URBAN ETHNOGRAPHY

RESEARCH IN URBAN SOCIOLOGY

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URBAN ETHNOGRAPHY: LEGACIES AND CHALLENGES

EDITED BY

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INTRODUCTION: BUILDING BRIDGES IN URBAN ETHNOGRAPHY

Richard E. Ocejo

Some methods in academic disciplines tend to stand out more than others. Think of breaching experiments in social psychology and anthropological fieldwork among an indigenous group. Or, perhaps envision scholars deep in thought, like the philosopher pacing or the mathematician staring at marked-up white boards (these two examples, may of course, come in part from Hollywood). In sociology, we have ethnography, particularly urban ethnography. To be sure, sociologists use the ethnographic method of participant observation in a variety of settings and to pursue numerous lines of inquiry. We have ethnographies in workplaces (Morris, 2018; Ocejo, 2017; Sherman, 2007), among families and households (Dreby, 2010; Lareau, 2003; Mose, 2016), and in small towns and rural places (Vidich & Bensman, 1958). And, we have ethnographic studies that focus more intently on processes occurring within specific spaces or across several of them (Benzecry, 2011; Calarco, 2018; Katz, 1999) than on analytically engaging with the relationship between social organization and behavior and the rich, textural contexts within which all behaviors and social facts are situated — a relationship that the Chicago School pioneered (Abbott, 1997) and for which urban fieldwork is especially known (Manella, this volume; Reyes, this volume). No ethnographic field site or topic has point of primacy over others; as a method, ethnography is a tool sociologists who wish to tackle an array of social puzzles can use to address certain questions that they raise. But, there is something distinctive about urban ethnography, about "being there" (Geertz, 1988) by "going out" in the city, among urbanites. It stands out.

Longevity plays a role here. In this volume, Stefan Timmermans and Pamela Prickett aptly describe urban ethnography as the "Adam and Eve" of the

method for sociologists. Urban ethnographers have produced some of the most influential and memorable studies in sociology, since the discipline's founding in the late nineteenth century (see Du Bois 1897, for a well-known example). Jonathan Wynn (2011) has focused on the myriad "urban characters" that ethnographers have examined, like Doc, the Italian gang leader in William Foote Whyte's (1943) classic *Street Corner Society*, and Hakim, the erudite street bookseller in Mitchell Duneier's *Sidewalk* (1999), and constructed, like the down-and-out in Nels Anderson's *The Hobo* (1923), and the apartment building watchmen in Peter Bearman's *Doormen* (2005). Ever since, turning their attention to its streets, neighborhoods, and institutions, ethnographers have been documenting the city's lifeblood: its people, and types of people.

And, just as urban settings are hardly the only places where sociologists conduct ethnographic fieldwork, so is ethnography hardly the only method sociologists use to study the city. Aggregate-level, city-level, and micro-level statistical analyses permeate the urban literature on such topics as housing segregation (Massey & Denton, 1993; Sharkey, 2013), and crime (Kohler-Hausmann, 2018; Sharkey, 2018). Sociologists and social thinkers have relied on archival evidence to make claims about urban life (Sennett, 1970). Spatial analyses through mapping (Verd & Porcel, 2012) as well as visual data collection techniques (Auyero & Swistun, 2009; Ocejo & Tonnelat, 2014) are becoming both more sophisticated and easier to use due to technological innovation. And, indeed, mixed-methods research is becoming an increasingly popular way to address social problems by analyzing them from multiple angles and with different approaches (Desmond, 2016; Klinenberg, 2003; Small, 2009).

Still, ethnographic analyses and storytelling remain standard-bearers of the discipline's concern with social life in cities, chiefly how their inhabitants make sense of their lives and how they find themselves dealing with urban conditions beyond their control. Popular images of cities portray a certain chaos and mystery: the constant stimulation from crowds of strangers, some in a hurry and some idling; changing streetscapes from block to block, and year to year; and the secrets of the humblest everyday activities. In his classic study of low-income African-American men, Liebow (1967) writes about discovering their streetcorner world by "accident" (p. 15). As much as he ventured to other areas in the neighborhood, the action he discovered innocently on the corner during his first days in the field (a police encounter, the presence of a puppy), introduced him to the people and behaviors he would focus on to understand inner city black men as they see themselves. Conducting urban ethnography − participant observation in city settings − and slowing down the hustle and bustle and rapid change of the modern metropolis to a crawl is still a favored way of making sense of why urbanites are as they are and do as they do.

This volume, *Urban Ethnography: Legacies and Challenges*, offers a look (one among many) at the state of urban ethnography today. It provides a platform for some of the method's most impressive craftspeople to discuss their scholarly work and efforts to sharpen how urban ethnography gets taught and practiced. It presents original work by scholars from many countries working in different areas related to the broader urban experience. Chapters contain

personal reflections on experiences in the field, discussions and critical takes on the method's history, presentation of analysis, and practical guidance. Most of them feature some combination of these foci. Seasoned and aspiring ethnographers alike will benefit from these authors' experiences and perspectives.

I divide this volume into four parts, organized around its twin themes: legacies and challenges. The chapters in each part best reflect that part's specific theme, although readers will find several instances in which a chapter also speaks to the themes of other parts. The themes of the volume and its parts are all forms of "building bridges," or extending connections across time, space, and boundaries. Urban ethnographers do so when they discuss the method's history, and consider the relevance of its traditions today. They do so when they use its techniques to discover the impacts global forces have on local conditions, and how those conditions in turn shape how the global gets situated and actualized in specific locales. They do so when they train students in the method, furthering its longevity. They do so when they carefully discuss how theoretical notions of the spaces they study, translate into actual behaviors and meanings within those spaces. And, they do so when they reflect upon the social divides between themselves and the people they study, and how to navigate them.

By legacies, I refer to both the knowledge and approaches that have been passed down to us from earlier generations, and how we are preparing future generations of urban field workers. In short, how we have been taught and mentored and how we teach and mentor. The two chapters in Part I: "The Legacy of the Chicago School," focus on the tradition of that famous and influential generation of urban scholars from the early twentieth century, and critically reflect on its usefulness and impacts today (Gabriele Manella and Victoria Reyes). They arrive during an important time for sociology, when the discipline in general and the Chicago School in particular are becoming subject to critical inspection over their origins amid cultures that reflected processes of racism and imperialism (Go, 2016; Morris, 2015). These works add to how we can think about this legacy in light of this intellectual moment.

In addition, both chapters in this part take up the notion of "the global," but in different ways. Based in Bologna, Italy, Manella has two goals: (1) to show examples of the Chicago School's lasting influence in urban sociology in the United States by analyzing texts; and (2) interviewing prominent urban scholars, and to trace the School's adoption in Italy through a discussion of key studies in Italian cities. He shows how researchers in both countries selectively borrow from the School's methodological traditions, instead of using them in their entirety, but in different ways that signify spatial and cultural distinctions between the United States and Italy. Manella addresses the question of how the influence and practices of a research school get sustained, morphed, and lost over time and across national borders.

Reyes, meanwhile, looks at the implications of the Chicago School in today's era of conducting "global ethnographies," or ethnographies that consider the influence of "global processes, connections, and imaginations" in local places and analyze the relational connections between the two (Burawoy et al., 2000; also see Burawoy, 2000; Gille & Ó Riain, 2002). If the Chicago School scholars

did not use theories of globalization or consider these connections 100 years ago, what good are their approaches today, when examining such macro-micro linkages has become an increasing necessity? Reyes argues that the Chicago School did in fact often consider the global, and offers several lessons from its work that we can take to help us conduct global ethnographies.

While teaching and mentoring students in the method are what many urban ethnographers do and spend a lot of time doing, we do not discuss *how* we do them − formally, in writing, or informally, among each other − nearly as much as we do our own findings and methodological decisions. The closest ethnographers come to doing so is in the methodological appendix, or the section in the back of a book where researchers can explain the origins, design, challenges, and dilemmas of their projects. These discussions have been quite common in urban ethnography for many decades (Gans, 1962; Whyte, 1943). But writings about how to actually teach and guide students in the method, with practical ideas, are rare. (A notable exception from one of the discipline's legendary figures should not have happened. In 1974, Erving Goffman was on a panel with other field workers to discuss their data collection and analysis procedures. While he did not like to be recorded, and even requested before his talk that no one record him, someone did anyway. Years after his death, Lyn Lofland transcribed, edited, and had published this talk, in which Goffman spoke almost casually about some of his thoughts on conducting ethnography. Despite his exalted status in the discipline as a theorist who was also a keen practitioner of the method, it is technically Goffman's only publication on ethnographic fieldwork (See Goffman, 1989).

The two chapters in Part II: "How to Train Ethnographers," address this need. Both pair a senior scholar (Stefan Timmermans and Javier Auyero) with one of their former students who are now junior faculty themselves (Pamela Prickett and Katherine Jensen, respectively). Timmermans and Auyero each have decades of experience practicing and teaching ethnography, while Prickett and Jensen are emerging as leading figures in their subfields. These glimpses into how they all go about getting students − graduate students as well as undergraduates − to discover an ethnographic imagination, to realize how ethnographers create and give structure to the objects they study, and to analyze texts for the methodological choices the authors made are like peering into a master class. Instructors, mentors, and students will benefit from their examples and approaches.

This volume's other central theme, challenges, could have several meanings. Ethnographers, after all, face a plethora of challenges and obstacles in their work while in the field, before entering the field, and even after leaving the field (see Lareau, 2003). These issues include gaining entry (or "getting in"), taking notes, handling ethical dilemmas, and "exiting" the field. Here, I wish to offer discussions of two general sets of challenges that all urban ethnographers face to different extents: how ethnographers are to define, conceptualize, and navigate the spaces and places they study; and the role that the complex intersection and configuration of our social identities and backgrounds (i.e., our "ethnographic

toolkit"; Reyes, 2018) play in our relationships with participants and abilities to generate and analyze data.

The four chapters in Part III: "Thinking About Space and Place," offer reflections on the issues ethnographers face when they get to and try to make sense of their field sites, and guidance on how to treat what they encounter both in situ and during periods of analysis. As mentioned, the notion that social facts are situated in actual times and spaces is one of the founding principles of urban ethnography. We go to where our participants live, work, and play, where we can observe what they normally do in the places where they normally do them. But space and its related concept of place (see Gieryn, 2000) are more than mere settings; they are significant factors in ethnographic research and analysis.

Given that the settings for urban ethnography are cities (except when they're not − see below), rich, detailed descriptions of the places where people behave are quite common in texts based on the method. But, the places urban ethnographers write about are more than descriptions, but constructed objects of analysis. Thomas Corcoran, Jennifer Abrams, and Jonathan Wynn take up this topic in their chapter on the tensions present in ethnographic depictions of place. Whether in the foreground or background, place appears as a social actor in ethnographic texts, but in different ways marked by a variety of dynamics − such as whether a place's past or present is being depicted, or what the boundaries of place are demarcating in terms of whether phenomena is "in" or "out." By recognizing and considering these tensions in their work, urban ethnographers can be far more precise in how they depict and analyze the places they study.

In an ironic twist, sometimes the challenges urban ethnographers face, come from the disciplinary legacies they inherit. As Waverly Duck and Mitchell Kiefer argue, scholars from sociology's classical era, including those from the Chicago School, created a narrative of cities and their spaces as prone to disorganization, and their residents to disorderliness. Early urban ethnographers focused much attention on conditions in the spatial types of "the slum" and "the ghetto" (Wirth, 1927; Zorbaugh, 1929), places with large concentrations of (mostly European) immigrants and African Americans. Over time, the black ghetto in particular, has remained a powerful sociospatial construct with disorganization and disorder serving as its default descriptors. The challenge for urban ethnographers studying low-income urban communities, then, is wrestling with this legacy of pathology. To address it, Duck and Kiefer propose focusing on neighborhoods' "interaction orders," or how they are socially organized as responses to disorderly spatial conditions. Based on trust and shared norms, interaction orders are more accurate reflections of social life in neighborhoods than perceived or assumed conditions, and ethnographers are in prime positions to reveal how exactly they work.

It is usually taken for granted in urban ethnographic texts that the places under examination have a certain degree of fixity to them. It is assumed that the people under examination have lived, worked, or been hanging out in the field sites for long enough to both feel a sense of rootedness there, and alert this feeling to others. However, in their research on Black gay men in Los Angeles and other cities, Marcus Anthony Hunter and Terrell J. A. Winder caution us to the

hiddenness and ephemerality of certain urban groups. They ask, "What is the geography of Black LGBTQ life?" Do these maps of the city align with existing ones of gay urban life? Hunter and Winder point out that not only have urban Black gay men and other sexual minorities often been left (or kept) out of the historical narratives and discourses of gay city life, particularly that within romanticized and predominantly white "gayborhoods," but the spaces they inhabit and places they construct are perhaps especially precarious in today's rapidly changing city: constantly shifting and disappearing. A fragile group made invisible or at risk of erasure survives over space and time through visibility and bearing witness to the forces that make phenomena stay hidden and even disappear, like discrimination and gentrification. Adding to Jack Katz's (1997) well-known list of "warrants" for ethnographic research, Hunter and Winder offer the justification of urban ethnography as an act of seeing the unseen, and revealing the meanings contained within their at-risk spaces and places, before it's too late to do so.

As mentioned, when ethnographers study spaces in settlements, the assumption is that they are specifically cities, usually large ones, as legacy dictates (Wirth, 1938). But what about community-based fieldwork in other types of settlements, like suburbs? What can a discussion of suburban ethnography tell us about urban ethnography? In her chapter, Karyn Lacy shows the differences between conducting ethnographic fieldwork in suburbs compared to cities, and to "studying up," or researching people in positions of power, compared to the more common "studying down," or researching people who lack it. For instance, spatial distinctions pose challenges. Suburbs are usually more spread out than cities, and have fewer public spaces for interaction. These obstacles to suburban ethnography are compounded by studying the middle and upper classes, who present special limits to accessibility. Lacy's experiences offer important contrasts to typical urban ethnographies that inform us of key truths of fieldwork.

The three chapters in this volume's final part, Part IV: "Layered Identities," cover the impacts that the complex configuration of identity has on urban ethnographers, specifically while within their field sites and among the groups they study. Considering our social standpoint, or the intersection of our own identities in relation to that of who we research, and treating the relationship between the two to the same level of examination as we do behavior, has become integral to ethnographic texts, often receiving pride of place at the front of books and ubiquitous in methodological appendices. In short, identities − of the researcher, the researched, and the commonalities and differences between them − are central to the production of ethnographic knowledge, and ethnographers are devoting greater attention to their layered roles in their work.

Race is among the most central and salient identities that ethnographers discuss in their moments of reflexivity (Reyes, 2018). Usually, however, researchers conduct fieldwork within the country of their national origin, which means they are working within the same racial classification system as they (and often their participants) grew up in. But what happens when this is not the case? Jean Beaman, a Black ethnographer, has experienced this very situation in her

extensive research on immigrant identity and citizenship in France, a country with a colonialist past that is rife with issues of race and racism but disavows their existence officially. She learns some valuable methodological and intellectual lessons from her sustained encounters. Being an American meant participants saw her as an outsider, but being Black meant they saw her as an insider, and therefore as someone who they felt comfortable discussing racial issues with. Beaman details what it is like to be an "outsider-within," which is also how her participants are viewed in French society.

Ethnography is body work. Ethnographers' bodies shape what they know, how they gain access and relate to the people they study, and how their participants perceive them. These realities vary depending on the identities of the researcher as well as the groups under investigation, and even the nature of the field site. In her chapter, reflecting on her experiences conducting fieldwork in Caracas, Venezuela, particularly as a woman among hyper-masculine groups and settings, Rebecca Hanson documents the gendered nature of ethnography, and how she was able to use the city itself as a tool to maintain distance between herself and those male participants who sexually harassed her – an all-too-common occurrence for women ethnographers. City spaces are often gendered, with some being "for men," and some "for women," and researchers' gender identity becomes especially salient when they enter them. In her own ethnographic reflections, and interviews with women ethnographers on their encounters with men in the field, Hanson shows how the city presents both constraints for women in terms of access and mobility in the field, as well as opportunities like being able to use the city's dynamics of turnover and anonymity to avoid stressful and harmful situations. Her push for ethnographers to take the role of the body in fieldwork into account is a welcome move away from ethnography's detached, objective character.

Part IV's, and the volume's final chapter operates on many levels, and brings together a variety of topics from previous ones. Trained at the University of Chicago, James Farrer left the United States for China in the late 1980s to conduct fieldwork for his dissertation. He, then, took a job in Tokyo in 1998, and has been there ever since, studying local groups and cultures in that city and in Shanghai. As a "migrant ethnographer," Farrer finds himself in both privileged and transient positions in his adopted home, a region that, he notes, stands at the periphery of academia. Through lively self-reflection, he shows how intertwined ethnography as a practice is with practices of everyday life, and how the method could be used as a means of forming one's own identity and, as a constant outsider-within, a relationship with one's home.

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It's been more than 120 years since Du Bois conducted the first systematic sociological analysis of a city in the United States, using fieldwork as a key methodological tool, and a century since the Chicago School began passing down ethnography as a methodological tradition for generations of urban researchers. The fact that sociologists like the contributors to this volume are

still using these methods while grappling with their shortcomings and controversies is evidence of these classic scholars' brilliance and continued influence in sociology. The twenty-first century presents a new set of challenges and opportunities for urban ethnographers, perhaps none more important than how global forces interact with local conditions and how diversity is shaping everyday life. Cities are the epicenters of both realities, and urban ethnographers are more attuned to the global impacts and to the role of social identities (among their urbanite participants and in their own research) than they have ever been before. Ethnography remains a powerful tool for sociology, and its practitioners, like the forthcoming authors, promise to continue using it to explore and understand our increasingly complex urban world.

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