged in creating situations of order; their work varies primarily by the distinctive challenges of establishing situated order. Skid row presents different challenges than do the mentally ill. This is not simply because the people confronted are different but because of such factors as: how people have been defined as problems before one arrives on the scene; the audiences involved in the scenes where such 'problem people' are confronted; and the other social agencies that may be used to remove the immediate realities of street problems.[1]

As a rhetoric, the analysis of how behavior is socially situated has had

more currency in sociological ethnography than in anthropology. But there are famous cases in which social cultural anthropology has gravitated toward situational analysis in order to explain why distinctive practices exist. Evans-Pritchard's encyclopedic ethnography of Azande practices and understandings of witchcraft ends by specifying the situations in which interest in witchcraft is most intense. 'It is likewise in connection with death that greatest attention is paid to oracles and magical rites. Witchcraft, oracles, and magic attain their height of significance, as procedures and ideologies, at death' (1937: 541). Put another way, the closest that Evans-Pritchard comes to explaining witchcraft, as opposed to describing how it works in Azande society, is by situating the moments in which it is most subjectively interested, practically implemented, and culturally interpreted.

By situating the description of social life, ethnographers make contributions to explanation that parallel those made by celebrated quantitative survey researchers such as Paul Lazarsfeld. Barrie Thorne's (1993) ethnography of gender in middle-childhood at school settings provides a clear example. Thorne resists two competing simplistic ideas. One holds that gendered natures and preferences explain differences in what boys and girls do and experience at school. The other attributes observed gender differences to prejudiced culture and ideologies. She asserts emphatically: 'These frameworks cannot grasp the fluctuating significance of gender in the ongoing scenes of social life.'

Thorne observed children at various times and in various places in the school's social world, and she notes the features of the situations when she writes her fieldnotes. She produces a database for arguing that gender differences appear regularly and in extreme form in some situations but not in others. Gender segregation emerges in 'witnessable choice' situations, for example: in choosing sides for teams or in sitting at lunch tables; in 'same age' settings as opposed to settings where children of many ages participate; and in 'kids only' settings, where adults are not present. Gender segregation does not emerge naturally or inevitably. The social structure of the interaction situation appears to elicit, block, or make irrelevant such powerful segregating forces as the temptation to tease and to guard gendered groupings from integration.

There are 'first cause' questions left unanswered in this study, but that will be so in any form of social research that addresses causal relationships. Any social factors used as independent variables or critical conditions can be made dependent variables in subsequent studies. Thorne's contribution is in showing that whatever the roots of the temptation to tease across gender lines, that temptation does not get mobilized, or, to resist language suggesting latent presence, teasing is not reborn except when the situational conditions are right (or, as Thorne would put it, wrong). Social researchers who statistically analyze summary views of social life produced through

fixed designs for gathering data talk in much the same way about mediating, suppressing, and facilitating conditions.

Thorne summarizes the point almost perfectly for the current argument. 'Explorations of *how* gender separation and integration take place, of ongoing process rather than presumed origins, can go a long way toward satisfying persistent curiosity about *why* gender separation exists' (1993: 61). It only remains to add that, even without entering the field to ask 'why?' questions, ethnographers can find bright signs toward explanatory issues by systematically including in their fieldnotes descriptions of how the people they observe constitute and respond to the situated contexts for their conduct.

## 6. 'Crafted', 'aesthetic', 'vivid', and 'nuanced' conduct: data at the obdurate edge of local environments

Readers sometimes appreciate ethnographies for taking them to places with exceptional intimacy. It is tempting to imagine that nothing more than manipulative rhetoric produces descriptions of social life that convey a 'you-are-there' sense of immediacy. But if all that were required was the motivation to manipulate readers, such passages would be more common; it seems they are not that easy to pull off. Moreover, whatever the contribution of writing style, there are, once again, good sociological reasons for the rhetorical effect.

By conveying a sense of immediate involvement in subjects' worlds, ethnographic descriptions help solve a problem that plagues the methodology. On the one hand, ethnographies must offer explanations or be subject to the criticism that they are merely descriptive.[2] Some effort at causal explanation, some suggestion of what in one sense or another is pulling or pushing people, is generally thought necessary to make a text compelling, perhaps even coherent. On the other hand, ethnographers eschew deterministic explanations, and for methodological, not necessarily philosophical reasons. Ethnographers often personally believe that factors like 'social class' or 'religion' or 'ethnicity' or 'gender' explain why people act as they do. The problem they find is that good ethnographic data never show such causes directly, not unless the researcher systematically discards negative cases (as Blumer, 1969, argued repeatedly). Such factors are relatively constant in people's lives, and what ethnographic data shows, if it shows anything, is life in action; behavior changing; people in the process of becoming; groups in the process of formation and transformation. It is still worth repeating Robert MacIver's (1942) reminder that constants cannot explain differences any better in social life than they can in the natural sciences. The causal power of static background factors is regularly

belied by the action on the foreground of social life, i.e. on the stages where people actively live.

The sort of determinism that fits descriptions of how people act in relationship to others is phenomenological. People often experience pressure as they act. In concrete living, they commonly feel decisively pulled to act in only one of a number of hypothetically possible ways. Some courses of action seem fraught with obstacles, others seem wide open, even inviting. Ethnographic description conveys a 'you-are-there' sense to the reader when people are shown acting in and against variations in the obdurate contours of their immediate environments.

Gary Fine's (1996) study of restaurant kitchens provides a quick illustration. He offers the phenomenological conception of the arc as what workers orient to as they apply themselves in the kitchen. Everyone in a restaurant kitchen knows that they can't operate as people sometimes do in their own homes, waiting for diners to define an appetite before food preparation is begun. Working cooks must anticipate a curve of demands from customers that is linked to a clock and adjusted in relation to reports of arrivals from the waiting staff. They manage work pressures in relation to the anticipated curve by segmenting food preparation tasks, differently assigning them to personnel, and, more subtly, defining the order of tasks so that work will proceed 'smoothly' and efficiently. Fine quotes a cook as saying: 'If you get the stuff lined up, it's easy.' Handling what seem at times to be 20 assembly lines at once, cooks operate in a way that can only be described in aesthetic or athletic terms. As Fine puts it, 'they are unable to specify the rules for what is to be done when.' Cooks 'adjust their speed and sequencing to meet the demands of the arc of work,' the emerging and declining 'totality of tasks.'

Note that, as Fine brings us close up to the feel of kitchen work, his descriptions turn toward sensual or aesthetic themes. He adds descriptions of the shortcuts that cooks innovate when demand peaks beyond what athletic finesse, intense concentration, and ferocious energy can meet.[3] Some of the shortcuts are standardized. There is no time to wait for ovens to cool down and heat up to different temperatures for different dishes; the precise and varying temperatures the amateur cooks find in recipe books are impractical in the restaurant. Some of the shortcuts may be innovated. For example, large parties may get only limited menu choices. Or, at times of high work pressure, the steaks may be just seared to give them the appearance of being grilled, then baked en masse on sheets in an oven (Fine, 1996: 21–3).

Ethnographers pull us into scenes by describing the aesthetics and the crafted character of behavior. Fine cannot see the arc, a phenomenon which, although it is the fundamental reality organizing most of the kitchen's work, transcends any single moment. The arc of demand is a real but metaphysical dimension that haunts the kitchen in part just because it is invisible. In this respect, the fact that we as readers are not there puts us at no disadvantage

in seeing the arc since those who are present cannot see it either. They feel it; ethnographic attention to the rhythms and situated innovations of conduct lifts such transcending realities to consciousness.

In the US, ethnographic sociology emerged out of a philosophical background of pragmatism, as did the theoretical perspective on social interaction advanced by Mead, Cooley and Dewey (for excellent intellectual histories, see Rock, 1979; Chapoulie, 2001). One of the methodological contributions of pragmatism for social research was a kind of inversion of the folk wisdom that necessity is the mother of invention. Following that maxim, a researcher searching for inventiveness in social life might search for circumstances of necessity. Actually the idea works better the other way around, at least as a methodological guide.

As in Fine's setting, so generally in social life, encounters with the point of the gun are relatively rare, not only because force is usually more attenuated but because it is temporally more diffused. Necessity is not visible right there in the moment of responsive action; it exists as a phenomenological upshot of the individual's simultaneous orientation to multiple time perspectives (cf. Mead, 1959: 15–18). What the pragmatists taught was that culture emerges to solve problems. Aesthetics don't necessarily come into existence for aesthetic reasons. For the ethnographer, the pragmatist's inversion of the folk maxim points to an important general guide: one resourceful way of seeing necessity in the field is by finding invention.

And even when there is the equivalent of the point of a gun motivating conduct, an ethnographer who brings out the inventiveness of subjects will give an immediacy to the reader's understanding of causal forces that will significantly enhance the power of what might otherwise be a crude explanation. Consider how Unni Wikan (1996) develops her treatment of women in poverty sections of Cairo dealing with the sexual demands of their husbands. Wikan reports that 'Kisses and physical caresses do not belong here – at least not among the poor.' Umm Ali, who already has conceived nine children 'through simple physical union' with her husband, Mustafa, often would like to resist, but, as she herself told a friend who had resisted her husband, 'You have to sleep with him. You must give him his right. . . . It is written in the Qu'ran.'

Wikan reports that once when Umm Ali resisted, Mustafa beat her and screamed: 'You cannot refuse me my right!' That is dramatic, certainly memorable, and many readers will identify with the victim, perhaps even vicariously responding in pain and anger. But the following incident, although it conveys less pathos, brings the reader into the scene in a way that is even more useful for developing explanatory ideas.

> Umm Ali told a story of one time when Mustafa was impatient to sleep with her, and Anwar and Afaf who lay in bed with them, would not fall asleep.

> Mustafa ordered them to sleep making it all the more impossible for them. The angrier he got, the more restless they became. When midnight came, and they had not yet dozed off, he tried to force her nevertheless.

But then Umm Ali crafted a moment of resistance. She could not hide behind her children, because, Wikan reports, while the 'women are frantic that the children might notice something . . . they complain that the men have no shame.' But they are not shameless about everything.

> She got out of bed and went into the hall where she sat down. There she was safe. There he would not pursue her. Intercourse belongs in the bed. (1996: 46–7)

The explanation that Egyptian, Islamic, poverty- and/or male-dominant culture shapes women's experience here is nuanced effectively through the ironies in this incident. Umm Ali's friend, we learn, has in fact resisted, so resistance is possible. We learned that it was Umm Ali herself who, citing religious culture, urged her friend to comply with her husband's demands. Gender domination does not work in a simple straight path. The resources the woman finds for resistance come specifically from the very culture that oppresses her. Of course, it would be fantasy, the fantasy of a Sheherazade saved by a desperate ingenuity renewed for a thousand and one nights, to imagine that Umm Ali does not face overwhelming forces. Her complex and creative responses do not undermine the explanation that cultural and gender forces shape her sex life. They ironically document the magnitude of the pressures by showing the ingenuity required to elude them.

Such fieldnotes give 'local color' to an ethnography, but however touristy that phrase may sound, they need not be considered a cheap rhetorical trick if they describe members' crafty, idiosyncratic ways of finessing persistent problems. When these features are what readers are responding to when they assess ethnographic description as especially good, there are likely to be, once again, good empirical reasons for their pleasures. Writing of this nature puts the reader 'there' and can develop 'vivid' portrayals of social life, because it shows the subjects sensitively alive to the demands of the situation.

There is, finally, a negative or surreal style in ethnography that gives a vivid sense of distinctive social situations, and that is strikingly effective in demonstrating causal explanations. The two examples I will discuss both show the influence of ethnomethodological understandings on ethnographic description. While the influence is revealed more in the author's citations than in any distinctive textual language, I note its presence to bring out the authors' approach to the analysis of fieldnotes.

The ethnomethodologists appreciate that everyone already does sociology. 'Folk' or 'popular' sociology, in this perspective, is not the work of

the dilettante but a theory of how social life works that people use to make social life work. Charles Frake, in his study of Philippine Moslems on the island of Basilan (1980), focused on how people enter a house. He saw his job as explicating the theory that the Yakan use as they move from roads toward houses, go to the base of ladders, ascend, enter porches, enter houses, and move through what they treat as significantly bounded internal zones in open rectangular spaces. They use their theory not in any self-conscious sense but implicitly, as they anticipate the meanings that the various actions they may take will have for others. For them, going into a home is no more or less a special event than it is for us, but is a theoretically rich process.

Now, the researcher cannot see the theory the Yakan use; he can only see people waiting below, calling up and down to each other in different ways, moving over space at different speeds, directing attention to each other more or less directly, addressing each other in styles that differ in their degrees and forms of respect. In some cases he sees them waiting for invitations before proceeding to penetrate the house further, in other cases not. Yet they usually act as if they know what the meaning of their actions will be for others; they appear to have a theory of social action that works well for them. It is not a perfect theory: as in our social lives, they are sometimes unsure what to do; sometimes they confront ambiguous situations and hesitate, seeking assurances as to the next move, taking risks. It is not that they have 'rules' about relationships from which they deduce the degree of the formality of interaction they should apply in deciding on an etiquette. Sometimes the etiquette that they enact defines the relationship that they suggest they have: 'in the ambiguous cases . . . house entrance etiquette becomes a way of defining the formality of the occasion . . .' But one does not know how Yakan society works until one knows how they work their theory of society to make it work.

The particular data passage I would highlight shows Yakans doing a kind of gloss on their theory:

> Teen-age girls will approach a friend's house and yell out, 'Hey, start cooking; we're here!' a gross violation of the 'rules' that, in another context, could cause deep trouble . . . a rule violation signaling humor in one situation may signal hostility in another. One must bend the rules with care, for expression of hostility, ridicule, or scorn can be very dangerous. (Frake, 1980: 228)

Just as getting the colloquially delivered jokes is an ultimate test of one's ability to operate in a foreign language, so being able to explain the specific sense of an everyday moment of humor is in a way an ultimate test of a sociological theory of some part of a society. Frake shows how the girls craft a moment of humor by drawing on and mocking the theory for entering a house that their society routinely employs. Frake's specific objective is to

describe *how* the Yakan enter houses, and if his description effectively conveys how they – as we might put it – do numbers on the practices of entering a house, he has explained *why* what they do takes on the particular emotional tones that characterize the situations that make up their lives.

Note that Frake brings out how the adolescent crafts her humor by drawing on something situationally invisible. There is a dialectic character to the descriptive 'how' and the explanatory 'why,' the former visible, the latter effective precisely because it remains invisible. Jokes lose their force to evoke humor when their logic must be explained. Ethnographic descriptions convey a 'you-are-there' sense to readers, and deliver an explanatory thrust as well, when they show that what is there for subjects specifically includes what they know in common is not there for them. As readers we are brought close to the subjects, overcoming a sense of social distance from them, as we follow a description of how they display to each other a particularly intimate knowledge of their culture. They make visible to each other an indexical pointer to an always underlying theory of how social life works. With them we see the iceberg beneath the tip's brilliant flash.

By describing idiosyncratically crafty behavior that is appreciated as such by the subjects, the ethnographer ironically makes visible the constraints in a society even as they are overcome. In an extreme variation on this theme, the ethnographer documents hard realities by describing how people, in responding to destructive forces they can never transcend, subtly maneuver to keep them submerged situationally. The big one, the ultimate topic for an a fortiori demonstration of the point, is death.

In his study of how news of death is delivered in a hospital setting, David Sudnow (1967) frequently makes negative assertions: 1) Doctors never say, 'We *think* your husband has died,' or, 'It's our *considered opinion* that your mother is dead.' 2) 'In none of the instances . . . [do they just say] Your husband died.' 3) Doctors reporting deaths are never asked, 'Have you enough knowledge to make such assessment?', nor do they hear responses such as, 'Let me talk to your superior about this.' 4) The hospital janitor is never given the task of conveying news of death, even though no technical expertise is necessary to deliver that news and even though the recipients never demand technical justification from doctors for their delivery of such news.

These negative observations are critical pieces of Sudnow's description of the scene. They are major supports for his positive claims about what is done when news of death is delivered. One positive proposition is that announcements of death by physicians are always given in a manner that indicates that death occurred in the course of dying. Another part of his theory asserts that doctors 'historicize' their delivery of death news, even with 'sudden' unexpected deaths like heart attacks, or even when they had no history of relationship with the deceased. Thus, in cases where the doctor first meets

Mr Jones only after he is brought into the hospital dead, the doctor will say something such as: 'Mrs Jones, apparently Mr Jones had a heart attack this afternoon and his body was too weak to fight it and he passed away' (Sudnow, 1967: 131–4).

There is a powerful methodological irony here. Sudnow uses his ethnographic evidence to make unusually strong causal claims. He predicts, for example, how doctors will deliver death news, at least in some respects. Yet he can be unusually positive about his causal claims specifically because of the kind of evidence he does not have. This bit of methodological magic is worth close inspection.

How does he get to his negative assertions? He imagines events that are powerfully absurd, even disturbing for members of this social world to contemplate. How does he get to a perspective on the absurd? Through sociological thinking: he compares what is done in this setting to what is done in others. Other menial tasks not requiring professional expertise are performed by the lowest members of the hospital social order. When patients have problems short of death, for instance cancer, relatives may well question a doctor's certainty about the patient's state, they may protest to superiors, and they often do request second opinions. When the news is good ('Your son's arm is not broken') there is no need to historicize the account. By thinking of these alternative situations, Sudnow in effect holds constant various potential variables that might be offered to explain how news of death is delivered. By isolating the distinctively crafted behaviors around death, he justifies an explanation that it is the social meaning of death that structures the interaction.

In a way, Sudnow's effort parallels Evans-Pritchard's, but if Evans-Pritchard starts with withcraft and works his text through hundreds of pages of exhaustive ethnographic description to an explanatory summation that focuses on death, Sudnow starts with extraordinarily close descriptions of how behavioral routines in hospitals are shaped by orientations to death, and he works his way to witchcraft-like fears, oracular rituals, and discourse formulas that magically hold off destructive powers. With these routines the hospital personnel draw on all the *mana* that is situationally at hand: the doctors' high status; the retrospective scientific formatting of the history of the death; and the stretched and rolling, culturally ensconced syntax for the delivery statements. And these devices for drawing the sacred into secular work seem deployed in what comparative analysis shows to be concerted tactics to keep the terror-provoking forces of death at bay.

The power that twists conduct into odd shapes in these studies, the fear of death, is made visible by noting how behavior is distinctively crafted in death-related social situations. Evidence of social action that never occurs becomes a strong indicator that the specifically effective causal force here is a sensed negativity. When an ethnography can make the descriptive case that

certain otherwise common forms of action never occur in a given type of social situation, it points brightly into the dark causes of what does in fact regularly show up.

There is in this example a general point about the ethnographer's research strategy for moving from descriptions of 'how' to explanations of 'why'. As discussed in the introduction, answers to questions about 'why?' are never contained within specific situations; they always reach beyond any one of the discrete instances that make up descriptive data. This is so not just because of logical reasons (what we take as answers to 'why?' always transcend the thing we want to explain) but for empirical reasons. There is a double production in each social act, an expressed and a hidden part of experience. What is expressed can be captured in descriptions of how news is delivered. But there is always another side to situated presentations of the self, something hidden, something held back: a certain reticence; a temporal perspective that reaches back beyond the present and a motivation that anticipates possible futures; a shadowed foundation of resources that are useful only to the extent that they are left out of direct awareness in the background of the situation; a feeling or sensuality out of which conduct emerges into the social field.

Answers to 'why?' are always about dimensions of social life that inspire by transcending situated action. Quantitative research typically acknowledges this by correlating outcomes with background or ecological patterns. Ethnographers convey the point perhaps most directly in data passages that resonate with poignance.

## 7. Poignant data

By poignant data I have in mind:

- the waitresses who, in W.F. Whyte's (1948) studies of the restaurant industry, break down crying when they are caught between the demands of customers and short-order cooks;
- many passages in Marjorie DeVault's (1991) study of the everyday work that women do in shopping, storing, preparing and serving food to their families, for example, that of '. . . a single mother with six children, who likes to save her own dinner until they are in bed, [who] observed, "That's a bad habit I have, I like peace and quiet" ' (1991: 134);
- 'A school bus approached that was packed with Anglo junior high school students being bused from an eastside barrio school to their upper-middle- and upper-class homes in the city's northwest neighborhoods. As the bus rolled by, a fusillade of coins came flying out the windows, as the students made obscene gestures and shouted, "Get a job." Some of the homeless

gestured back, some scrambled for the coins – mostly pennies, others angrily threw the coins at the bus, and a few seemed oblivious to the encounter' (Snow and Anderson, 1993: 198, 281);

- Goffman's (1963) opening of *Stigma* with a letter to Ms Lonelyhearts from a 16-year-old born with no nose, who ends, 'Ought I commit suicide?,' and signs, 'Desperate'[4];
- the day that the regular lunchtime play among a small set of factory workers studied by Donald Roy (1959–60) abruptly stopped, revealing smoldering anti-Semitic resentment and temporarily casting a pall on the workplace; The play, which took forms such as stealing food from another worker during 'banana time', which made otherwise tedious work enjoyable. The trigger was a transparently mock, unexpectedly piercing suggestion that 'the professor' who was married to the offended worker's daughter had been discovered teaching in a barber's college in hobohemia;
- the realization by a taxi-dance hall worker that her career would entail an age-related progression to dance halls of ever-lower social status (Cressey, 1932).

Poignant description is distinctive to ethnography. Statistical findings can be exciting but by definition they override the individual idiosyncrasies that color the most dramatic moments in people's lives. Ethnographers naturally feature poignant material for practical reasons, some obvious, some realized only in the exercise of the craft. Eager to attract and hold readers' attentions, the ethnographic writer is well-advised to draw on compelling cases. But even when one attempts to be systematic and non-sensational in data presentation, the very mass of descriptive information available requires some principle of selection. When searching for a way to begin, it can help to choose as an initial core what seem the 'best' data, best in a common-sense appreciation of what is most effective in a gut sense.

When ethnographers gravitate to the more poignant moments in their fieldnotes and interviews, they are following a larger wisdom that they may not fully appreciate. Such data can significantly advance the development of causal explanations. Poignant data represent a certain kind of structure in the social lives being rendered. To get at the common features of poignant passages, we need to have in mind richer accounts of a few. Here are three.

Herman, a 45-year-old janitor, was a key informant for Elijah Anderson (1978) in his study of a bar and liquor store that was a hangout for a small circle of men in a ghetto neighborhood. From time to time, Herman liked to say, 'I'm a man among men.' Early in Anderson's field research:

> Herman, beer in hand, boasted to the men about a Christmas party he was going to attend where he worked . . . Much of the conversation and interpretation within small groups like this one involves people's attempts to present themselves as important – as 'somebody' according to some standard the

> group values . . . [he] talked of the 'foxy chicks' he would be kissing under the mistletoe and of the 'intelligent folks' he would be 'conversin'' with. Jake responded by saying, 'Aw, that nigger's crazy.' Other responses were similar, but Herman persisted.
>
> At one point in his presentation Herman invited me to the Christmas party . . .
>
> When I arrived at his place of work on the day of the party, Herman showed me around the buildings he kept clean as a janitor. He led me from room to room . . . taking great pride in their immaculate look. As he showed me around, he said in an aside that he would have to introduce me to the others as his 'cousin,' since he could not let 'just anybody in there . . .' [At the party] Before introducing me around Herman quietly asked me my mother's name. I told him. Then he told me his mother's name, and assured me all the while that this was 'just in case somebody don't believe us.' (Anderson, 1978: 14–18)

A second example is from Jonathan Rubinstein's (1973) ethnography of the Philadelphia police, a Goffman-guided study still unparalleled in its interaction sensitivities and detailed rendering of the situational realities of patrol work:

> A young white officer . . . stopped his car and rolled down the window to look at the elderly Negro man. Instead of getting out of the car, he yelled across the deserted street to him, 'Take your hand out of your coat.' The man had turned back toward the car when it stopped, and he had his right hand jammed inside. He did not react to the command. They were frozen for several seconds; then the patrolman repeated his demand. When the man remained silent, the officer drew his pistol, continuing to remain seated in his car. He placed his gun in plain view and again ordered the man to show his hand. The man was very agitated but he remained silent. Slowly he began to extract his hand, but he gave the appearance of concealing some intention which threatened the patrolman, who cocked his gun and pointed it directly at the man. Suddenly the old man drew out his hand and threw a pistol to the ground. He stood trembling. The patrolman uncocked his gun with a shaking hand and approached. He was on the verge of tears, and in a moment of confusion, fear, and anxiety, he struck the man with the butt of his pistol. 'Why didn't you take your hand out when I told you? I almost shot you, you dumb bastard.' The man protested . . . complaining that there was no reason to hit him. The patrolman recovered from his fright, but . . . refused to acknowledge any responsibility. 'Are you wearing a sign? How the fuck am I supposed to know what you're gonna do?' (Rubinstein, 1973: 304–5)

Note how this event ironically shows how the person formally in power feels helplessly overpowered by the dynamic of the situation.

A third example is from Mitchell Duneier's (1999) study of unhoused black men selling used books and magazines on New York streets. A key challenge was explaining why they sleep on the streets. Although the men were poor and frequently used drugs, the answer was not simply drugs or poverty, as Duneier discovered when he was occasionally given money to hold:

> Sometimes when Ron asked me to hold his money, he returned at one or two in the morning and insisted on getting it back. Once, when I refused and reminded Ron what he had told me earlier [not to give it back should he demand it later that night], he said, 'My money is my money! Give it to me!'
>
> 'Okay, Ron, I'll give you twenty dollars' [of the 50 or 60 Duneier had received], I responded and did so . . . A few days later, now sober, he expressed appreciation that I hadn't returned the money to him earlier. He then used it to buy some extra books from Joe Garbage, who had struck gold on a hunt. He also bought some food, and paid back a debt of ten dollars to Marvin. (Duneier, 1999: 159–60)

Why do men like Ron not use their money to sleep indoors? Instead of buying drugs or renting a hotel room, they invest in their business:

> Ishmael chooses to sleep on the block – not because this is the best sleeping alternative he has, and not because he has spent all of his money on drugs, but because he is on the block first and foremost to work and, through that work, to live his life. (Duneier, 1999: 169)

Even when they are invited to stay with relatives, they may sleep on the floor. Sleeping on the sidewalk protects a good vending site and keeps one, we might say, concretely in the community of vendors. Their lives on the street, which seem to passersby to be the product of drug-driven, disorganized lifestyles, is from the inside a matter of making life thoroughly meaningful as serving work. To go to cheap hotels, which they could afford, is to accept a self-definition as homeless.

Across a broad range of times, places and social areas of study, ethnographers have been responsive to similar themes in selecting poignant data. One is routine forbearance. In some of the examples, forbearance gives way suddenly in eruptions of anger at being pushed to the border of humiliation or hysteria. In others, such as Unni Wikan's description of a woman innovating a defense against her husband's sexual demands, it is revealed in private moments when the children go to sleep. In still others, forbearance takes the form of a withdrawal from interaction when peer play cuts too deeply or of a near-pathetic request for sociability that an old man forces out of his own reticent mouth (see the descriptions of Bart in Duneier, 1992).

Closely related is a theme of humility or quiet suffering. These moments

display people as routinely oppressed, subservient, or at least burdened. The burden is double, as they usually carry it in silence. They are depicted living with constraints they usually endure without protest.

Another theme in poignant description is the subject's sense of the moral character of social inequalities. The policeman's articulation of frustration at being subject to people he should be controlling quickly replaces the initial righteousness of his anger. The mother's private eating is touching because it is defined as self-indulgent, as a guilty luxury put off until obligations are fulfilled. The moral theme in several of these examples emerges from a background of racial tensions in which shame and humiliation figure as daily themes. Herman is obsessed with issues of respectability. Ishmael sleeps on his street to guard his vending spot, and with it, his homespun version of the Protestant ethic.

The objective modesty of the behaviors described contrasts with the great moral stakes subjectively involved. These are mundane actions, often flimsy, naive, desperate efforts to attract esteem or save face. So much hinges on so little. Juxtaposition is key to the effectiveness of the data. To paraphrase Goffman (1967), in police patrol work, it is a constant that an act can quickly become a deed. A motion otherwise so minor as to escape any notice, like putting one's hand in one's pocket and pulling something out, can become devastatingly fateful, as it was recently in New York when Amadou Diallo allegedly reached into his pocket to pull out his wallet, presumably to identify himself to a crew of policeman, and was killed by one of the 41 shots aimed at him. Herman asks so little of Eli Anderson that the ethnographer could not refuse passing as his 'cousin'; Herman's braggadocio makes clear that it will mean so much to him. It would cost only $10 for Duneier's sidewalk book-and-magazine sellers to get a safe, dry, comfortable bed for the night, with a shower and perhaps also a meal included. Even though their income is low, the cost to them is not enormous in monetary terms: they do often make $60 a day. But the stakes for them are much higher: the ability to live a seamlessly meaningful life as 'entrepreneurs' rather than as 'homeless.'

We can note also the themes of innocence, faith and hope in these examples. The hope that a quarter picked up from the street will matter. The faith that routinely getting the kids fed and to bed will make a difference for them in the long run. The innocent turning to Miss Lonelyhearts for salvation.

And there is a poetic touch in these data. Something deeply felt is presented in a context that embodies a meaning; the meaning of the event to the subject cannot be conveyed in an abstracted formula. The particular and the general coexist in a mutually resonant relationship in these passages. It is of little if any probative value simply to label subjects as oppressed by or obsessed with their position in a morally stratified social order. By displaying just how moral

sensibilities arise in experience or are overridden by circumstance, the ethnographer grounds theory in the details of subjects' lives and creates for the reader an especially memorable, distinctive picture of a social world.

In combination these features give poignant descriptions a special value for developing causal explanations. Much of what moves people in the most important parts of their lives can be described only indirectly. As a matter of their ontology, a person's most precious concerns, fundamental vulnerabilities, and honored values may not be viewed analytically without destroying them. What is frightening and what is seductive share the condition that they can powerfully motivate behavior only so long as they remain at least partially mysterious. Once the naked body is put under a glaring light on the examination table, once the monstrous mask is deconstructed as a simple combination of features taken from otherwise segregated animal and human classifications, they lose their positive or negative charms. If shame, concerns about self-worth, obligations to serve the family, etc., are most convincingly documented in poignant data, it is not because writer and reader are lost in a mystifying sentimentality, but because such powerful forces exist in people's lives only when they are encountered transcending the self in diffusely embodied, densely contextualized experiences.

We return now to one of the central problems animating this inquiry. Ethnographers face the particular challenge that, to the extent that people can clearly state what motivates them, they can be studied through standardized surveys; there is no warrant to invest the time to hang out with them, or to interview them in the sporadic and rambling ways that are necessary if one wishes to catch expressions as they emerge in the everyday flow of subjects' lives. In the final analysis, what makes ethnography an indispensable research tradition is the natural elusiveness of the forces that seduce and force people onto the paths of their social lives.

Poignant data show people in moments when they are manifestly vulnerable or deeply touched. By describing people as they are suddenly penetrated by forces of circumstance, the ethnographer points to typically muted causes that shape conduct in extensive stretches of life transcending the luminous moment. Is there any doubt that the borderline hysteria portrayed in Rubinstein's example is, by way of apprehension and avoidance, behind routinely exercised patterns of police behavior? When we see the request made of Duneier to hold onto money even if its owner demands its return, are we are not justified in appreciating that we are seeing the tip of a formative principle in the lives of and Ron and Ishmael? When Anderson describes Herman's machinations to have the college-educated PhD candidate pass as his cousin, are we not assured that an inquiry into the moral organization of his corner of southside Chicago life will be rewarding? There is a systematic vagueness about the evidentiary value of poignant experiences. They indicate, by way of being exceptional moments, a customary forbearance;

we know we do not know precisely how the depicted concern is felt beyond the dramatic moment. Such moments show forces reaching clearly moving magnitudes as subjects attend with focused interest on the specifics of the immediate interaction context: the homeless men rushing to grab small change; a joking phrase that misfires by taking aim on a spot of vulnerability; Herman's request to know Anderson's mother's name so as to underwrite his pretensions. By that very token, we know we do not know how far in the lives of our subjects the current influence stretches. A text composed solely of such data would be frustratingly provocative at best, if not damnably sensationalistic (or, as ethnographers sometimes hear the objection, 'journalistic'). But poignant description offers good leads toward explanation. Any researcher who can recognize poignant moments in fieldnotes or interview materials should be able to find a path out of a descriptive morass and into a data-organizing investigation of explanatory causal ideas.

Poignant data are also useful to ethnographers for responding to the common criticism that their explanations are circular. Survey and experimental researchers describe and code background features and explanatory variables independent of the coding of the behavior to be explained. In contrast, ethnographers develop causal explanations by showing how people connect backgrounds to their conduct as they interpretively make their social statuses or contexts practically relevant to their behavior. In the process, ethnography becomes vulnerable to the charge that its findings are circular. The outcome to be explained seems to produce its causal background. Ethnography may then only seem able to provide a testing ground for the description of grounded concepts that must be plugged into testable explanations by other research methodologies.

The phenomenological structure of poignant experiences answers this dilemma. The themes of forbearance; of resistance overcome; of defenses suddenly penetrated; of dense emotions experienced in a moving fashion by the subject; all provide the researcher with subjective evidence that forces exist beyond the phenomenon to be explained. People behave these ways, the ethnographer can then argue, not simply because of gender, or racial, or occupational inequalities, but because, related to these background or structural features, there is an emotionally, sensually or aesthetically thick fabric that permeates their social lives, transcending the separate situations of social interaction that data may serially describe. Poignant moments reveal those forces, not in completely naked fashion but in the process of coming into the half-light of emotionally intensified awareness (Willis, 1981 [1977]) is a classic argument along these lines). The implication, which ethnographic inquiry is then advised to take up, is that subtle, shadowed forms of these themes may be detected in the more routine embodiment of behavior that constitutes the bulk of social life. With poignant passages as a touchstone,

the ethnographer can then search the mass of data for more elusive instantiations of causal forces.

At several points I have noted the problem that ethnographers face if their subjects can tell them directly what moves them. In such circumstances, it would seem that the ethnographer might be little more than an intermediary, translator, amplifier, middle-person, etc. This formulation is a little too simple. In fact, subjects often do tell the ethnographer precisely what moves them. The problem is, we cannot hear them at first. It is quite common for a researcher to realize, only after working with data for a long time, that the subjects were indicating the theory that explains their conduct from the start. What takes time to hear is the transcending resonances in subjects' expressions. When Herman repeatedly says, 'I'm a man among men,' the researcher, hearing each word with perfect clarity, still might well ask himself, 'What the hell is he saying?' In the end one realizes that there is, almost literally, some hell that Herman is proudly poking his head above with such chanted phrases. The problem is not to catch the phrase correctly in a transcription, it is to catch its resonances. The 'cousin' incident, which links Herman to the ethnographer Anderson via a kinship metaphor and then to a metaphor of institutionalized social stratification (the glory of the university that looms in high profile on the background of this ghetto corner scene), provides the signposts for the structural explanation that is necessary to articulate the reverberations in Herman's prosaic street song.

## Conclusion

The criteria for evaluating ethnographic data that have been addressed here exist in a gentle mist. They are primarily used to make recommendations in a passing manner, not as characterizations that invite close analysis. Such terms as 'poignant,' 'rich,' and 'paradoxical' are best used lightly, almost casually, or not at all.[5]

It is possible to explicate the meaning of these terms, for example to bring out the strands of description that make a given data passage 'poignant.' In an examination of ethnographic culture it is helpful to give a technical specification for each of these terms. But this does not mean that the ethnographer should try to collect data or write in a manner logically derived from the resulting definitions.

In the field, the researcher may not appreciate that given observations or interview segments are especially important. The pressure to sustain rapport will often block recognition that what one is witnessing will be seen later, and from the outside perspective of scholarly writing, as particularly useful. Even when data are written up from notes or transcribed from tapes, the weightiness of different portions may not immediately appear. It is not

uncommon to find that data become compelling only when one is attempting to construct a text.

Much of the work of constructing ethnographic texts *ought* to proceed in a mist of vague evaluative notions. If ethnographers become too self-reflexive, they risk driving themselves out of business. Precisely articulated definitions of what 'good data' look like are exactly what distinguishes fixed design research from ethnography. We have good reasons to honor our naturally emerging, strong, but only vaguely expressed enthusiasms about some of the descriptions of social life that we produce. But better that such reasons be explicated in separate methodological writings like the current article than in research proposals ('I will get nuanced and poignant data that capture enigmas about the social lives of . . .'); in research protocols ('In order to obtain data sufficiently varied to permit the testing of rival explanations, obtain a minimum of three variations on each major pattern in the analysis'); or in textual presentations ('The following materials are offered to increase the grounded character of the analysis').

Analytically vague but aesthetically powerful appreciations of ethnographic data have their primary value not in justifying a work but in the practical aid they offer for moving from description to explanation.[6] There is, after all, a mystification at the center of any explanation that would honor the subject's capacity to create as well as receive culture. Whatever the pulls and pushes in the subjects' environments that we may find convincing as explanations in a summary account, if our explanations are to avoid determinism, they should show how the phenomena we wish to explain become compelling to the subjects themselves. In the end we must explain conduct as the outcome of a kind of self-mystification, a bootstrapping of motivations that does the double work of, on the one hand, perceiving obstacles and attractions in the environment and, on the other, obscuring the work of recognizing forces that ultimately gives them objective status.

So one caveat is that, while we should take the commonsense terms for appreciating ethnographic data more seriously, we should not practice them too formally. Another is that the terms addressed in this article surely do not exhaust those spontaneously used to recognize the compelling powers of ethnographic data. The intention of this article is only to begin a critical acknowledgment of the pragmatic values in ethnography's cultures of appreciation.

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## Notes

1 Bittner's central insight has become a kind of media cliché in police shows. 'Have we got a situation here?,' a supervising officer on t.v. or in the movies will often inquire. We might as well rejoice rather than be depressed at the success of ethnography in infiltrating popular culture, although in the case of the police, there appear to be two very different cultural lenses in use. One of these is in entertainment culture, which dramatizes situational variation as critical, the other is in political discussion, where demon personalities, management conspiracies, and racist ideologies are seen as holding sway. Bittner's overall argument was in the nature of a social phenomenology. The essential task of the police, as indicated by descriptions of what they most distinctively do when interacting with the public, is essentially to exercise a unique authority to insist that everyone else 'shut up!' (1979). In other words, where there are competing definitions of what is going on, the police have the unique legal authority to make any situation *their* situation. Whatever the value of the police in reducing crime, all modern societies have sufficient moments of such chaos as to find that function useful.

2 What is wrong with being 'merely descriptive'? Put in other words, the objection might be that the observations are random and incoherently assembled. Why describe this and not that? Why include all these descriptions in the same text? An answer will require an explanation of some sort. To take an extreme case of what might seem description without explanation, even photographers who would present visual evidence of social life without text are subject to this constraint. 'If they [social documentary photographers] had not theory, they would have no basis on which to make the choices through which they produce their images.' Becker cites Jay Ruby for the observation that anthropologists take pictures that are not so much informed by anthropological sophistication as photographic sophistication. Thus the better ones will show sequences of actions rather than isolated images. Sequentially organized data is especially useful for developing explanations (Becker, 1986: 243–4).

3 There is a parallel between the non-rational commitments that cooks and boxers make to their work. While there are increasingly females among cooks, the occupation remains primarily male at the routine commercial level, and it may be that the rewards to masculinity at taking on the aesthetic/

sensual/athletic challenges in both settings explain why both are willing to invest so much of themselves for such little monetary reward.

4 It should be noted that this letter was fictional, part of a novel by Nathanael West. Columnists who give advice to the lovelorn have often made up or rewritten the letters they respond to. For our purposes, which will be to deconstruct poignance, the fictional character of the example is not an obstacle.

5 Even 'thick description,' the most famously proffered phrase that would seem to fit this series, is not explicitly defined by Geertz in the essay it entitles. Geertz is arguing that the ethnographer should articulate the multiple meanings of given segments of social life, and analyze the relations of the various orders of meaning. The spirit of his essay is antithetical to any effort to pin down criteria by which given works might be differentially evaluated as more or less 'thick' descriptions.

6 The topic of this article is the transition in the research and writing process from a focus on narrating how social life works to an analysis framed more explicitly as an explanation. For the different set of considerations that properly goes into evaluating whether an explanation proffered in an ethnography is well-substantiated and preferable to alternative explanations, see Katz (1982). There is, perhaps, a risk that appreciating that given passages of ethnographic description are poignant, revealing, nuanced, etc., will lead some readers to a sentimental evaluation of a work. But there is no reason why it must, especially if we understand that such standard concerns about evidence as representativeness, reliability, reactivity and replicability do not disappear simply by floating an 'ethnographic' label over a research report.

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