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As Everett Hughes noted, there is an "underside" to all work. Each job includes ways of doing things that would be inappropriate for those outside the guild to know. Illusions are essential for maintaining occupational reputation, but in the process they create a set of moral dilemmas. So it is with ethnographic work. This article describes the underside of ethnographic work: compromises that one frequently makes with idealized ethical standards. It argues that images of ethnographers—personal and public—are based on partial truths or self-deceptions. The focus is on three clusters of dilemmas: the classical virtues (the kindly ethnographer, the friendly ethnographer, and the honest ethnographer), technical skills (the precise ethnographer, the observant ethnographer, and the unobtrusive ethnographer), and the ethnographic self (the candid ethnographer, the chaste ethnographer, the fair ethnographer, and the literary ethnographer). Changes in ethnographic styles and traditions alter the balance of these deceptions but do not eliminate the need for methodological illusions.

TEN LIES OF ETHNOGRAPHY

Moral Dilemmas of Field Research

GARY ALAN FINE

The only safe way to avoid violating principles of professional ethics is to refrain from doing social research altogether.

—Urie Bronfenbrenner (1952, 453)

Master sociologist Everett Hughes (1971) often trenchantly noted to his apprentices that there is an "underside" associated with all work. Each job has techniques of doing things—standard operating procedures—of which it would be impolitic for those outside of the guild to know. Illusions are essential to maintain an occupational reputation. Such actions are typically hidden in the backstage regions from which outsiders are excluded. As has been said, "no one without a strong stomach should watch sausage or laws being made." The production of *good things* might not be pretty. The reality of life in an operating room, in a

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kitchen, on a baseball diamond, or in a judge's chambers is not always the stuff of heroic public images.

Illusions are necessary for occupational survival. Indeed, as umpire Hank Soar remarked in response to former professional pitcher Jim Bouton's (1970) "exposé" of professional baseball: "If we all wrote about what we know about other people, there'd be no baseball" (Bouton 1971). No baseball—not in the physical sense but on the moral plane. The world is secured on secrets. *implicit*

Yet illusions have a way of growing, of laying down roots, of becoming taken for granted. This begins to be problematic when practitioners take illusions for real. It is not that practitioners operate out of cynical knowledge but, rather, they should operate with the recognition that they must make choices, which impel them to behave in ways that differ from how they would like "the general public" to assume that they behave. This is reality in a division of labor in which work lives are enacted behind gauzy curtains. Unresolvable moral dilemmas are endemic to work.

I examine the underside of qualitative methodology. In a methodology that is increasingly self-critical, self-conscious, and self-reflective, such a review is legitimate. Yet my title stings. I use the word "lies" rather than "myths" or "dilemmas" because "lies" capture better the assertion that we should be aware of the reality that we are shading in our assumptions about the world—and being provocative is sometimes a virtue. My argument is not that we can avoid these choices because occupational truth is unattainable and perhaps not even entirely virtuous. I do not suggest nor do I believe that we are a cabal of cynics but, rather, that such choices are constrained by the conditions of academic work and acceptable textual practices. Although I do not call for us to abjure all methodological or textual practices that lead to these dilemmas, I do believe that it is crucial for us to be cognizant of the choices that we make and to share these choices with readers.

Qualitative research is both more and less than its public image. We indulge in claims, assumptions, and rationalizations about the method and the analysis behind it that require close and cold scrutiny. Humans have unlimited abilities to justify their

actions through moral discourse. Further, so much of the process of fieldwork is hidden and backstage that judging texts is complex. Researchers are lone rangers, cowboys, individualists. Analysis is private, field notes are rarely available for secondary analysis, and much ethnographic writing is accepted on faith. We assure ourselves that there are good and sufficient *ethical* mandates for this secrecy. Opportunities for deception are great. Although researchers are fundamentally honest, as lawyers, clergymen, doctors, and car salesmen are fundamentally honest, everyone's goal is to permit life to run tolerably smoothly—to engage in impression management.

In discussing the 10 "lies" of ethnography, I emphasize that all workers are caught in a web of demands that compel them to deviate from formal and idealistic rules. Borrowing from Becker, Geer, Hughes, and Strauss (1961) idealism is likely a luxury in a pressured circumstance. I discern a number of images of ethnographers—mental images and images for public consumption—based on partial truths or even self-deceptions. Consider the kindly ethnographer, the friendly ethnographer, the honest ethnographer, the precise ethnographer, the observant ethnographer, the unobtrusive ethnographer, the candid ethnographer, the chaste ethnographer, the fair ethnographer, and the literary ethnographer. These are not the only images that one could examine, but in each case they are common images to which ethical and competent field researchers wish to hold. It would be an authorial fiction to allege that this set has a claim to completeness; rather, they represent a set of important concerns.¹

To bring order to this list, I divide it, like Gaul, into three parts. The first three lies represent challenges to the "classic virtues" of ethnographers. These virtues—sympathy, openness, and honor—have been challenged by contemporary, postmodern researchers, but they remain as touchstones of how the "true" ethnographer should deal with his or her informants. They represent the standards of observational morality, grounded in both science and the Western ethical tradition. As one who has been associated with this classical, realist tradition—the *Ancien Regime*, my editors sniff—they are lies to which I am intensely

sympathetic and are positions to which many novice participant observers instantly gravitate, perhaps in their naiveté. As a result, they deserve critical attention.

A second set of issues are challenges to "technical skills." When we instruct our students how to perform the mechanics of ethnography, we insist that they be precise, observant, and passive. Unlike the first trio, ethnographers are more likely to hold to the value of these demands, particularly the first two. How could we claim that we should not be precise and observant? The challenges are less philosophical than grounded in the inevitable limits of competence.

The final set of four challenge the "ethnographic self." These are tied to discursive practices: ways of presenting oneself and one's work. Data are not properly "sociology" until they are published. If unpublished, knowledge perishes. What are the conventions by which one presents oneself to one's colleagues to appear morally upstanding and trustworthy?

Just as the list of 10 is incomplete, the means by which I divide them is inexact. Each set of categories impinges on each other. After all, everything that we learn about the research of another depends on a set of discursive practices. Technical glitches can be transformed into moral virtues or the reverse. Firm lines do not separate morality, technique, and presentation.

THE CLASSIC VIRTUES

THE KINDLY ETHNOGRAPHER

Most, if not all, ethnographers make a play for their subjects, suggesting that they are intensely sympathetic chroniclers. Most ethnographers, of whatever stripe, are quite taken by the lives of those they examine, but this is not inevitably so. Sometimes, we examine unpleasant lives, groups, and organizations—and might choose to do this with malice aforethought. The examination of disparaged groups—groups that one begins the research expecting to dislike—does occur in the social sciences (e.g., Peshkin 1986), although not as often as one might expect.²

This phenomenon is well-explored by Jack Douglas (1976) in his provocative *Investigative Social Research*. Douglas, more than most ethnographers, is explicit about the reality of disparaging informants and of being suspicious of the information that one receives. His powerful metaphor of the investigatory paradigm of research stems from this stance. Douglas assumes that subjects might mislead, evade, lie, and put up fronts (p. 57). Recognizing this, Douglas suggests that similar interactional tools might be legitimate for the sociologist—turnabout is fair play. The illusion of being more sympathetic than we are aids research but is deceptive. Inevitably, we must confront the "agony of betrayal" (Lofland 1971), if only because our analysis is more detached than our emotions demand.

Sometimes in the course of research, we become sympathetic to the aims of the group. For instance, some years ago I became interested in the deflection of stigma and presentation of self in social movements (Fine 1992). I attended the national conference of Victims of Child Abuse Laws, a group organized to support adults accused of child abuse and to curb the power of social workers. As a parent of two young children, this was a group with which I had some qualms about being associated, both meeting these "creeps" and in having my good name associated with theirs. Although the research was not designed to debunk the organization, I assumed that members had to defend themselves. Through a relatively brief research sojourn, I found myself convinced that some of these activists were unfairly accused and others justly labeled and that the movement as a whole had a severe problem of boundary maintenance. Although I was not a hostile researcher, I was less sympathetic than I led others to believe. Should I have confessed my suspicions, or simply have made neutral and seemingly positive statements about understanding the legal system and social services agencies from their perspective? The identity that I presented was different from the one I felt.

For politically committed researchers, investigative research has a considerable appeal (e.g., Burawoy 1991; esp. Salzinger 1991). Yet such a stance presupposes limited informed consent, in that what is being informed is less than what the subjects

turnabout
of lies

would wish to know in hindsight. It is also less than what the researcher recognizes that she or he should report. Our informants have given us a "gift" (Jacobs 1980, 377), but how have we returned the favor? In research of this kind—for example, the workings of the inner circles of the Ku Klux Klan (Kennedy [1954] 1990)—we might neglect the standard ethnographic injunction to understand the world sympathetically through the informant's eyes (M. Wax 1980, 278). We have "dehumanized" and "demonized" our informants, placing them outside our moral community, in the guise of justice (Appell 1980, 355).

The researcher appears to be a kindly soul but turns out to be a "fink" (Goffman 1989, 125), a spy, an undercover agent, operating against the interests of the observed group (Johnson 1975). Even though this approach is justified in terms of its overall benefit and in light of the postmodern impulse that we will always have a political stance, it is based on a lie—a lack of kindly intentions, a hidden secret.

THE FRIENDLY ETHNOGRAPHER

Will Rogers once said—and many since have mocked—that he never met a man he didn't like. This is the claim of the qualitative researcher: Will Rogers in academic tweed. The researcher should not dislike anyone. It is the rare ethnographer who admits that this is not the case. Most researchers discover that there are individuals with whom they are incompatible. We do not like everyone that we meet—certainly not everyone that we meet in the workplace, particularly when goals and motivations conflict.

This claim covers a range of emotions and types of relationships. Many emotions stand between the ecstatically fulfilling and the brutal horrid. In reality, we find individuals with whom we are close but with whom we can maintain cordial, if somewhat distant, relationships when there is no tension in the system and when we are not aiming for conflicting goals. Many relations are "temporarily friendly." Then there are others with whom we feel acutely uncomfortable and from whom we attempt to keep our distance. Even in ethnographic research we create

elaborate rationales whereby we place ourselves in other spaces. Finally, we must honor those sacred few of whom we can say with confidence that we really do not like, that we hate. Many ethnographers uncover an occasional person of that sort—a target of dislike. Hopefully not too many or this style of research, which, after all, depends on pleasantries, would be impossible. Hated individuals are found within our ethnographic world, but in the narrative representation of that world, they often vanish. We crop them from the picture. The illusion is that we have managed our affairs sweetly and well. We do this both because we wish to present ourselves as likable and also because most researchers outside the "confessional" mode (see Johnson 1975; Van Maanen 1988) see the discussion of personal animosities as irrelevant.

This assumption of irrelevance raises a problem when our dislike stems from something that relates to the research question—in other words, when the personal dislike is not merely idiosyncratic but is connected to our orientation to the research scene. Maurice Punch (1986) has asserted, for instance, that when attempting to write about the rhetoric of a progressive English private school, he and some of the major actors came to dislike each other—dislike that grew out of conflicting goals and understandings. For observers who are driven to *attempt* to like everyone, hostility might flower when their friendly face is not accepted by some of those to whom it is offered. A spurned ethnographer can be a dangerous foe. This spurning is not necessarily idiosyncratic but can emerge directly from the conditions of research, although it has tended to be treated as an embarrassing nodule, hidden from the reader's prying eyes.

I confess to several instances in which bad feelings developed between my subjects and myself. I touch upon one instance in the methodological appendix describing my seasons studying Little League baseball in *With the Boys: Preadolescent Culture and Little League Baseball* (Fine 1987), but significantly I did not reveal this dislike within the main text itself or in articles, seemingly suggesting that although such dislike was relevant methodologically it was not relevant substantively, even though

it reflected the intensity of adult needs for justifying their activity. One coach, not of a team that I had singled out for attention, felt that I was collaborating with his rivals in the league and refused to permit me to collect the questionnaires from his boys that he had previously willingly distributed. During the season he attempted to humiliate me, as, for instance, not accepting a lineup card that another coach asked me to deliver. As a consequence, I took private pleasure writing about this man and his son in my book, although I was very careful to be "ethical" in that I never mentioned his name and excluded identifying features. Perhaps if he read the book, he might recognize himself, or perhaps his colleagues would. Those of us with access to "the media" have power that others cannot match. Our structural position as reporters places us as gatekeepers into the social world. Taunt us if you dare.

THE HONEST ETHNOGRAPHER

The grail of informed consent is at the end of the twisted road of most ethical discussions. Research subjects, many say, have a *right* to know what they are getting themselves into.³ Such a sentiment sounds proper and has been institutionalized through a maze of federal and academic regulations. However, this advice is contrary to the writings of classic ethnographers (and other methodologists) who are concerned about "reactivity"—those who want their research "clean." Two valued goals conflict: Something must give. If subjects know the research goals, their responses are likely to be skewed.

The goal of informed consent is complicated by the ethnographic commonplace, gleaned from Glaser and Strauss's (1967; see M. Wax 1977) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, that good ethnographers do not know what they are looking for until they have found it: Theory is grounded in empirical investigation. This model suggests that there is truth out there that we must be careful not to pollute. Not only are we unsure of the effects of explaining our plans but often we do not know what we want until well into the research project. Many qualitative researchers must complete a Human Subjects Committee doc-

ument or a grant application that asks for the hypotheses and how they will be conveyed. Often, the only honest response is that what we are studying is Them.

The expanded version of explaining that we are studying you is to say, with considerable vague truth, that we are interested in the problems faced by people in your condition, what you do, and how you think. In many research settings, this is satisfactory, particularly when groups feel underappreciated. This explanation proved admirably suited to my research with professional cooks and amateur mycologists, both of whom felt that the public did not appreciate them: The descriptive ploy seduces many an informant. I did not have to explain *precisely* what I wanted to know, although my informants eventually made educated guesses, as I came to conclusions myself.

By "not being honest," I do not mean that ethnographers fib about their research, although they might, but rather that ethnographers shade what they do know to increase the likelihood of acceptance: placing our ease before that of our informants. In the process, we construct a web of justifications for this deception. In this sense, ethnographers use the same arguments as do those who select laboratory experimentation, claiming that the truth will systematically compromise the findings and create *demand characteristics* (Rosenthal 1966).

The controversy over the absence of honesty reached its apex in the controversy over Laud Humphreys's *Tearoom Trade*. Humphreys interviewed informants who had unknowingly participated in his ethnography of impersonal sex in public restrooms, but he did so under the guise that they were chosen through random selection. He tracked down these individuals through their license plates. In the enlarged edition of his book, Humphreys (1975) reconsidered his decision. Clearly, these individuals were interviewed under false pretenses, even though there was no evidence that they suffered harm. Throughout life we mislead others for goals that appear worthy—or if not worthy, at least convenient. One might ask why honesty should in practice, as opposed to in theory, be seen as virtuous, particularly in the absence of harm.

gatekeepers
of info

cover up?

don't know
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