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ETHNOGRAPHY 1900

Learning from the Field
Research of an Old Century

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Ethnographic research has changed dramatically over the past century, as a review of research published in the American Journal of Sociology from 1895 to 1910 attests. After describing the characteristics of that research and the scholars who published it, the authors analyze what has changed. This examination of ethnographic research suggests that despite methodological and theoretical advances over the past century, some traits of those earlier studies have been lost in contemporary field research. Specifically, the authors point to the loss of clarity, authority, and confidence in much current research. Ethnographers of a century ago believed that they were able to picture social scenes, deal with public problems, and provide ameliorative solutions. Moreover, they spoke with confidence and authority, an authority that is now downplayed in ethnographic research.

With the dawning of a new century, the desire is real to examine from where we have come, a snare to which academics are no less prone than others. Ethnographers face the new millennium with the security that their chosen methodology is well established (Denzin and Lincoln 1994; Gubrium and Holstein 1997). Yet, at times, such security may blind us to how our style of research has changed across the decades; we perhaps forget what has been gained and, also, what has been lost.

To this end, we assay what “ethnographic” research was like a century ago, focusing on the decades that bracket the past century’s turn: an examination of the research of the *fin de siècle*. Sorting through the first fifteen years of the *American Journal of Sociology (AJS)* (issues published from 1895 to 1910), then the singular journal in the discipline of sociology, we examine research that could be broadly defined as “ethnographic.” These articles present data from informal or formal observations or from interviews in the context of a community. Taking an inductive approach, we organize the articles according to their themes and ethnographic techniques.

In this article, we briefly describe the ethnography of the day: What “ethnographic research” meant in 1900, who was writing it, its topics, the methods and data presentation, and the prescriptions for social betterment. But we need more than description. We hope to transcend the mere curiosity of historical narrative and to point suggestively to

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changes in perspective. We do not believe that the research of 1900 is better than that conducted today—a contention that using presentist standards would be false—but ironically, improvements in methods, theory, and substantive knowledge have coincided with a decrease in ethnographic clarity, confidence, and authority.

To study ethnographic research at a time when ethnography (much less sociology) was ill defined forces the modern researcher to impose some criteria as a means of selection. As ethnographers ourselves, we shudder at the imposition of such definitions, preferring a more inductive approach. As such, we selected articles using as broad a lens as possible, defining ethnography as the collection and presentation of data based on formal and informal observations or on conversations in the context of an explicit community. Any article that showed evidence of formal and informal observations or conversations, be it statistics collected by observation, observations of actions, or direct quotations, was selected for examination. Using these admittedly broad criteria, we identified fifty-one of the *AJS* articles from 1895 to 1910 as “ethnographic.” (See Table 1.)

PEOPLE AND PLACES

In part, to describe ethnography in 1900 is to describe who was doing qualitative research at the time and where this research was done. Overwhelmingly, ethnography at the turn of the past century was conducted in cities. Of the fifty-one ethnographic articles examined, forty are situated in urban environments, most typically Chicago (thirteen), followed by New York, Milwaukee, Pittsburgh, and various other cities. For these researchers, the urban environment was an exotic setting. With much ethnographic research taking place in Chicago and with *AJS* originating at the University of Chicago, it is not surprising that many of the ethnographic articles published in *AJS* were by authors affiliated with the University of Chicago (fifteen of fifty-one articles). These researchers provided the foundation on which the first Chicago School of ethnography would be built, and by 1920, *AJS* had become a central means through which the Chicago School was constituted (Abbott 1999, x). In addition to the University of Chicago, eleven other articles were by authors affiliated with educational institutions such as Harvard and Syracuse.

TABLE 1: Ethnographic Articles in the *American Journal of Sociology*—1895-1910 (alphabetical by year)

<i>Year</i>	<i>Author</i>	<i>Title</i>
1896	Clare DeGreffenried	Some Social Economic Problems
1896	I. W. Howerth	Profit Sharing at Ivorydale
1897	Frank W. Blackmar	The Smokey Pilgrims
1897	John R. Commons	The Junior Republic I
1897	Geo. Fairchild	Populism in a State Educational Institution
1897	Dorthea Moore	A Day at Hull House
1897	E. C. Moore	The Social Value of the Saloon
1898	Sadie American	The Movement for Small Playgrounds
1898	John R. Commons	The Junior Republic II
1898	O. J. Milliken	Chicago Vacation Schools
1898	Paul Monroe	Possibilities of the Present Industrial System
1898	George E. Vincent	A Retarded Frontier
1898	Charles Zueblin	Municipal Playgrounds in Chicago
1899	Annie Marion MacLean	Two Weeks in Department Stores
1899	Mary Roberts Smith	The Social Aspects of New York Police Courts
1900	Royal Melendy	The Saloon in Chicago I
1900	J. A. Stewart	The Model Public Bath at Brookline
1901	Nellie Mason Auten	Some Phases in the Sweating System of the Garment Phase of Chicago
1901	Mary Taylor Blanvelt	The Race Problem
1901a	Charles J. Bushnell	Some Social Aspects of the Chicago Stock Yards I
1901b	Charles J. Bushnell	Some Social Aspects of the Chicago Stock Yards II
1901	Francis Cope Jr.	Tenement House Reform: Its Practical Results in the "Battle Row" District in New York
1901a	J. M. Gillette	The Culture Agencies of a Typical Manufacturing Group: South Chicago I
1901b	J. M. Gillette	The Culture Agencies of a Typical Manufacturing Group: South Chicago II
1901a	S. S. MacClintock	The Kentucky Mountains and Their Feuds I
1901b	S. S. MacClintock	The Kentucky Mountains and Their Feuds II
1901	Royal Melendy	The Saloon in Chicago II
1901	Victor L. O'Brien	Columbia Park Boys Club
1901	Clinton Rogers Woodruff	Philadelphia Street Railway Franchise
1902	Charles J. Bushnell	Some Social Aspects of the Chicago Stock Yards III
1902	Frank A. Horack	The Horseshoer's Strike of Philadelphia
1903	James E. Boyle	The Union Label
1903	J. W. Braam	The Ruskin Cooperative Colony
1903	Kathleen Chandler	A New Idea in Social Fraternity
1903	Leonora Beck Ellis	A Study of Southern Cotton-Mill Communities

TABLE 1: Continued

<i>Year</i>	<i>Author</i>	<i>Title</i>
1903	M. W. Law	Our Ishmael
1903	S. S. MacClintock	Around the Island of Cebu on Horseback
1903	Annie Marion MacLean	The Sweat Shop in Summer
1903	T. H. MacQuery	Schools for Dependent, Delinquent, and Truant Children in Illinois
1905	George E. Vincent	A Laboratory Experiment in Journalism
1907	Amy E. Tanner	Glimpses in the Mind of a Waitress
1908	Grace Abbott	The Chicago Employment Agency and the Immigrant Worker
1908	Margaret F. Byington	The Family in a Typical Mill Town
1908	Edward T. Devine	Results of the Pittsburgh Survey
1908	Annie Marion MacLean	Life in the Pennsylvania Coal Fields with Particular Reference to Women
1909	Grace Abbott	A Study of Greeks in Chicago
1909	Annie Marion MacLean	With Oregon Hop-Pickers
1910a	Sophonisba Breckinridge and Edith Abbott	Chicago's Housing Problem: Families in Furnished Rooms
1910b	Sophonisba Breckinridge and Edith Abbott	Housing Conditions in Chicago III: Back of the Yards
1910	Milton B. Hunt	The Housing of Non-Family Groups of Men in Chicago
1910	A. F. Van Schelle	A City of Vagabonds

While academics produced much of the ethnography at the time, more than one fifth of the ethnographic articles in *AJS* were by authors affiliated with organizations outside of universities. Such organizations included the Committee of 50, which sought to study the extent and effects of alcohol consumption in urban areas; the Young Women's Christian Association, which sponsored research on the labor of women; Hull House; the Chicago Civics and Philanthropy Organization; and the New York Tenement House Commission. Fourteen of the fifty-one ethnographic articles had their roots in such organizations. Much of the ethnography sponsored by organizations was conducted by women (see Deegan 1995). Women authored eleven of the fourteen articles sponsored by organizations. In contrast, only five articles

authored by women noted affiliations with universities, while twenty-one articles by men indicated university affiliations.

While a tendency existed for ethnography to be connected to universities or organizations, research was open to all who could claim insights into social problems. In fact, ten of the fifty-one articles demonstrated no clear affiliation, simply noting the author's place of residence. At a time when the discipline of sociology was yet to be clearly defined, *AJS* was open to ethnographic research that originated outside of university walls and welcomed the insights of both men and women, although being part of Albion Small's network was crucial in the days before blind review (Abbott 1999, 88). Taken together, nineteen of the ethnographic articles were authored by women and twenty-six by men (we were unable to determine the author's gender for six articles). While female authors accounted for more than 34 percent of the ethnographic articles in *AJS* from 1895 to 1910, women accounted for approximately 16 percent of all *AJS* articles during that time, a percentage that would fall to 5 percent by 1925 (Abbott 1999, 92).¹

OVERLAPPING THEMES OF INTEREST

The dominance of the city as a research site and as a social problem intimately colors the themes addressed in ethnography at the turn of the century. Based on this urban context, seven overlapping themes provide threads of commonality between the fifty-one *AJS* articles: (1) the lives of immigrants, (2) housing conditions, (3) working conditions, (4) health conditions, (5) the lives of women, (6) the lives of children, and (7) morality. In this light, it is worth remembering that elites and even middle-class lives are barely discussed.

The waves of immigrants who flooded cities at the time became a popular object of study. Fully twenty-three of the fifty-one articles address the lives of immigrants. This lifestyle is analyzed largely in relation to housing conditions (thirteen articles) and working conditions (eight articles). Interwoven with urban housing and work conditions are health conditions. Thirteen articles address health issues, ranging from the squalor of the Chicago Stock Yards to studies praising the benefits of city playgrounds. Of great importance are the ways in which immigrant lifestyle, housing and working conditions, and health

conditions affected the lives of women (eleven articles) and children (seventeen articles). Finally, the aforementioned themes often were tied to issues of morality (twenty-eight articles), the most prominent of which were crime (twelve articles) and alcohol (eleven articles).

While eleven of the fifty-one *AJS* articles are not based on urban research, they often are discussed in comparison to city conditions. For example, an 1897 article chronicles the criminal tendencies of a rural family to argue that cities are not alone in confronting moral degeneracy (Blackmar 1897). Consequently, life in the troubled city remains a backdrop for these eleven articles, and the same themes retain their importance.

PRESENTATION OF METHODS

Given the social context and interwoven themes that color this ethnography, one may ask, "How did these researchers go about their business?" For these early researchers, no single dominant methodology or paradigm existed for the presentation of qualitative data, and where today much time and effort is spent chronicling the methodology used based on disciplinary conventions, no such expectations encumbered these early ethnographers. Of the articles examined, thirty-two give no clear indication of how the data was collected, placing the burden of inference on the reader.

For the modern reader, reading ethnography without methodological outlines can be as frustrating as deciphering an alien language. However, nineteen of the articles did make methodological statements. The simplest of such statements took the form of footnotes, such as a study of profit sharing at a company that remarked, "The facts presented have been gathered from personal study and from communication with members of the firm and its employees" (Howerth 1896, 43). Other studies gave methodology a more prominent position by locating a few sentences in the main text. For example, a study of a Dayton factory states,

This article, descriptive of that institution, is not based upon a personal acquaintance with the employer, but upon an inspection of the work and conversations with employees. Such an investigation reveals the possibilities of the present industrial system, and emphasizes the fact that with

employees and employers themselves lies the responsibility for many existing evils. (Monroe 1898, 731-32)

A few studies even addressed objectivity. A researcher studying Chicago saloons attempts to ward off temperance bias:

The laboratory method was employed. The saloons were visited, an attempt was made to escape that bane of social investigation—the psychologist's fallacy. In so far as possible, conditions were exchanged, purse and script were left behind. The saloon became an integral feature of life. It was loafing place, news center, and basis of food supply in its free lunch counter; a complete orientation was made into its life. Trammelled neither by an abstinence pledge nor by a predisposition for its wares, it is believed that the freedom necessary to unbiased judgment was obtained. (E. C. Moore 1897, 2-3)

Unfortunately, this researcher does not elaborate on the meaning of the "laboratory method." Nor does the researcher discuss sampling or the time spent in the field. Such omissions are the rule, not the exception, and remained so for several decades.

While objectivity was a concern for a handful of these researchers, others had more explicit political agendas in which the methodology is explicitly bound. Consider the participant observation of a sweatshop:

To the student, the philanthropist, and the legislator, it suggests a rational ground for constructive action; to the general public it may serve to awaken a sense of personal responsibility; while to the toiler himself it may mean hope in the future. . . . Duty may lead me to endure the hardships of the worker in the interests of amelioration; she just as surely leads others to assist in lifting the burden when once it has been pointed out. (MacLean 1903, 290)

While these excerpts are enlightening, they fail to answer the many questions that accompany ethnographic research design, and these researchers felt little need to detail their methodology. When such accounts were included, they took many forms, from scattered bits and pieces woven into the text to page-long accounts. Yet, the accounts lack the detail to which we are accustomed, leading the modern reader to ponder, "What, exactly, did you do?"

TABLE 2: Ethnographic Methodology and Data Presentation: *American Journal of Sociology*—1895-1910

<i>Form</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Travel diary	4	7.84
Social survey	15	29.41
Life history	1	1.96
Nonfictional account	26	50.98
Participant observation	5	9.80
Total	51	100

DATA PRESENTATION

Recognizing the brief and ambiguous methodological accounts that typify ethnography, we find that data collection and presentation take five general forms in the period: diaries from exotic travel, social surveys, life histories, nonfictional accounts, and participant observation (see Table 2).

Perhaps the form of ethnography most foreign to the modern reader is the travel diary. Gone are the days in which a researcher could publish such observations in the discipline's premier journal. Travel diaries took the form of informal observations, quotes, and anecdotes, as suggested in this account of travel through Kentucky:

It was from a desire to see something of this old frontier life that I recently undertook a very short journey in the mountains of eastern Kentucky. In this descriptive article I shall simply jot down certain impressions and indicate a few lines of investigation which this interesting social survival suggests. It is hardly necessary to say that I have attempted no sweeping generalizations on the basis of a few days ride through parts of three counties. (Vincent 1898, 2)

Kentucky was an exotic ground for travel diaries. In addition to the article cited above, later articles describe the Kentucky mountainside while attempting to explain the origins of Kentucky's infamous feuds. Included in these articles is an anecdotal retelling of the Hatfield/McCoy dispute (MacClintock 1901a, 1901b). In total, four of the fifty-one *AJS* articles took the form of travel diaries.

While travel diaries were rural in nature, social surveys were conducted primarily in urban areas and attempt to describe a defined community. These fifteen social surveys use qualitative observations and interviews to generate descriptive data on the community, creating statistics, direct quotations, narratives, and anecdotes. As such, they fit the broad definition of ethnography we used when selecting the articles. Examples include research on Chicago saloons (Melendy 1900), sweatshops (Auten 1901), Chicago employment agencies (Abbott 1908), New York tenement housing (Cope 1901), and housing, work, and health conditions in Chicago stockyards (Bushnell 1901a, 1901b, 1902; Breckinridge and Abbott 1910b).

Typically, social survey researchers used ethnographic tools to collect statistical data, presented either in tables or in the text. For example, a study of the "cultural agencies" (i.e., churches) open to Chicago immigrants states,

In nationality the churches are composed as follows: Two Baptist churches with a membership entirely Swedish, and one with fifty Germans, the other members being chiefly Americans. The Congregational churches are cosmopolitan. The stronger church has twelve nationalities represented in its Sunday school. Of the Catholic churches two are wholly Polish, two wholly German, one Irish and mixed, one Hungarian, and one mixed. The Evangelical churches record themselves as one of Germans totally, one English-speaking, and one mixed. (Gillette 1901b, 189)

A study describing a section of Chicago housing provides another example of statistical data compiled through qualitative observations:

Although the rooms are large and ceilings high, there is very often an insufficient amount of air. In 15 per cent of the sixty-six sleeping rooms visited, there was a violation of the legal requirement of 400 cubic feet of air for adults, and 200 for children. The rooms, however, were usually light. In only 5 per cent of all the rooms visited was the window space not equal to 10 per cent of the floor space. (Breckinridge and Abbott 1910a, 296)

In addition to statistics, the social surveys also present general surface descriptions of the community studied. A study of the Chicago stockyards paints such a picture:

When we try to account for these conditions and turn to some of the physical causes of the disparity, we do not have to look very far. In the first place, the Stock Yard district is very badly paved, where there is any paving. Most of it is of wood, in a very bad state of repair, so that riding over the district on a bicycle is a difficult and uncomfortable process. This wood paving, of course, absorbs considerable impurity from the drainage and from the air. In the Hyde Park district, on the other hand, except on Wabash avenue and streets immediately adjacent, the paving is largely of macadam or asphalt (Some of the older east and west streets, such as parts of Fifty-first and Forty-seventh, are wood). But in this district almost all of the streets are paved, while in the Stock Yard district many of the streets are for miles in rainy weather scarcely better than mud holes. (Bushnell 1901b, 300)

These surface descriptions often are accompanied by photographs, a contentious medium for contemporary ethnography due to ethical complications and norms of confidentiality. It is ironic that with rare and dramatic exceptions (Becker 1978), this form of description has vanished from the discipline's leading journals.

Where the authors of social surveys used ethnography to create surface descriptions of community life, the authors of life histories used ethnography to provide detailed descriptions of individual lifeworlds. One researcher recorded the life histories of a poor rural family:

The present article is concerned with a single family group, that of a pauper family which has fastened itself upon a small town. The family, or tribe, though much smaller, resembles somewhat that of "The Jukes" or the "Tribe of Ishmael." It may be an extreme case, but is similar to a group of families found in nearly every town and village. It is characterized and classified as the family of decided pauper characteristics and weak criminal tendencies. It gives the same lessons in social degeneration which are enforced by the larger families alluded to above. It has been thought best to follow in detail the life and character of this group, rather than to attempt wider generalization of the subject of rural pauperism and criminality. (Blackmar 1897, 489)

In contrast to the generalizations common to social surveys, this researcher used life histories to gain more specific understandings of rural crime and poverty. Although only one of the fifty-one *AJS* articles could be described as a life history, books using life histories as a form

of ethnography were also common at the time (Herzfeld 1905; Holt 1906; Hapgood 1909).

Situated between the generalities of the social surveys and the specifics of the life histories are what we label “nonfictional accounts.” Where social surveys make communities the unit of analysis and life histories put the individual as the unit of analysis, nonfictional accounts focus on a specific context or setting and use formal and informal interviews, observations, quotes, and anecdotes to describe that place. These nonfictional descriptions range from subjective storytelling to more detached reports, akin to what one might find in a modern newspaper. While the presentation of data in the nonfictional accounts reflects our definition of ethnography, of all the fifty-one articles examined, the nonfictional accounts were the most ambiguous methodologically. Of the fifty-one *AJS* articles, twenty-six took the form of nonfictional accounts, making it the most frequent form of ethnography at the turn of the century.

These nonfictional accounts can be situated along a continuum with subjective storytelling at one end and detached reports at the other. The subjective storytelling incorporates the researcher’s perspective:

A year later this boy was seized with typhoid fever, and languished for months in the county hospital. I visited him there and satisfied myself that he had good care. In his delirium he always hailed me with a mysterious, beckoning gesture; and, as I bent over him, invariably confided, in a hoarse whisper, while his hot hands clutched mine: “dey took away me pants, Miss Law, and dere’s fifteen hunder dollars in de pocket. Won’t you please und take care of it for me? Dey want to steal me money off me. It’s dat nurse dat done it.” Night and day he raved of money, of bargains, and ‘swipes,’ over which he exulted slyly; or he recounted the things he had bought for ‘dey kids;’ or berated them with vivid expletives, for wearing out their shoes so fast. “But I’ll git yer some more, sis!” he said once, adding as he turned wearily on his pillow; “You can’t wear such thick ones like me, ‘cause you’re a girl.” Some one injudiciously informed him, while he was convalescing, that he had accused the nurse of stealing from him, and he was deeply mortified and very penitent. “I feel so ‘shamed to think I said dat to de nurse, und she was so good to me, too; but I told her I was sorry.” (Law 1903, 841)

This example is from a study of a boys club, and the emphasis is on telling a story from the researcher’s point of view.

Moving toward the other end of the continuum, nonfictional reports create a greater feeling of detachment than the subjective narratives, providing general descriptions based largely on formal and informal observations, such as this observation from the New York police courts:

Magistrate No. 1 is an excellent lawyer, but cranky and severe; he lost his temper frequently; complained of the drafts from the windows, while the police geyed him almost openly. A wife appeared before him complaining of abandonment; the husband, on being called to give his testimony, vituperated the wife; the wife jawed back, and the magistrate scolded them both, much to the entertainment of the onlookers. He seemed to have a special grudge against foolish, incoherent, and tearful women, though his manner was certainly calculated to frighten out of the prisoner or witness whatever sense she had. (Smith 1899, 150)

Although this quotation reveals the subjectivity of the researcher, the account is more descriptive than the previous narrative, providing a greater degree of detachment. While this example of nonfictional reports is infused with the opinions of the researchers, the data are presented in the form of observable “facts,” providing a sense of detachment.

The greatest level of researcher detachment occurred when the researcher left the description to the subjects themselves. This approach is exemplified in a study of a businessmen selling clothing with a union label:

One merchant in the working district said: “I began with a small store in a factory suburb. Union men came in and asked for union label goods. Their unions were strong, and so I ordered a big stock of union-label overalls and jumpers, which I sold on a narrow margin at fifty cents each, one dollar a suit. I sold them well ‘till a store opened near by and put in a line of non-union overalls and jumpers at seventy-five cents a suit. That soon killed my trade, and I had to close out my union line at a loss. That cured me.” (Boyle 1903, 165-64)

This researcher avoids the appearance of subjectivity by dispassionately reporting the accounts of his subjects. In sum, the nonfictional accounts are characterized by methodological ambiguity and are situated along a continuum with subjective storytelling at one end and detached reports at the other.

Finally, research fitting our broad definition of ethnography also took the form of participant observation (five articles). The goal of these articles is to obtain a level of *verstehen*, creating an understanding of the lives of the subjects. Take as an example a participant observation of department store clerks:

It seemed evident that valuable information could be obtained if someone were willing to endure the hardships of the saleswoman's life, and from personal experience be able to pass judgment upon observed conditions. The urgency of the need, coupled with an enthusiastic interest in the work for which the Consumers' League stands, led me to join the ranks of the retail clerks for two weeks during the rush of the holiday trade. It may be urged that just judgements could not be formed at a time when conditions must be abnormal. It is true that conditions were abnormal, but the importance of knowing to what extent cannot be overestimated. The consumer should know how far his Christmas shopping works hardships for the clerks. Moreover, he should concern himself with the question as to whether the abnormal conditions he has helped to create are in part mitigated by adequate payment for the work extracted. (MacLean 1899, 721-22)

Researchers using participant observation immersed themselves in the lives of their subjects by working, living, and eating in the same communities, all in an attempt to gain a firsthand account of their experiences. The data obtained are rich with detail. However, the emphasis is on personal experience, as exemplified in this study of waitresses:

All day long the back-ground of living was an ache. This showed itself in an indisposition to do anything more than was absolutely necessary, to sit down at every opportunity, to stand laxly in the dining-room, instead of being brisk and alert—in short to act like the typical shiftless servant. We soon were that. We were not on the lookout for work. On the contrary, we came to have a vague feeling of resentment against our mistress, and enjoyed taking advantage of her. The ones who did the chamber work filched black and white headed pins, hairpins, and other small articles, and kept us extravagantly supplied with towels. We ordered deserts for guests who were not there, and ate them ourselves. We supplied ourselves with plenty of ice-water for our rooms. We took every opportunity of proving to our own satisfaction that though our mistress could work us for thirteen hours a day, we could even the score in the end. Still, this puts the matter too definitely, for only the teachers so framed the

case to themselves, and that humorously. Rather, the truth was that with this constant ache in the background, our minds became dulled, the inhibitions which usually prevent such belittling tricks were removed, and the ethical tone was lowered. (Tanner 1907, 50)

Through the experiences of the researcher, the reader can *feel* the aches, pain, exhaustion, and joy of the workers, creating a level of empathy unattainable through travel diaries, social surveys, life histories, or even the nonfictional accounts.²

WHO IS TO BLAME, WHAT IS TO BE DONE: EVALUATION AND BETTERMENT

Ethnographic researchers at the turn of the century used travel diaries, social surveys, life histories, nonfictional accounts, and participant observation to explore overlapping themes involving immigrants, housing, working, health, women, children, and morality. However, these researchers were not content with ethnographic description. Their goal was not simply to raise “awareness.” Instead, they also provided pathways for change. At a time when the discipline was vague, interdisciplinary, and heterogeneous, the commonality that made these researchers “sociologists” was the concern for practical social reform (Abbott 1999, 85).³ These researchers had the admirable humanistic goal of raising the quality of society and the lives of those living in society, and normally, ethnographic descriptions were accompanied by prescriptions for betterment (forty-one articles). Prior to making suggestions for change, ethnographic researchers needed to identify the causes of the social ills they sought to remedy. They needed to place blame, and they located it in two places: populations and social conditions.

Despite a desire to uplift the toiling masses, researchers were quick to cite the *characteristics* of the masses as the problem to be cured, a contradictory mixture of compassion and disdain. Take the statement of a researcher studying sweatshops:

Perhaps the causes most generally recognized and understood are those due to the character and situation of the workers. First among these is the absence of American ideas and sympathies. It was in New York, where the tide of immigrants enters, that the system first gained a foothold and reached its most acute form. The foreigners, as has already been seen in

the case of the Russians, not having money enough to take them farther into the Land of Promise, settle down in New York. Their standard of living is so low that they are willing to work for wages which an American would not accept. (Auten 1901, 630)

For this researcher, a primary cause of the problem of the sweatshop resulted from the laborers themselves with their lack of American ideals and low standards of living. The researcher downplays economic exploitation as the modern reader cries “Victim blaming!” This tendency is further exemplified in this discussion of immigrant alcohol consumption:

The people who, either through hereditary advantages or force of character, have advanced in civilization enough to find their places among those who rule the world and direct its enterprises, will not tolerate the saloons near their homes; while those more retarded, who are ruled, want the saloons and give up to them, without any adequate return, but frequently with only added moral and physical depravity, their hard-earned wages. (Bushnell 1901b, 305)

This researcher lays problems of alcohol consumption upon people from other cultures who are physically and morally “inferior,” not only basing the problem in individual groups but also evaluating that group according to an ethnocentric standard. Ethnocentric tendencies are also evident in this excerpt concerning immigrant culture:

In the coal fields there are, roughly speaking, a million immigrants—men, women and children—most of them of Slavic races, who have brought over to this country the manners and customs of a lower civilization than ours and who are living under conditions which tend to perpetuate their civilization instead of raising them to the level of ours. (MacLean 1908, 347)

This researcher locates immigrant culture on a scale beneath her own “higher” civilization, citing the “lower” culture as an impediment to progress. Cultural relativism is absent.

However, not all ethnography placed social problems on the heads of culturally inferior individuals. Many researchers related social ills to the combination of individual and social conditions, while still others placed blame squarely on social conditions. For example, one researcher

connects moral deviance to housing conditions, not individual or cultural failings:

What can we expect in the way of character and morals from persons brought up under such conditions as these? What kind of citizens will the children make when they have been reared under the influences of such an environment? What kind of fathers and mothers will they make to the children of the next generation? What kind of a purification of politics can we hope for in the future from men who have been brought up in an atmosphere of crime and drunkenness, who have been taught to cheat and believe in the righteousness of the principle that 'to the victors belong the spoils'? It is this thought of the hopelessness of ever trying to educate to a high standard of morality the boys and girls who are brought up in the atmosphere of the average New York tenement of today, that impresses upon us the importance of this housing problem. (Cope 1901, 335)

Another author blames the employment problems of immigrants on education, poverty, and corrupt employment agencies:

Ignorant of our language, the country, and the American standard of wages, and compelled by his poverty to accept the first possible work, the immigrant is especially defenseless when he offers himself in the labor market. At no time does he need disinterested guidance and help more than in securing his first work, and yet he is dependent in most cases upon the private employment agent and he becomes, because of his ignorance and necessities, a great temptation to an honest agent and a great opportunity to an unscrupulous one. (Abbott 1908, 289)

Social conditions are responsible for the problems immigrants have finding stable work, not individual and cultural deficiencies.

For the modern reader, the confidence with which these ethnographers make their claims is impressive, and this confidence overshadows their concern about validity and ethnocentrism. Today, many of us find their causal presumptions and ethnocentric statements irresponsible, if not offensive. Over the course of a century, we have progressed, largely by deflating the certainty of early researchers to ask problematic questions about cultural relativism and validity. But the confidence of these ethnographers was combined with a sincere compassion to improve the quality of life, and this combination provided the

normative foundation on which their vision of a better society could be built.

This foundation enabled ethnographers to make prescriptions for betterment. These prescriptions range from the simple to the complex. Simple prescriptions take the form of “ideal types” serving as models to be multiplied. For example, one study of a public bathing facility praises the facility’s success and presents it as a model to be copied in other cities: “Taken all together, the Brookline institution, as a combined recreative and cleanliness bath, is defending the sound sentiment engraved over its door: ‘The health of people is the beginning of happiness’” (Stewart 1900, 474). Similarly, a study of a house dedicated to refining the cultural tastes of immigrants lauds the house and suggests that such houses should be used in conjunction with settlement houses, stating that such culture houses are a “practical venture along humanitarian lines. It is in no way a rival of ‘settlement’ work, but proceeds along with it, offering the more intimate home influence rather than the wider institutional relations” (Chandler 1903, 455).

Middle-range prescriptions go beyond simple suggestions and models, instead urging a set of policies. For example, after experiencing the toils of waitressing, one author asks,

What is the solution? It would be premature for me to attempt an answer on the basis of a single experience. I have been giving only a snap shot at reality. But I would quote Jane Addams. She believes that the most essential thing is stated hours for work, and my past aches and pains urge me to add that the hours stated should be eight in number. What reasons can be given for making the average servant’s day from one-third to one-half longer than anyone’s else, especially when she works seven days a week! What will become of dinner? I don’t know—nor would I care if I were the waitress or cook! (Tanner 1907, 55)

A researcher studying immigrant housing suggests the creation of a government agency to regulate housing:

It may be said, however, that in the machinery of the city Health Department and in the intelligent use of inspectional visits, combined with instructions upon sanitary matters, there could be formed an agency little utilized as yet. Inspectors who would interest the men in the hygienic side of the question would find a welcome response among many of the groups; for frequently questions were asked by the men as to the number

who could sleep in a certain room without danger to their health. A method of ticketing the rooms or placarding on the doors has been tried very successfully in many cities and might be beneficial with many of the groups if the placards were printed in the language of the groups and if the co-operation of the men was secured. (Hunt 1910, 170)

While middle-range prescriptions consist of one-step policies, the complex prescriptions contain multiple steps. Take as example the proposed remedy to end the exploitation of immigrant workers by corrupt employment agencies:

The final remedy suggested for this situation is the reorganization and strengthening of the State Free Employment Agencies, but in the meantime certain results can be obtained by some modification of the present employment agency law. Those suggested are that the fees charged should be public and uniform, that there should be no division of fees with contractors, that statements containing detailed information about the work and the employer should be furnished to the applicant in a language he can understand, that damages should be allowed when work is not secured or not as represented, and that fees should be promptly refunded when no work is secured or when it lasts only a short time. These reforms are asked not only as a protection to the immigrant, but to the community in which he lives. (Abbott, 1908, 305)

FROM 1900 TO 2000: THE UNEASY RELATION BETWEEN CONFIDENCE AND TRUTH

Presenting a set of studies from “long ago” satisfies a nagging curiosity, but description alone is insufficient. Instead, we need to ask how these studies comment on contemporary ethnography. As such, we draw from our insight gathered by reading these earlier texts in light of our knowledge of current writings. All textual analyses, of course, are limited; yet, the resultant assertions, albeit imperfect, provide the basis for the contrast of past and present.

In an intellectual era free from uncertainties produced by a questioning of truth claims, ethnographers at the turn of the century assumed that the social facts they observed had an objective existence. Today, it is common for sociologists to scoff at these romantic notions while highlighting the ethnocentric assumptions peppering old studies. This

is a valid criticism, but lost in the shuffle is the footing provided by a belief in the truth. An audacious confidence in their interpretations, and the assumptions that their conclusions mattered, empowered early ethnographers. The resulting evaluations, coupled with a desire to change the world for the better, allowed these researchers to make prescriptions for progress. In doing so, ethnographers from a century past combined three traits that we may have lost: clarity, authority, and confidence.

Clarity. It was widely assumed that with sufficient effort, one could understand what a community or social scene was really like. The world was a transparent environment, capable of being known by one who approached it with care. The currently well-accepted assumption that one's "standpoint" affected the outcomes of one's investigation was absent in these studies. Instead, one could "know" what it was like to work in a sweatshop or live in a tenement house. Furthermore, one could communicate these experiences in clear and compelling language to readers who had experienced neither.

Authority. As readers of this journal can attest, contemporary ethnographers often care deeply about their informants and press for social change, not unlike colleagues from a century back. Yet, reading the earlier texts reveals a different perspective, one involving authority. While contemporary ethnography has not turned away from people in need, we no longer see ourselves as providing authoritative prescriptions for personal change. We have come to mistrust our positions and, as is evident in anthropological writings, may even question our right as elites to enter nonelite, minority, impoverished communities as expert knowers. The writings of ethnographers of 1900 were filled with a deep and abiding compassion for people, but this compassion was grounded in an authority that assumed that elite values were desirable and that they could and should be adopted. Moreover, that these writers shared the perspectives of many policy makers surely gave them power to affect policy: a power rarely evident today. Make no mistake; elitism has its costs, and value-laden analyses typically underestimate the affect of social structure on life chances. However, elite values often are widely shared even within disadvantaged communities (Horowitz 1983), and the authority of ethnographers of 1900 communicates useful "moral" strategies for reaching desired ends. Conservative however these strategies may (now) be, people could, and did, learn from them.

Confidence. These writers believed not only in their own skills and knowledge but also in the agency of their informants. They were fully confident that changes were possible. While activists today refer to “participatory inquiry” (Reason 1994), in which researcher and informant collaborate, a century ago, researchers believed that informants could learn mighty lessons from ethnographers. For better or worse, we have lost this confidence, and as a result, we often discount the possibility of individual change. Perhaps these researchers were naive and talked down to informants. Even so, they “knew” that individuals could affect their own lives. While they often neglected significant structural forces and engaged in what we now call “victim blaming,” they did not cast their subjects as victims. Despite their ethnocentrism, they believed in human agency and viewed their subjects as actors capable of significantly improving their social position. For good or ill, contemporary ethnography has lost this confidence.

We *do not* believe that ethnographers today should dismiss multiple perspectives for the sake of overconfident elite-based normative judgments. Reading these early works, we grimace at the questionable and offensive stereotypes presented as analysis. These early ethnographers failed to interrogate the assumptions on which their work was built, and the establishment of a discipline suspicious of normative evaluations enables us to see different sides to a story, sides to which these early ethnographers were blind. The inclusion of multiple perspectives forces us to question the hidden assumptions that often underlie our research, making for a richer understanding of social settings and interactions, and higher standards for ethnographic excellence. In this sense, we have undoubtedly made progress.

But what has been lost? Is it possible to interrogate normative assumptions without reducing them to uncertain moral preferences, disabling ethnographers as trained professionals from commenting on progress and proper normative standards? This is a difficult question that cannot be answered by this article. But looking back forces us to wonder about our role, and as we enter a new millennium, the issue is of central importance to ethnography. Our discipline has properly deflated our vainglorious assumptions, but what have been the costs of such deflation? An irony surely exists in the decline of clarity, authority, and confidence, because in contrast to the vague, poorly articulated methodology of the past, the recognizable improvements in ethnographic methodology should have increased clarity, authority, and confidence.

We should come to recognize that we increasingly “know” a lot, especially compared to a century ago, and most important, we should recognize that we have the right to feel so. We operate in a highly critical intellectual community, one that is often especially suspicious of our chosen methodology. Although we should always proceed with caution (indeed, we are forced to), we should also proceed with confidence in our abilities and the authority to make our voices heard.

NOTES

1. In terms of race, it is notable that the *American Journal of Sociology* (*AJS*) did not publish any of the ethnographic work of W.E.B. DuBois during this period, although his works *The Negro Artisan* (1902) and *The Souls of Black Folk* (1905) were reviewed by the journal (Work 1903 and Steward 1903, respectively).

2. Interestingly, of the six participant observation articles, three were authored by Annie Marion MacLean. MacLean also wrote a book based on participant observations of wage-earning women (1910). Much of MacLean’s research was sponsored by the National Board of the Young Women’s Christian Association, and she also had connections with the Consumer’s League. But MacLean was also an academic. She had an affiliation with the University of Chicago, was a professor of sociology at Adelphi College, and considered Chicago’s Charles Richmond Henderson her mentor. Her articles exhibit a high degree of methodological awareness, as she discussed the implications of her methodology in greater detail than the authors of other articles published in *AJS*. Based on her use of participant observation and her methodological awareness, it could be argued that she is the “mother of modern ethnography.”

3. At this time, the major social reformers were the clergy, and as a result of the “reform thrust,” the University of Chicago Press originally conceived of *AJS* as a religious journal (Abbott 1999, 97).

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