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To cite this article: Dvora Yanow (2021) Ethnography on Trial: Introduction to the Dialogue, *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, 9:4, 826-834, DOI: [10.1080/21565503.2021.1963992](https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2021.1963992)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2021.1963992>



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Published online: 17 Aug 2021.



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DIALOGUE: MISUNDERSTANDING ETHNOGRAPHY:
EVIDENCE IN LAW, JOURNALISM AND POLITICAL
ETHNOGRAPHY

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Ethnography on Trial: Introduction to the Dialogue

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ARTICLE HISTORY Received 5 March 2021; Accepted 12 July 2021

While [ethnographers] do seek to uncover the rules of action, *such rules are not as clearly discoverable as law is to lawyers – through examination of definitive statements*. Most rules of social behavior are tacit and unstated. Frequently they arise in interaction and can only be recognized after the fact ... *They are, however, the rules used by participants*, not those imposed by others – [e.g.,] legal officials ... In observing behavior, including conversation, my intention is to capture the rules and meanings by which [what I am studying] is defined and observed by participants; to understand the cultural categories and meanings through which [that activity] is assessed, understood, and seen as appropriate or inappropriate and the ways in which such categories are applied in different circumstances.

– Joseph Gusfield (1996, 102–103, emphases added)

... [T]he assumption that if we ... were only privy to the “crucial facts,” the story would unfold, is to miss a key feature ... Partial understandings, epistemic confusion, and undigested bits of cultural “information” made up the *modus vivendi* ... , open[ing] onto competing conventions of credibility about what and whose evidence could be trusted and those moments in which it could not.

– Ann Stoler (2009, 185)

In *Interrogating Ethnography: Why Evidence Matters* (2018), law professor and lawyer Steven Lubet mounts a concerted attack on ethnography for relying upon evidence that would not meet the standards that obtain in legal proceedings. What is ethnography, and why should this concern political scientists?

Defining ethnography is methodologically contested terrain – is it a form of writing alone (the term’s *graphos*)? a set of observational methods? a sensibility, a way of being in the world and engaging the people (the “*ethnos*”) one encounters? In lieu of a textbook-type definition, consider sociologist Joseph Gusfield’s last sentence (see epigraph) and the experience-based explanation offered by political scientist Richard F. Fenno of the rationale informing his US legislative studies’ method. Often regarded as the US dean of political ethnography, Fenno captures, operationally, the heart of the method known as participant-observer ethnography:

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[We] cannot understand the representative-constituency relationship until we can see the constituency through the eyes of the representative. ... When we talk with our national legislators about their constituencies, we typically talk to them in Washington and, perforce, in the Washington context. But that is a context far removed from the one in which their constituency relationships are created, nurtured, and changed. ... Asking constituency-related questions on Capitol Hill ... could well produce a distortion of perspective. ... “[B]ack home,” ... the representative may picture himself or herself as a part of the constituency – me *in* the constituency, rather than me *and* the constituency. (1977, 883)

Fenno characterizes the method for generating such contextualized insights as “looking over their shoulders” to “figure out ... what it is they see,” “[r]ather than assume that I already know what is interesting or what questions to ask”: “The research method has been largely one of soaking and poking – or, just hanging around” (884). It is that situated epistemology of “figuring out” (and then [re]presenting) what *they* see, rather than assuming a priori what is, or should be, meaningful to situational members that sets participant-observer ethnography apart from other modes of inquiry.

Ethnography is as much at home in political science as in other disciplines. Far from originating in anthropology, ethnography developed in colonial administrations. As anthropological historian Oscar Salemink notes:

... [C]ontrary to the now common assumption that ethnography is the descriptive (or even the field research) part of anthropology, ... professional anthropology is a fairly recent manifestation of ethnographic practice ... *[I]t is better to regard academic anthropology as a specific instance of ethnographic practice than the other way around.* (2003, 2, 9; my emphasis)

One of several “marked” ethnographies,¹ “political” ethnography cuts across all disciplinary subfields, from national (Curry 2015) to comparative politics (Smith 2019), international relations (Stepputat 2012) to “theory” (Longo and Zacka 2019). It also travels methodologically, from realist-objectivist approaches to interpretive ones (Yanow [2003] 2016, 9–10; see also, e.g., Schatz 2009; Schwartz-Shea and Majic 2017; Pachirat 2018). Additionally, the understanding that anthropologists do “ethnography” whereas sociologists undertake “participant-observation” is traceable to the 1929 split between the two disciplines at the University of Chicago, each claiming “its own” method. In the UK, where no such split occurred, the terms often appear together: “participant-observer ethnography.”

Although Lubet’s book has attracted critical attention in many fields and arenas (e.g., “Panel Discussion” 2018), we know of no such engagement in political science. Why should the discipline attend to these matters? Imagining the uses to which the book might be put in teaching, advising, and manuscript evaluation leads Dialogue authors to seek a readership among political scientists and others engaged with questions of evidence, knowledge claims, and related methodological issues out of concern lest Lubet’s appraisal be taken at face value. We see potential costs to students and faculty seeking to pursue ethnographic work, as well as to ways of seeing and knowing in political and other social sciences. These Dialogue essays critique the book for its misunderstandings and misinterpretations of how ethnography and journalism – one of Lubet’s touchstones – are practiced and its ignorance of long-standing, more informed engagements with ethnographic methods and ethical concerns. In short, the logics of ethnographic inquiry, as articulated by Gusfield, Fenno, and Dialogue essay authors, differ fundamentally from those of the Chicago courtrooms in which Lubet has practiced.

The book

Courtroom language suffuses chapter titles, starting with “Introduction: The Ethnographic Trial,” after Duneier’s thought experiment (2011). Reading across his collection of ethnographies, Lubet faults ethnographers for (listed by chapter):

- (1) not presenting “a reality as it actually exists” (Lubet 2018, 9), drawing instead on unacknowledged hearsay;
- (2) basing analyses on opinion, shirking evidence;
- (3) relying on unverified second-hand reports, “rumors, folklore, ... popular beliefs ... , or half-truths” and “undependable informants” (29, 40);
- (4) using circumstantial evidence, not keeping “their own naiveté or credulity” (43) from eschewing disconfirming evidence;
- (5) engaging in selection bias;
- (6) presenting rumors “as statements of fact ... to reinforce the author’s theory” (75);
- (7) anonymizing names, locations, and other details, by contrast with what he claims are journalists’ practices (but see journalist Sharon Batt’s essay);
- (8) participating in criminal activity and not reporting crimes observed.

To counteract such problems, Lubet calls on ethnographers to have others check our facts, citations, and field notes, in the name of verifying our accounts and replicating our research.² The concluding chapter argues for “evidence-based ethnography.”

Appreciating Lubet’s critique requires knowledge of another book and its reception: Alice Goffman’s ethnography *On the Run* (2014). Much of his book rests on Lubet’s assessment of Goffman’s,³ summarized here briefly along with the acclaim and critiques it received. A participant-observer study of a poor, Black neighborhood in Philadelphia – setting and actors’ names are disguised – Goffman’s research features a group of young men involved in various ways with drugs. It describes the lives of the men, the police officers who work to curtail their drug activities, and the mothers, girlfriends, and other family members who seek to care for them. One chapter discusses the neighborhood’s “clean people” who do not participate in the drug economy. The book ends with a 50-page methods appendix.

Goffman’s article from the research, published in the American Sociology Association’s flagship *American Sociological Review*, earned her the 2010 Jane Addams Best Article Award from the Community and Urban Section; the dissertation won the Association’s 2011 Dissertation Award. The book, written from the dissertation, appeared to wide academic and public acclaim. Elijah Anderson, Howard Becker, Carol Stack, and other leading sociologists praised it. Cornel West endorsed it as “... the best treatment I know of the wretched underside of neo-liberal capitalist America” (<https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/O/bo18039324.html>). The *New York Times* listed it as an “Editor’s Choice” selection (*Book Review*, July 6, 2014) and included it among the 100 notable books of 2014 (*New York Times*, December 2). *Times* book reviewer Alex Kotlowitz (2014) called it “a remarkable feat of reporting”; the *New York Review of Books* said it would become “an ethnographic classic” (Jencks 2014).

And then, the negative criticism exploded (e.g., Betts 2014; Singal 2016). Some critics made a game of seeing who could find the pseudonymous “6th Street” research setting and

identify gang members. A year after the first reviews, Lubet published four (2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d).⁴ He focused especially on Goffman's story, at the end of the Appendix, of driving around with her friend "Mike" on several nights after their mutual friend "Chuck" had been killed. Mike, who is packing a gun, thinks he knows who did it, and they go looking for him. Lubet challenged Goffman on the veracity of the facts presented in key parts of the book and accused her of "conspiring to commit murder," a felony (cf. Goffman's reply [2015]). This point is, indeed, a troubling aspect of Goffman's account. But it is not without alternate explanations (e.g., Lewis-Kraus [2016], Batt's essay). An ethnographer might have asked her what she thought she was doing, rather than assuming omniscient knowledge of intent. As Stoler (2009, 185) writes, there are different frames in which events [are] understood, reported, and played out:

... [D]iscrepant stories provide ethnographic entry into the confused space in which people lived, to the fragmented knowledge on which they relied, and to the ill-informed and inept responses that knowledge engendered. Coherence is seductive for narrative form but disparities are, from an ethnographic perspective, more compelling.

The essays

In rebuttal, these essays argue several points, from different perspectives: political science fieldwork and theoretical work, discipline and subfield, legal studies and journalism:

- (1) Nick Cheesman's "Reading paperwork realistically" tackles Lubet's treatment of official documents as evidence, showing that his understanding misses their ontological and political realities: documents do not "report" facts, Cheesman writes, but "render" them.
- (2) In "Interpretive sufficiency: Where evidence in journalism and ethnography meet," journalist Sharon Batt takes on Lubet's argument that ethnographers should adopt journalists' norms to achieve greater accuracy and ethical conduct, showing that his ideas do not comport with current practices, themselves much closer to interpretive methods.
- (3) Reflecting on her own field research in Abkhazia, Anastasia Shesterinina argues, in "Sources of evidence and openness in field-intensive research on violent conflict," one, that ethnographers need to leverage multiple types and sources of evidence, which does not fit Lubet's sense of a hierarchy privileging some types over others; and two, that Lubet's insistence on fact-checking, re-interviewing, and verificational reviews of data would not only not have worked in her conflict-ridden setting, but would have endangered participants.
- (4) In "Trying Lubet's ethnography: On methodology, writing, and ethics," Dvora Yanow examines the implications of some of the framing of Lubet's book: his dismissal of anthropological ethnographies; a problematic research design; his use of rhetoric in lieu of evidence; and his ignoring of methodological discussions and research ethics – all while generalizing from US urban sociological ethnographies to "ethnography" writ large.
- (5) Drawing on Gunnar Myrdal's 1944 book, David Forrest considers, in "Steven Lubet's 'American Dilemma,'" whether Lubet's thinking is shaped by an ideological

commitment, however unconscious, to “the American creed” rooted in an egalitarianism that presumes court proceedings to be decent and fair, blinding him to political realities such as Goffman described.

The essays share an underlying assessment that the book is rooted in a methodologically troubling conception of “evidence,” of which the “evidence-based” call is emblematic: “[W]hat constitutes ‘evidence’ in evidence-based practice ...” is “the ‘received view’ of science,” in which logical positivism holds sway (Bender and Holmes 2019, 3). Arguments promoting it adduce experimental evidence expressed through statistical analyses. This excludes observational evidence grounded in local knowledge emerging from the lived experience of members of the situations being examined, such as through clinical or field research (Yanow 2007) – including ethnography. Lubet’s “evidence-base” slights the appreciation of non-controlled, field research whose outcomes might provide insights into the cultural categories and meanings of those who live and/or work in the settings ethnographers study – to wit, the processes Gusfield and Fenno describe. In such research, “lies” and “hidden transcripts” can also comprise useful data (Scott 1990; Fujii 2010): people may have good reason *not* to present their experiences as elites do. In sum, the book advances claims of a universalizing bent without recognizing that these emerge from particular philosophical, methodological, and disciplinary traditions, an argument at the heart of the epistemological critique sounded by standpoint and intersectionality thinking (Smith 1974; Collins 1986; Haraway 1988; Crenshaw 1991; Harding 1992; Hartsock 2004). Moreover, it ignores the nearly century-old history of such disagreements in its author’s own field of legal scholarship, between “legal formalists” (Lubet’s position) and “legal realists” (parallel to arguments voiced here), as Forrest notes.

Interrogating Ethnography would seem attractive to those who define scientific research in ways inimical to methodological pluralism, eschewing non-realist-objectivist methods and methodologies in particular – especially following on the Data Access and Research Transparency (DA-RT) movement in US political science, which challenges many accepted ethnographic practices.⁵ Professor Lubet writes that he admires ethnographic research and its contributions (2018, xv), which we appreciate knowing. In political science, however, the kinds of positions articulated in his book, which not only favor a realist-objectivist approach to science, but also assume that it is the sole acceptable form of doing science, risk being taken as the only way to see and know political topics. That would be to the detriment of the future of participant-observer ethnographic research in the discipline. Much of the criticism of ethnographic research voiced in Lubet’s book replicates the challenges doctoral students face at job talks and scholars of all ranks are confronted with in conference presentations and classrooms from those unfamiliar with its tenets (Anastasia Shesterinina, personal communication, May 2019). David Forrest put the point this way: “... [N]one of us is necessarily trying to mount a sustained defense of Goffman’s book (or any of the other books that Lubet discusses),” nor are our arguments “contingent [up]on any group of ethnographic studies being perfect.” Even were Lubet’s claims concerning any of the works he discusses correct, the methodological “principles and assumptions driving his interpretation of [Goffman’s] story” – and of ethnographic research more broadly – “would still be problematic” (personal communication, May 25, 2019).

Broader contexts

These Dialogue essays' critiques become even more resonant in light of the heightened awareness, worldwide, concerning police brutality against darker-skinned people, especially following the May 25, 2020 death of George Floyd in the United States:

- in Canada: fatal police shootings of people from Black, Indigenous, and immigrant communities and deaths of those in mental distress during police responses to “wellness checks” prompted nation-wide protests and calls for change voicing longstanding anger about systemic racism in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and municipal police forces (Shah 2020);
- in Paris: 35,000 turned out in two anti-racism protests, including of the earlier death of a Malian-heritage man, whose breathing was also hampered in police custody (Méheut 2020);
- in The Netherlands: over 50,000 protested deaths in police custody of darker-skinned men, including earlier of an Aruban and a Dutch-Haitian in March 2020, both apparently from choke holds (Holligan 2020);
- in Australia: thousands protested the deaths of Indigenous people in police custody, one of them in 2018 under circumstances resembling George Floyd's (“Black Lives Matter Rallies ...” 2020).

Ethnographic research continues to be relevant for studying these and other issues, including the very types of state practices that got some ethnographers or their participants in trouble – or killed (see Yanow's essay). It requires a more informed engagement than Lubet's critique supplies.

This Dialogue discussion also bears on another context: the arena in which matters of “truth” and evidence are under attack. Do ethnographers no longer follow established norms, fabricating data, ignoring evidence? If this is indeed a problem, however, its solution is not to counter with a methodological attack that ignores everything we have learned about ethnographic practices in the last decades. This is the time not to water ethnography down, but to elaborate a robust examination of its contributions and possibilities. A pluralist political science requires recognizing that different methodologies advance different standards (Schwartz-Shea 2014): no single scientific standard exists against which ethnographic research should or must be measured. As it can be conducted in keeping with interpretive methodological criteria or the realist-objectivist ones voiced in *Interrogating Ethnography*, that book cannot stand – in essay authors' views – as the yardstick for judging all such research. The answer to problems of practice lies not in fact-checking, but in engaging fully with the scientific and ethical mandates of good ethnography.

Notes

1. “Marking” a term delimits its scope: “urban” ethnography, e.g., is a “marked” ethnography. See, e.g., Yanow (2012, 31–32); on marking generally, Zerubavel (2018).
2. As replication's centrality and success in natural science have both been challenged, its applicability to social science is, therefore, questionable. At a minimum, it requires a stability that does not obtain; consider, e.g., climate change (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2014).

3. The index devotes nearly a full column to Goffman's book, far more than any other entry. In his review, Hallett (2019, 258) wonders how well Lubet's book would stand up if all those passages were removed.
4. Other assessments, public and academic, domestic and international, include Parry (2015), Stoller (2015), Lewis-Kraus (2016), Portilla (2016), and Van Maanen and de Rond (2017). For a fuller listing, see Pachirat (2018, 158, n6), a critical engagement with ethnography's evidentiary and other methodological issues whose penultimate chapter, also drawing on Duneier (2011), puts on trial the ethnographic practices raised by Goffman's and others' works.
5. The literature advancing and critiquing DA-RT has grown rather large. For a recent set of critiques and references, see Yanow et al. (2018).

Acknowledgements

These essays originated in an APSA roundtable co-organized with Peregrine Schwartz-Shea, which included Martina Avanza. My thanks to the reviewers and to my Dialogue colleagues, including Martina, for contributing the international cases and sources and actively participating in the collaborative planning, thinking, and internal manuscript reviews from the initial roundtable onward.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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