

What a highly controversial ethnography says about tensions, problematizations and inequality in contemporary ethnographic practice and regulation

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to illuminate how inequality – in the way ethnography as a research tool itself is used – underwrites many of the methodological tensions in the recently published and widely-debated *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City* by Alice Goffman.

Design/methodology/approach – The author conducts an in-depth, critical analysis of *On the Run* as an epistemological case to visualize methodological and moral challenges that burden ethnographic practice at large.

Findings – The author opens dialogue on undercover ethnography, the overreach of institutional review boards, privilege in the use of ethnography as a research tool, “Othering” and the exoticization of the underclass, and the boundary shift from observer to participant roles with deep immersion. The author unpacks these areas of contention toward the construction of a potential alternative combining public sociology with what is called a sociology of compassion.

Originality/value – While the book provides an intimate, rich account of the experience of law among the underclass, the author demonstrates that it constitutes an epistemological case ideal for examining how the issues of pre-fieldwork preparation, positionality and deep immersion are conceived – and problematized – in mainstream ethnographic practice.

Keywords Ethnography, Epistemology, Inequality, Positionality, Othering

Paper type Case study

Introduction

In 2014, Alice Goffman, daughter of Erving Goffman, published her first, widely read, landmark book *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City* (OTR) examining questions of inequality, racial tensions, and the experience of law in inner-city life in Philadelphia. Not long after, however, an onslaught of fiery criticisms ensued from across journalistic and academic circles, questioning the veracity of her findings, chastising how it contributes to a larger conversation around race in America, and casting doubt on the integrity of her methodology and her very person amidst grievous accusations of participation in criminal activity (Lubet, 2015; Singal, 2015).

OTR, consisting of a rare cross-racial ethnography conducted over six years and garnering wide academic and journalistic attention, is an ideal epistemological case with which to interrogate many insights on contemporary ethnographic research practices demonstrated by the study in particular and modern traditions of (urban) ethnography at large. In particular, this paper focuses on examining three key sites of methodological tension underwritten in OTR: demonstrating how pre-fieldwork preparation straddles the line between undercover ethnography and the reach of institutional review boards (IRBs); the consequences of (failing to recognize one’s) positionality as a researcher in terms of “Othering” racial minorities and generating advantages that privilege certain ethnographers above others; and the repercussions of deep immersion in the field for a researcher’s interpretive shift from observer to participant roles and thus, the content of research findings and the very fate of subjects. Throughout, this paper interrogates the problematizations with these three lines of



inquiry that demonstrate inequality in ethnography as a research tool itself. This paper concludes with a discussion on a recommendation for moving beyond the problems identified, articulating what I term a sociology of compassion and in connection to public sociology.

The case of *On the Run*

With the war on crime and the war on drugs from the 1980s onwards as its backdrop, *OTR* is a dramatic story of social change in the space between the micro level of individual lived experience and the meso level that defines the social structures of communities, encircling the phenomenon of mass conviction that disproportionately targets young, black Americans. The data draws on an incredible six years of ethnographic fieldwork, far exceeding the usual length of contemporary ethnographies. Spending much time with members of the community, like Chuck, Reggie, Tim and Josh, among others, Goffman's argument is essentially about the experience of law (Levi, 2017), showcasing their adaptations to not only convictions themselves, but their aftershocks: people remain "on the run" after convictions by seeking to avoid the police and authorities. The lynchpin idea is a conviction puts someone on the radar, setting in motion a set of rules and regulations that bind their actions, keeping them under surveillance with the looming risk of imprisonment for any subsequent infraction (Goffman, 2014, p. 114).

Such restrictions fan out to affect those around convicts as well. In gripping detail, for instance, Goffman recounts how one subject (Anthony's cousin) was sentenced to prison for "conspiracy to sell drugs and possession of an illegal firearm after she refused to serve as a witness for the case against the father of her child," after which her four-year-old daughter was "sent to Philadelphia, where she was passed from relative to relative" (Goffman, 2014, p. 66).

The precarity for men and women alike reorders the social fabric of the poor, black Philadelphia communities in *OTR*. A salient dimension where this visibilizes is how "staying out of prison and maintaining family, work, and friend relationships become contradictory goals: engaging in one reduces the chances of achieving the other" (Goffman, 2014, p. 53). Out of a fear of encountering police, men distance themselves from institutionalized authority, including finding a legitimate job and avoiding police even in emergencies (Goffman, 2014). What results is the perpetuation of violence when men neglect to contact police during instances of violence and exact vigilante justice on their own accord. Here, Goffman recasts the typologies in Anderson's (1999) *Code of the Street* by locating the construction of "decent" and "street" (what she calls "clean" and "dirty," respectively; Goffman, 2014, p. 161) characters in a context where authority itself is dangerous: people who shirk away from "decent" behaviors do so not for respect, but for eluding the danger of imprisonment that authorities represent to themselves and to alters when one is a fugitive (Goffman, 2014, pp. 36, 181-182).

The subject of how Goffman conducted her study has stimulated much debate within academic and journalistic circles. The methodological tensions encapsulated in *OTR* and reactions to it refract the logics of inquiry of a larger class of (ethnographic) cases and a broader conversation on transformations in the research process altogether (George and Bennett, 2005, Ch. 3). In the following sections, this paper outlines and problematizes key methodological tensions in *OTR* and the larger issues in the modern ethnographic practice that underwrite them (see Table I).

Methodological tension	Problematization
Pre-fieldwork preparation	Undercover ethnography
Researcher positionality	Overreach of institutional review boards (IRBs)
Deep immersion	Class: privileged uses of ethnography as a research tool
	Race: "Othering" minorities and exoticizing of the underclass
	"Going native": changing actor behaviors and field dynamics

Table I.
Schematic outline of
key methodological
tensions and
problematizations

Pre-fieldwork preparation*Undercover ethnography*

Prior to *OTR*, Goffman recounts how she entered the field site by leveraging ties with Miss Deena, a manager at her university cafeteria under whom she had worked prior. She asked if Miss Deena had recommendations for potential students in need of tutoring, out of her purported interest in literacy rates among the underclass. Afterward, Goffman was connected with two of Miss Deena's grandchildren, whom she taught several times a week. It is not mentioned when she obtained ethical approval for her six-year study, but it is stated that her tutoring role was in anticipation of upcoming coursework, thus implied to lead up to *OTR*.

Captured here is a methodological tension largely ignored by critics, but which deserves attention: the issue of undercover ethnography without disclosing its practice, amidst participation in another ongoing activity with others. IRB policies would claim that Goffman's pre-fieldwork preparation is unethical – done outside their watch and therefore, regulation that would ensure her practices do not stray outside the boundaries of institutionally acceptable risks (see Heimer and Petty, 2010). The deception, moreover, threatens to violate the privacy and rights of subjects that could endanger their wellbeing (Neyfakh, 2015). The idea is that doing so strips subjects of their agency and, worse yet, possibly forces their behaviors, opinions, personal information be disclosed in publications without permission (Palys and Lowman, 2000).

The reach of IRBs

Encapsulated in this methodological tension is a struggle between ethics as manifested in institutional bureaucracy and ethics in the interests of facilitating efficient research practice (Heimer and Petty, 2010, p. 602). This tension mirrors a similar tension between institutional convenience and efficient legal practice in the sociology of law (Edelman *et al.*, 1993). The idea is that the latter often gives way to preserve the former, echoing Weber's observation of how the means of research are controlled by privileged administrative figures in bureaucratic enterprises (Weber, 1968, p. 983). According to Feeley (2007), institutional ethics has spawned "an aggressive enforcement process at universities across the country," widening the jurisdiction of risk-averse administrators over scholars. The bureaucratization of the research process thus grows to encompass all types of research irrespective of external factors, like funding sources.

With *OTR*, like other ethnographic studies, the governance of pre-fieldwork speaks to a form of overreach – one that drains the creative spirit driving quality research. Research begins, as Luker (2008, p. 157) suggests, with a spark of inspiration to see structure and pattern in relatable circumstances of the world around us. In practice, this means we (commonly) begin our ethnographic research with an observation of our embedding social environments, perhaps most explicitly captured by ethnographers who write about their "day jobs" (see Pierce, 1995). It is also a useful practice for finding key informants to access a field, like Miss Deena in *OTR*. The attempt to restrict "undercover" research has become a growing attempt to govern informal researcher behaviors deemed related to research, like networking, and affect governmentality in academic capitalism. Ultimately, this not only inhibits knowledge production in an increasingly competitive academic market but eradicates researchers' agency in favor of compliance to a bureaucratic machine insensitive to nuance and well-defined problems in the research process.

Researcher positionality*The role of class: privileged uses of ethnography*

The most compelling and visible methodological tension with *OTR* is Goffman's failure on several accounts to recognize her own social positions (her gender, class and race).

Positionality is important, as Luker (2008, Ch. 3) recounts, given that our experiences of advantage and disadvantage shape how we understand the world, make observations and interpret them (Landy *et al.*, 2016). Failing to do so thus invites blindness to our own implicit assumptions about our subjects and their social context, as well as to our very influence on the field itself and the conclusions we draw.

We glimpse Goffman's social distance from the subjects she proceeds to study in the fetal stages of *OTR*, when she had difficulty finding Miss Deena's home to tutor her grandchildren, unfamiliar with inner-city zoning patterns, noting she:

[...] couldn't find the right address. As I walked around peering at the two-story brick row homes, a young man stopped and asked me if I was a cop or a caseworker, there apparently being no other reason that *a person like me* would be in the area [...] when I began coming to Miss Deena's house for evening tutoring, I entered a world in which white people were a tiny minority. (p. 215)

This sets off a cascade of actions only possible for her class, like when Goffman wires US \$100 to Miss Linda (Singal, 2015). Here, Goffman neglects how providing financial resources is not only uncharacteristic of the context, but also one that stems from class – not every researcher could provide US\$100 on a whim, let alone inner-city residents. Thus, it may be surmised that much of her success in gaining participants' trust owes to her class-based ability to provide resources that are rare in the field. Yet, she credits this trust to a "stroke of luck," (Goffman, 2014, p. 240), like her undescribed ability to get key informants and a very respected position in the local social order, highly uncharacteristic for women in her site (Goffman, 2014, p. 240).

More than a potential Hawthorne effect born of a researcher's influence on the actions of their subjects (Contreras, 2012), Goffman's (2014) ethnography showcases the unsung importance of class in gaining access to participants and improving one's transition from a full observer to a participant (Au, 2017; Wieder, 2001). Above all, it shows how ethnography can become a research method of privilege that anticipates inequality. Like how survey instruments and analysis methods were so costly in the 1960s that they were restricted to upper-class men (Luker, 2008, Ch. 3), ethnography can be an exclusionary method for the wealthy by permitting, like Goffman, greater access to disposable resources to provide subjects and catalyze immersion or even change one's position in the field itself.

The role of race: "Othering" to exoticize the underclass

Race is another dimension that demands reflexive accounting for. Goffman (2014) reflects uncritically on her racial identity, noting, for instance, that:

If my being white was a permanent fact that nobody ever forgot, it [...] seemed to come into and out of focus, as if my whiteness were a property of the situation or interaction in play, *not* merely a trait [...] [therefore] I am fairly confident that Mike and his friends and family spoke more about race, and about the racial politics of policing and imprisonment, when [...] I was with them, but not [...] as freely or as frequently as they did in my absence. (p. 232)

The practice of making inferences about subjects' thoughts and feelings is indispensable to reflexive writing in ethnographic fieldwork (Emerson, 2001, p. 98), but which must be based on "observable facial expressions, gestures, and talk, and describe these from the child's perspective" (Emerson, 2001). This is so stronger evidence can be provided for these inferences by way of a symbolic interactionist approach, one that Goffman (2014) makes gestures toward here, but fails to substantiate. What is more, her use of reflexivity importantly reveals how reflexivity differs for racial identity. Race demands accounting for as an axis of privilege: how it allows access and blockage into circuits of social embeddedness one observes by recursively shaping how one is perceived by actors in the field.

It emerges that in cross-racial ethnographies like Goffman's (2014), race can become a form of privilege (also Au, 2019). It is here that we can observe intersections between the axes of race and class in Goffman's experience that pass unacknowledged: her ability to acquire and strengthen a unique position, seen as well-resourced but not depended upon, respected but not ridiculed, in the social order of Sixth Street was arguably the result of her being white and comparatively wealthy. For instance, she recounts one subject, Mike, a respected neighborhood figure, afforded her legitimacy by introducing her publicly as his adopted sister. She credits Mike's decision to the belief that "he liked having a female friend who wasn't asking for sex" (p. 226), despite that Mike would sleep with some of the many women pursuing him for advantages.

Thus, Goffman's account of her relationship with Mike represents a glaring oversight. It is whiteness that set Goffman apart from Mike's other females, just as it was class that distinguished her from other community members, having financially aided Miss Deena and other occupants on Sixth Street. Indeed, another subject alludes to this by noting how "she should be lot less *generous*" (p. 221). The advantage of her unique position was, therefore, not a "stroke of luck," but resultant of multi-faceted forms of privilege sourced from her race and class.

Social positions like race and class are important for how theorizations are conducted surrounding the field site. Goffman (2014) reports at several points about her unfamiliarity with local "African American Vernacular English" (p. 215), confessing how she was "struggling to overcome a language barrier" and consequently had to "work hard to learn the grammar and vocabulary they were using" (p. 230). Goffman goes on to demonstrate how:

[Chuck and friends] [...] employed more slang than Aisha [...] [Aisha also] had the rapid and muffled speech of a teenager [...] I frequently couldn't understand what she said, and would awkwardly ask her to repeat it. Or I'd pretend to follow [...] (pp. 214-215, 230)

Rather than an attempt to understand social actions within a locality, adopting local vernacular to reveal its regular, ongoing social embeddedness (Emerson *et al.*, 1995, Ch. 2), her account crosses (and so reveals) a fine line between understanding this embeddedness and "Othering" in order to do so. Not only does she rely on "thin" (ethnographic) documentary evidence (Murdock, 1997), like the mere fact that she did not understand a teenager's "muffled speech" (itself a value judgment), but she aggrandizes them into cornerstones of some master category of behaviors and agency endemic to social life within a culture that she reifies (Emerson, 2001, p. 55; Sewell, 1999). Goffman (2014) goes further, for instance, to note how:

[...] after spending a few months with Mike and his friends, I moved even further away from their ideals of beauty or femininity [...] as a strategy to conduct the fieldwork, and [...] because I was, as a participant observer, adopting their male attitudes, dress, habits, and even language. (p. 233)

Here, what is problematic is the treatment of subjects as objects whose interests are somehow static in the social fabric, enough to triangulate her own persona and consequently "move away" from their "ideals of beauty and femininity." Indeed, Goffman deems black men in America characterizable by affixed "attitudes, dress, habits, and language" so different from whites in America that they constitute a subculture. The implication thus arises that the social problems (substance abuse, violence, gender inequality, police conflict) burdening the inner city are a result of subcultural characteristics that are inherently racial. This characterization is underwritten by an essentially racist undertone that invokes the "black subculture of violence" hypothesis that black males are more violent because they culturally value it (Wolfgang and Ferracuti, 1967). Despite its debunking by criminologists (Cao *et al.*, 1997), this implicit conceptualization continues to motivate many urban ethnographies like *OTR* (Wacquant, 2002), depending on whilst contributing to "Othering" processes (Luker, 2008, p. 153) against blacks in America that exoticize them for scrutiny by academics.

Here, Goffman relies on documentary evidence to reify the culture of Black minorities by “Othering” them, problematizing their lived experiences to justify *OTR*. Indeed, she recounts how, prior to *OTR*, she became interested in Blacks for “[their] problem of literacy [...] after working alongside a number of people with quite poor reading skills, [so] [...] tutoring seemed a decent reason for a young, middle-class white woman to be spending time in a working-class-to-poor Black section of the city” (Goffman, 2014, p. 215). Throughout, *OTR* itself never strays far from a marginalizing tendency consisting what Tuck (2009) calls damage-centered research – “the need to document the effects of oppression on [marginalized] communities [...] thinking of [them] as broken” (p. 409).

Like Anderson’s (1999) *Code of the Street*, whose theoretical framework Goffman explicitly builds upon, *OTR* attempts to be logically generalizable (Luker, 2008, Ch. 6), presenting findings in a way that shuttles between particulars of Sixth Street and broader social forces (Emerson *et al.*, 1995, Ch. 7), like deciphering meanings about black masculinity and drug culture from observations of how “old heads” (older men) around Sixth Street taught men survival strategies in the local drug trade (p. 8, 195). However, also like *Code of the Street*, *OTR* represents a tradition of exoticizing the underclass that characterizes urban ethnography in America, an obsession with their brokenness that remains divorced from efforts to improve their material conditions at the same systemic level as the theory construction they inspire (Wacquant, 2002).

Deep immersion

The tensions behind “Going Native”: altering dynamics in the field

Conducted over six years, *OTR* is a rare empirical example about a highly theorized, but understudied concept: “going native.” In ethnographic practice, researchers, who, by default, are complete observers, must wander across the spectrum to become complete participants, entered into the social relations within which meaning and culture intertwine to better understand a phenomenon from the inside (Gold, 1958; Adler and Adler, 1994). Coined by Malinowski (1922, p. 290), going native has since become a reference to one becoming so immersed in a field site that one has “become a native,” unable to disentangle oneself from their role in the field and establish enough critical distance[1] to generate theory-driven observations as a researcher (Kanuha, 2000). Two interrelated problems emerge: blindsiding oneself to the social dynamics in a field by taking observations for granted and interacting enough to change these dynamics.

In *OTR*, an unacknowledged tension exists between attempts at becoming a “native” vs an observer. Goffman (2014) emphasizes that in her attempts to be a participant (favoring proximity), she “wanted to live and work alongside Mike and his friends and neighbors so that I could understand their everyday worries and small triumphs from the inside,” for which she conducted a “method of participant observation [that] involves cutting yourself off from your prior life and subjecting yourself as much as possible to the crap that people you want to know about are being subjected to” (p. 240). Goffman goes so far as to change her attire, the way she spoke, her gait and her attitudes toward others (p. 221).

Yet, Goffman differs from this account at various points by adopting what she calls a “fly on the wall” approach (favoring distance), by:

[...] receding into the background [which] became a technique to reduce my influence on the scene but also to limit any risk I might be placing people under [...] Was I increasing Mike’s or Chuck’s dealings with the police simply by hanging around? After a while I decided that this wasn’t the case [...] police routinely swooped into the neighborhood to make stops, conduct raids, and search men who were walking around whether I was present or not. Still, it couldn’t hurt to be as small a presence as possible. (p. 236)

This approach is problematic itself, as it treats findings with an air of objectivity, assuming, for instance, that the same interpretation holds across time. But objectivity is, as has been argued from as far back as the Frankfurt School, a fallacy dependent on distortions of social reality (Adorno, 1975/1955, p. 185; Au, 2018a, b). Values and actions are “not simply mirror reflections of objective reality” for researchers and subjects alike are embedded in the very world being studied, acting as both target *and* source of the worldviews, assumptions, and theories used to study it (Luker, 2008, p. 31; Bordo, 1987). As Giddens (1984) classically notes, even a statistic is comprised of layers of social action, never final nor static as its very acknowledgment by constituent actors recursively spirals out to (re)shape it[2].

This tension importantly showcases the polarizing struggle that ethnographers have, wanting enough proximity to earn subjects’ trust to observe their lived experiences whilst maintaining enough distance to conduct this observation removed from worldviews entrenched in the field. Where does the balance tip? Considering the timeline of *OTR* itself shows that the length of an ethnography is a deciding factor in shaping how a researcher navigates the boundaries between the two approaches. Too much time, in Goffman’s case, inadvertently prompts researchers to shift toward a much more interactionist approach.

We observe this with the overall methodological shift in the accounts of her interactions. She starts, for instance, with a rigidized set of observations and method of data collection that keeps faith with her “fly on the wall” approach (favoring distance). Where at the very outset of her fieldwork, she underscores how:

[...] blending into the background became an obsession [...] so that people walking by wouldn’t necessarily see me [...] I also learned to become a quiet person, someone who doesn’t say or do much, who isn’t known to have strong opinions. (p. 235)

Over time, however, she began participating in the same rituals that locals did. For instance, Goffman reports how she felt after the mother of one of her teenage girl subjects tried to set her up on a blind date, which she refused, leading to suspicions that she was lesbian:

Aisha’s mother’s behavior toward me didn’t seem to change, but the idea that a rumor could circulate that my motives toward Aisha and her teenage girlfriends were questionable left me *horrified*. The next time someone offered to set me up with a guy, I instantly agreed. (p. 219)

Although one might claim her reaction is an attempt to preserve the natural order, minimizing her disruption to the field, her emotional response (horror) to the prospect of subjects developing a certain view of her (that she was lesbian) more closely represents an intimate fear concerning her personal identity. In this respect, she fails to maintain the critical distance she desires but also demonstrates how going native blurs the boundaries of personal identity and the roles a researcher adopts in the field.

The six-year long *OTR* thus shows it is not only interpretations that shift in ethnographic fieldwork (Luker, 2008, p. 40), but also modes of data collection and the emotional proximity that researchers feel toward their roles in the social order. This, I assert, is because, over the span of years, ethnographers are no longer merely researchers at arm’s length, but come to accumulate a reputation and emotive connections with other subjects that makes them more susceptible to influence by dynamics of the field, that is, as researchers become participants, subjects become ties.

We can best observe this interpretive transition with Goffman when she learns that one of her subjects, Chuck, had died:

[...] I was crying, squatting on the floor among the medical staff, and then a guy told me that Chuck’s heart had stopped. I was texting Mike that he was gone and that no, they weren’t going to revive him [...] Mike said, “Don’t move. I’m on my way.” At this point it occurred to me that I’d snuck through a great deal [...] and had absolutely no business being there. (p. 254)

Reflecting on (and reprimanding herself for) her emotional outburst, Goffman performatively demonstrates the continuing tensions between being a “native” vs a “fly on the wall”:

Compounding the disturbance of my sheer presence were the mistakes I made in the weeks following Chuck’s death. The first error was hugging Chuck’s father when I saw him at the house [...] I saw Chuck’s father walk through the door. We both began to cry, and as he approached I got up and hugged him [...]. (p. 259)

Here, we observe how Goffman interpretively holds fast to her “fly on the wall” approach, reprimanding herself for deviating from it. That she still broke faith from her “fly on the wall” approach in favor of a “gone native” approach signals an embeddedness in her field rivaling the locals and, thus, was no longer a mere researcher. After all, she was “spending so much time on 6th Street that few people there hadn’t met [her]” (p. 239). Hence, failing to express sympathy in this context would have been more out of character for her than if she had, since she had transitioned from an outsider to “Vanilla” or “Nil,” a member of the community integrated enough to become “an expected part of the scene” (pp. 151, 233).

Thus, Goffman errs by envisioning objectivity in her findings in the field, but in a way that demonstrates how extensive ethnographic work on the order of years binds researchers to their participant roles and inculcates a proclivity for permitting social relations to influence their perceptions. Following this integration, we observe how “going native” also creates extreme outcomes, like when researchers, after becoming integrated members of the community, are swept up into and supportive of a phenomenon that challenges the ethical standpoints of their researcher role. In other words, ethnographers “gone native” abandon researcher ethics to adopt a new framework of ethics, one espoused by subjects in the field.

Here, we observe most clearly the researcher influencing the field in unanticipated ways. In addition to the aforementioned cases where Goffman offered financial help to Miss Deena, she goes beyond her to actually change subjects’ behaviors in the field:

When Mike had first gotten the news that he was wanted on this shooting charge, I was quite shaken, and thought the case was a unique and significant experience in his life [...] as the date neared I urged him strongly to buy a suit. When he refused, I attempted to persuade him to [...] locate some khakis and a tie. Instead, Mike came to court wearing jeans, sneakers, and a well-pressed white T-shirt. (p. 225)

The writing shifts from a statement of events to an account of her active involvement. Goffman’s decision to “urge” and persistently “persuade” Mike to change his attire moves directly expresses her position – and ultimately changes a cornerstone outcome in her subject’s life course. That her encounters with Mike and other subjects are progressively written as first-person and personalized recollections indicate the deepening extent of her involvement over time (Luker, 2008, p. 94) – more and more, they show how ethnography on the span of years makes her perspective as an ethnographer less distinguishable from that of an initiated, experienced, and integrated member of Mike’s community; a narrator become native.

Discussion and implications: toward a new agenda

Ethnography, Burawoy (1998) powerfully asserts, is deeply embedded in theory-building exercises that depict macro-level processes at work, illuminating both tenets of a larger theory and/or social context for phenomena (see also Emerson, 2001, Ch. 1). Thus, the representations ethnographers construct of their populations deserve greater scrutiny, especially those that involve deep immersion on the order of years. The possibility grows over time, like Goffman’s (2014) example illustrates, that researchers “go native” and the boundaries between participant and observer roles blur to push them toward actively contributing to, rather than passively observing, social events around them. Within this

scope, pre-fieldwork preparation raises the problems of undercover ethnography and the overreach of IRBs attempting to regulate informal parts of the research process and, by extension, subvert the agency of researchers. Additionally, neglecting one's positionality (across race and class, for *OTR*) and subtly "Othering" racial minorities under the pretext of scientific inquiry, like perpetuating and legitimizing age-old racist assumptions of minorities (i.e. "subcultures" of the underclass), is a characteristic of (urban) ethnographies that has largely gone unacknowledged.

The pivot of these problematizations, as has been demonstrated, lies in the attendance to the interrelated issues of self-reflexivity and researcher positionality. The impulse to interrogate oneself is key to unearthing how broader social (racial, class, gender, and so on) categories to which we belong inform the implicit motivations in our work (Landy *et al.*, 2016). This bleeds across all stages of the research process, from project design, approaching the field, interpreting and writing the data. Self-reflexivity comes up in issues of undercover ethnography because it calls into account clashes of ethical and moral boundaries, particularly in the study of the underclass when the researchers almost always hail from a higher socioeconomic class. It arises also in the relatively "thin" descriptions evoked in the researcher's reporting of these settings, when characteristics we observe of subjects of the underclass are decontextualized and aggrandized to make an exoticized statement about the poor. Our infatuation and surprise at the social structures we discover of the underclass, such as Goffman's (2014) account in *OTR*, betrays a postcolonial assumption that they do not have social structure, that the social order we assume is integral to the social organization of human activities is alien to the poor (Berman, 1997).

There are dangers to this lack of self-reflexive empathy. We risk misrepresenting the underclass, disempowering them, and stripping them of their humanity (Hewitt, 2007). And above all, failing to attend to these issues in the field, allowing these mistakes to breathe life and appear in academic publications, permits these tendencies to become standardized practices for the field at large. As Toni Morrison once commented in an interview on *The Bluest Eye*, "The rape is as awful a thing ... as can be imagined. But I want you to look at him and see his love for his daughter and his powerlessness to help her pain. By that time his embrace, the rape, is all the gift he has left" (Morrison, 1983, p. 125).

How can we strip ourselves of this legacy? How do we move beyond these problems of knowledge production, true for ethnographic practice in other contexts as much as in *OTR* (Wacquant, 2002)? Scholars have called for curbing the reach of IRBs (Feeley, 2007) and have showcased the commonness of pre-fieldwork preparations that transpire outside their view (Luker, 2008; Pierce, 1995). With the interrelated problems of "Othering" and exoticizing the underclass, one alternative could be developing what might be called a sociology of compassion.

A sociology of compassion consists of an epistemological framework that displaces the preoccupation with damage in extant research agendas with a focus on contexts of thriving social support and tools of empowerment (even when it is not in the face of adversity, see also Tuck, 2009). A sociology of compassion articulates the need for more positive and agentic representations of the underclass in ethnography. As researchers, we pride ourselves on professional standards of practice that attempt to excise social, physical, and emotional harms from the data collection methods themselves (Au, 2018a; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1993). But what we less often realize is that beyond the immediate circumstances of a research project, the publications we produce are potentially more powerful influences on the social, physical, and emotional wellbeing of our subjects. In short, they go on to influence the way large audiences think about the subjects we study and their lived experiences, confirming or refuting stereotypes, projecting hope or despair, inspiring judgment or sympathy. Like how black feminists gained political empowerment in the academy and beyond by seizing control over their representations in academic works over

the twentieth century (Collins, 1990, Ch. 4), a sociology of compassion vindicates the need to share agentic control over representations of a work with subjects of the underclass as well as attention to the positive parts of the heritage that orders their activities (Newman, 2002).

To better serve the goal of political empowerment, this also involves shifting the role of the ethnographer in the immediate field. Instead of looking at how far we might integrate ourselves into the field to access their social structure, we should be reflexive in asking how to empower the communities of the underclass that we study. There is oppression at work and there are tools that the researcher can offer to cast this oppression into the light and alleviate its conditions. Like one of the most important thrusts in participatory action research shows, knowledge production offers ways of visualizing sources of inequality and oppression, articulating political challenges to them by addressing the appropriate authorities, and developing grassroots attempts of social transformation for victimized minorities (Maguire, 1987, Ch. 7; Park, 1993; Tuck, 2017).

Thus, research analysis and writing should be done in connection to what Burawoy (2005) calls public sociology – exercises to improve the communities' researchers study on the same (systemic) level that the theorizations made of them are commonly located. Gleaning inspiration from decolonization literature, just as the practice of decolonization should not consist of trite discourse but with actions that demonstrably enhance the material conditions of the colonized (Tuck and Yang, 2012), ethnographic research on the underclass and inequality, should not conclude with empty calls for abstract change restricted to an audience of academics with disproportionately few ties to policymakers to begin with. Research agendas on these subjects should actively incorporate plans for advocacy to stakeholders, nuanced articulations of potential policy improvements, and efforts to critically report findings in mainstream media sources – which should be demanded of future research agendas and hold them accountable for (not) doing so.

Notes

1. What I mean by critical distance is Chong's (2013, p. 270) use of the term to depict a position of evaluation: critical autonomy and the achievement of an optimal balance of distance and engagement.
2. This critique of statistics echoes parallel critiques of the construct of a fact leveled by the Frankfurt school (Adorno *et al.*, 1976).

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