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Iddo Tavory and Stefan Timmermans

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## Two cases of ethnography

### Grounded theory and the extended case method

■ Iddo Tavory

*University of California, Los Angeles, USA*

■ Stefan Timmermans

*University of California, Los Angeles, USA*

**ABSTRACT** ■ Sociological ethnography largely draws upon two epistemologically competing perspectives – grounded theory and the extended case method – with a different conceptualization of sociological case-construction and theory. We argue that the sociological case in the extended case method is foremost a form of theoretical framing: relying on theoretical narratives to delineate the boundaries of an empirical field. Grounded theory follows the tenets of Chicago School ethnography where the sociological case is elicited from ethno-narratives of actors in the field: the institutionally and interactionally delimited ways members in the field ‘case’ their action. This difference in sociological casing, in turn, is reflected in the ways theory is used. Where the extended case method uses theoretical narratives as a denouement of the case, grounded theory employs theory to construct a grammar of social life.

**KEY WORDS** ■ ethnography, methodology, grounded theory, extended case method, epistemology, theory construction, narrative

In contrast to anthropologists’ preoccupation with the epistemological foundations of ethnography, the practitioners of fieldwork methods within sociology have been formulating methodological guidelines to practice

participant observation – developing various conceptualizations of sociological fieldwork in the process. In recent years, some of these meta-ethnographic ruminations have fallen within two distinct camps – ‘Grounded Theory’ and the ‘Extended Case Method’. In various publications, Michael Burawoy used grounded theory to contrast the distinctive character of the extended case method (ECM) (Burawoy, 1991: ch. 2 and 13; 1998). Authors in the grounded theory (GT) tradition have dismissed Burawoy’s criticism as a simplistic reification of Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss’s original writings (Charmaz, 2006; Clarke, 2005) but have not closely engaged with Burawoy’s criticism. Although to an outside observer these discussions may recall the war between the countries of Liliput and Blefuscu in *Gulliver’s Travels* over the correct way to break a boiled egg, we argue that the methodological and theoretical exchange between GT and ECM demonstrates two epistemologically different ways of linking empirical fieldwork data and theory in sociology.

From the onset, both GT and ECM promised a different kind of sociological approach as an alternative to functionalist positivism; both claimed to provide a more comprehensive theoretical picture of social life, and both privileged ethnography as method of choice, although following vastly different routes to accomplish these goals. Our purpose here is to engage GT and ECM, not to prove the superiority of one over the other, but in order to examine the different sociological epistemics implied and produced by using these approaches to ethnography. We forego a facile criticism of the rhetoric of ‘substantive versus formal theory’, ‘subjectivist versus objectivist’, ‘empowerment’ and ‘intervention’ to investigate the sociological pay-off of GT and ECM as ethnographic practices. Rather than evaluating GT with the philosophical criteria promoted by ECM or gauging how ECM measures up to grounded theory’s standards of theory construction, we start by exploring how ECM and GT answer the question of ‘the case’, as in the generic question of ‘what is the study a case of?’.

We are thus interested in ‘casing’, the process of determining what kind of sociological case one has or establishing the sociological properties and boundaries of the situation at hand. This implies an evaluation of the empirical phenomena that come into sociological purview, the analysis of this empirical material, and the breadth of theoretical knowledge used or generated within the study. We argue that the conceptualization of the case in ECM reflects an a-priori theoretical framing. In that sense, ECM produces a theoretically driven ethnography, or what can be called ‘theorygraphy’, in which research activities aim to modify, exemplify, and develop existing theories. In the other camp, and against the epistemology forwarded by theorists of narrativity such as Hayden Whyte, the GT case is constructed from within what we term the ethno-narratives of actors in the field. Fieldworkers in the GT tradition take their theoretical clues from the

‘ethnos’, the lived experience of a people as bounded by various structures and processes. ECM and GT thus form two distinct positions on a continuum of the relationship between data and theory in fieldwork. This difference in case construction between ECM and GT spills over into the question of the kind of theories used in these approaches. Where the conceptualization of cases in ECM demands macro-theories of the social that provide social relations with purpose and interests, the theories used in GT – notably symbolic interactionism and phenomenology – require a more general set of sensitizing guidelines of people acting together.

### **Grounded theory and extended case method: divided against functionalism**

Grounded theory originally emerged out of Glaser and Strauss’ ethnographic study of death and dying in the San Francisco Bay area (Glaser and Strauss, 1965). The study’s methodological principles were articulated in the polemical *Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). GT aimed to justify qualitative research against a triple marginalization: theoretical marginalization by Parsonian and Mertonian functionalist theorists spinning grand theories and looking for straightforward empirical verification; methodological marginalization, where qualitative research was delegated to producing hypotheses to be tested by statistical quantitative methodologies; and finally a marginalization from within the field of qualitative analysis, referring to ethnographic researchers who conduct unsystematic, a-theoretical research. Thus, Glaser and Strauss proposed that sociologists build theory ‘from the ground up’ through systematic conceptualization and constant comparisons with similar and distinct research areas. They advanced a set of methodological principles such as theoretical sampling, conceptual saturation, open coding, and memo writing to guarantee that theoretical claims were supported with data. Theories grounded in substantive areas could then lead, so they claimed, to formal theories of social life.

Grounded theory reflected two competing traditions of American mid-century sociology. Influenced by Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton at Columbia, Glaser emphasized the need for rigorously constructed middle-range theories based on explicit, transparent coding procedures. As a graduate of the University of Chicago’s sociology department working with Herbert Blumer and Robert Park, Strauss stressed the need to capture fundamental social psychological processes as they unfold (Abbott, 1997). Over time, Glaser published methodology books that stayed close to the original empiricist, inductive codification of emergent data (Glaser, 1978) while Strauss, in collaboration with Corbin, accentuated the need for

constantly verifying and modifying concepts – regardless of their origin (Strauss, 1987; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Contemporary researchers further refined and repackaged GT: Adele Clarke infused GT with postmodern thinking (Clarke, 2005) while Kathy Charmaz recently emphasized the interpretive legacy of grounded theorizing (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007; Charmaz, 2006). After becoming a generic qualitative research methodology, grounded theory further diversified in more constructivist and post-positivist versions (Clarke, 2009; Glaser, 2007).

In this article, we situate GT in the pragmatist tradition of the Chicago School of sociology with an analytical focus on social processes across time and space, action-oriented analysis, and the open-ended meaning of interaction. Thus, GT and the closely related tradition of analytical induction offer a set of methodological steps to retrieve lived social life.<sup>1</sup> Analytical induction emphasizes the ongoing double-fitting of emerging theory and empirical phenomena and the ability of the researcher to ‘retrodict’, that is, to delineate the necessary and sufficient conditions that made a phenomenon happen (Katz, 2001); GT encourages an in-depth familiarity and granular analysis of micro data to produce empirically backed-up, generalizable theoretical claims.

Whereas GT was developed from within American sociology, the ECM emerged out of the British school of anthropology. In an initial attempt to improve upon prevailing structural-functionalism theories but in reality weakening this paradigm from within, the Manchester School of anthropology introduced the ECM (Gluckman, 2006 [1961]) and ‘situational analysis’ (van Velsen, 1967). In contrast to the normative societal order predicted by structural-functional theorists such as Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown, anthropological fieldworkers of the Manchester School began to document and theorize repeated instances of conflicts at their Zambian field sites.

Where many anthropologists were blinded by structural functionalism and ignored anomalous ‘disruptive processes’, Gluckman and van Velsen suggested a different methodological approach to incorporate the study of norm-conflicts in what was one of the first moves towards what was later dubbed a ‘post-structuralist’ anthropology. Gluckman proposed to study actors empirically through particular incidents and then link the incidents as constitutive of the processes studied. Social researchers should thus document a series of disputes, ruptures, and norm conflicts and record as much of the total context as possible. Theories could then be built from stringing together similar case reports of conflicts over time. Thus, in an exemplary study, Mitchell documented witchcraft accusations in a Yao village over an eight-year period (Mitchell, 1956). Rather than taking these accusations as isolated instances of sorcery, Mitchell analyzed the charges as a manifestation of fragile village politics, leading over time to the split

of the village, demonstrating that periods of bitter quarrelling are inherent in the life cycle of these villages (see also Turner, 1957).

This increased focus on duration and complexity entailed a redefinition of what was understood as a 'case' and a shift from a theoretical illustration or an empirical exemplar from which one can extract a general rule to 'a stage in an on-going process of social relations between specific persons and groups in a social system and culture' (Gluckman, 2006 [1961]: 16). According to Mitchell, methodologically, a case gained relevance only in view of some identified general theoretical principle. This focus on theoretical framing was an answer to the conundrum of a case's generalizability: Mitchell noted that there was no statistical way to establish that a case was typical or representative, and theoretical saliency should therefore be used to justify the sampling choice (Mitchell, 2006 [1956]). Rather than merely including formal structural summaries of fieldwork data, van Velsen further argued for providing concrete empirical instances of actual behavior to allow the emergence of 'exceptional' and 'accidental' instances in terms of the general theory used (van Velsen, 1967).

In sociology, the major interlocutor (but see Glaeser, 2005) of the ECM has been Michael Burawoy, whose project in the late 1960s in former Northern Rhodesia brought him in contact with members of the Manchester School working in the same region (Burawoy, 1991, 1998, 2000). He has elaborated upon the anthropologist's ECM to expand its temporal and spatial scope and explicitly privilege social structure. Where Gluckman viewed societal conflicts as expressions of societies, Burawoy saw them as results of pervasive macro-forces. ECM, according to Burawoy:

applies reflexive science to ethnography in order to extract the general from the unique, to move from the 'micro' to the 'macro,' and to connect the present to the past in anticipation of the future, all by building on preexisting theory. (Burawoy, 1998: 5)

Burawoy has argued for a 'reflexive' science where social researchers move from localized interventions, to a wider analysis and intervention in regimes of power, broader structuring external social forces, and, finally, to reconstructions of existing theory. The chosen social situation, much like in the original Manchester School, is viewed as an anomaly requiring a modification of existing theory.

Burawoy thus supersedes the anthropological extension towards temporal processes to include underlying structural conditions in light of one's theory: 'We begin with our favorite theory but seek not confirmations but refutations that inspire us to deepen that theory. Instead of discovering grounded theory we elaborate existing theory' (Burawoy, 1998: 16). Whereas Burawoy claims that GT suppresses the macro-context of time and place in order to construct generalizable theories by looking for similarities

in disparate cases, the ECM seeks differences among similar cases to further explain existing theories of domination and resistance.

### **The cases of extended case method and grounded theory**

The different institutional biographies and intellectual interlocutors of GT and ECM also reflect fundamental differences in the basic assumptions wielded by practitioners (see Burawoy, 1998; Timmermans and Tavory, 2007). Among those, one of the most pervasive differences between the ECM and GT can be understood through the concept of the 'case' – what is the ethnography a case of? And how do researchers figure out what sociological case they have? Such queries are embedded in a deeper and more general question of the case as an analytic unit. But although there is little agreement about the way cases are arrived at (Becker and Ragin, 1992), there is some consensus that a case refers to the way in which the empirical observation or set of observations in a study are not only 'ideographically' analyzed as a unique occurrence but as an instance situated within a series – a sociological topic of interest, a unit in an empirical or theoretical whole.

Trying to unravel this conception of the case, Ragin (1992) distinguished two dimensions – specific versus general, and as empirical units versus theoretical constructs. Thus, the uses of the 'case' can be situated within a fourfold table, as either something that is found in the world (specific-empirical); is constructed according to specific theoretical needs (specific-theoretical); an object that must be delimited and charted during the research process (general-empirical); or one that exists as a pre-established convention (general-theoretical). Common to all these perspectives is the realization that part of the challenge facing sociology is 'casing' – the act of constructing the case as an analytic unit. One of the key differences between GT and ECM is whether a researcher explicitly uses a theory as the starting point to the boundaries of the case or treats the case as something produced in the social world.

Cases in ethnography typically consist of complex narratives. Abbott (1992) distinguishes between research based on a static 'variable' and a socially constructed and temporally complex 'narrative case'. Thus, in variable analysis, the response to a pre-conceived question is treated similarly across respondents. The 'case' in this type of study can be seen as a uni-dimensional snapshot of the respondents' lives. While a stratification study may rely on agreed upon measures of socio-economic status, historical and ethnographic studies, according to Abbott, produce much more textured narrative cases. Where the case in a quantitative study is designed to be a limited slice of life, the ethnographic narrative is more akin to the 'case' of the historian or the novelist. Such a case envelops a storyline with

multiple protagonists, complicated and convoluted sequences of action, and a plot that may sometimes span several years of participant observation. As a writing genre (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Geertz, 1988) ethnography presents the reader with a storyline: a narrative of social life circumscribed by virtue of publication in a monograph or research article. While most ethnographies generate narratives, ECM and GT differ on the kinds and origins of the narratives they produce.

Combining Ragin's classification of cases with the specific narratives in GT and ECM ethnography opens up a fruitful pathway to theorize the differences between those two kinds of ethnography. Narratives can be defined loosely as 'constellations of relationships (connected parts) embedded in time and place' (Somers, 1992: 601). However, the form of these constellations and their relation to the empirical world is far from simple. In a reflection on the nature of narrativity, Hayden White (1987) has argued that in contrast to other forms of writing (such as the chronology) the narrative adds a sense of closure to the structure of the world. While in the 'actual' social world event follows event in an ever-continuing succession, the narrative artificially binds time and space. Thus, narrativity presents both the writer and the reader – according to White – with an ultimately fictitious sense of closure. Instead of perceiving the narrative structure as constituent of the world itself, White ties these characteristics of narrativity to a psychological need for finality and orderliness – the universality of the narrative is a product of the psycho-social make-up of people. The narrative is in essence a fable – seductive exactly because it is alien to the very structure of the historical world, supplying it with the false coherence and solidity that we crave.

White's analysis of narrativity is mainly set against grand historical narratives, such as those of the industrial revolution. Here, he claims, the closure of the narrative is at its most arbitrary, completely dependent on the researcher. Nothing in the structure of the eventuality lends itself neatly as neither point of origin nor point of completion – ending the industrial revolution in 1820, in 1825 or in 1840 is a theoretical decision, not something made necessary by history itself. White constructs a general theorization of narrativity, implying that just as these grand-narratives of history are ultimately arbitrary, so are the micro-narratives of everyday life. Thus, the macro and the micro are united in their researcher-constructed narrative structure.

In ethnography, White's approach is translated into the claim that the ethnographer forces upon the chronicle of life a closure alien to the open-ended character of social life. Thus, ECM proponents chastise GT and AI for presenting a naïve, artificial closure 'grounded' in social life and disregarding the researcher's role in theoretically circumscribing the events. If the ordering of the world is always theoretical, any attempt to claim that



the organization of the narrative comes from the field alone is nothing but 'an epistemological fairy-tale' (Wacquant, 2002: 1481). If one realizes that the narrative is always already theoretical, the only intellectually honest course of action is moving from the theory to the field and back to theory. Being immersed in one's favorite theory with a sense of clear theoretical case boundaries, the ethnographer swoops down on an empirical site that seems to behave in a theoretically anomalous manner. In Ragin's terms, casing in ECM consists of elaborating general theoretical constructs with specific empirical instances.

In term of the relationship between narrative and case, ECM thus treats the ethnographic field as a way to re-think the boundaries of the case already implicit in the narrativity of theory. This approach harkens back to Merton's (1957) view of the role of ethnography, although substituting Merton's Popperian philosophy of science where the aim of observations is a refutation (Popper, 1963), with a more sophisticated view influenced by Lakatos on the role of generative theories in the making of science (Lakatos, 1970). Thus, inspired by Lakatos, the aim of ECM is to add yet another 'protective belt' or another layer of theory to the theoretical narrative, thereby reshaping it to fit the new set of observations. The observations influence the relationship between theory and field: as the narrative of theory never maps exactly and unproblematically onto the field, it must be always re-worked – if ever so slightly – to encompass the empirical.

The paradigmatic ECM example of the interrelationship between the narrative of a theory and the ethnographic field is Burawoy's (1979) *Manufacturing Consent*. Set against Donald Roy's (Roy, 1952, 1953) earlier studies of the same Chicago engine factory, Burawoy produces an inverse picture from his predecessor. Where Roy's studies showed how and why factory workers worked less than they possibly could, Burawoy's ethnography set out to investigate the ways in which – although against their best interests in a Marxist framework – workers put an extremely large amount of time and effort into their work, the ways in which the system of 'quota restriction and goldbricking' described by Roy actually works to the workers' detriment, and the influence of large economic forces in shaping workers' lives.

Burawoy's ethnography starts with a review of the boundaries of the neo-Marxist theory of work relations – using Gramsci's notion of hegemony to problematize sociological theory as well as other neo-Marxist interpretations of the labor process. Similar to the situation described by Roy, Burawoy finds that workers 'build a kitty' (Burawoy, 1979: 58) and swing between periods in which they work extremely hard in 'gravy jobs' where they could earn bonuses for exceeding their quotas, and periods where they worked 'stinker' jobs that paid only base rates. These observations constitute the baseline from which Burawoy constructs a theory explaining why

workers do not unite more effectively, and the ways novel and older measures of work management become part of a larger structure of control. By allowing laborers to 'work' the system on a small scale, management actually makes sure that workers do not organize against the interests of factory owners: the 'game' of the shop floor worker marks the shift 'from despotism to hegemony' (Burawoy, 2003: 653).

In spite of apparent similarities in the empirical findings, Burawoy did find 'small but significant changes' (Burawoy, 2003: 650). Yet, as Burawoy readily admits, the most important difference produced by this ethnographic 'revisit' stems from the emphasis on capitalist macro-forces shaping the work environment. For Roy, working within the Chicago School tradition, the micro-level empirical findings themselves are the crux of the argument. Not quite sure what to expect when he enters the factory, he soon finds that the curve of production is far from expected. Using this observation as a sociological puzzle, he constructs a data-driven theoretical explanation. Shifting the emphasis, Burawoy re-thinks the effects of state capitalism, and thinks through some of the questions left open in Gramsci's theory of hegemony. Burawoy situates the factory work in the bigger, macro-sociological picture of occupational shifts within the American capitalist economy. Hence, his study becomes a case of hegemony with neo-Marxist theory setting the parameters of his case.<sup>2</sup>

The main achievement of Burawoy's ethnography is thus not so much in the empirical development of minute detail, but in the tying of the field to theory, and the modification of existing neo-Marxist theory. Although the theoretical narrative provides the general 'casing' of Burawoy's site, the empirical findings don't always fit snugly within it. Where this mismatch between theoretical casing and empirical findings appears, the ethnographer is forced to re-think some element of the theory. The ECM critique of the GT's case construction, 'from the field up', is thus couched in the implicit idea that the social world is not neatly or naturally divided into parts and cases (and even if it would be, the ethnographer would be unable to appreciate these narratives without strong theories). The construction and boundaries of the case are always dependent on theory.

Although the argument between ethnographic camps was not couched in this language, GT adherents reject ECM's view of narrative. Instead, they observe that while events indeed keep following events in an endless chronology, social life remains ordered and narrated through institutional and inter-subjective mechanisms. An official narrative – for example, schools are about education – hides countless contradictory subversive narratives about social life. Yet each of these narratives is neither arbitrary nor a figment of agents' imagination. Patterns of action are coded and coerced by the institutions and the intersubjective structures of everyday life in which agents operate. These coded patterns, in turn, supply social action

with coherence, predictability and structure, which is translatable into a narrative in White's sense. Thus, from the GT perspective, the narrative is not simply imposed by the theorist but originates in the many ways in which the social world is experienced and acted upon by members. In Ragin's classification, GT involves a move from general empirical to specific theoretical cases, exactly a countermove to ECM.

GT is not alone in viewing the social world as narratively self-ordering. Beyond qualitative studies of events and narrative (Sewell, 1992; Somers, 1992), quantitative attempts to systematize historical sociology (Abbott, 1995, 1997; Abell, 2007; Bearman et al., 1999) have developed theoretical tools to capture narrative structure. Thus, for example, Abell (2007) replaces rational choice with narrative action, assuming that people do not act in accordance to 'rational' calculations of action, but rather by inserting themselves into culturally available narratives of action. In a more theoretical vein, both Berger and Luckmann (1966) and ethnomethodologists Mehan and Wood (1975) discussed the construction of coherence as a basic building block of intersubjective worlds one of the bases for any action and interaction.

Whereas GT practitioners do not see the narratives in the field to be deterministically 'natural', they argue that social worlds continuously produce bounded narratives to further shape and enable action. A simple institutional example from the realm of educational research is the narrative of graduate studies. Although there is no logical necessity for the time constraints around the ethno-narrative of graduate school, graduate students, professors and bureaucrats seem to be obsessed with the passage of time (Horowitz, 1968). Actions and projects do not flow from one to the next, with only theoretical boundaries 'casing' them within the institutional framework. Rather, tardiness on a project will incur an institutional reaction, sometimes terminating the studies altogether, sometimes incurring shame, or withdrawal of financial support. But the point is obviously much wider. Every career study must take into account the ways in which institutions bind and shape time and action, thereby producing closure and narrativity to what might perhaps otherwise become a seamless flow (see Adam et al., 2002; Becker et al., 1961; Lewis and Weigart, 1981). From this point of view, the reason ethnographers are able to find patterns in the field reflects not only their own theoretical and folk-theoretical biases but the dramatic structure of the field itself (Turner, 1969, 1974).

The methodological processes of field-note writing (Charmaz, 2006; Emerson et al., 1995), constant comparisons (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Katz, 2001), and coding (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) to which GT adherents pay much attention, but which ECM ethnographers rarely discuss, should also be understood in this light. Although field notes are explicated mainly as a mnemonic device (Emerson et al., 1995), the

meticulous emphasis on these aspects of the fieldwork actually plays an additional part in GT, meant to render familiar settings strange (Shklovsky, 1965). By estranging the seemingly obvious interactions seen in the field, the unexpected ways in which narratives are constructed and 'cased' in the field come to the fore. These ethno-narratives – the narratives embedded in the field through various intersubjective processes – are then the basic building blocks of the GT analysis.

This attempt to pursue the ethno-narratives of everyday life is perhaps best seen in analytic induction. As Katz (2001) explains, after a basic narrative structure of the field is gleaned, the ethnographer must try to find negative cases – narratives that seem not to fall neatly within the conceptual structure previously elicited. Indeed, the field study is only completed when 'the researcher can no longer practically pursue negative cases' (Katz, 2001: 481). Although this use of the negative case may initially seem closer to the methodology offered by ECM – looking for cases that do not fit the theory – the negative case remains internal to the ethno-narrative itself. After researchers construct what seems to be an ethno-narrative, they look for instances within the field which violate the narrative structure, honing and chipping the categories until a fit emerges between the different instances and a generalizable ethno-narrative.

An example of this position can be seen in Katz's (1999) analysis of families in a mirror fun house. There, Katz shows the ways in which laughter and 'funny moments' are interactionally constructed. The puzzle posited within the study is that distorting mirrors seem to be intrinsically funny. Yet, 'individuals who experience the mirrors in isolation from others don't find them laughably funny' (Katz, 1999: 91). Thus, the analytical question to resolve is the interactional narrative structure of humor. How is the co-construction of image attained when the angle of vision of different viewers is different? How is, in other words, the tension of humor constructed? In order to answer these questions, Katz uses conversation-analytical techniques and video-taped interactions to look at the different micro-narratives that viewers construct, as well as the negative cases in which these narratives moments of humor dismally fail. Thus, viewers use different strategies to produce humor: telling other parties where to stand in order to reach a similar position in front of the mirror, or picking up a child to create the same viewing angle. In order for tension to be built, both commentary and glances are exchanged to make sure that parties are co-tuned to the same elements of the situation. Through the collection and fitting of different cases within the situation, Katz shows that part of what is constructed through fun houses is the temporally bound feeling of 'togetherness', the building of a commonality that is incorporated into the array of ways in which groups do 'family' and mutuality (Katz, 1999: 130–41).

More generally, this process points to another difference between casing in the GT and ECM positions. Whereas the ECM field worker knows in advance which theory will be used as the theoretical boundaries of the case, in GT the ethno-narratives of the field appear before the casing within sociological theory. Thus, the ethno-narratives of members serve as the pivotal point of the analysis, often requiring ethnographers to get acquainted with theoretical bodies of literature they did not arrive with. Where ECM ethnographers explore the fit between theoretical casing and empirical findings, the GT ethnographer begins with the ethno-narratives of casing, only then to move into the realm of theory. The ethnographer finds either a fit between theoretical and local ways of casing or is forced to construct new theoretical narratives to explain the members' ethno-narratives.

This, of course, is not to deny that the position of the ethnographer influences the emerging analysis. GT, like any sociological practice, is both highly influenced by the interests and blind spots of the researcher and shaped by theory. Thus, a simplistic view of GT and ECM would be that they represent 'subjectivist' and 'objectivist' poles of social science (see Bourdieu, 1977: 1–30). According to such a reading, GT would be an explication of the life world of subjects' experience, whereas ECM would be an imposition of social laws on the world. This reading, however, misses the mark on both accounts. Although GT is attentive to members' ethno-narratives, grounded theorists always work within the confines of sociological theory: although ECM begins with theoretical concerns, it does not mean that practitioners are not sensitive to empirical surprises they encounter in the field.

### Theories of denouement and grammar

At least hypothetically, it seems that the question of theory in both GT and ECM is unrestricted by questions of method. After all, the 'favorite theory' of the ECM could be symbolic interaction; the theory found within a GT study could be Gramsci's notion of hegemony. Yet, actual ethnographies show a clear division. ECM practitioners gravitate towards neo-Marxist theories while GT practitioners strongly favor symbolic interaction and phenomenology. Of course, a large part of the differences here result from the institutional history of the field, including the influence of Blumer's Second Chicago School of sociology (Fine, 1995) and the move towards conflict theories and questions of globalization in some quarters of anthropology (Appadurai, 2006; Kearney, 1995). Although this institutional history is undoubtedly important in determining the conceptualization and use of theory, we argue that it is a partial explanation. Instead, the ways in which EM and GT ethnographers think about the concept of the case and

narrativity are a promising starting point to further unravel the meaning of 'theory' in their works.

Theory means at least two things in regard to the question of case formation. Firstly, theory can produce the general picture of the social world as the general 'coordinates' of what is possible. Whether middle range or 'grand theories' of the social, these theories predict the ways in which different actions and structures coalesce in order to produce larger social effects and patterns. In relation to the question of the case, these theories provide the boundaries and structural plot of the narrative. In other words, they provide the final point within the narrative, which serves to differentiate the theoretical story from a chronology of the world. The theory thus provides a literary denouement, or a 'punchline', of the empirical story. Secondly, however, a theory can provide the ways in which social reality is constructed within action. In this sense, theory provides not the boundaries of the case, but rather the grammar of narratives. In this function, 'theory' refers to the patterned ways in which the sociologist makes sense of the narratives through which agents construct their reality.<sup>3</sup>

These two distinct conceptualizations of theory divide the use of theory in ECM and GT. Theory as it is used by ECM practitioners – namely neo-Marxist theories of hegemony and globalization – refers to the social world. Such theories provide the ways in which the observations in the field are tied to larger, usually invisible, patterns of control and macro-structures of domination. Whether in Burawoy's use of Gramsci and neo-Marxist theories of the state or in the later shift within ECM towards globalized forces, the theory answers a question of social ontology – 'what does the world look like?' and such neo-Marxist theorization provide the denouement of the empirical narrative. It ties the ethnographic observations to outside forces and the reasoning behind the casing of the empirical.

As a way of casing, and as Burawoy admits early on (Burawoy, 1991: 30), the neo-Marxist bent of ECM is not logically necessary. And yet, the range of theories that can become the ethnographer's 'favorite' does not cover the gamut of different senses in which 'sociological theory' is used. The ethnographer can choose among a range of theories, but they must all be able to tell in advance *what* kind of empirical observations *should* be seen in the world. Without this horizon of the 'what', the chosen site loses its sharp contours as a problematic empirical case, and theoretical casing becomes impossible. The study is trapped.<sup>4</sup>

ECM's use of theory is thus limited if one follows Burawoy's four movements of reflexive science, where research moves from an interview or set of observations to an analysis of social processes, then onto social structures, and back into one's theory. It is the third step towards the discovery of underlying structures as modified by broader social forces that requires a theory that privileges macro-structure. Because, Burawoy notes, these

social forces are often not apparent in the research setting: 'These social forces are the effects of other social processes that for the most part lie outside the realm of investigation' (Burawoy, 1998: 15). Since these social forces may lie outside the consciousness of research populations and the empirical grasp of fieldworkers, they become only apparent through the researcher's adopted theory. The danger is one of objectifying social forces as external and natural. As Nina Eliasoph and Paul Lichterman pointed out, Burawoy's privileging of structure renders many interesting empirical observations – including the question of cultural reproduction – irrelevant (Eliasoph and Lichterman, 1999). Still, whether and how global, multi-national, or national social forces impinge on micro interactions can be verified by tracing the actual mechanisms that produce such influences.

The use of 'theory' in GT is usually manifested in symbolic interaction, phenomenology, and of late, actor-network theory. This use of theory, again, is far from coincidental. In spite of obvious disagreements, these theories share an open-ended conception of the social. In contrast to neo-Marxist theories, these theories are all involved in an attempt to provide the ways in which action is inter-subjectively (or inter-objectively/inter-speciesly, in the case of actor-network theory) constructed and experienced.

The symbolic interactionist precepts of interaction-structure is, as Strauss writes: 'open ended, partially unpredictable ... interaction is regarded as guided by rules, norms, mandates; but its outcomes are assumed to be not always, or entirely, determinable in advance' (Strauss, 1969: 10). Symbolic interaction is thus a theory of the ways in which the social both becomes partially embedded in structures and negotiated in everyday life, always open-ended and subject to re-articulation by the agents in the field. In this sense, symbolic interaction answers questions of process. Remaining agnostic (Henwood and Pidgeon, 2003) to the actual structure of the field and interests of the agents within it, symbolic interaction provides a theory of the social grammar of everyday life.<sup>5</sup> This is, of course, not to say that theories of 'what' do not enter the GT ethnographers' analysis (Timmermans and Tavory, 2007). The GT ethnographer always, necessarily, comes into the field with additional 'what' theories – the story of the Lockean Tabula Rasa is indeed but a myth.<sup>6</sup> And yet, these proto-theories that are part and parcel of perception and observation are not hermetic. Rather, GT ethnographers bracket these proto-theories during fieldwork to return to them in the late stages of their study. As Becker puts it, such 'what' theories are:

at best a necessary evil, something we need to get our work done but, at the same time, a tool that is likely to get out of hand, leading to a generalized discourse largely divorced from the day-to-day digging into social life that constitutes sociological science. (Becker, 1998: 4)



## Forms of narrativity

We charted a dividing line between theory and fieldwork that distinguishes GT from ECM. Through an analysis of the process of ‘casing’, we claimed that GT subscribes to the assumption that the social world studied through fieldwork is inherently narrative-bound. Institutions and interacting people provide narrative closure of lived experience and help delineate social life as a meaningful entity. Consequently, the theoretical principles underlying GT and AI are aimed at sensitizing the researcher to the recurring structuring of those narratives, providing the researcher with a theoretical tool-kit designed to organize the grammar of narrativity.

In its most simplified form, symbolic interactionism’s working premise is that people are actively involved in collective meaningful interactions that evolve over time in anticipation of the reaction of others. Similarly, phenomenological sociology draws attention to embodiment and the structure of meaning, but does not resolve its ultimate purpose. Concepts such as trajectory, career, or social worlds reflect the processual nature of this kind of endeavor. GT is ethnography in the Chicago School sense of the term: an attempt to describe a group of people doing things together as they are located in time and space (Abbott, 1997). The endpoint of this kind of sociological fieldwork is a set of conceptualizations that aim to capture a facet of the substantive area studied. Glaser and Strauss advocated in their original works for building formal and widely generalized theories out of substantive theories (Strauss, 1995). But, with the possible exception of labeling theory, such attempts are rare. Indeed, this type of theorization often pays attention to how larger structures affect the situational contexts of ethno-narratives only when these ‘forces’ are institutionally framed and thus observable. Some of the more intrinsic ways in which the ethno-narratives are shaped and influenced by the larger, globalized, world we live in may thus escape attention.

Where GT hinges upon the ethno-narratives of everyday life, ECM contests the narrative character of the field. Instead, it seems to subscribe to more of a chronological view of social life: where history is, as Arnold Toynbee put it, just one damn thing after another. In place of the ethno-narrative, the world is ordered theoretically. The narrative closure that eludes the empirical world is provided by theories ordering social life and providing it with direction and (as is often the case) moral valence. Neo-Marxist and structural theories predefine precisely what aspects of social life are relevant and interesting. This kind of theory-driven ethnography is primarily aimed at expanding and modifying the scope of these formal theories with anomalous cases. Although the very notion of the ‘anomalous case’ must, to some degree, assume that some kind of narrativity of social life can be detected, these narratives can themselves only be cased with the help of an existing theory.



The choice for a method thus reflects a particular sociological epistemological orientation – a certain use of the concept of ‘theory’. In that general sense, GT and ECM are indeed theory-method packages (Clarke, 2005; Star, 1989). Fieldwork in one tradition is intrinsically different from the same activity in another tradition because of the ways that participant observation and theory feed into each other, and what theory actually means. This difference, in turn, has practical ramifications visible in the produced ethnography. GT or AI would find it hard to glean the invisible macro-forces emphasized in ECM, exactly because they are often not perceived in the life-world of interlocutors. ECM ethnographers risk substituting the narrativity of social life with theoretical narratives, sacrificing perhaps the one unique tenet of ethnography not shared by other sociological methodologies.

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### Notes

- 1 Analytical induction, as a research agenda for qualitative analysis, was also developed within the Chicago School, promulgated by Znaniecki's (1934) formulation of the method, and expounded upon by Alfred Lindesmith's (1947) study of opiate addiction, and Howard Becker's writings (1958). The affinity between AI and GT can be seen both in the working networks and biographies of AI and GT practitioners – with the Chicago School playing a prominent role in both, and Strauss' work with Lindesmith (Lindesmith and Strauss, 1949) – and rhetorically, as where Strauss (1987) presents Lindesmith's along with Becker's and other studies influenced by both symbolic interaction and analytic induction as prominent cases of grounded theoretical studies.
- 2 Whereas Burawoy (2003) differentiates between a theoretical lens and the emphasis on ‘external factors’, both these shifts in analysis are – in effect – directly tied to his neo-Marxist theoretical framework. According to Burawoy, if anything, his ethnography would have benefited had he been ‘more attentive to Marxist theory’ (2003: 654).
- 3 The relation between these two uses of the word ‘theory’ is not straightforward. Although, as Abend (2008) argues, some uses of the term ‘theory’ are very tenuously related, the two uses of ‘theory’ we present have a

pragmatic family resemblance (Camic and Gross, 1998: 455) sharing an attempt to generalize aspects of one case, so it is applicable to the analysis of others.

- 4 This analysis of the use of specific forms of neo-Marxism in ethnography should not be taken as a general critique of neo-Marxist theory. See, for example, Louis Althusser's (1971) notion of practice, and Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) theoretical formulation of a 'post'-Marxist analysis interested exactly in the questions of 'how', and bracketing the question of 'what'.
- 5 Another prominent theorization along the same lines can be seen in Berger and Luckmann (1966). Attempting a synthesis of pragmatist interactionism and Schutzian phenomenology, the questions they open – as well as the answers they provide – are always articulated in the language of process. What the theorization provides, much like in symbolic interactionism, is a theory of *how* the social is constructed, never *what* is constructed.
- 6 Thus, the notion of 'induction' has been lately substituted within GT circles itself with Peirce's concept of 'abduction', which acknowledges the fact that every observation includes a proto-theory of the world (Reichert, 2007; Richardson and Kramer, 2006; Strubing, 2007).

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■ **IDDO TAVORY** is a PhD candidate at UCLA. He is currently conducting a historical and ethnographic study of a Jewish-Orthodox community in Hollywood. He has published on interactional aspects of the AIDS epidemic in Malawi, as well as methodological and theoretical papers regarding interactionist and cultural sociology. He has also edited *Dancing in a Thorn-field: The New Age in Israel* (Hakibutz Hameuhad, 2007). Address: Department of Sociology, 264 Haines Hall, 375 Portola Plaza, University of California, Los Angeles, CA 90095–1551, USA. [email: iddotavory@ucla.edu] ■

■ **STEFAN TIMMERMAN**S is Professor of Sociology at UCLA and author of *Postmortem: How Medical Examiners Explain Suspicious Deaths* (Chicago, 2006), *The Gold Standard: The Challenge of Standardization and Evidence-Based Medicine in Health Care* (Temple, 2003, with Marc Berg), and *Sudden Death and the Myth of CPR* (Temple, 1999). Address: Department of Sociology, 264 Haines Hall, 375 Portola Plaza, University of California, Los Angeles, CA 90095–1551, USA. [email: stefan@soc.ucla.edu] ■