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Gary Alan Fine, Tim Hallett,

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Stranger and stranger: creating theory through ethnographic distance and authority

Gary Alan Fine

Department of Sociology, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, USA, and

Tim Hallett

Department of Sociology, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, USA

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Abstract

Purpose – Classical ethnographic research begins with the recognition that the observer starts as a stranger to the group being studied, a recognition as evident in the analysis of formal organizations as of gangs or tribes. From this position of difference the researcher must learn the themes and dynamics of a setting of otherness. The researcher begins as an outsider, a stance that creates initial challenges, yet permits the transmittal of novel information to external audiences. This is particularly true while studying organizational worlds that explicitly focus on occupational socialization. The paper aims to discuss these issues.

Design/methodology/approach – This conceptual paper relies on the close reading and analysis of three major ethnographies of occupational socialization.

Findings – The reality that (many) ethnographers begin as strangers permits them to understand socialization processes while observing how group cultures change. The authors defines this as the “stranger paradigm.” This otherness is joined by the perspective of the scholar’s discipline and awareness of comparable research that permits understanding of forces that are unrecognized by participants, but which can be profitably scrutinized by disciplinary colleagues within their own occupational worlds. The authors term this “ethnographic authority.”

Originality value – To support the claim that distance and authority support the formulation of theoretical insights, the paper examines organizational ethnographies that examine the occupational socialization of doctors, morticians, and ministers.

Keywords Occupation, Socialization, Ethnography, Authority, Distance, Stranger

Paper type Conceptual paper

More often than not, even when studying a setting with which they have some cultural familiarity, ethnographers study strangers while being strangers themselves (Weiss, 1994; Daniels, 1967; Agar, 1980). This distance presents challenges, and scholars have written about the general awkwardness of this position (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 2), the different stances ethnographers can take while filling this role (Cressey, 1983), techniques for building rapport with research participants from the stranger position (Everhart, 1977), the ethical problems that strangers pose for research subjects (Daniels, 1967, pp. 286-290), and the feelings of vulnerability that it creates for the researcher (Kleinman and Copp, 1993). The ethnographer is often a stranger who hopes to understand the social world of a group that is populated by other strangers, while standing in a strange social position. Anyone who has undertaken an ethnographic

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project has felt, at least temporarily, a kind of “insanity of place” (Goffman, 1969) while negotiating these dynamics. To be successful, an ethnographer must be a modest extravert, either by disposition or training. She must embrace this role, yet be content as a listener, never dominating an interaction or a scene.

Nevertheless, in addition to these problems, we argue that the stranger position has merits; it can be a source of methodological rigor that facilitates the collection of rich data and the creation of conceptual insights that have theoretical generalizability. As Meintel (1973, p. 47) suggests, being a stranger can promote self-discovery, providing clues to the social world being examined and its relation to the one from which one hails. Such inferences depend on researchers simultaneously being ethnographic strangers and disciplinary authorities, translators of group processes for academic publics. These positions are not tangential to the collection of data and presentation of ethnographic inferences, rather, they are integral. As stranger and as authority the ethnographer plants one foot in the field and the other in the academy. The development and presentation of empirical and theoretical claims are linked to the position of the knowledge-maker and cultural producer within social fields (Bourdieu, 1977, 2003). Academia is its own field, and the challenge for ethnographers is to become an insider in another field. However, the ethnographer can never become a full insider. At best she can become a partial and reflexive insider, applying the tools of ethnographic objectification to her academic world in addition to her field site, cognizant of her positioning and the power it entails. The theoretical inferences that can be drawn from ethnographies are not generated through the mind and heart (or not through them alone), but through the position of the researcher relative to the observed group and audiences of persuasion.

We begin by analyzing the implications that the roles of “alien” and “eccentric” have for organizational ethnography, and how understanding these dual stranger roles facilitates the creation of theoretical inferences while compelling us to revisit the issue of ethnographic authority. To demonstrate connections among inferences, the stranger roles, and authority, we turn to an empirical domain which has generated a significant body of fieldwork among scholars interested in the institutional creation of work worlds. We examine socialization as it occurs in organizational contexts: in our case in professional schools. This research tradition has the advantage in that, like the ethnographer, students struggle with adjustment to a novel interaction order.

For this analysis we draw upon three organizational ethnographies: Howard Becker *et al.* (1961), *Boys in White: Student Culture in Medical School*; Spencer Cahill’s (1999) study of mortuary students; and Sherryl Kleinman (1984), *Equals Before God: Seminarians as Humanistic Professionals*. These organizational ethnographies of doctors, morticians, and ministers by no means exhaust the ethnographic literature on professional socialization (e.g. in medical education Bosk, 1979; Zerubavel, 1979; Broadhead, 1983; Kellogg, 2011), but they provide a diversity of sites, while examining similar processes. The socializing organization serves as an ideal environment in which external and internal forces are played-out, and in which novices and ethnographers face similar challenges in terms of learning the established local culture and becoming incorporated into the culture. In these training sites the very lack of knowledge of the researcher is constituted (while gaining the allegiance and sympathy of other trainees), but additionally, because of the researcher’s own socialization, she can draw comparative lessons from the experience; lessons that contribute to the growth of understanding of larger processes of organizational incorporation, culture, and training.

The ethnographic stranger

The approaching stranger [...] has to place in question what seems unquestionable to the in-group and cannot even put his trust in a vague knowledge about the general style of the pattern but needs explicit knowledge of its elements. This entails a dislocation of the stranger's habitual system of relevance (Alfred Schutz, 1944, p. 499)

Building on the classic texts of Georg Simmel, Robert Park, and Alfred Schutz, scholars have been fascinated by the idea of the stranger, feeling that to analyze and understand the stranger as an ideal type is to address belonging, cohesion, and separation. The stranger reveals the power of moral, social, and cultural boundaries. She illuminates social boundaries by standing outside, while stepping in. To be marginal involves being a part of a community and apart from it, a trader and wanderer (Stonequist, 1937, pp. 177-178; Levine, 1977, p. 17). The stranger becomes embedded within an interaction order, even without allegiance to social relations. In Simmel's (1950, p. 402) terms, a stranger can be simultaneously near and far: "the person who comes today and stays tomorrow." And who, we add, is recognized for doing so. To see the stranger as a social type is to recognize social, cultural, and organizational boundaries as constituting meaning (Shibutani 1955; Lamont and Molnar, 2002).

The stranger is not only an ideal type. It has long been recognized that the observer as stranger is at the heart of the [realist] ethnographic method in which the observer starts from a position distant from that of the members of the group being studied, yet comes in time to appreciate their perspective (Nash, 1963; Wax, 1971). This role facilitates observations about institutional worlds for which ethnographers lack native knowledge, uncovering what others consider taken-for-granted and simultaneously unpacking novel operating practices that may seem indeterminate to outsiders. Through acceptance, the ethnographic stranger can document the processes that contribute to the acquisition of recipe knowledge and tacit understandings.

Our argument, building upon past understandings of ethnographic outsiders, is that the stranger is not a single role, but several intertwined social relations (see also Cressey, 1983). We contend that there are two distinct, although often overlapping, types of embedded strangers — aliens and eccentrics. These roles provide two challenges in the relationship between stranger and community — acceptance and socialization. Thus, the researcher's goal is to moderate one's ignorance (overcoming the alien role) and learn to be a credible actor (overcoming the eccentric role). While both are linked to the behavior of the researcher, the former includes a cognitive challenge, while the latter is more directly linked to the appropriate display of affect. Ethnography always involves acquiring suitable behavior, but this occurs in light of cognition and emotion. Neither role ever entirely vanishes, but each changes in practice.

The first type of stranger – the alien – begins as unknown, but this distant stranger can be incorporated once one learns basic rules that are coupled with the assignment of a social standing. Acceptance occurs as mutual awareness shifts the stranger's role. Many organizations permit outsiders access either as potential recruits or as courtesy members. Such individuals are welcomed if they are seen as having characteristics that the group admires. If tested and judged worthy (Haas, 1972), they are given access to action arenas.

Despite acceptance, the stranger may remain "odd." For the stranger with different feelings or behaviors, the challenge is socialization. The eccentric must be socialized to a set of group or organizational standards, cultural ideals, and behavioral practices.

To belong the stranger must demonstrate loyalty to the defining features of the interaction order. In other words, the stranger must demonstrate local facility, an embrace that generates the awareness of those features of an action domain that contribute to deep understanding.

As such, we assert that these overlapping, if distinct, models of the stranger influence ethnography within organizational environments. How does the field researcher utilize the position of the stranger as a form of practice? Is the ethnographer a stranger from distance or difference? Our answer is that she is a combination of both.

The stranger in ethnographic practice

There is the stranger in analysis and the stranger in practice: a social type and a methodologist. The stranger is not merely a theorist's armchair conceit, but is also a technique of observational rigor. The stranger role permits the ethnographer to treat the organization in a way that is neither emotionally overcommitted, nor so far distant that recognizing the meaning of events and relations is impossible. While it may feel awkward and uncomfortable to be alien and eccentric, this has methodological advantages. These stranger positions and the processes of being accepted and socialized let the ethnographer witness group process and create generalizations.

The ethnographic stranger as alien. With the exception of those field researchers who are full members of a group, the ethnographic mission entails the persuasion of a group to incorporate the ethnographer into its midst. Although the alien is never an empty vessel, researchers at first lack the exposure to the personnel, group culture, and local understandings on which participation depends; they must build theory by presenting that deep data on which persuasion – their own and others – is based. Ethnographic accounts must be peopled in order to be persuasive (Fine, 2003). The outsider must gain access to the epistemic core of the domain under study, whether a church, workplace, school, or movement organization and then share that core. In the best of circumstances boundaries are provisionally opened for a stranger who will not make a full commitment. Ethnographic strangers depend upon the kindness of organizations. Anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker (1966)(Everhart, 1977) phrased it well: the participant observer is “stranger and friend.” The image of the good-natured, agreeable stranger is central to the ethnographic method.

The ethnographic stranger as eccentric. The second feature of the ethnographer as stranger involves institutional socialization and its limits. The acclaim given to the key informant recognizes the necessity of guidance across an epistemic boundary. Naivety motivates explanations and stories to aid in socialization. The awkwardness of the ethnographic stranger produces a wealth of teachable moments and whose presence provides an open ear to be filled by sympathetic insiders. “Regulars” are often flattered to teach the ethnographic outsider the rules of their domain. This recognition began with the enshrining of “Doc” in William Foote Whyte's (1943) *Street Corner Society*, but other key informants serve the same role. While the ethnographer is seen as the eccentric (often labeled “The Professor,” in a comment that is simultaneously deferential, ironic, and differentiating), groups are impressed when this other strives to adopt their habits. Although socialization to an organizational reality is often partial, it uncovers processes that ethnographers hope to theorize.

The stranger role, induction, and deduction

To make inferences ethnographers utilize both analytic induction and analytic deduction; both techniques are facilitated by the stranger role. The stranger relies on a

form of epistemology that depends on bracketing the group's tacit understandings, but then identifying those understandings as the source of other observations. The stranger role permits the ethnographer to integrate inductive and deductive analysis, otherwise lacking in research that is limited by being too close to or too distant from intuitive meanings.

Consider the ethnographic stranger who hopes to join an organization. Though stranger, the researcher is not a blank slate (Snow *et al.*, 2003; Tavory and Timmermans, 2009). What we observe resonates with other groups in which we have participated. As a result, we begin with loose expectations — expectations that one might even call hypotheses. These are tested *in situ*. Such expectations are a starting point, a necessary epistemological crutch, but as our outlook is met or up-ended, we acquire wisdom from the scene itself and the confidence to change, or even reject, our beliefs. These inductive insights, central to the moral capital of qualitative field methods, result from ruptures of the deductive process. The ethnographic stranger arrives with a different set of expectations from those held by members, but anticipates that these expectations will be challenged and desires new ideas as organizational exposure increases. The internal process of interpretive negotiation is central to what makes ethnography powerful in adjusting expectations to field experience.

Over time inductive insights are tested. Even if the ethnographer does not label this hypothesis testing, it is recognizably similar. Deduction and induction are joined through a constant double-fitting of theory and data (Ragin, 1994), but more than this, it is the insight of the (now knowing) stranger that overturns misguided assumptions. Being an outsider matters, but along with being an outsider, the researcher becomes socialized to knowledge and to affect, even though this is often a courtesy socialization.

The ethnographic authority

The stranger paradigm renders a certain kind of inference possible. By learning the rules of an organization that might otherwise be opaque, combining insider knowledge with outsider theory, the ethnographer, as alien and eccentric, can observe how group processes link causes and effects. Whether these claims are accepted as plausible in a way that matters for the discipline is a different but equally important concern. To draw theoretical inferences from ethnographic data is one thing. To make them stick is another. In a post-crisis era, this process is contingent on the presentation of an academic self, a fragile ethnographic authority that is linked to the stranger role, as this role demands that the ethnographer mediate between lay and scholarly communities.

This combination of brokering and translation, while subject to scrutiny, is a source of ethnographic authority. Not only are ethnographers judged by those who participate in their research, they are also judged through colleagues' evaluation of their self, their site, and their show. Assessments depend not on blind trust (although colleagues are routinely granted deference in avoiding charges of scholarly incompetence). They depend on established institutional practices of scrutiny as in the cases of ethics boards, blind review, tenure evaluation, hiring, and critiques by discussants. It is a fragile authority in an era of postmodernist and feminist critiques of ethnographic representation and increasing statistical sophistication (Tedlock 2000; Van Maanen, 1995, 1988; Wray-Bliss, 2003). Nevertheless, this authority is vital if the conclusions of ethnographers are to matter practically, empirically, and theoretically, to both the public and the academy. To be sure, claims of authority have been challenged by some scholars, especially during the crisis of representation and our ongoing methodological angst (Yanow, 2009). While sensitivity to members' values is essential, recognition of power

relations is necessary, and reflexivity serves a vital end (Holland, 1999). Denying the skills, theory, and training of the academy leads to ontological hopelessness. Without reviving this decades-long debate, which in effect ended in a cease-fire, we believe that without analytic authority, ethnographers serve as little more than translators for those with whom we “hang out.” Our theory, linked to the traditions and ongoing concerns of our disciplines, provides a value-added quality that makes our work worth reading by those whose interests are with our concepts as much as, or perhaps even more than, our informants. In this academics shape the terms of debate in their theory-based ethnographies, but we should emphasize that this should not be the only form of describing groups in a hyper-communicative world. Multiple voices are crucial and serve distinct purposes. We should be unafraid of the fact that academic perspectives might (or might not) vary from those of indigenous actors. While this paper is not designed to resolve this debate, our perspective as ethnographic realists informs how we treat the brokerage role of the fieldworker and her constructed authority.

The expertise of the stranger as a source of ethnographic authority

Despite emphasizing the stranger role as critical to ethnographic practice, the ethnographer is not just any stranger. The ethnographer is a stranger trained in the arts of observation and analysis. Graduate students acquire skills for collecting and organizing data – writing fieldnotes, conducting interviews, taking life-histories, and constructing data matrices – skills that lay strangers and those being studied rarely have. These skills may be imperfect, but they are real, and they are sharpened with practice.

While the confidence that should be placed in these forms of training has been questioned (Clough, 1992; Clifford and Marcus, 1986), within the realist tradition disciplinary skills count (Hammersley, 2000). In stripping ethnographers of confidence to provide insight separate from that of those they study, we eliminate what makes ethnography lasting and consequential: the ability of the researcher to make claims that add to academic knowledge. While embracing an epistemic modesty, ever sensitive to the perspectives of community members, scholars recognize their ability to discern connections that stand beyond the local perspectives of their informants. As Hallett and Fine (2000, pp. 613-614) note, the crisis of representation “properly deflated” ethnography’s “vainglorious assumptions,” but the recognizable improvements that have been made in ethnographic methodology and our critical reflexivity should now increase our provisional confidence.

The ethnographic stranger is not only in a position to collect data necessary for building theory, but is also equipped with skills that other methodologists lack, skills that generate confidence in our constructed accounts. Too often ethnographers have given up the claims provided by their ability to draw from comparative cases (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006). This ability to engage in comparative case analysis while presenting the details that comes from being a socialized stranger makes the ethnographer’s account robust.

Brokerage as a source of ethnographic authority

If the ethnographer is an outsider to those being observed, she is an insider to those who evaluate the report. The ethnographic stranger is uniquely positioned to be a broker in connecting the field with the academy, bringing the site into theory and, perhaps, permitting the academy to consider joint action with previously distant actors.

As a broker, the ethnographer is in a position of power, and can support (or harm) an organization, bringing it into contact with other organizations with similar interests or access to resources. Further, the brokerage role that links the observed organization with the academy creates what those in science studies term a “trading zone” (Gallison, 1997). The role of the expert, fraught with issues of power and control, always has this function of connecting communities, giving power to some, denying it to others (Wynne, 1996; Collins and Evans, 2007). The battle for expertise can be contentious. As noted, we acknowledge this but for the purposes of this paper, we treat the academy as the guardian of publishable knowledge.

The ethnographic stranger ties the local conditions of an organization to possibilities of generalizability, possibilities typically unrecognized by members. It is through the researcher that the local is made typical. In some regards, the broker, establishing knowledge conduits in the social order (Burt, 1992; Hillmann, 2008), underlines the marginality of the observer.

It is here that C. Wright Mills’ (1959) compelling concept of the sociological imagination applies. Not surprisingly, the members of an organization interpret the circumstances that affect them in light of their local conditions. And they are not wrong to think so, even if too great an emphasis on these conditions closes off possibilities of interpreting immediate circumstances in light of extended social fields. The specialized training of the ethnographic stranger permits the recognition of the broader consequences of local action. The stranger role provides an entry point to knowledge by an observer who lacks a partisan investment in a scene while maintaining critical distance. This role provides an exit point for that same knowledge as the ethnographer hopes to be as an honest broker: a fair-minded reporter with a desire to see similarities.

For the ethnographic broker, unlike other institutional novices, leaving the group is not only an option, but a goal. Theoretical saturation means that for the researcher the site has become too comfortable with little being learned. The observer who stays too long may abrogate disciplinary responsibilities. This danger is evident when those within the realist tradition speak in hushed whispers and with a measure of concern of the researcher who has “gone native.” The ethnographer who goes native refuses to use her privileged role to advance knowledge.

The demand for brokerage emphasizes the necessity of what Glaser and Strauss (1967) term the constant comparative method. How can one perform comparative analysis when blinded by the compelling uniqueness of one’s scene? The ability to move from scene to scene is crucial for seeing routine processes of change.

Beyond this linkage is the role of the ethnographer as translator, a guide to the strange. The expert serves as narrator, creating a text that builds on other narratives that are embedded in disciplinary discourse. She is a purveyor of expert knowledge, presenting knowledge in a usable and comprehensible form. And it is here that collegial scrutiny becomes essential.

Persuasion of skeptical audiences as a source of ethnographic authority

In examining the ethnographer as broker, we emphasized the relationship of the researcher and two sites of engagement: the field and the discipline. While important, this focus deemphasizes that one’s colleagues may not much care about the particular organization being observed. While ethnographic projects may have many goals, the scholarly goal is the persuasion of skeptics who are not invested in the research. One must package the observed group processes for academic publics. A crucial

criterion of ethnography – whether it enters the canon and is accepted as “true enough” – is its persuasive, rhetorical quality (Gusfield, 1976).

Part of the authority of the researcher depends on typifying group action so as to be utilized by others. In this no fixed or absolute standards exist, but one must negotiate professional credibility by presenting claims that are neither too obvious nor too outré. We balance the “novelty bias” (the desire for the new) and the “prior assumption bias” (the desire for the known) while recognizing the biases of our own discipline (Bourdieu, 2003). In this we address the politics of plausibility.

To be plausible, texts as they are translated from the field to the academy must address three questions. First, does the evidence suggest that the claims fit the beliefs of the informants, even if the claims extend beyond folk knowledge? Here the ethnographer must satisfy the skeptic who demands, “Show me the data,” not with a varnished summary, but with relatively unprocessed field notes and interview excerpts (Fine, 2003, Katz, 2001, 2002).

Second, do the claims resonate with the standing beliefs of our colleagues, incorporating their scrutiny and their biases? The challenge is to unearth a finding that is unexpected given existing theory and research, and yet also “makes sense” given this theory and research. Importance springs not only from what we did not know, but also from what transforms what we do know in plausible ways (Davis, 1971). If one’s claims are judged “not new,” analytic power is diminished. Yet there are limits – the finding cannot be beyond comprehension – the constraints of doxa (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 168). It is not only the meanings of the organizations that must be acquired; the meanings of one’s disciplinary community must also be negotiated. The disciplinary audience wants to be surprised, but then relieved, secure in the belief that knowledge has been stretched and not exploded.

Third, does the account resonate with other instances in other organizations (e.g. other medical schools), and related scenes that have some of the same features and demands (e.g. law schools) on which ethnographic theory depends? Theory must build upon the persuasive quality of observed behaviors (Fine, 2003). The demand is not for empirical generalization, but theoretical generalization. Even if empirical details vary across sites, the argument must provide theoretical leverage for understanding an array of settings (Mitchell, 1983; Small, 2009).

The roles of the ethnographic stranger and its implications for ethnographic authority set the stage for the presentation of theoretical claims. When a story is plausible, compelling, and inspiring the research gains standing and, most importantly, is used by colleagues. Distance from the research site and legitimacy within the discipline provides a platform on which theoretical arguments become part of academic knowledge.

Watching professionals being made

Having described the position of the ethnographic stranger and its relationship to ethnographic authority, we consider a trio of organizational case studies of occupational training: observations of the education of doctors, morticians, and ministers. While the list could be extended, here we can only demonstrate the intersections of strangeness and authority through cases that are similar in process, but different in setting. The examination of occupational training is propitious for our goals as these researchers stand outside of the professional community being studied. Nevertheless, they are trained as are the novices, if not with identical intensity. They enter with similar public imaginaries, but without a commitment to the work itself.

As the scholars' primary community is outside the line of work, the ethnographer can provide both descriptive authority and theoretical generalizations beyond the skills of trainees. Further, occupational training is, by its nature, temporal in character, transforming novices into credentialed workers.

In Becker *et al.*'s (1961) ethnography of the University of Kansas Medical School, the structure of training encourages students to create a group culture to cope with their crushing workload. Becker *et al.* describe this culture as an evolving group perspective that, through the window of organizational demands, shapes what the students learn, how they learn it, and their emotional attachment to the occupation. Cahill's (1999) ethnography of a mortuary school articulates a process through which the life experiences of the students creates emotional capital and career commitment. Kleinman's (1984) ethnography of a seminary reveals that contact with the community changes the students' imagined occupational practices from a divine ideal to a humanistic pragmatism. We return to the development of ethnographic theory after describing how each study utilizes the stranger role and ethnographic authority as a means to construct theoretical accounts of what happened, how, and why.

Strangers in their midst

We begin with the methodological choice of being an outsider to a domain of socialization, an embrace of strangeness that characterizes all three of these organizational ethnographies. Cahill describes it best as his analysis, subtitled "The Case of Mortuary Science Students (and Me)," weaves his emotional responses into the text (Kleinman and Copp, 1993). Cahill (1999, pp. 103, 105) underscores his discomfort, "Before beginning my observation [...] I had had little contact with death and the dead. I was and still am frightened and repulsed by the very idea [...] What was apparently unusual [among the mortuary students] was my own discomfort with the blank stares of grotesque busts, the sight of a corpse, and the very idea of sitting alone among caskets." He writes of being unable to finish lunch while seated with students casually discussing cranial autopsies. The mortuary students managed better. Cahill was an alien, eventually becoming known, but always odd. What the organization and its socialized inhabitants took for granted, Cahill struggled with.

While Becker *et al.* (1961, p. 18) describe no such transactions of disgust, they too stood outside the blood and guts of medical school. As they write, "we did not assume that we knew what perspectives the doctor would need in order to function effectively in practice [...] We did not, furthermore, assume that we knew what ideas and perspectives a student acquired while in school [...] . we necessarily had to use methods that would allow us to discover phenomena whose existence we were unaware of at the beginning of the research; our methods to allow for the discovery of the variables themselves." Becker and his colleagues had little a priori understanding of medicine, and as strangers they called upon students to share the concerns of their training.

More than most researchers Kleinman (1984, pp. 112-113) was an archetypical stranger; one is tempted to describe her as accidental participant in a distant organization. As a graduate student she decided to take a fieldwork class at Northwestern University and found a dormitory room in a local seminary. She writes, "I reflected on what living in a seminary might be like and worried a little about it. I expected students, for instance, to pray much of the time, wear black, look somber, read the Bible a lot, talk about theology, God, personal faith, and perhaps proselytize [...]. Upon hearing that I would be living in a seminary, most of my friends laughed and

said, ‘You are going to live in a seminary?’ [...] Since I am Jewish and agnostic, I expected the students to treat me like an outsider.” While Kleinman was an alien, unaware of the content of ministry schools, and, like Cahill, was uneasy about this strange organization, as a fellow student (albeit in a secular field) she developed social ties readily. Her oddity provided the students with a challenge that their embrace of the ministry was designed to meet. Students expected to reach out and connect with strangers. Kleinman, friendly and concerned, provided a site of pastoral engagement.

In these studies, the distance – real and imagined, tied to knowledge or linked to emotion – between observer and informant is central to the research. Ethnographers can turn this strangeness into an advantage. The distance provides opportunities for considering organizations in ways that were unexpected and even counter-intuitive.

Strangers as bridges

If the collection of data was all that mattered, then normalizing the stranger would conclude the research. But for most ethnographers housed in an academic home, the goal is to become experts for a new audience. As ignorant as they once were, by the end, saturated theoretically and empirically, they have become authorities. Bridge-building and truth-telling constitute expertise.

Part of the power of *Boys in White* derives from the fact that Becker and his colleagues provide a comprehensive and novel description of how student life is shaped by occupational demands in medical school. Building on rich accounts of the counter-hegemonic character of student culture, autonomy, and pragmatic idealism filtered through interactionist theory, Becker *et al.* present a persuasive account of the intersection of group interaction inside of, and in response to, the organization.

The account is plausible, in part, because of the within-case comparisons that Becker *et al.* leverage to understand the creation of student culture. Early in their fieldwork the researchers noticed distinctive in-class seating patterns among those who were in academic fraternities versus independent students. Building on this observation, they noticed variation and then convergence in how students dealt with the overwhelming requirements of medical school. While all students came to realize that it was impossible to “learn it all,” the students in fraternities collectively focussed on what they believed the faculty most wanted them to know, whereas the independents initially focussed on what they believed would be most useful for their eventual medical practice. However, as the first year progressed, independents embraced the fraternities’ perspective. Idealism was laid to rest. This nuanced understanding – possible through comparison and the temporal nature of fieldwork – appeals to a skeptical audience that searches for patterns in the data.

The same can be said of the other studies. Like Becker, Cahill also constitutes himself as authority, a broker to an unknown and grisly domain. He uses his research training to take us to an organization where few of us would go on our own – mortuary school. Cahill (1999, p. 103) embraces the stranger role and in doing so “became convinced that important lessons could be drawn from the contrast between the mortuary science students’ emotional reactions and my reactions to the work of funeral direction.”

Cahill increases his analytic leverage by comparing the students who completed the program with those who dropped out. Although nearly all of the students reported difficulties with the dirty (and smelly) work of embalming dead bodies, students with prior experience with the funeral home industry were more emotionally prepared and could more easily adapt to the demands of normalizing work with the dead. Based on

his fieldwork skills and his position as a broker who can link this strange work to scholarship in the sociology of emotion, Cahill convinces the reader of the plausibility of his account.

In Kleinman's (1984) ethnography of a seminary, the idea that ministers-in-training are not very religious is a striking finding that forces us to reconsider our stereotypes, and ask, "What do they think they are doing if not holding to a firm sectarian dogma? How have they placed humanity before the divine? How are they equals before (in priority to) God?" Kleinman's revealing data answer this irony: the students learned that excessive holiness alienated them from the very communities that they hoped to shepherd, and also alienated them from their colleagues.

However, Kleinman's (1984) analysis reveals another irony, evident when she compared female students with male students (pp. 85-99). On the one hand, humanism is an egalitarian ideology that emphasizes personal ties, and women are traditionally seen as nurturers. In this sense the humanism that the organization promotes would seem like a natural fit for female students, and less so for male students. The egalitarianism of humanism could potentially undermine and feminize the "masculinity" of ministry as a profession. In contrast, female students knew that they would be challenged by cynical parishioners wary of their gender, and here they sought the authority of a professional status, protection that they did not want to relinquish. In this regard, female students had a harder time reconciling humanism with their neophyte image of their profession than did male students.

In these cases authority derives from the effective presentation of richly observed relations and demands, transforming them into something deeper and connected to other realms. To the extent that we trust the ethnographer as fair, we grant authority, even if this is a fragile trust that must be continually renewed.

Creating theory in practice

The roles of stranger and authority set the stage for the presentation of theoretical claims. Distance from the research site, coupled with legitimacy within the discipline, provides a platform on which theoretical arguments become part of academic knowledge.

Perhaps there is no better example of an ethnography committed to this type of ethnographic inference than *Boys in White*. While there are many influential topics in this classic study of medical education, the one that has become iconic is how organizational demands construct the "fate of idealism" (Becker *et al.*, 1961, pp. 439-441). Briefly stated, students arrive at medical school with an idealistic, if naïve, commitment to patient care. They think they can cure all ills. They soon discover that the organizational reality of medical school training suggests otherwise. The faculty makes impossible demands, and students must develop strategies to meet them. Students respond pragmatically by separating their idealism in patient care, which remains, with the occupational techniques and practices that permit them to comply with training requirements.

The "fate of idealism" involves processes by which trainees cope with potentially inconsistent demands. More specifically, to deal with the demands of their training, students create an evolving culture. A naïve long-range perspective where physicians represent the best of all professions gives way to the initial perspective as they begin medical school (we are going to "learn it all" even if we have to study continually), that changes to the provisional perspective (you just "can't do it all"), and settles into the final perspective (out of all this material, we will focus on what we think "the

professors want us to know”). These perspectives shape what the students learned and how they learned it.

The institutional conditions of professional training combine with local culture to produce student perspectives and corresponding practices that shape their emotional orientation. Abstracted from the data, this story provides an account of the forces that produce changes in self and occupational engagement. While the specifics of medical training cannot be generalized to other professions, this theoretical account can be (Psathas, 1968; Fine, 1985; Granfield and Koenig, 1992).

Cahill’s (1999) work, while not as directly linked to idealism, also implicates occupational socialization. Cahill is interested in how “emotional capital,” serves as the mechanism through which background expectations produce occupational commitment. As noted, in examining a mortuary school, Cahill discovered that students who had backgrounds that exposed them to funerary practices tended to adjust successfully to institutional demands, whereas those who were not so aware did not. Previous lived experience creates the emotional capital that permits coping with the strain of death-work. The ability to cope emotionally with what Cahill himself found “nightmarish” created the strength of identity necessary to fit within the organization. In other words, life experiences produce emotional capital, which then produce career commitment. This story fits Blau and Duncan’s (1967) classic account of the effects of parent’s occupational standing on social mobility and Bourdieu’s (1977) account of cultural reproduction, but as importantly it identifies the emotional processes through which these mechanisms unfold at the organizational level.

Kleinman (1984), too, recognizes the role of organizational culture. On entering seminary, new ministry students held images of what their training involved, images that did not differ so much from Kleinman’s own expectations. But in the course of socialization students learned that an explicit display of religiosity distanced oneself from the community. It made too much of an emotional show, claiming status at the expense of others. As a result, and ironically, “God-talk” was frowned upon. To be godly worked against their pastoral goals, at least as defined by their teachers. They had to become humanists with each other and with parishioners, rather than channelers of the divine. The faculty demanded realism in the midst of heavenly ideals and sympathetic contact with the community (both inside the seminary walls and in the secular domain beyond).

These three texts are in implicit dialogue (the later works cite *Boys in White*). While distinct in emphasis, each addresses how institutional demands mediate prior expectation, occupational commitment, and competence. Each is thoroughly connected to ethnographic mandates, and in all the researchers began as strangers. Yet, the researchers make claims that are separate from those of participants. In this the studies are taken as authoritative. While these studies present scenes that are unique organization settings, they can be taken as depicting the general process of the creation of occupational workers.

Strange inferences, strange roles, strange authority

Just as researchers have been animated by understanding the forms of social relations among actors, social relations matter in the creation of scholarly knowledge. While it has long been acknowledged that the ethnographers’ position as a stranger can be problematic, in this paper we argue that this position has merits: it is through the two stances of alien and eccentric that the ethnographer can see and examine taken-for-granted processes that may seem indeterminate to outsiders and mundane to

group members. Against this backdrop we address two related topics. First, how the ethnographer's position as stranger facilitates the creation of theory from field observations. Second, how the ethnographer's position as a disciplinary professional facilitates a particular type of theoretical claim, distinct from hypotheses in controlled experimentation and also separate from the lived experience, "authentic" knowledge of informants. We hold that viewing the ethnographic stranger in this light compels us to revisit the contentious issue of ethnographic authority, and we examine how the ethnographer's disciplinary training and position as both a stranger and broker become the bases upon which authority, however fragile, is constructed.

Although we argue for the salience of the stranger and ethnographic authority, we recognize that the amount of starting "ignorance" of one's field site and how much concluding "proficiency" are necessary has been a topic of heated debate both in classic ethnographic training (Becker, 1998) and in laboratory studies in science studies (Latour and Woolgar, 1979; Collins, 2004). Debates on the value of participatory competence remain contentious. As field researchers have emphasized (Adler and Adler, 1987), researchers draw upon a range of social relations in acquiring participatory skills. Some researchers choose to be complete members with forms of intuitive knowledge that derive from participation and sometimes deliberately study their personal perspectives. These non-strangers face different challenges than those discussed here as they cannot rely upon the enlightening surprise and constant comparative testing based in stranger-knowledge. However, the customary stance of the participant observer, particularly in classical ethnography, is that of the outsider or stranger. This researcher leverages distance to perceive patterns of effects that insiders take for granted or misinterpret, blinded by the power of tradition and by the comfort that tradition makes possible. Groups treat their forms of interaction as transparent and proper. In contrast the ethnographic stranger relies upon the drawing back of opaque curtains, recognizing processes that transcend groups. The ethnographic stranger can determine what belongs to the group, what belongs to the organization in which the group resides, and what, perhaps, belongs to humanity.

We return to the nexus of the stranger and the authority. What C. Wright Mills (1959) speaks of as the "sociological imagination" valorizes the intersection of the outsider and expert. This involves the ability to separate scholarly insight from group history and the ability to go beyond local explanations (a personal tragedy, affecting one person) to a generic consideration of change (a social problem, affecting multitudes).

This tension is at the heart of ethnographic projects. Strangers may lack competence, but they have expertise as well. The stranger is a dramatic role that some play, illuminating social boundaries, but it is also a position that we depend on to insure that we are not swept away in a tide of conventional meaning. Ethnographic insight depends on this standpoint.

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About the authors

Gary Alan Fine is John Evans Professor of Sociology at the Northwestern University. Over the course of his career he has conducted a dozen ethnographies, including investigations of Little League baseball, restaurant kitchens, mushroom collectors, professional meteorologists, and competitive chess players. His current research is an investigation of the occupational socialization of MFA students in the visual arts. Professor Gary Alan Fine is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: g-fine@northwestern.edu

Tim Hallett is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at the Indiana University. His research lies at the intersections of social psychology, organizations, and culture. He has done ethnographic research in restaurants and in schools, and has used that data to publish articles about the inhabited nature of institutions (*American Sociological Review* 2010), symbolic power and organizational culture (*Social Psychology Quarterly* 2007), and how emotions "blow up" in organizations (*The Sociological Quarterly* 2003). His current ethnographic project examines the professional socialization of students in a Masters of Public Affairs program.

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