Special: An interview with Robert Prus:
His Career, Contributions, and Legacy as an Interactionist Ethnographer and Social Theorist

by Steven Kleinknecht
McMaster University, Canada

Abstract

I have used an extended, open-ended interview with Robert Prus as a means with which to consider his contributions to ethnographic research and social theory. Given the range of his scholarship, a fairly detailed listing of the topics covered in the interview is presented at the outset. In addition to (a) considering Robert Prus's own career as a scholar, attention is given to (b) his involvements in symbolic interaction as a field of study, (c) ethnographic research as a mode of inquiry, (d) generic social processes as a realm of theorizing about the nature of human group life, and (e) some specific ethnographies on which he has worked as well as (f) his critiques of both positivist and postmodernist scholarship and (g) his involvements in tracing the development of pragmatist social thought from the classical Greek era to the present time and even more recent thoughts on (h) the sociology of Emile Durkheim and (i) public sociology.

A professor at the University of Waterloo in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, Robert Prus teaches courses in the areas of symbolic interaction, ethnography, social psychology, deviance, and social theory from the classical Greek era to the present time. A rather prolific writer with several books and over fifty journal articles and other publications to his credit, Professor Prus has written on various theoretical, methodological, and substantive aspects of sociology and human group-life. In addition to interactionist theory, ethnography, and generic social processes, he also has addressed card and dice hustlers, the hotel community, marketing and sales, consumer behaviour, economic development and, more recently, classical Greek contributions to pragmatist thought. In recognition of his scholarly achievements, Dr. Prus was awarded an Honorary Doctorate of Literature from Brandon University in 2002.

I interviewed Dr. Prus in late June of 2006 talking with him about his career, research, and thoughts on the discipline. We met over the course of three interview sessions lasting two to three hours each. The interviews all took place at a deli in a local grocery store. It was a comfortable setting with just enough background noise and activity nearby to keep the atmosphere fresh. As others who know Bob can relate to, when one talks with him about sociology it is difficult not be taken and moved by his sincere dedication to, and vision of, the sociological enterprise. If

you're unfamiliar with Prus's approach to understanding the social world, you will soon discover that he is a most astute, thorough, and thoughtful practitioner of interactionist ethnography. Having once been a student of Bob's at the University of Waterloo I've experienced first-hand his ability to get students excited about interactionism and ethnography. The opportunity to sit down and have him share his thoughts on such a sustained basis was a much-welcomed experience for me. As always, Bob was congenial and enthusiastically discussed his passion: Chicago-style interactionist ethnography.

What follows is the result of our conversations covering various aspects of Bob's academic career. This statement considers his approach to conducting sociological research, and his thoughts on the discipline. Along with many other things, our discussion covers: his education from rural Manitoba to graduate school in Iowa to the field of ethnographic research; interactionist roots and key sources such as Herbert Blumer and George Herbert Mead, as well as Plato, Aristotle, and Emile Durkheim; his thoughts on his previous and ongoing ethnographic studies; his insights on early Greek contributions to pragmatist thought; approaches to and suggestions for data collection and analysis; conceptual formulations such as "generic social processes" and "subcultural mosaics;" and critiques of quantitative analysis, positivism, and postmodernism.

Because the interview is rather extensive, reflects a series of three open-ended conversations, and covers a series of interrelated topics, some segments of the interview have been rearranged to foster flow and clarity for the reader. Whereas the following statement very much reflects our discussion as it occurred, I have provided a list of the major headings and themes addressed in this statement. This way, readers can more readily locate specific subject matters as well as connect parts of the broader conversation that deal with related topics.

PART ONE

In this section Bob and I discuss the early stages of his career. We begin by examining his very early days in rural Manitoba, Canada and move on to explore how he became involved in interactionism and ethnography. Following this we discuss his involvements in encyclopaedia sales where he started to become fascinated with negotiation and interaction and his graduate studies at the University of Iowa. We also consider some of his scholarly influences they played a role in his career.

Discussing a chance meeting he had with a student dubbed C.R.D. Sharper and another student named Styllianoss Irini, Bob revisits how he became involved in research on card and dice hustlers and the hotel community, respectively. As we follow his career path we begin to see how Bob started to gravitate towards interactionist ethnography to the point where it became the central focus of his academic career.

More recently Bob has become intrigued with the philosophical insights of Plato and Aristotle as he began noticing the linkages of their ideas to more contemporary pragmatist thought. As he notes, his interest in exploring Greek philosophy in particular, and tracing interactionist roots more generally, has opened up what he views as nothing short of an academic treasure chest. Perhaps one of the most

significant jewels Bob has discovered is Emile Durkheim's involvements in pragmatist scholarship.

Tracing Western thought from early Greek scholarship to modern sociological theorizing, Bob has taken it upon himself to highlight the historical development of pragmatist thought and interactionist scholarship, a point that is revisited in Part Two of our interview. Central to the development of the sociological enterprise, Bob indicates, is the construction of concepts. To be worthwhile, however, our sociological concepts must be grounded in the everyday experiences of human group-life and have a generic, processual, and transhistorical quality. Here, Bob echoes Blumer's call for a concept-oriented naturalistic approach to understanding the social world.

Getting into Symbolic Interactionism & Ethnographic Research

Steve: Let's start by talking a little bit about your early education. Where did you get started with your education? Let's even go back to your undergraduate years or earlier.

Bob: I grew up in rural Manitoba. In some ways our experiences with people, all these things, accumulate. So, that's part of what you grow up with. Now, in my case, my dad drank a lot. He was an electrician, but he drank a lot. He was able to find work, but he had a habit of drinking on the job and people don't always appreciate that. So, he lost work. As a result, as a family we ended up moving around to a number of small towns in rural Manitoba. Now, at the time of course I didn't really appreciate this. It was disruptive and embarrassing at times. It wasn't really a desirable kind of lifestyle. But now, looking back I realize it was an opportunity to see the backside of a lot of small communities. And, in small communities people basically do the same things that they do in larger communities, but it's there more right there in front of you and, since it's small, you can see things. That was just part of my growing up experience.

At that time I had no knowledge that there was such a thing as sociology. I had no concepts beyond the most general kinds of concepts that people would use to make sense of things. I knew what "the wrong side of the tracks" meant because that's where I spent most of my time. Fortunately, I did well in school. So I had a sort of marginal existence in a sense. When I was in high school I did well in physics, chemistry, and math. I went to university initially with the idea that I would study in those areas. I didn't really know that there was such a thing as sociology and psychology. I had seen some television shows and such, but I thought that was like a hobby people had. I thought no one would get paid for doing something that was that interesting. But when I went to university they had these courses – psychology and sociology. I ended up switching from the sciences into the arts. This was just much more interesting to me. But at that point, I still had no idea what symbolic interactionism was.

Steve: Were there some courses that piqued your interest at that time?

Bob: There was one course that stands out. It was a course in social psychology taught in the psychology department. It was very thorough. They used a book by Secord and Backman published in 1964. The reason I can say that so precisely is because they put out another volume of the same book in 1974 and it was very much a Mickey Mouse version of the 1964 text. The 1964 text was very, very thorough.

My own undergrad education was really quite weak in sociology, but this book, however, was very useful and it basically carried me on to graduate school.

Steve: Even early on in your career, even at this stage, were you thinking that you might become a professor?

Bob: No, no, no...

Steve: I know when I first started out I was thinking that I was going to be headed to law school. So, I thought the best way to get there was to take some criminology courses, so I ended up studying sociology. What were some of your early directions in that regard?

Bob: Well, I really didn't know that I would even finish the undergrad program. So it was quite the discovery process. I had no intention of going to graduate school. The idea that someone would actually pay you to go to school seemed unfathomable to me. I just did a three-year undergrad degree and in my third year a couple of professors suggested that I might go to graduate school. They said you would get a teaching assistantship or something. And I said, "Do you mean that they are going to pay me to go to school?" That was an unusual idea to me. Now, I have to tell you we have many students that I talk to about that don't know about that either. The other thing that happened that was very interesting was I took a job selling encyclopaedias. Did I ever tell you about that?

Steve: No, I don't think so.

Bob: It was a summer job and I didn't do very well at it. In part, I felt sorry for people. I realised when you go to their homes that they don't have this kind of money. I could relate to my own experiences, right? We didn't have money to buy an encyclopaedia set, but if somebody came by, we might buy it. But it was kind of a waste of money. Anyways, that was part of it.
    We worked neighbourhoods in groups. After doing a presentation, we would meet up, often getting picked up in the car. I would get back in the car and they would say, "Well what happened that you didn't make the sale?" You know, they were very good in that sense. "Why didn't you finish the sale?" And they used to chew me out. They would say, "You need that killer instinct!" "The money is there, it's your money, and you let these people walk away with your money."
    Much more importantly than that, and what I found so consequential about the encyclopaedia salespeople was that they knew how to relate to people. They would go and set up appointments, and it was all about impression management. I didn't have that term then, though. It was all about the presentation, not just "of self," but a whole educational package and connecting with people.
    I was taking courses in psychology and sociology, but most of them didn't have that kind of realism to them. I found this very interesting, that I was hanging around these encyclopaedia salespeople and learning a lot more about people than I had been from my sociology and psychology courses. But I wasn't making money at it. I didn't have that killer instinct or monetary disposition, say. Still, I needed a summer job. After a while I took a job in a steel factory where the money was much better than selling encyclopaedias. But the encyclopaedia experience stayed with me. So did the factory work, but differently.
    When I went to grad school I was looking for something that connected with

what I had learned and experienced while working with the encyclopaedia salespeople. I went to the University of Iowa. Iowa is not that far from Manitoba. They offered courses in social psychology and that's what I thought I wanted to do. I went there and found that it was very much a quantitative, mainstream sociological program. At Iowa, the expression that they often used was, "If you can't measure it, it doesn't exist." So they had that very pronounced positivist emphasis.

At Iowa I was able to use this book on social psychology that I mentioned to you before – not just the book, but also the ideas and concepts and such. I ended up doing an M.A. thesis on dating relationships. It was a questionnaire type of thing. I don't suggest that anybody read it because I don't like it. But at the time it was something that I felt would allow me to complete the programme and I didn't feel as if I had many options. They really wanted a quantitative thesis.

In the M.A. programme we also had comprehensive exams. It was actually very interesting. I was studying for this methods comp and one of my fellow students said, "Well, you know, we could get asked about ethnography." I said, "Ethnography, what is that?"

Steve: So, you hadn't heard about ethnography at this point?

Bob: I might have heard it, but it hadn't registered. In the methods courses I had been taking there was nothing of that sort at Iowa. He said, "It's like *Street Corner Society*. So, I went and I read *Street Corner Society*, but it didn't seem like it really had a sense of direction. It was interesting in a way, but really, to my mind, there was nothing to it. Now, I would say that in *Street Corner Society* the best part in the whole book is the appendix where Whyte talks about the methodology… Nevertheless, I read it and I thought, "If they ask me a question about ethnography, I will tell them about *Street Corner Society*.

Carl Couch, who did symbolic interaction, was at Iowa. But at that time he was a very structuralist type of symbolic interactionist. It was the Iowa School. They also liked structuralist and quantitative types of models. That was their emphasis. I had been getting more exposure to the Chicago people – but only in part. It was really just this sort of structuralist interactionist analysis. So I really didn't pay much attention to symbolic interaction at that point.

Now, when I did my PhD I had become interested in how people acquire images, reputations, identities, and things of that sort. I had read Goffman's *Presentation of Self…,* Becker's *Outsiders*, and Blumer's *Symbolic Interactionism*. I had been reading these basically on my own. I realised that at Iowa there was really nobody doing this kind of work. So I tried to find someone that I thought would be the most reasonable person to work with. I selected John Stratton as my advisor. John was a student of Don Cressey – Cressey was into "differential association" from Edwin Sutherland – a related kind of emphasis to symbolic interactionism. John was interested in prisons more than anything, but I did not want to spend time hanging around prisons. I thought about it and eventually I decided that I might do a study of parole officers. That was pretty close to prison and John might like that. But in Iowa it was to be a quantitative thesis. So that's what I did. I asked my committee, "Would it be okay if I interviewed some of these people, parole officers, as well?" They said, "Oh yeah, you can do that as well, if you want." Do your questionnaire, but if you also want to do the other, you could do that. So, that's what I did.

Along the way I also took a course on the sociology of religion. The fellow teaching it was basically a Weberian scholar. But it occurred to me that people recruited other people to religion somewhat like these encyclopaedia salespeople

did. So my idea for a paper for this course was to go and talk to clergy.   I talked to clergy from different Christian denominations to see what they did to try and get people to come to their church and intensify participation on existing members, keep people from leaving, and if they dropped out what might they do to bring them back into the fold.   Also, how did they deal with people who had doubts about their religion? I started doing some interviews, but I really didn't know what I was doing in a more formal sense because I did not have any training. I hadn't taken any courses on doing ethnographic and field research.

Steve: So, you were sort of self-taught at this stage?

Bob: Yes, with the books I was reading. They were my teachers in a sense. When I finished grad school I had a job teaching at Windsor. I was teaching a criminology course and I had my students write papers on different aspects of crime, but I tried to get them to write on something they knew about.   So you know, petty crime, speeding on the highways, just more commonplace types of activities.

This one student asked if he could do a paper on pool hustling. He was older than I was. I said, "Do you know any pool hustlers?" He said, "Well yes. My dad ran a pool hall and so I could go and talk to the people there." I told him to read Ned Polsky's *Hustlers, Beats, and Others* and Goffman's *Presentation of Self…* and see if he could connect with those sorts of things.

As I say that, I also realize that I had a good education in Iowa in many ways because it was quite rigorous. We had to know a lot. If you were in deviance, you had to know a fairly wide range of the deviance literature. Although their social psychology was more structuralist, they still expected you to have a range of familiarity with things. Their social theory was quite extensive. I mention this in part because as I am talking, one of the people we spent time with was Georg Simmel on "form and content." I see Simmel as one of the precursors to what would become "generic social processes." Another source that might strike people as kind of funny in a round about way… The person teaching the social theory course at Iowa was Jim Price. He was a student of Robert Merton.   Robert Merton had the term "codification" and we had "codification" pounded into us. It was basically the idea of establishing categories of things. You would see where things were similar and different, and you put them in categories. It required some comparative analysis. That was stayed with me as well… That sort of comparison process is basic to Generic Social Processes.

Steve: Was there a specific point in your career where you actually started to think of yourself as a symbolic interactionist?

Bob: Yeah, basically between my M.A. and PhD. I started reading more of these Chicago interactionist materials on my own and I realized, "Hey, I'm one of these people."   Then I wanted to read everything I could.   They had all these great concepts. They had labelling theory, perspectives, and identity. So that was part of it. I realized that they were closer to these encyclopaedia salespeople I had been hanging around with, but they had these concepts such as Becker's "career contingencies," Blumer's "intimate familiarity," activity, just interactionist thought more basically. Really nice concepts! In grad school, we had this instructor, Richard Woodworth. He was at Iowa for just a short period time, but he introduced us to Alfred Schutz and that was very good. So, Schutz, Berger and Luckmann, and

Garfinkel. That again became part of my conceptual package. These things became resources. These things accumulated over time and that was part of what I had to work with.

To go back to Windsor and this student that was interested in studying pool hustlers. I'll show you how this connects. This student's paper wasn't very good. I gave him, like a C or a C- or something. But in this paper there were a couple of things that were just so authentic. I didn't know where he might have gotten these from. So one day after class, I said to him, "Do you have a few minutes? I'd like to talk to you about your paper." He said, "Yeah, it wasn't very good was it?" I said, "No." He said, "Well, my wife helped me with it." I thought "Well, C-, I'm not going to worry too much about this." Later on he told me his wife was a psychology major and had told him to take lots of things out because she thought that these might offend the professor. I think he took some of the more realistic aspects out. Anyways, we got talking about hustling pool and it turned out that he was putting himself through university hustling pool. He had been hustling pool for some time. So I thought that it might be interesting to do a little study on pool hustlers.

We started talking about hustling pool on a more sustained basis and he became increasingly comfortable with me. Then, one day, he started talking about card and dice hustlers. I thought, "Card and dice hustlers, what is this?" Basically, as he described them, they were like professional thieves. Well, I knew Sutherland's text (*The Professional Thief*), but I also knew that Ed Lemert, who was considered an expert in the area, had said that these professional thieves are things of the past, that they do not exist anymore. Well, Ed Lemert was wrong about this. This fellow, whom I later called "Card (C.R.D.) Sharper," it was really from him that I learned to do ethnography.

For the hustlers to find parties (events in which to set up card or dice games) and effectively fit in with the people there, they would need to develop some really good social skills. That was something, again, that I could connect with the encyclopaedia salespeople. I realized that ethnographers are doing the same sorts of things. They just hadn't labelled it or identified it in such explicit terms. Later on, I wrote a little paper called, "Hustling the Hustlers," which reflected some of these things. But that study was, for me, really a major education!

Steve: In that research were you out there in the bars and doing the observation?
Bob: No, at this point I wasn't in the bars. I hung around with C.R.D. Sharper. But, if you go to one of these parties, you can't just sit in there and watch because you become too obvious and besides you don't see anything. You just see people playing cards or drinking, or whatever they're doing. The moves, though, are all secretive. They try to do everything in a way that looks so natural that no one thinks anything is going on. In fact, that's the point they emphasize. It has to look natural!

Later when I talked to magicians about this sort of work, they told me that they divide people into "box magicians" – people who buy tricks or people who develop tricks – and those who do what they call "natural magic," which is essentially sleight of hand. The natural magicians liken themselves to the card and dice hustlers. They say, the idea is that things have to look natural, like nothing unusual happened, and all of the sudden you produce this wonderful effect! Now, you see, with card and dice hustlers they produce this same effect, but they can't show people what the effect is, right? They conceal credit for the effect, the outcome. So the emphasis is entirely on managing impressions – in both cases, actually, but in different ways.

With the hustlers, you're basically stealing from people, but you're trying to do it in such a way that they feel very comfortable and don't know what's going on, and

ideally will invite you to come back again. They have events that they will go to year after year. They have a book, like a listing of all the places, listing the events which are good and which are not. It's very systematic with the more professional hustlers. If there's some kind of event and it's in this area or wherever it happens to be, and it's on July 31st, for example, and it was a good party, they'll be there next July 31st and the next July 31st. And, in some ways, it's even easier because now they know a few people and they're just part of the whole thing. So there again, a lot of impression management – fitting in with people and relating to them.

You know, I was talking to Anselm Strauss about this later and he asked me, "Where did you learn to do field research?" And I said, "Well, I learned to do it from a card and dice hustler." He kind of laughed and said, "You know, that's very interesting because our tradition really has that kind of basis. You know, Nels Anderson's *The Hobo*, Clifford Shaw (*The Jack-Roller*) hung around with this delinquent named 'Stanley,' and Ed Sutherland (*The Professional Thief*) had Chic Conwell. It's just part of our heritage." I thought his commentary was very interesting. So, I teach these courses on ethnographic research, but I've not taken any courses on ethnography.

Steve: That's interesting. So, it's basically all come from learning from others in the field.

Bob: Yes, and books. Because whenever you read an ethnography, a good ethnography, you're going to learn some things about people and doing research and analysis. I've learned a lot in that way. Then, as you go to conferences, again you talk to people about their projects. Like Peter and Pattie Adler were doing a study of drug dealers (*Wheeling and Dealing*) at about the same time I was studying the hotel community. I ran into them at a conference and it was really very nice, great actually, because they were telling me things that they were involved in – activities, dilemmas, strategies – and of course I could relate to those so readily because our work was in many ways so parallel. So you do run into others that are doing similar things and you can talk about methodology and research dilemmas and things of that sort.

Steve: Have you found that being able to dialogue with other scholars over the years has been important for you?

Bob: Yes. In fact, one of the nice things about being a symbolic interactionist is that there's a community of people that you can tap into. This, of course, I didn't realize at the outset. It's really tough to do something entirely on your own and try to sustain something entirely on your own. Most people aren't able to do that. So it's great to have that community.

As you know there are some factions and splinters within, but nevertheless it's been very good in that regard. If somebody says, "Well I'm an eclectic," I'm not really sure what to do with that person. But, if they say, "I'm a functionalist," okay, I can look at them in terms of that perspective. If they are in that community then they would have some realms of research and concepts, basically like the interactionists do.

Steve: Would you consider "Road Hustler" your first ethnography?

Bob: No, actually it was a very small, class related study of the clergy in graduate school. That was my first attempt at ethnography in a sense. And somewhat concurrently I was hanging around these parole officers, working on the dissertation. You know, now, of course, I would try so hard to do the parole study ethnographically on a much more consistent basis. So I started doing things of that sort, but nothing very sustained.

But, you know, we're all sort of long-time ethnographers from when we were kids because, to participate in this world, we all have to understand some things about the people around us. We might not have taken notes and we might not have had concepts that were very sophisticated, but we have to come to terms with other people. That's just part of the socialization process. It's an ongoing thing.

Steve: So doing ethnography in a more sustained sense is kind of a natural extension?

Bob: Yes, basically. And you want it to be authentic. The idea is that we want to be as close to our subject matter as we can. Herbert Blumer uses the term "intimate familiarity" in much the same way. We need to establish contact with the instances and examine the ways in which the instances are developed and take place.

If you're doing quantitative analysis and looking at variables, you're really not looking at the instances. You're looking at, and they probably wouldn't like this, but you're sort of looking at what's left over. "Did they do this or did they not do that? Did they commit a crime or did they not commit a crime?" That's your dependent variable and then your independent variable is something like class or gender, or whatever. But there is no connectedness between the two.

If we're going to talk in terms of things impacting on something else, or influencing, or shaping, or whatever, I think you need to be really mindful of showing exactly how this takes place. The only way to really do this is to study the instances in detail and then, from those instances, develop some sort of comparative analysis looking at where things are similar and where they're different.

It's in the instances that group life takes place. Like in this conversation, or those people over there giving an order of coffee, or whatever. Those are the instances. So by authenticity that's part of what I mean – that we get as close with our concepts to representing what is going on as we can.

Steve: In terms of your career path, let's go back to talking about that for a moment. You had left off by talking about some of your early experiences when you were at Windsor. When you were teaching your courses there, did they have this sort of interactionist emphasis?

Bob: Yes, I think they did. Still, my intention when I was at Windsor was to do a parallel study on Canadian probation and parole officers. It would have been informed by quantitative analysis as well, so it would have been very similar to what I had already done. I'm really glad I didn't do that. It would have been boring in the first degree! So, running into C.R.D. Sharper turned out to be a wonderful break.

Steve: A key turning point then?

Bob: Yes, in terms of understanding not only what ethnographic research was about, but also what you could do with it – how potent it is! That's something that just gets overlooked because there's so much emphasis on quantitative analysis as if it were somehow scientific. But, having the potency and the ability to see how things take place, how they connect, and what parallels you find across situations that was something that I became increasingly aware of as I went through that project.

Sometimes people will say, "What about your major education?" I say, "Well, there's *Road Hustler*. There's the hotel study (*Hookers, Rounders, and Desk Clerks*). There's the marketing and sales stuff (*Making Sales* and *Pursuing Customers*." A lot of times I just take my formal education for granted because I've learned so much in these other settings.

Steve: Which is something I think a lot of people can relate to – that is, by getting out into the field, this is actually where we learn about what it is that we actually do.

Bob: Yes, it's true. In the hotel project, *Hookers, Rounders, and Desk Clerks*, that was to my mind such a worthwhile project. At the time I really didn't know how it was going to take shape. At different times I wondered if we were ever going to get finished. But, looking back on it, we basically studied a little community, with all of these different roles and sets of actors, and how they connected with each other.

A lot of the research on deviance will look at people involved in one role or one field of activity, but it doesn't look at the interconnections. But you can't understand one without the others. So, that was an interesting thing to realize.

Steve: At what point were you doing your research on the hotel community?

Bob: I had just arrived at Waterloo and was just finishing up *Road Hustler*, and this fellow, we call him Styllianoss Irini in the book, came by. He was interested in graduate school at Waterloo. He wasn't accepted at Waterloo. Why, I don't know. Nevertheless, we talked about what he was doing. I found out that he was working in this hotel and they had hookers, strippers, loan sharks, bookmakers, and just about everything else. I said, "You know what? You should keep notes on this." I said, "Do you have a tape recorder?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Well, just talk into the tape recorder and don't worry about being repetitive. Just talk about the things that happened. Don't worry if you repeat things, it's okay."

Anyways, he sent me a couple of tapes and I listened to them and it was very, very interesting. He was coming up with things that I hadn't thought about. I was teaching deviance courses and I thought well the least I can do is go down and see what this situation looks like for myself. So we met and he introduced me to some people. They basically seemed quite accepting of me. I went back a few more times. It was a very interesting situation.

After a few weeks or months, I began to realize that this is like nothing that's ever been written, at least that I knew of in sociology… Now, later I would learn about Anderson's *The Hobo*, Cressey's *The Taxi-Dance Hall*, and Wiseman's *The Stations of the Lost*. Those are the closest studies I know of now. But we focused even more on the interconnections of the various participants, the different identities, and the transitions people would make from one role to another. Also, it wasn't just one bar. It was a series of bars with a number of interconnected people. They had relationships, activities, and identities. It was all part of a much larger process. It was really important in terms of getting away from an emphasis on individuals, even

within particular categories, to a focus on the community.

As it turned out, it was really easy for me to connect with these people in lots of ways because I had spent a couple years hanging around C.R.D. Sharper. They were into hustling, so it was made easier in that regard. It was difficult in other ways, though, because these people had very erratic lifestyles, some were emotionally up and down, and some had very unsettled lives. These were things that I had to work around. You didn't set up appointments like you would with a doctor or a clergyman. There was a looseness to it or a fluidity that you would have to keep adjusting to. Again, for me, it was such an important education.

Steve: What were some of the key things that you learned from that research?

Bob: A stronger appreciation of community as a concept and the fluidity of the human group – how people could move back and forth... Most of the things that I had read about from Howard Becker, Herbert Blumer, Paul Cressey, and others were things that allowed me to make sense out of what was going on. It was having concepts and having other ethnographies and thinking about "What's going on in this situation and what are we learning here?" Notions of career contingencies, intimacy and distancing, trouble and regulation, and various kinds of hustles. Those were all just part of it.

Steve: So the past reading offered you somewhat of a framework to work with?

Bob: Sure. It gave me some things to compare and assess to see whether these things would fit in this situation and in what ways. How do people initially become involved in roles? When are they likely to continue them? It was a study, in a sense, of a broader subculture, but subcultures within as well. It had that quality.

Steve: What were some of the key things, methodologically, that you learned from doing these projects?

Bob: The biggest thing was just about how to relate to people. As a researcher you're not there to prove anything to them. You're there to be open to what they have to tell you. This might seem like it's a little bit off your question, but it's very important! I can't remember if it was in *Road Hustler* or someplace along the way in the study of the hotel community, but I began to realize that *activity was the key*! You want to see what things people are actually doing and how exactly they are doing them.

So, methodologically, instead of people's views about things being the most important, activity becomes your centralizing element. If you are focusing on activity, all those other things – identity, relationships, perspectives, and emotionality – can be envisioned as activity.

I didn't know about Aristotle's views on activity at that time, but he argues that when we're studying people we really need to focus on activity. That was something that really struck when we were studying the hotel community, but you'll also see that *Road Hustler* was developed around activities.

Activity becomes the methodological emphasis. What exactly is going on, how does it take place, how do people enter into the process, and what do others do? You're following the flows of activity along. Comparative analysis also is so important. Where is it similar and where is it different?

Steve: So, by comparative analysis you mean you're comparing communities and seeing how they are the same and different from one another?

Bob: It could be that. It also could be that you just did one interview with one person and now you're comparing it to an interview you did with another person. You're comparing cases. It could be the same person, but just two different instances of the same activity. Say you're doing a study of smoking and you talk to the same person and ask about the last time they smoked a cigarette and maybe the time before. You shouldn't assume that whatever you did once will be the same. In fact, I suspect that for most smokers having that first cigarette will be a different experience for them than the next one. What they actually do is likely to be different. That would be another instance. And, you see, with Glaser and Strauss when they talk about "grounded theory," in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, that's basically what they're talking about. Aristotle uses the term "analytic induction." It's a comparative method. Plato uses the term dialectic sometimes, it's more or less a constant comparison process, where you are focusing on the similarities and differences and asking about the implications.

Key Influences & Interactionist Roots

Steve: How do you see yourself fitting into Chicago School interactionism?

Bob: I remember talking with Howard Becker about Herbert Blumer. He said, "When we were at Chicago it was just such a large cohort. Most of us learned our symbolic interactionism from Herbert Blumer. Most of us worked with Everett Hughes, but we learned our social psychology from Herbert Blumer."… I learned my symbolic interaction from reading Blumer's text (*Symbolic Interactionism*) more than anything else. It's the best statement we have… I spent one afternoon talking with Blumer at Berkeley. At that time I think he was 80 years old or so, but still very coherent. I wasn't wise enough at that time to tape record him.

Steve: What were some of things you discussed with him?

Bob: We talked about different people. We talked about Erving Goffman, Anselm Strauss, Ed Lemert, and Ed Sutherland… We talked about a lot of things. Not so much issues from his writing. We understood that we had that base. Also, I didn't know what to expect. Looking back, I would have liked to have been more prepared…

We talked about the hotel community. He had read *Road Hustler* and my work on the hotel community. He understood it well. Amongst other things, he spent some time in the waiting room of one doctor who had a lot of underworld clientele. Herbert Blumer would go there Saturday mornings and talk to the people in the waiting room. It was my impression that he thought he might do some research on this group, but he never did. He did tell me that he introduced Broadway Jones to Ed Sutherland, but in the book *The Professional Thief* he is named Chic Conwell.

Herbert Blumer, to me, epitomizes Chicago sociology because, better than anybody, he indicates the linkages between pragmatist scholarship and ethnographic research. Blumer has been a constant conceptual inspiration for me.

You know, as I read my own stuff, the things I'm writing, at different times I will say, "What would Herbert Blumer or Erving Goffman think of this?" I'll sort of invoke the role of the third person. Or, if I'm stuck on something I'll say, "How might Herbert

Blumer deal with this issue?" Now, of course, I also consider how Aristotle might deal with certain things. They're very helpful in that sense.

It's very useful as a strategy for writing and analysing because, within oneself, we'll have certain ideas and we start to think of something in a certain way. But, if we take the role of the other, we can bring in different ideas that obviously were somehow stored in our minds, but that we haven't made explicit. So, I find that very helpful. And, you'll have dilemmas, like how might I sort this out? Is there a better way to approach this? I can say to myself, "How might Herbert Blumer deal with this?" Of course, you have to know that author fairly well to invoke their ideas.

Steve: You mentioned Everett Hughes. I think he might get lost sometimes in our thinking about contributors to ethnographic research. How do you think about Hughes and his contributions?

Bob: I actually don't spend a lot of time thinking about Everett Hughes. I think his greatest contributions were to encourage people to do studies of occupations. If you wanted to study occupations, Hughes would let you study it in all sorts of different ways, not solely just as an interactionist. Where Blumer, I think, was more concerned with maintaining an interactionist emphasis. So it's easier for me to identify with Blumer than Hughes. With my students I tell them that they can study a whole wide range of things, but to do it with an interactionist viewpoint.

Steve: So, the interactionist viewpoint is key for you.

Bob: Yes. Where it seemed that Everett Hughes' primary emphasis was with the sociology of work. He had other interests, of course, and interactionism was prominent, but it was only one way of approaching the study of work.

Steve: Do you think the same way then about Park and Burgess?

Bob: Herbert Blumer seems to have been influenced very much by George Herbert Mead and by Robert Park. From Robert Park, in part, he gets an emphasis on ethnographic inquiry. Blumer also has this early material on collective behaviour that, to my mind, is not very good at all. But it keeps getting reprinted over and over and over again. Now, in 1971 Herbert Blumer wrote "Social Problems as Collective Behaviour," which is an excellent article. To me, though, it seems like it's written from the viewpoint of George Herbert Mead, whereas the earlier material on collective behaviour, I think, is much more influenced by Robert Park.

It seems that that sort eclecticism belongs more to Park and then Hughes, both of whom have somewhat similar styles. At Chicago, I guess, all of these people more or less interacted with each other, with fragments and splinters. It seems that Blumer and Hughes didn't get along all that well, but nevertheless that's part of our legacy. But I don't find Robert Park's work to be all that useful. I think part of it is his conceptual mix. Everett Hughes' work has this conceptual mix as well. He does some things that are more consistently interactionist, but other things were more mixed. So those two don't have a particularly prominent position for me. Burgess, even less so. He was really more interested, I think, in family relations from any perspective, rather than being an interactionist per se.

Steve: So then with Blumer's later work on collective behaviour, you could see the interactionist focus coming out more there than in his earlier work?

Bob: Yes, it was just an entirely different statement on collective behavior. It's so very good! But it's a statement based on Mead's approach to community life rather than Park's approach. It's very different. So much more attentive to what people do in collective contexts.

Steve: You've also mentioned pragmatist scholarship. Now, I'm assuming Mead would be part of that group. Perhaps you can describe how you see Mead tying in? Do you see Mead as influencing your work directly or is his work somewhat mediated for you through Blumer?

Bob: I would say it's mostly Mead mediated through Blumer. I find Blumer's material much more direct and clear. All of Mead's texts were written from students' notes, so that might account for some of the differences. If I had to recommend *Mind, Self, and Society* or Blumer's *Symbolic Interactionism* for somebody just to read one, I'd recommend Blumer's *Symbolic Interactionism* because it gives you so much more. Still, Mead is so good!

One of my big surprises with regards to Mead was when I read more material from Wilhelm Dilthey. The surprise was to see just how much Mead's work resonated with some central tenants of Dilthey's thought. As it turns out Mead had gone to Germany and spent some time with Wilhelm Wundt and then with Dilthey. It's not clear what the lines of influence are, but I remember reading some passages from Dilthey and it was like déjà vu because the ideas that were in Mead had earlier been expressed by Dilthey and sometimes in much more crystalline form in Dilthey. The Americans who went over to Germany wouldn't have had a very good command of German, so it's hard to tell how they comprehended these materials. Still, they learned things. In a memorial statement to George Herbert Mead, John Dewey says that when Mead came back from Germany that his mind was preoccupied with the relationship of the individual to the group. So there is that aspect.

There again, you know, a lot of people tend to see symbolic interaction as individualistic, and it's not. Mead clearly emphasizes the importance of the group. While the group consists of individual people – discrete organic entities, they are entities that collectively develop language and other practices of sorts. The idea is that there would be no meaning, no thought of a meaningful sort without the community and without the symbolization process. This is in Dilthey and this is in Mead. I have great respect for Dilthey, Mead and the pragmatist tradition.

Now, one of the things I have found more recently in reading the Greek material and going back to the American pragmatists is that James, Dewey, and Mead had very little familiarity with Aristotle's texts. That surprised me! You'd think that, being philosophers, they would be familiar with his work. But, you know, a lot of philosophy has been written in the intervening centuries and, in trying to keep up with what is contemporary, people often lose track of what happened earlier.

They will acknowledge that the Greeks started pragmatism – James does and Dewey does -- but they don't seem to have studied the classical Greek texts that carefully. They apparently know Plato much better than Aristotle, which is very, very common in philosophy I've found. Most philosophers are Platonists. And, a lot of those who call themselves Aristotelians are logicians. Some know Aristotle's work on ethics, which is quite incredible, but most really don't pay much attention to Aristotle's work on rhetoric or politics or poetics or memory. They just isolate themselves more into analysis. That broader neglect of Aristotle was a surprise to me. I thought the philosophers did a better job of that, but they don't actually. Most really don't know

Aristotle very well. Mead is very critical at times of Aristotle, but I don't find his critiques justified. I also have difficulty understanding the basis on which Mead is being critical because the affinities in their works are so striking. But Mead doesn't know Aristotle well at all. If he knew Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, or even *Nicomachean Ethics* well, he would see the affinities.

Steve: Who have some of your more contemporary influences been?

Bob: One of the nice things about being a symbolic interactionist, as opposed to doing something parallel, but working on your own, is that you do have a community of other people that you can connect with. You can go to conferences, you have literature in common, and you have people in common. It is a social world and that's so important. For some people, such as our grad students and undergrads, we've been able to help connect them to that community. For me, it was really after finishing graduate school that I became part of that community. At Iowa, they had symbolic interaction, but it was a very different kind of symbolic interaction. So, I ended up meeting a lot of people, Chicago-style people, essentially on my own. Nevertheless, it was very useful to meet these people and something that I believe is invaluable.

If I think back over the years, I've met a number of people that have been very helpful, such as Peter and Pattie Adler who were doing research on drug dealers when I was doing my hotel research. You know, Clint Sanders, Tom Morrione… Gary Fine I haven't had so much contact with, but I like Gary and he's there doing things. Of course, Billy Shaffir and Jack Haas, Lonnie Athens, and David Karp. There are just a whole lot of people in this tradition. You see them here and there, but they sort of become your intellectual family. You talk about things with them. You debate things with them. The community, that's really part of where you are.

Confronting Criticisms of Interactionism

Steve: I was going to talk about this later, but I think we can talk about it now since you brought up a criticism about interactionism. One of the criticisms is that interactionists are psychological reductionists. You had gotten to that to a degree by talking about the criticism that interactionists focus too much on the individual. But, as you point, that really isn't the case.

Bob: I would say that *we absolutely are not psychological reductionists.* There's no equivocation on that! The reason I say that is because the symbolization process isn't something that people develop on their own. It's a group thing. It requires some sense of mutuality. Language is not an individual thing.

So, without the group, there would be no concepts, no meaningful thought. What could you possibly think about? Where would these ideas come from? I guess maybe one could say we're born with these ideas. We don't!

As symbolic interactionists, we are definitely not psychological reductionists. It's always the group. Still, having said that, we're also very mindful of people's capacity for agency. But, agency is also a social process. All of those things are effectively products of group interchange. Even notions of individualism or subjectivity, those are group-based concepts.

Steve: How do you think of those as group-based concepts?

Bob: In terms of language. Without that, without language, you wouldn't have a his or her, he and she, you and me, they and I. How would this person become an individual apart from the other? You would have no sense of "whatness." Here again, Aristotle says that things only have meaning relative to what we compare them with. I think he's entirely correct in that. So, without a sense of what is hard, we wouldn't have an idea of what is soft. Without a sense of a group or the other, does it make sense to have an individual? There would be no advantage to having the concept of an individual or a self if you're there all by yourself.

So, it's this notion of "whatness." And, whatness doesn't come from physical sensations. It doesn't come from within. It seems to be linguistic. I was struggling with this in developing a paper on memory. There are different modes of memory. We realize that other animals have memory, but do they have recollectable memory – you know, where they can recall or reflect back on something, where you deliberately pull something from your past experience into your immediate consciousness? Aristotle says, "No they don't." Once again, I think he's entirely correct about that. The reason people can do this is because of language and language is a group thing.

Early Greek Contributions to Pragmatist Scholarship

Steve: Let's talk a little bit about some of your more recent work – the work you've been doing on the Greeks.

Bob: Yes, the Greek project. How did it get started? In 1998, I was basically finishing the manuscript for *Beyond the Power Mystique.* I had been going through the literature on power, more specifically to see if anyone had written on power as an enacted social process. I wasn't finding very much, but every now and then I'd find references to Plato or Aristotle.

These were just brief, cryptic references. They were just short, mostly oblique references and I had gone back to the 1700s or so and it looked like things just kind of flattened out or there wasn't much there. So, I was a little reluctant to go back even further and start reading these things, but I decided I'd do this because I should know, right? I read Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and "Wow, is this ever good!" I thought, like "Holy Moly, I'm supposed to be some kind of expert in labelling theory, and here this guy has given us a version of labelling theory that just is so incredibly good!" I realized I had to learn more. So, I started reading more of Aristotle's texts and also Plato's materials because I realized that there were these interconnections between Plato and Aristotle. At that time, the power mystique book was in press. I had one last chance to fix some of the errors or typos or whatever else. I decided that before it goes to press that I would have to talk about the Greek material because what I had found was so good.

I experienced some trepidation because I hadn't had much of a chance to study this material and bounce my ideas off people who were really knowledgeable in the area, but the material I found was just so important. So, I wrote a statement up. I pulled some other material out of this text and put the material in from the Greeks because it seemed to be so consequential, so important. So, that was the beginning.

After that I just kept reading more and more material from the Greeks, following some conceptual themes along over the millennia. I began to realize that various people had pragmatist themes that they would work on, but these didn't have a nice consistent flow. At certain points it might be people in rhetoric who were talking about these issues, but at other times it might be people in poetics or religion

or education. As I read this material, initially on the Greeks, I began to realize that American pragmatism was so parallel to some Greek social thought, especially from Aristotle.

The two also seemed too parallel to just be separate things. So, what were the connections? I knew I could trace Mead's pragmatism back to Dilthey, but could I go back further? That was sort of the question. I was working my way back in terms of history and then working my way ahead from the Greeks towards the present time in these different areas. I was mainly focusing on pragmatist themes or emphases in the literature but that was just one of a number of things that the Greeks talked about.

In getting involved in the Greek project, however, I put two ethnographies aside. One is on shopping behaviour – the sequel, basically, to the study of marketing and sales – and it's quite a well-developed study. In fact, I think I pretty well have two volumes of material. Maybe I need to develop another four chapters. So, it's really quite extensive. Then I have another project on economic development, not as far along, about halfway through. Both of these I thought were important projects. But, when I came across this Greek material and realized how good it was, I thought, "Lots of people can do ethnographies, but how many people are going to go and actually trace the routes of our tradition?" It wasn't simply a matter of saying, "Well, you can find it in Greek thought" or "There are these authors here and there throughout history that talked about similar things."

People, theorists in sociology, have talked about American pragmatism as if it was this unique, frontier, democratic type of development – only in America could such a theory develop. I realized that this argument was completely nonsensical. But, in addition to that, this material offered great potential for comparative analysis.

We're more used to thinking of comparisons on a horizontal level. You might do a study of the Mennonites and somebody else might do a study of hookers, and somebody else on the police, and somebody else on blogging, or something. We can sort of compare these and, in our broader analytic quest, we might go back to the 1920s or so, to the beginnings of Chicago ethnography, say. Or, we might go cross-culturally with the anthropologists where they have material that's more comparable. We think of the value of doing comparative analysis in these regards. But what I realized was that there was something else going on here. If we can locate these texts from the past, we can do transhistorical analysis and a lot of it is also transcultural. It means that there are these jewels scattered throughout history, the problem being… to find them.

Steve: What do you see, then, as being the intellectual payoff in doing the Greek project?

Bob: There are lots of payoffs. One of the more immediate payoffs, for me, is a realization that if you know Plato and Aristotle, you basically know Western social theory as it's going to develop over the next 2,500 years. You don't know exactly what people are going to talk about or what they're going to lose in the process because they end up losing lots of things. There hasn't been a nice consistent follow through. We have lost so much. You don't know what they're going to emphasis, because people will pick up on little themes and emphasize them. But, you know the basic parameters of what will become Western social thought.

So, you can read lots of material that comes along later comparatively quickly because you're not reading everything separately by itself. You're reading it relative to the base. And, once you know the base, it's so much easier to see what's there

and what's not there and where they're going. That's one kind of payoff, which I hadn't anticipated. In terms of understanding our roots, that's another important thing to know. Otherwise you keep reinventing the wheel.

As it turns out, again to go back to the Greeks, Plato and Aristotle have some incredible insights to offer us, things that 2,500 years later we haven't appreciated in a direct explicit sense. So, there are those kinds of things as well.

There's also the advantage of comparative analysis. Say we want to understand relationships. We could understand relationships between dating couples, bikers, the Mennonites, whatever group you want. But, we have texts that have been written 2,500 years ago and they also talked about relationships and they look at it in process terms and it's quite descriptive. A lot of the material that I work with from the past has a quasi-ethnographic quality to it. So you can look at and see what it suggests about relationships.

I'll give you an example. Ovid wrote a book on the art of love. It looks at how people get involved in relationships, how they intensify them, when they break up how they deal with the loss of the relationship, how they deal with jealousy, so many things that we experience, yet at a different time, a different location, and a different lifestyle. But, what are we learning about relationships? So, it has that incredible comparative payoff.

There's really so much work to be done in this area. I can go through and track some of these articles and talk about them, but there really needs to be a lot of sustained comparative analysis using these as resources. I've done a lot of synoptical statements of these texts because I realize that most people aren't going to go and read all of these books. But, if they have a synopsis that's fairly accurate, with "chapter and verse" references, they can find things that they are looking for and compare it with this other material. So, if they're studying emotions, or identities, or acquiring perspectives, or whatever, they can go here and there, and across different substantive fields as well, because these people wrote on many different topics.

If we just discovered some community out there, I don't know, in Africa or South America, that we haven't heard of before, you could see all these anthropologists converging on it, or trying to. You could say, "Well, look at all the resources we have here for comparative analysis." As it turns out, the anthropologists don't do much comparative analysis, but nevertheless they have that idea.

But, instead, I could say we have to look at all the material we have from the Greeks and from the Romans and various other communities. It's not consistent, but the material is here and there. It's just an incredibly valuable set of resources. Because these materials are cross-cultural as well as transhistorical, if you find the same sorts of things going on there, it makes a stronger case for some generic concepts… Plus we can specify things more precisely. That's really the intellectual payoff.

It's also something that I realize that I can only do a little bit of myself. There's a lot of history, historical materials, to work with. It's fun, but at the same time there are a lot of texts out there. And you see, in part, people have dismissed so much of the past because they think that if you really want to understand today you have to look at today's people. Durkheim was developing a text, *The Evolution of Educational Thought* in his lectures. It's not a very well-known statement. But he explicitly and forcefully makes the argument that you can't understand today's people without comparing them to yesterday's people. He says, moreover, that you don't want to limit your comparisons to the last three or four centuries. You want to go back as far as you can. His idea is that you want to go back as far as the Greeks because, in terms of the foundations of Western social thought, as much as any place, it began

there. It wasn't as if the Greeks suddenly had all these ideas on their own, but they were the great compilers. They got materials from the east, west, north, and south and they started to put it together. So it became this incredible goldmine!

When people talk about the cradle of Western civilization, this is what they're talking about. I'd heard this phrase many times, but never really appreciated how entirely viable it was. The Greek material is just so good, so precise. And, Plato and Aristotle, to their credit, are very concerned about defining their terms. In fact, they insisted that if you're going to talk about something, be sure to define your terms. They have different styles of writing, but nevertheless, they are quite precise.

That's something that I hope that I can give to the social sciences because the social sciences have so little history and so little awareness of the value of transhistorical material. It's something that I think we can do, as interactionists, in ways that people could not do as quantitative scholars. Again, to go back to Durkheim and this text, *The Evolution of Educational Thought*, Durkheim really works in a very parallel way to what I'm doing. I was really quite surprised to find that.

Durkheim's Contributions to Pragmatist Scholarship

Steve: That is interesting. The way you talk about Durkheim is quite different than the way in which he has been talked about by other sociologists.

Bob: Yes, because you see, the books that he is best known for are going to be, *The Division of Labour in Society*, *Rules of the Sociological Method*, and *Suicide*. So the books that he wrote in 1893, 1895, and 1897, those are what he's best known for. The materials that he wrote later on such as, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, *Moral Education*, *The Evolution of Educational Thought*, and a statement *Pragmatism and Sociology*, which is very, very good. In those, he is much closer to us. I would say he effectively adopts a sociological pragmatist viewpoint, it is much better than William James who reduces things to psychology. See, Mead doesn't do this; Mead really differs from James here too. For Mead, there is the group. The group is irreducible in quality. Durkheim says that, too. Durkheim, in his later works, is much more attentive to language, concepts, and activity. He says you can't reduce a complex, dynamic thing like society to some simplistic, abstract variables. Now, interestingly, he doesn't criticize his earlier texts, but his later works are really very different. So, I've been learning from Emile as well.

Steve: You had said earlier that you work in a somewhat similar fashion as Durkheim writes some of his later works. In what ways, then, do you see the affinities?

Bob: First, in his later works, Durkheim is very analytic. He is interested in speech and meaning and how people develop and use concepts. In his later works, he also emphasizes the importance of ethnography and history, which surprised me. In his *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, he builds extensively on ethnographic materials. So, in those ways there are similarities. The emphasis on the group and activities within are further similarities.

In a lot of ways, the later Durkheim is quite consistent with what we think of as Meadian social thought. I hadn't realized that until just a little over a year ago… I'm writing a text on Durkheim's sociological pragmatism. It is another extension of the Greek project actually.

The Scientific Merits of Symbolic Interaction & Qualitative Research

Steve: It's interesting to think of how our careers and focuses change overtime. Until about halfway through my undergraduate degree I didn't really think of qualitative research as being scientific or that there could be a real science to making qualitative observations. I had thought that it best served to find variables to be tested with quantitative measures. That changed after I took your class and read some interactionist and qualitative research texts.

Bob: The point that you raise – that is, "is symbolic interaction a science?" – is a very important question. Herbert Blumer, in his 1928 dissertation, talks about this directly. He doesn't use the term symbolic interaction. He talks about Cooley's method of sympathetic introspection, which effectively is ethnographic research. He says that, if by science you mean the type of inquiry you find in the physical sciences, where you can be very precise and rigorous, it doesn't seem that we can do that. But, he says, if a science, a human science, is to respect its subject matter, then we need a different type of methodology than that which is used in the physical sciences. Basically, you see the rudiments of his arguments for interpretation and the idea that a science of the human condition needs to take into account people's use of language, concepts, agency, and reflectivity. This is part of the reason that he argues that if you don't respect the things that are most distinctively human, how can you say you are doing a scientific study of the human condition? That is effectively what he says. But yet, a lot of people presume that because they are counting things and running statistical analyses that they are doing science.

In the papers that I did with Tony Puddephatt on causation and the one with Scott Grills on the myth of the independent variable, we say that if you're going to proceed scientifically with things, shouldn't you look at instances of things and shouldn't you look at the ways in which these develop? So, it's a different notion of science. It involves studying human group life in great detail.

If you're going to talk about causation, you should show the linkages between the things that are presumably involved. So, if we say that age or race or gender or class causes crime or is really consequential for crime, well how exactly is that? Did age cause crime in itself? Well, we know that it never did. But, even if it did, what exactly is the linkage? If you went to a courtroom and you said, this is my evidence, they would say, "Listen, forget it. You don't have a case!"

Independent, dependent variables, they would say, "What kind of proof is that?" It's like saying that guns cause death or something. You know, it has to be more than the gun, unless it spontaneously blows up or something and bullets go all over the place. You see what I mean? It's this idea of a connection.

That's probably an argument we could pursue a little more. Well, what exactly is the connection of these things? If you can't establish a connection, what would be the value of just talking about it? You would have to speculate on connections, right? That's what people, so many social scientists, do.

And many people out there want simple things, they want promises, hopes. They want to be able to control their destiny. They may know that these things are not possible, but they want them all the same. If you come along and promise that you can tell them the six, three, two, or whatever factors that cause this or that, people want to listen.

The interactionists and, Blumer more than anybody, took issue with on those sorts of things, claims. But, a lot of people haven't. I think even in our own part (as

interactionists), there is a tendency to assume that since other sociologists are doing things scientifically then that must have some integrity without actually looking at the science they are actually engaged in. Once you do that, it starts to look quite different.

The Centrality of Concepts

Bob: To go back to this idea of the community, and Durkheim makes the point that it is in the community – in the course of human interchange -- that people develop concepts.

Concepts enable us to do things. If you have to reinvent the concepts all the time, you may not even develop concepts that are anywhere near as good as what has been developed.

That's a problem with a lot of ethnography. People don't seem to understand that there's a technique to doing it and they think that they can go on their own little trip and other people can read it and gain all sorts of insights from it. But, insofar as it doesn't parallel things in other ways it's harder to draw comparisons. If you have studies that talk about identities, it could be on almost anything, any realm of human group life, but you can build on those.

If you have someone that "talks about my experiences with a new car" and another one that talks about "my emotional trauma," and they're working with different concepts, there aren't any linkages. But, if you talk about my experiences with a new car and my experiences with some emotional setback as a set of definitions, emergent definitions, you might have something that you could at least compare. That's an important thing.

If you're not in a community where you share concepts, you can't tap into mutual reference points. You can't really assess any concepts because you don't have shared comparison points to assess things. Even if you could create some concepts on your own, you would have all these people creating new concepts that are just bouncing around somewhere. You need someway of getting people to focus on things together.

Steve: Do you ever find that there are a number of concepts out there that are saying the same thing, but are labelled differently? There almost needs to be someone going around putting all of them together. It's like having a bunch of different languages and we need to bring them together.

Bob: Two things. One is to what extent are the terms synonymous? If they are more synonymous, then you can more readily bring the two together. However, if one is coming out of this paradigm and the other is coming out of that paradigm, even if they're the same terms, they are different because of the connotations that each represents.

At the same time, are there some more basic themes? Again, Durkheim, even though he doesn't know Aristotle really well, he goes back to Aristotle's categories and he says every human group needs categories like this in order to do things. He's arguing for some basic themes there and, of course, our notions of generic social processes would be very parallel to that.

It's almost like a magic carpet. Once you have these concepts, you can take them with you any place. That's the nice thing. You have some points of comparison. Herbert Blumer also talks about that. He says that concepts do not eliminate the unique qualities of things, but concepts provide a way of establishing or knowing

what's unique and what's common. Without the concepts we wouldn't have a basis of comparison.

PART TWO

In this section we discuss a variety of different topics ranging from ethics and research funding and the notion of Generic Social Process to the need for comparative analysis in and across the broader field of ethnographic research. We also discuss the difficulties and benefits of co-authoring papers and juggling multiple research projects, consider whether or not Plato and Aristotle can be considered ethnographers, and have a short dialogue on animal-human relationships and the dualism debate. We conclude part two by discussing the "meaning-making process" and the role of habits in human activity. Throughout our epistemological discussion Bob emphasizes the human capacity to develop and share meanings for objects, the processual and generic features of group-life, and the value of concepts to both human understanding and the sociological enterprise.

Comments on the Discipline

Steve: One question that comes up for people and one that came up for me in my ethics review is, "What type of contribution will this research make to the community you're researching?" What do you advise on this sort of question?

Bob: What I tell people is that we're really not there to change people's lifestyles or tell them how to live. We're basically there to learn from them. The idea is to leave the community relatively unscathed and let them develop their lives as they figure it ought to be, not to have some sociologist, or some outsider, or perhaps even somebody from the ethics committee tell them what they should be doing. This is not our agenda. If it turns out that our work is of some use to them, well that's fine, but that's really up to them.

Steve: How do you think about funding agencies, like the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), wanting researchers to have some sort of community outcome from their findings?

Bob: SSHRC has lost a sense of scholarship. SSHRC is just trying to become a bigger empire and they think the way they do it is to, at least on the surface, indicate to people that we are doing these wonderful things. That we are going to eradicate crime or effectively deal with social problems. It's not going to happen! It's just obvious that these things are around and will stay around.

Most of the research that SSHRC funds won't be of much benefit anyway because it doesn't really look at what people actually do. If you are not doing that, you don't even know what is going on. It's rather pretentious to propose to tell people how they should live a better life. At the back of it there seems to be some idea that there is this sort of ideal set of criteria that will define a better life for people and that we should somehow find that. It is an idealistic emphasis taken maybe from Rousseau and possibly even as far back as Plato.

It's a strange thing that SSHRC is doing. To my mind it is an anti-intellectual stance. There is this emphasis on, "How can people out there use this information?" Well, people out there don't have one set of interests. The questions they may want to have answered might have very little to do with scholarship.

We want to understand human group life generically. If we don't do that, we lose our sense of theory and a sense of perspective. To say simply we're going to give them whatever they want, that's okay, but it doesn't mean that they, the public, know what scholarship is or how scholarship is best developed. We're going to give them, I suppose, what you might call "public social science" because it is somehow engaging the public. It is a very bad set of policies and I spoke against SSHRC when they proposed this. To my mind it is just a very anti-intellectual stance. Nevertheless, they went through with it and the universities will adjust to whatever SSHRC wants because that's where the money is. So, that is going to create some problems for ethnographers and other serious scholars along the way because instead of concept-oriented social science, we are going to get who knows what kind of emphasis, depending on, I suppose, local representatives or whoever is speaking loudest at that point.

Steve: At the same time, I see us as being well positioned as ethnographers to offer insights into public issues. I agree completely with you that we're not out there to immediately affect people's lives, but in the end if we produce a well-written ethnography there probably will be groups that are interested in it. The way I look at it, I put something together, I'm not giving advice, I'm saying these are the perspectives of the people that I spoke to, this is how I analysed it, these are some concepts that I developed out of or refined in my research, and then in the end, say if a policy-maker gets a hold of it and wants to use my findings to develop directions for further research or for policies or whatever they want to use it for, then that's fine. But as a researcher, I don't see that as being my immediate goal.

Bob: I quite agree. And again, we can make the argument for authenticity, which underlies a lot of what you're saying. So, I have no problem with that. I think we should be trying to learn things for people, but to learn things for the people does not necessarily mean that we should be following the people's notions of what social science is at this and that point in time.

We want to follow the people's notions of what constitutes their life-worlds. Then, we need to try and develop a social science that connects the different themes and activities across these life-worlds. That's the sociological enterprise. We have to go one step up, even though when we do the research, we need to get right in there and see what is going on and explain to people that we really are interested in the things that they're doing. We need to take those things apart piece-by-piece.

Now, they might not be interested in actually looking at the more sustained research that we develop. They may want some simple idea of what the factors are and some simple solutions to things. Well, we don't have those things. There are no simple solutions to those things. But, some academics will promise that.

Steve: When I propose new research I always try to point that the benefit of the type of research that I do is that of getting close to people and seeing firsthand what they do. What better way of understanding social life than by getting close to it and interacting with people, discussing what they do, how they do it, and when they do it? You know, those sorts of things. It's more difficult to promote ethnography, say in terms of convincing a group that it's worthy research and worthy of funding when that

group has a specific form of research in mind to begin with and will only accept a certain type of research. When I first started doing ethnography and employing interactionist ideas, I said to myself, "This type of research makes perfect sense." It resonates with me and a lot others who first start to pick it up. Why wouldn't you do research this way? This seems to be just a logical extension of the human condition. If you want to understand social behaviour, hang out with people.

Bob: I agree. There's no better way of putting it.

Steve: I think it does or at least can resonate with people in the funding agencies, too. Even when I tell people who don't understand what sociology is per se, while some of it can seem pretty esoteric, on a lot of levels our approach (SI and ethnography) resonates with the common person as well.

Bob: Yes, it does have that quality to it.

Generic Social Processes (GSPs)

Steve: The idea of "Generic Social Process," can you describe what it is and how you came up with it?

Bob: Sure. You know, while we work with the idea that everything is in process, the idea of GSPs is really to look at human group life and ask, "Are there any systematic processual regularities? Is there any way of looking across at the things that people do at different times, at different places, different settings, and different contexts and seeing if there are some commonalities?"

It is based on notions of comparison, thinking in terms of where things are similar and where they are different. Even though as an analyst or a scholar or whatever, when we are studying situations, we tend to think in terms of what the relevant concepts are. In that respect, I really don't know when or how I started thinking in these terms. Is it from elementary notions of science? Is it from just experiencing things that people would say over the years? I truly don't know.

At one point, however, we had a conference (1985). It was a conference on symbolic interaction and ethnographic research. This was one of the early ones we did. I was trying to find some way of organizing the papers because, as you know, in this area people can examine virtually any substantive area and we have all sorts of angles or processes that we can deal with….

So, I was trying to find some way of putting this conference together and I decided what we really needed to do was to organize the conference around "process." I tried to sort out the paper topics. You know, what sorts of things were they talking about overall? At that point, I think I ended up with five notions: perspectives, activities, identities, relationships, and I think the fifth was making commitments. Overtime, I've increased the number of GSPs and I don't know what the actual number of them is, if there is a number. It became a way of organizing things that made sense to me. I ended up writing a paper on GSPs for this conference as a means of trying to introduce the other papers. That eventually was published. That was sort of the more formal beginning of it.

Who was I indebted to? Well, I was indebted to Herbert Blumer, of course. He talked about generic processes. I was indebted to Georg Simmel, for "forms" and "content." But also John Lofland and Ed Lemert, and other interactionists like Howard Becker and Erving Goffman, who had talked about these notions in process

terms. So, it wasn't as if I did anything so exceptional. It was really just taking things that were there in different ways and refocusing them somewhat. Also Glaser and Strauss and there are others that I talk about in the 1996 text.

Comparative Analysis

Steve: Was there something from Glaser and Strauss' text that inspired some of your work?

Bob: Their material on grounded theory basically is a variation of analytic induction. The idea is, again, you work with similarities and differences, which seems like such a simple thing, but we don't really encourage our students to do that much comparative analysis.

But, Glaser and Strauss talk about the importance of developing theory based on data -- observations, interviews, whatever, wherein one starts to ask where are these materials similar and where are they different? So, that book was important. It really isn't a theory as such. It's a procedure. The idea is that you would ground theory in the instances.

While Glaser tended to be somewhat more quantitative, Strauss, as a Chicago-style interactionist, was more ethnographic in his emphasis, but they certainly agreed on that comparative aspect. There's a nice little quotation there, I think it's from Anselm Strauss, 1970, where he says something to the effect, "If we don't develop some concepts that transcend these situations, all we are going to have are just isolated islands of ethnography." You need some way of connecting these studies and that's really the value of grounded theory.

Now, sometimes ethnographers feel that that's being too restrictive. They think that with ethnography that you should be able to do anything you want. But, if you're not comparing things, how can you possibly know what you have there? Because, again back to Aristotle, we only know things relative to those things that we compare them with.

Blumer makes a similar point in his "Science without Concepts," which I believe he wrote around 1931 – it's in his 1969 volume. He says that concepts do not destroy the unique features, but instead they enable us to appreciate what's unique relative to other things. Still, there is the idea that some ethnographers have this idea that if you start to focus on concepts you'll destroy the unique features. On the other hand, you have nothing that you can take with you if you don't have concepts. Concepts are really the key to knowing.

Steve: So, perhaps an undue emphasis on just thick description?

Bob: You could have it, but what would you do with it in the end? It's only of value when you have something to compare it with.

Process & Activity

Steve: Another thing that appears to be standing out is an emphasis on process. Where does this come from?

Bob: Probably from the Chicago tradition. In my own work, I become so much aware of the relevance of activity. If we have to start with anything, that would be where I

would start in every ethnography. What are the things that these people are doing? Then, sort of follow those along because everything develops around activities.

In social psychology, there is this idea that you have beliefs and then you have activities. I think the much more accurate way of looking at it is that you have activities and, as you develop notions of what the activities are, beliefs and activities become so interconstituted. All meaningful activities are tied up with concepts and all concepts have relevance to the things that people would do. Even in terms of, I suppose, fictional concepts. And, you might say that nobody would really do this or go there or whatever, but we also envision fiction… as a mode of entertainment or whatever, relative to lines of activity.

Co-authored Ventures

Steve: You've written some co-authored papers, such as your work with Scott Grills. I think you and Richard Mitchell did some work on technology together. How did these projects come about for you? For example, *The Deviant Mystique* that you did with Scott.

Bob: *The Deviant Mystique* really goes back to teaching this course in deviance over the years. Along the way, at some point, Scott was my teaching assistant for that course. So, that worked out quite nicely. Later on I was working on this project and I asked Scott if he would like to be involved with it.

If you're working with someone on a project, especially something bigger, it's so nice for you to have a mutuality of perspectives. I realized over the years, having tried some things with people who, let's say, worked from different intellectual centering points, that things don't develop very well over all. But if you have people working on a project that have mutual viewpoints, then you can focus on the project rather than get involved in side issues. So, that was very nice. Working with Scott was quite enjoyable. Working with most of these people has been pretty good. They have certain interests or fields or whatever, but if you can develop something around those interests it works out nicely.

I also think it is so good for a person to have multiple projects on the go. If you can avoid it, never work on just one project at a time because there is a great intellectual pay-off, even for people on their own to be working on multiple projects. As they go back and forth, say between two or three projects, they'll be making the comparisons that are so valuable to them; they'll see things. You don't get bored as readily because you always have something going on. It's sort of like these daytime soap operas where they have about eight plots going on at once. It's something like that. Then, different people have different interests and if they intersect at some point in time you might end up doing a project with them. Then, depending on them and their timing and the other things that they might be doing, you might in some cases do more things with them. Or, that might be it, because they're off doing other things and you're off doing other things. It is nice if you can find that person you can work with.

The ideal really is, let's say I take a run at something and I give it to you, and now you just rip into it. If you think something's good, you keep it. If it's something you think should be changed, you change it and add whatever you think would be viable. Then, you give it back to me and I do the same thing. I'm not so concerned about saving it, but just "What's it worth, what can we do, and how can we make it stronger?" Are there things to drop out or things to add? When I get it back to you, hopefully, it'll be a stronger paper. Then, you do the same thing again and we'll just

go back-and-forth. In part, depending on when something's due, say for a conference or other things, you might be working on, you'll decide when to wrap it up. That's really my favourite way of working.

I like working with someone who isn't worried about having to re-write something to make it better. My idea is, "If you can see a better way of writing it, write it that way." We want to have clarity, precision, comprehensiveness, and authenticity. Again, we want it to be generic and pluralist. I do that when I work with my own material, which is fine, but having that other person working with you is nice because they'll bring in these other variants. It's the best when that person attacks the paper and isn't worried about saving the paper, but is concerned with making it better… Lorne Dawson and I have worked on projects like that. Tony Puddephatt, too.

Early Greek Scholarship and Pragmatist Thought

Steve: Okay, on that note, perhaps we could talk about some of your work on the Greeks. Plato and Aristotle are obviously great thinkers. And, I know that you make it clear in your writing about them that these people are not ethnographers per se, but definitely great thinkers. And, I know you stress that it's necessary to get close to the social world in order to understand it. So, I see Plato as doing a lot of talking about the social world, but is he observing it? They meet in groups and discuss different issues and work through them logically. They're philosophising. So, to me, they don't really appear to be engaging the social world. They're not really observing it. In *The Republic*, Plato is working with an ideal type of society. It seems to be good philosophy and they're great thinkers, you know, the way they work through things. But, are we perhaps getting caught up in a bit of a "Greek mystique?" Do we get caught up in emphasizing these scholars too much sometimes because there's this mystique that surrounds them? That is, we have this fascination with them because it seems so amazing that they were thinking these great things 2,500 years ago. They were thinking of the types of things we're still thinking of now and, in a lot of ways, we haven't even approached this type of thinking in over 2,500 years. So, my question or concern is that we get caught up in placing too much emphasis in a group of people that weren't really directly interacting with the social world. They weren't observing it or getting close to it. Now, I don't know the Greek literature as well as you do, but I thought maybe this is something that we could discuss.

Bob: That's a really important question, set of concerns, Steve. I'm not sure where to begin because there are so many interrelated things. I do not know just how Plato and Aristotle learned so much about people. But, the Greeks seemed to have spent a great deal of time going to court and listening to cases and debating about things. They spent a lot of time dealing with rhetoric and poetics. So, to be a scholar in those days you wouldn't be as narrow as we are now.

Plato's idea, and he talks about this later on in *The Republic*, is that before you could teach philosophy you spend the first 30 years of your life learning everything you can about everything, just getting the best education you possibly can. Then, you spend the next five years studying dialectics, which is this comparative analysis and taking everything apart piece-by-piece, seeing where things are similar and things are different, and looking at what the implications might be, and what the interlinkages and connections are. Now, you're like 35 years old. You now spend 15 years say, running the family business, in the military, in a trade, or something. He says that we wouldn't think of you becoming the principal leader of

the country, but you could get into bureaucracy and politics. But, after those 15 years of experience, now at about fifty you can go teach philosophy.

Steve: So it seems like they had to be very much a part of the everyday world before they could be philosophers.

Bob: I think they very much were. Plato sets up this ideal society, but when you go through his text and you look at the ideas that they're dealing with, you realize he didn't start out with some ideal and then create all sorts of contingencies. He obviously spent a great deal of time inquiring into the ways that people were doing things and their relationships with one another. I have the impression that Plato tends to deal in prototypical instances, if that makes sense. You have instances and then you say, "What is generic about these instances?" He seems to be thinking in that way. Aristotle does this as well. The most sustained ethnography from that period is actually Thucydides' *The History of the Peloponnesian War*. How good is it? It is amazing! It is as good as anything we've ever produced. In fact, you might even make the argument that it's better than any single study we've ever produced as contemporary ethnographers.

Steve: What makes it such a strong ethnography?

Bob: It's very thorough. Thucydides considers the history of the Peloponnesian war. The Peloponnese is the southern peninsula of Greece, basically covering the region around Sparta and Athens… It's an account of the war, and the peace, and treaties, coalitions, and whatnot between Sparta and Athens and their shifting allies over a twenty year period… He basically tries to trace the overall developmental flow of these relationships, alignments, strategies, and such.

Thucydides was an Athenian. At one point he was an Athenian General, but after his group was defeated in this battle he was banned from Athens… But, he said, it worked out well because now the Spartans would talk to him quite openly. So, he could add more aspects to his study. He basically tries to look at the things that the people involved did and from the perspectives of the relative players in the setting. He said he talked to people as much as he could because he wasn't there during all the events, but nevertheless he tried to be thorough. Now, I don't know how he financed the project, but he didn't do this for a dissertation or anything of that sort. It just seems to have been a genuine quest for knowledge.

It's a very highly detailed statement that social scientists really haven't yet appreciated and yet there are lots of things that could be learned from it. So, he gives us a statement that is extremely valuable. We could go and pull out the concepts and sharpen them a little more. Nevertheless, there are many things that, as you go through it, you could say, "I'm going to look at the coalition process. How do coalitions come about? When are they sustained and intensified? What are the limitations? When do they break down?" Well, he gives you lots and lots of instances. So you can start to study that.

There are a couple other Greek ethnographies that are very good. Herodotus writes, *The Histories* just before Thucydides. Xenophon talks about a Greek expedition into Persia, but he also wrote about other things. The Greeks, remember, were students of rhetoric and for them rhetoric wasn't just talk about things. It was a realm of influence work and activity. Although a lot of rhetoric was developed in the courtroom, they also realized that it had great relevance to the military and in the political context – and in ceremonial contexts where people were being honoured or

chastised. They take this apart piece-by-piece. Now, someplace along the line you need instances.

So, are Plato and Aristotle ethnographers? No, I wouldn't call them ethnographers in what we take to be a more conventional sense of the term. But, they certainly were active participants in the world and certainly astute observers. They don't connect things quite the way we do in the Chicago School tradition. But, they are obviously concerned about developing concepts that were linked to what people did. It wasn't pie-in-the-sky stuff. It's very precise and thorough. When I read Aristotle's *Rhetoric* I couldn't help but think that most of the stuff that we've done on labelling looks pretty limited compared to his text. It's just so good!

Now, there are people that say, "What could we possibly learn from the Greeks? I mean this is 2,500 year later. Surely we've progressed a great deal since." They have the idea that knowledge just keeps developing exponentially and that there's this great continuity. But, there isn't that continuity. Many things have been lost. People often attack the value of history or lessons from the past. Durkheim talks about this in, *The Evolution of Educational Thought*." He deals with it quite systematically. It is apparent that, for various reasons, people don't always like ideas from the past… We have lost so much that way.

The postmodernists now will tell you that you don't need the past. The past is all just an illusion. The only thing that has any truth-value, somehow, is postmodernism. Of course, if you say that nothing has any truth-value then that would presumably include postmodernism as well. So, you do have detractors of various kinds.

Some people might say that I'm glamorizing the past. I don't think I'm glamorizing it at all. What I'm trying to do is to connect what we do with the past. I place great value on contemporary ethnography, but it can be more valuable when compared to other places and times. It's especially valuable when you can compare to other ethnographies that are more detailed and have more of a pluralist quality to them. So, I've been trying to go through the literature and find texts where people have dealt with instances of human group life in more detailed and sustained terms. Not where you get a little quotation and make a big deal out of it. Rather, I'm looking for statements that are developed in more sustained and detailed terms.

Comparative Analysis & Generic Social Processes (GSPs)

Steve: So, what often gets lost in our individual ethnographies is that we have something that becomes a statement unto itself, that doesn't really have a lot of value unless you make, not only the contemporary comparisons to similar types of work, but also comparisons across history.

Bob: It's this basic idea that, if your concepts are any good, they really should reflect a wide range of subject matters that yet are somehow related. So each time somebody does a study in the present time, and you're interested, say, in the relationship process, you'd like to look at that study, if you're addressing relationships, and see what else you can learn about the relationship process. Are the things that we said earlier still valid? Do they need to be qualified? Are they questionable, based on this additional piece of information?

If we can go back in time and, say, find something from Ovid and *The Art of Love*, where he talks about relationships. Or, we can go back to Thucydides and look at relationships or alliances between different city-states. Or, we can go back to Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* and look at his notions of friendship or some other

notions of love in Plato's *Symposium*. These texts give us a number of comparison points that we simply would lack. The idea, in part, is to make our generic social processes as informed and robust as we possibly can. I guess the idea is to make the strongest claims that we can make. But, to make the strongest claims, let's make sure we have the strongest range of materials with which to work with.

Steve: How generic can we take our generic social processes? I'm thinking of something like relationships. Should we qualify it and indicate that we're only referring to the generic aspects of *intimate* relationships? Or, can we just say we're looking at relationships in the broadest generic sense? For example, can we apply it to people's relationships with technology? Or, should we keep it to purely social relationships?

Bob: To have a relationship with technology, that's very different. In a sense you do. People do engage technology, but technology isn't just a physical thing. It's a whole social process. Nothing has any particular value in itself. It's part of all the other things that we deal with. So, I have a pen here, but a pen would have no value without paper or something to write on. A pen would be of no value for writing text if we didn't have an alphabet, some symbols. A pen would be of no value if we didn't have something that we as a community thought was worthwhile recording. We might use it for artwork or something, but the physical elements are all connected with what we do in the life-world more generally. So, we're part of that process.

It's a different use of the term to look at relationships between people. And, of course, we can look at relationships between two individuals. You might even talk about a relationship that a person has with him or herself. Once you're a social being, you have a relationship with yourself. Aristotle talks about this. He asks if someone can be his or her own best friend. He says, "Yes," which is an interesting idea. He actually develops this idea and it's very, very thoughtfully developed.

Also, when you relate to two or three people, you change the dynamics from one on one. If it's relationships between groups, then many more situations can develop. And, what we would want to do is to try and qualify the concept, "relationship," so we can ask questions. How do relationships come about? When are they likely to intensify, stabilize, dissipate, and become reconstituted? Those kinds of things seem to be entirely generic with that process aspect. But then when you start to break it up and look at it with multiple people, then you realize that you have to qualify or specify, somewhat, your use of the concept. Again, it depends on what you want to do with that concept "relationship." So, it's an ongoing process in itself.

The idea is that each time you have another ethnography, assuming that it's detailed, representative, and has a pluralist or open quality to it, or at least it has a lot of those features, it becomes like a little treasure chest to me. The idea is that you'd like to get all these treasure chests and open them up and compare them to see what's going on. That's my notion of social science I suppose.

Steve: I know more people are getting into the area of studying human-animal interactions. I know some symbolic interactionists looking at this. Clint Sanders is one.

Bob: Audrey Whipper is another one. She's retired now, but was very interested in horse-rider relationships.

Steve: I know *Qualitative Sociology Review* is running a special edition on this topic. How do you think about studying human-animal interactions? And, how do you think symbolic interactionists should be approaching this? I'm easing into another debate: the object-actor debate or the dualism debate. And, the proposition that objects can have agency.

Bob: Presumably we're talking about animals that have the capacity for memory. That is, animals that can be taught things. Still, I also would make the argument that, other than humans, it appears that other animals don't have the capacity for recollectable memory – that is, to remember things when they want to remember things.

      People seem to have a different kind of language, if you want to use that term. If you accept that difference, which is a very consequential one, then you realize that when we're talking about, say, people and dogs, people and horses, people and chimpanzees, that the people are doing most of the intellectual work. I would say virtually all of the conceptual work.

      It's the people that are giving meanings to the relationship. The animals are reacting and they're sort of part of the environment, but I don't believe they have concepts. People do. While people can teach them certain responses to words or whatever, that's very, very different from having a concept of the word or thinking of objects in more abstract, recollectable terms. I think that when people talk about their animals, and even with infants, they tend to assign qualities to those beings that are not merited. But, you can also assign qualities to inanimate objects. People will do this with ships and automobiles. It seems that we can assign agency to these other objects. Do these other things or animals have agency as people do, as linguistic beings? I would say, no, they don't. They seem to be able to initiate things, but they are not conceptually meaningfully or knowledgeably doing so.

Steve: With regards to the debate of whether or not objects have agency, wouldn't the interactionist answer to this reside in Blumer's idea of "obdurate reality" and the fact that we live in a world of objects which we give meaning to? We interpret them and give qualities to things. Like you said, we can treat our pets as if they have human qualities and give our cars names and such. For interactionists, doesn't it come down to the idea that we are the ones assigning the meaning?

Bob: Yes. Again, for all the things out there, excluding people, there is no source of meaning, no concept of what things are. There is no reality. Reality is a humanly constructed process. It's a concept. Other animals may engage in behaviour, they may have some memory, and we may assign them agency of various kinds, but they don't have a concept of "what the world is." They don't have the concept of, I'll use the term "whatness" – what is and what is not – that humans in every group seem to have. That, I think, is absolutely critical. So, do they live in a world of objects? No.

There are no objects except as people define them as such. Does that mean that everything is a blur or a process? No, it doesn't mean that either because these are human concepts as well... I think that other animals operate in terms of signs and images but not concepts. And humans don't either, until they acquire language.

Steve: One idea that I've heard is, what about the automatic door that closes on you? You're halfway through the door and it closes on you and impedes your movement. Therefore, doesn't that object have agency?

Bob: Does rain have agency?

Steve: The idea doesn't resonate with me. The door doesn't have agency. We react to this door closing. We say the door is closing. The meaning we associate with it is that we cannot move forward or perhaps we have to push the door open more. We're interpreting the situation. So, we're the ones interpreting and assigning agency.

Bob: I'm with you on that. We could talk next about the ideas of object and subject. The way I would look at it is that, as humans, there is no objective world and there is no subjective world. It's an intersubjective world. Nothing has any meaning or value apart from the group context. It's the group in which concepts develop. In order for things to have meanings, we have to be able to attach concepts to them.

Even notions of individualism or subjectivism, there are no individuals apart from the group context. It's a concept within. There is no community apart from the concepts of the group. It's within the group that all notions of "what is" and "what is not" develop. As children are taught a language they basically are taught concepts. They acquire concepts – notions of "whatness." It's by invoking the notions of "whatness" that they become active meaningful participants of the world. They could be active before, but not in a meaningful sense because what meanings could they assign to anything if they don't have some concepts or a sense of "whatness?"

In the paper I wrote on memory [*Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 2007], I talk about the pragmatist metamorphosis. I think that compared to the metamorphosis of the butterfly, the acquisition of speech is just an incredibly spectacular phenomenon because in the process of acquiring language people not only undergo a transformation, but they go from a state of a non-knowing object to a knowing object. So, they go from a non-knowing essence to something that can assign meanings. They are now something that has a sense of reality. But the reality doesn't inhere in the objects; it inheres in the concepts of the group.

Emile Durkheim, whom we don't think of as a symbolic interactionist, actually provides an important statement on this in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. It's very explicit and a very, very nice statement. This is central to human memory. The human memory is imbued with this notion of "whatness." We make sense of things by locating them relative to the community's concepts – the "whatness" of the community.

The Meaning-Making Process

Steve: In your book, *Beyond the Power Mystique*, you talk about some of the myths of symbolic interaction. Something I thought you worded quite well and I can't remember which "myth" you were referring to, but relates to what you were just talking about, was your discussion of being born into a pre-existing culture. You basically discuss how we are born into a pre-defined world and then we acquire culture and understandings through the socialization process. And, in another book, and I can't remember it's title, but it's an earlier book on symbolic interaction, the author discusses abstract thought. He basically states that once we have some concepts to work with we can relate these concepts to one another and in doing so in our mind we can develop new concepts of things. Then, perhaps, when we come across a similar situation to what we were in before, we can draw upon our understandings of the previous situation and apply our previous understandings, through abstraction, to these situations. The human capacity to think abstractly or generically is definitely an interesting area to examine.

Bob: I think it might be in the memory paper where I talk about this. Some people say that our notions of reality are limited by our words, say our concepts more specifically. I take issue with that because once you have a concept you can start to do things, extend things. The concept becomes like a tool or resource for developing more concepts. So, the limits are not defined by one's language per se.
        The other idea is that it's the pre-existing world of the group that is so critical for comprehending people, what they know and do in the present. But this is really just right out of Mead. Durkheim too. And Aristotle. That is often overlooked, but again, it's nothing new. I have to just say I've had lots of great teachers!

Steve: I had thought about this idea, too. That is, the idea that as soon as we acquire knowledge and as soon as we have concepts for things that we are in a sense limited by pre-existing knowledge because it's hard to move beyond and challenge a pre-existing way of thinking about things. People's minds are set.

Bob: Again, you see, the resistance is not just on an individual level. If you're trying to influence a particular person, it's not just that person that you're dealing with. You're dealing with their senses of the other, what they've learned, and the activities that they've engaged in. So, it's really all of those things. That's part of the reason why it's really so difficult to implement change. It's difficult because of all the things that the people at that point in time are connected with. That's what, in part, enables us to remember things more effectively because words are connected not just with the dictionary meanings or people's verbal meanings, but they're connected with some sense of emotionality, activities, relationships, and occasions or events. All of those things facilitate the memory of those things, but at the same time, if you want to change that item it's harder because of all the connections.

Steve: Here's another thing: habits. So, we develop habits out of a way of reacting to similar situations. Some would argue that it's not a minded process. That is, it's a process that doesn't involve us actively thinking about it. It's something that we do habitually. So we're not really assigning meaning. What do you think about this?

Bob: It's all of those things, actually, because before you get language, you can certainly develop habitualized ways of dealing with things. You don't know what's

going on, but you have tendencies and resistances. So, even as you acquire language, you have this set of tendencies and resistances that you're bringing with you. You don't know what they are. As you're encountering language and people are trying to get you to develop these other habits, it's all part of a process and no one can really separate out how this or that will develop. So, even if you are trying to condition, say, a young child you don't know how effective this will be or if other things will show up later on. But, once you acquire language, you have a way of giving things meanings and that changes the character of habits for that being and for the others around him. But, again, it's not just that person him or herself, because the other people are also acting towards you and some may be encouraging and discouraging certain things even as you're being encouraged and discouraged differently by other people.

So, you may have a couple small children in the family and they're used to entertaining each other. They might develop habits in terms of bouncing around or whatever. And, now, the mother is saying, "Settle down you two. Settle down!" But, the two are looking at each other and they're used to just bouncing around together or talking to each other. They've developed that style. Similarly, when they go to school and the teacher tells them to settle down, but they're in the habit of bouncing around together, disattending, and talking to one another. So, you have all of these habits.

You have habits becoming established. Some that people are more aware of and some that they are not aware of. Some they can do things about, some they don't seem to know how to change even if they wanted to. And then there may be these resistances from, say, the teacher's or the parents' viewpoint, but those things may be encouraged by people's peers, siblings, or whatever. So, this is a very interesting topic. Tony Puddephatt and I have talked about doing a paper on habits and a paper around the concept of character because these are all related.

Who is very helpful? Well, Aristotle again. You know, I've been surprised to see just how helpful the Greek literature has been to me. As I've thought about different things, I've had access to these resources. They present ideas, often quite clearly, that presently aren't recognized, like Aristotle's notion of a recollectable memory. I've not seen anybody other than Aristotle deal with that. He does it so well. GSPs, the Greeks would have had no problems with this whatsoever because they think at an analytic level… Also, most also think in term of process. Maybe that reflects their training in rhetoric, I don't know. But most contemporary philosophers don't have a good sense of process. They're structuralists mostly. They're weak on intersubjectivity and interpretation, reflectivity. They miss activity, speech… So, Aristotle's *Rhetoric* presents basically the GSP of influence work. To Aristotle, more generally, everything that people do is to be understood as an activity.

Even later, when we find Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) influenced by Aristotle, we see that emphasis… Aquinas says that the conscience is not a thing, it's an activity. I found that very interesting because we usually think that theologians as seeing the conscience as a thing. Aquinas split the Catholic Church. The traditional viewpoint is that people are born with a spiritual soul, like this divine presence enters into them somehow and they have a soul. Aquinas takes Aristotle's viewpoint that people are born with a "psyche" – a life-energy in Aristotle's terms. But, there's nothing mystical about it. There's nothing divine about it. People have a life-energy. Rabbits have a life-energy. Carrots have a life-energy. In some ways it sounds pretty close to what we would think of as DNA. Nevertheless, Aquinas takes that viewpoint. So, he splits from the traditional Catholic, Judaic, and Islamic notions that people are born with a spiritual essence. He says no, they are born animals and

develop habits. He says that later on, when they die, if they had developed good characters, he believes as a matter of faith, that they may acquire heavenly souls. Aristotle doesn't make that kind of connection or assertion… That's where Aquinas splits with Aristotle. There were people that tried to have Aquinas excommunicated because of this radical idea. It was amazing that he was allowed to stay in the Catholic Church and later was sainted!.. Like Aristotle, there are a lot of pragmatist features in Aquinas's writings.

PART THREE

Building on our earlier discussion on Bob's substantive research, we discuss the ethnographic approach in more detail. Bob offers a number of experiential insights, personal strategies, and advice to scholars concerning what he's learned about participant observation, conducting interviews, and analysing data. He advises researchers to continue to engage the ethnographic literature and involve themselves in more than one project or field site at a time during their own primary data collection. Such an approach, he maintains, allows researchers to more fruitfully develop transcontextual and transhistorical concepts. Bob also presents his viewpoints on advising new scholars, suggesting that it's important to encourage students to consider graduate studies early on and get them fully involved in collecting their own ethnographic data early in their academic career. We also consider the concept of subcultural mosaics and its relevance for the study of community life. Towards the end of the interview we discuss some of the shortfalls Bob sees within quantitative, positivist, and postmodernist approaches within sociology. He argues that such approaches simply do not offer an authentic representation of how group life is actually accomplished. We also consider Herbert Blumer's emphasis on intimate familiarity as well as analytic induction and grounded theory as aspects of the sociological venture. We conclude by discussing Bob's viewpoints regarding the viability of sociology. Here he maintains that an interpretivist approach, which builds on pragmatism and interactionism, and employs ethnographic techniques, is the most viable way of developing a more authentic study of the social world. A list of Robert Prus's book publications is provided at the end.

The Ethnographic Approach

Steve: What sort of methods do you advocate in terms of collecting data?

Bob: What we think of as the standard ethnographic package. We have participant observation and then other kinds of observation when we aren't able to participate as fully or directly in a group's activities. But, to my mind, the most essential feature is really extended open-ended interviews. That is so consequential! However, people have done well and have generated valuable materials sometimes without much extended interviewing. The value of the interview, though, is that you can ask people for more detailed accounts, variations, hesitations, reservations, excitement or boredom, and everything else that goes on. Sometimes, though, people aren't as willing to cooperate with the interviewer or they don't have the time, but ideally, extended, open-ended interviews are what you would like.

Steve: So, really the opportunity to sit down with somebody and talk to them in-depth about their viewpoints and activities, and discuss these things with them?

Bob: Yes. Now, the materials that I've been working with are the Greek and Latin ethnographies, which are historical documents. I'm thinking of Augustine. He writes a book on rhetoric called, *On Christian Doctrine*. It's basically a text for preachers, but, in the process of giving this account of what you could think of as an army of rhetoricians for God, Augustine talks about the limitations, the challenges, the conditions and such with which these people are working. He doesn't give you interviews, but nevertheless he provides this very valuable account of early Christian missionizing activities, recruitment practices. There are certain claims that you can't make about it as an ethnography, but in terms of understanding the life-worlds they were in, the activities they were doing, the way they were presenting things, the dilemmas that they experienced, and the challenges they faced, it's still very good. In the process Augustine also gives us some things that you don't find in a lot of other ethnographies. It's quite an amazing statement on influence work. It's about how people can try to develop charisma for themselves as speakers, but more especially Augustine wants them to develop charisma for God. So, the speakers, as they're presenting ideas, he wants to indicate how they could use rhetoric to enhance the image that people have of God.

Working with Multiple Ethnographies – Past and Present

Steve: So, when you're going over these historical documents, given your background in ethnographic research, do you find certain techniques helpful in approaching some of these documents?

Bob: Yes, extremely. I basically approach them like I'm an ethnographer. I use the entire stock of knowledge that I have about contemporary ethnography as I'm going through them. I'm asking myself, "Is this authentic? Is it pluralist? What sorts of issues are they raising? How are they dealing with these or those concepts?" So, I'm trying to bring that in as a comparison point. As I read these things I have that as my base. Is this material similar or different? What does it offer us in comparison to contemporary ethnography? I'm not trying to make it incredibly wonderful, but I'm not trying to diminish its value either. The idea is that we use these historical works as part of our whole package of resources. Why would we want to ignore them?

I really like reading ethnographies, especially those that are done more extensively. So, I could take, for example, Gary Alan Fine's *Gifted Tongues*, which deals with high school debates and is a very nice book. I would say, "Here's Gary dealing with influence work." I can look at John Lofland's *The Doomsday Cult*, which presents another instance of influence work, but in a religious context. I could look at say some work that Billy Shaffir has done on the Hassidic Jews and their notions of leaders and who is authentic and related concerns. Then I could take those things and read Augustine *On Christian Doctrine* and ask how his ideas compare with these other contemporary materials. Why not play with a whole deck of cards instead of limiting ourselves to just the cards that came up in the last five or so?

Steve: I agree. I guess most of us just focus on the contemporary data and look at just a single study.

Bob: That's another thing. Many people get so caught up in whatever area they're working in that they think that that's really the ultimate. They don't seem to realize that other people, often their very contemporaries, are doing the same thing. But, if nobody ties them together, what are they worth? And some people think that if something isn't the newest, the most recent, how can it be very valuable? They say things like, "Well, we now have computers, cell phones. What did they have?" Karl Marx made the same kind of mistake. He proclaimed basically, "We have the steam engine. What did they have?" Now, we look at the steam engine and it seems pretty obsolete, just like how people will later look at our cell phones and computers as obsolete. On the other hand, if we can produce some elaborate well-developed ethnographies that deal with the things that people actually do, not what we think they should do, but what they actually do, then those will be valuable over the long term.

When Thucydides wrote *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, he said there'd be some people that will be very disappointed with this book because it lacks a romantic, poetic element. He said, though, "I'm writing this to last forever, so that people centuries from now who are involved in wars and related matters will be able to read these set of accounts that I have and relate to them." So, he had these images of developing ethnographies that essentially last forever.

Norman Denzin and I disagree on this point. Norman is very concerned about developing things for the present, to achieve some sort of evocative, present-oriented scholarship. I'm really concerned about developing things that people might use now but also centuries and millennia later when they might want to know what was happening in this or that situation or what was really going on. Then you have the goods, right? You have the activities. Are these detailed and relatively clean? That is, they're pluralist and not biased, not moralist, not prescriptive, but essentially an attempt to indicate what this group was doing. Presenting their viewpoints on things rather than promoting or defending one or another sense of morality. So, that's in part my idea.

Strategies for Conducting Ethnographic Research

Steve: In terms of particular strategies when conducting ethnographies, are there any particular kinds of strategies that you find useful during your interviewing or when making observation?

Bob: Yes, there are lots of strategies. I guess number one, if there was a number one, would be to focus on what people are doing – the "what" and "how" of the activities. If you could have a single number one, that would be it. Patience is really important. If you're going to be a good ethnographer, you have to be patient. You have to be willing to take your time with the people and listen to them and not presume to know. You have to be persistent. You have to stay with things and follow them up. You have to increasingly ask people for more detail and elaboration. Ask things like, "Can you explain this? Can you tell me more about this? How does that work? Have there been times when you didn't do that?"

I place a heavy emphasis on "how" questions – the process – and try to avoid the "why" questions. "Why" tends to put people on the defensive. It promotes motive talk. It encourages people to give you simplistic answers. Sometimes I'll ask people a question and they'll say, "Well, you mean why, right?" And, I'll say, "Well, I'm really interested in the whole process, everything." Sometimes I'll tell people that I really need to know everything about what's going on and don't worry about boring me with

the details. It's very different from "keep it short, make it sweet, and keep it to the point." No, no, no. We really need all the detail!"

So, just take your time and try to pursue things as comprehensively as you can. Keep records of things, all the things you encounter. The interlinkages people have with one another are important. The sequence or natural history of events is important. You want to follow things along. It's also very important to keep asking people for instances. "Can you give me an instance of this or that?... Can you tell me about another time?" You are not just asking when people are more or less likely to do certain things. Ask about times when it's been easy, fun, boring, tough.

If it's a sensitive topic, you might ask them about things that other people do. Once they start to see that you're really not uptight about the things that other people do, they're more willing to tell you about the things that they do. It's very important to be non-judgemental. If somebody's kicking his or her dog, well, isn't that interesting? You're not there to be offended. If you're going to be a more adequate ethnographer, you really can't have concerns with morality that you take into the field or concerns about pride or trying to be somebody.

When you're there, they are the stars! My job is to learn about them. I'm not there to explain sociology, tell them what Herbert Blumer thinks, or impress them with what I know or have done. No, it's all about them! I try to spend very little time talking about me in the field. I let them talk. If they are talking, you're just going "Ah hah," "Uh huh." Indicate an interest. You'll ask things like, "How's that? What did you do then?" You're interested, but you're not moralizing with them. You can laugh with them and cry with them, whatever you want, but remember that you're there to learn from them. You really want to be careful to maintain a stance whereby they can give you all sides of things. You're not really there to be one of them and they don't expect you to be one of them. But, you can't let your differences be threatening to them. So, it's very important to have them, as much as you can, feel comfortable with you.

I'll tell people, and especially newer people to the field, don't worry about you being uncomfortable. Worry about them being comfortable with you. They have to connect with you. Then, of course, when you concentrate on that then you sort of forget about you trying to be comfortable with them. That's not what's important.

It's like when I was doing the study on the hotel community. As you know, I'm not a bar person. That's not my lifestyle. When I'm there, though, I'm intensely interested in everything that goes on in the bar. It's a matter of relating to people so that they know they can tell you things, that they have your confidence. But, they don't expect you to be them. I don't try to impress them. They're the stars. I try to make that apparent to them. So, when they're talking, I tell them, "That's very interesting! So, what did you do then?... Had you thought about doing other things?" You always want to flip it around so they have an opportunity to indicate the full range of possibilities. So, if they're kicking their dog you might say, "So, your dog's giving you a little trouble today is it?" Then you might spend a few minutes talking about the dog and then you get on with other things. But, you can't be there to moralize with them about the dog because, if you do that, then you're just jeopardizing the whole situation. As I say, you're not there to express values or morals or pride or whatever. You're just there to learn. Learn as much as you can!

Make every interview as worthwhile as you can. I don't go in with a list of questions. But I do like a list of points or topics to discuss. I've found that a good thing to do with people is just to have this on a clipboard and pass it over to them and say, "Here are some of the things that I'd like to talk about." So, they look at it and see that there's nothing threatening. They're sort of relieved. Then I say, "Is there

any place you'd like to start?" Then they could say, "Well, maybe here." "Okay, good, tell me about that." I can go back later on and pick up on things, but in the meantime get as much as I can from them. Something else I do, if I just have a few minutes with them or a half hour, I try to get something in detail rather than trying to cover a whole lot of stuff on a superficial level. Even if it's something small, let's do a good job of it.

If I'm doing an interview I'll maybe spend four or five minutes, maybe more, kind of warming up with the person, just letting them feel comfortable with me and being more relaxed just talking with me. For example, when I did the study in shopping activity, I'd often ask, "What's your favourite kind of shopping?" Just start out with something like that – something very easy.

Another thing that's not a bad idea, if you know you are going to meet with somebody, you can say, "Well, here's a list of things I thought we might talk about. You can jot down some other things. So, when we get together we'll just go through these and see what we can do and take it wherever it goes." I'll leave that sheet with them for them to think about. They don't have to be hit cold every time. That can be very good actually!

Again, when doing the interviews I like to ask, "What can you tell me about this?" Just leave it open. I like to do that rather than reading them some long question where they have to take thirty seconds to sort out what you just asked them. Then, in your approach you can be more specific and ask for more detail. It's like if you were writing a book, you would first introduce people to the basic concepts of the book and then the more detailed stuff. So, just let them get used to the idea. Also, when you're presenting your research project to them, present it as fundamentally straightforward as you can – just a very basic variation of what it is that you're doing. You want them to feel comfortable with what it is that you're doing. You don't want to give them some sort of deeply academic, highly analytical statement.

A problem that is becoming more and more bothersome is dealing with ethics. Ethics committees want you to be very technical. A lot of participants in the field don't like the ethics part of it because everything is so austere and formal. So, I explain to people, "At the university, this is what the ethics committee wants us to do, so we'll go through this and you can see what you think. Then we can just talk about things." They like that. You can just talk about things. So, the idea is that you have to humanize it and unfortunately the ethics concerns dehumanize the interview. I don't think that's their intent, but they really do put additional kinds of stress on people in the situation and invite a lot of inauthenticity as a consequence of that. People feel the strain of the whole process.

It's so important that you just take your time with people. How long should an interview be? If somebody that says they did an interview in half an hour I tend to think, "What kind of an interview could this possibly be?" It's probably not worth much at all. In half an hour you've not gotten much past getting acquainted and telling the person a bit about the project. Of course, one interview is never the same as the next. That's something else that ethics committees don't really understand. To them everything should be standardized. In a good interview I'll spend hours and hours with people. I'll spend as much time as they will possibly give me. If you have less time, though, try to be as thorough as you can possibly be on the matters that you cover. Again, if you can't cover all the topics, do a good job on the few that you can cover. Then overall, you end up with more material, better material.

Another thing, of course, is that your interviews wander. If it's a long interview, with a lot of things you want to ask about, you might find that it's maybe good to start halfway through your list of topics so that you're getting a fuller range of materials

covered in-depth over a series of interviews. Sometimes you can go back to the same people, which is great, and you can pick up on things. Sometimes you don't have those opportunities, say, if people are more mobile or unsettled. So, you get what you can at the time. Like in the hotel study, we never knew when we were talking with somebody how long the interview might be or if we'd ever see the people again. It was just a very unpredictable and somewhat volatile setting because people were into so much action and had such unsettled lives. We wouldn't use the phrase, "Lets make an appointment." We'd say, "Could we maybe get together tomorrow? Okay, well what time might be good for you?" Even then, you never know. You have to adjust to the people and try to relate to them in terms with which they feel comfortable. If you don't do that you might be getting answers, but I don't know what they'd be worth.

Steve: Such good advice.

Bob: You'll also find that when you're talking to people that there may be certain areas that they are more sensitive about and who knows for what reasons. So, I tell people, "If there are certain things that you'd rather not talk about, just let me know, but whatever we do talk about I'd like you to be as sincere as you can be and be as helpful as you can be. If there are things that you'd like to keep confidential that's your prerogative." That usually works out pretty well.

Another thing, if we're taping, again depending on the situation, I'll often put the tape recorder close to them, depending on the pick-up and such, and I'll say, "This is how you put the pause button on. Anything you'd like to have off the record, just push this down." Then they can feel like they're more in control of the situation, which is good… The idea is to connect with them so that they're talking to you, like you're having a conversation. You're not just doing question, response, question, response. You have to get beyond that!

There will also be certain people that you will have difficulty with and that's just how it is. Sometimes you can get them to open up after awhile. Other times, they really don't. They may not be used to talking very much or who knows what. You'll just run across that. It could be your very first interview. It could be your third or your nineteenth or something. But, those sorts of things will happen. You'll also run into people who don't take you seriously. Often this tends to be friends. Friends can sometimes be really good sources. Other times, though, they're used to giving you the business or just being non-serious with you. So, sometimes, friends can be the worst of interviews and sometimes the best. But, with each interview, it's good to let it assume its own course in terms of tempo and style. You adjust to the person, not the person having to adjust to you. Some people are quicker. Some people are more relaxed or laidback. You have to adjust to their styles.

As we're talking, I'm thinking of this one woman from my research on economic development. I said to her, "Here are the sorts of the topics I'd like to work on" and gave her my clipboard, but she held onto it. She says, "Okay, first topic" and she basically interviewed herself all the way through. I would just say things like, "Yes... How about that? Could you give me some examples?" She would cover one topic and then just move to the next. It was really quite interesting. She seemed to feel comfortable doing that, so that's okay, she can interview herself.

One of my most difficult situations involved doing an interview with a guy that was a heavy chain smoker. He was another economic developer with a large office. I'm talking to him and the interview is going on and on. He has his coffee and whatnot, great! It's like five hours and we're still doing the interview. He's enjoying

talking to me. But, later on I'm becoming more and more incoherent. I'm not used to all this smoke. I also knew that my questions weren't very good at this point. I thought they were rather incoherent. But, it doesn't matter, he's going on. He now had a very good sense of where we're going with things, what kinds of things were important, what kinds of details I was after. All he basically needed me to do was to be there and nod. It was just some phenomenal material. The secret, though, was not the questions that I asked him. The key was that he was just enjoying describing all of these aspects of his life-world to someone.

You see, the nice thing about our role is that a lot of times people who are insiders are not really that interested in talking to other insiders about these life-worlds in the same kind of detail. We come along and we're interested in all the things they do – the shifts, the transitions, the boring things, the exciting things, the uncertainties, and all that. So, they really like talking to us. That's so important! Once they become accustomed to the idea then, since they have such a strong stock of knowledge about their realm of activity, they can just go on. So, I try to let them talk just as much as they can. A good interview will be one where I talk maybe about 5% of the time and they do the rest. So, I'll have transcriptions where I ask, "Can you tell me about this?" and they're going on for maybe a couple pages. Then I'll say, "What about this?" and let them go again.

Steve: I can definitely relate to what you're saying. For example, I have this really good quote from my research on computer hackers. Towards the end of my interview with one computer hacker, I remember saying, "You know, I really appreciate you taking this time to share your experiences with me." And he said something like, "No, I thank you for taking the time. You're willing to sit down and take the time to talk to me about something I love doing."

Bob: Oh yes. Doing research on the marketing and sales project, I had some very similar experiences. I'd set up an appointment initially and they might say something like, "Time is money" and maybe give me an hour. So then I'll go there and keep track of my hour because I know I might not have any more time. So, at the end of the hour I might say, "Would you like to continue because we've been here an hour and I don't want to take advantage of your generosity" and they'll say, "Oh no, no, we'll keep going!" Then, people will say, "I'm really glad you came. I would have paid you to do this interview!" It's because they have a chance to talk about things, sort of like your experience with the hacker. It's a very common experience.

Something else I wanted to mention is that when you're in the field, it's really important that you keep confidences of people relative to other people. Sometimes newcomers in the field want to show people how much they've learned or how much the other person has told them… And they'll go, "Oh so and so told me this." It's a big mistake, though. Just keep everybody separate. If they ask what someone else said you just say that you'll have to let them talk to the other person about that. It's important that you keep everyone's confidences.

Steve: Have you ever had an interview where people are just giving short, quick responses? If so, how do you handle it?

Bob: You can try and ask for instances. It may be the case that they just don't feel comfortable in the interview and this just may be their way of putting you off. It may be the case that they're worried about other things and that their mind is not there. Sometimes I'll say, "You probably have a lot of things on your mind that you need to

do today. If it seems worthwhile to you, perhaps there's another time that we could come back and follow up on this?" They might tell you about some of the things that are on their mind. Then you can give them a call later to see how they're doing, but it may or may not work out. Still, you're better to do that than just keep them in that situation.

It may also be the case that they don't know what they're talking about. I remember when I was doing the study of the hotel community that there was this one young black guy, a sociology student, who told me that he really knew a lot about the players and pimps and such. So, I asked him to talk with me about this. We're talking for a while and he's giving me these vague answers. So, eventually I asked him if he really knew what was going on or if he was just getting stuff off television. And, he told me that he had seen some stuff on the show "60 Minutes." Again, that's another good reason to ask for details. By doing this, you find out if people know what they're talking about or if they're just trying to impress you. That can happen, too. Sometimes people just like to seem knowledgeable about things.

Another thing that's good to have with you during an interview is a pen and paper. When people give you answers, they tend not to give you nice linear answers. That's because in the human group, in real life, things are so interrelated. So they often discuss a number of things when explaining one aspect. So, if you have your notes, then you can jot down different things that you want to discuss and follow-up as you go. You can't do follow-ups on six things at once.

It's also good to have things tape-recorded because then you can listen to them and you realize that you should've asked about this or that. Maybe you can get back to that person for more sustained interviewing. Or in the next interview, you can attend to those things so that your interviews become increasingly better.

Some people will say that if you're changing the questions, how can you do an analysis? My idea is that you ask as much about as many things as you can and as you're going along, you're learning things. That's part of what you're dealing with. So, you're not trying to establish standardized notions of reliability, but rather more thoroughly learn what's going on in the situation. If you knew everything that you needed to know at the beginning when you're making up the questions, you probably wouldn't need to do the study. So, it has this openness to it and it's important to adjust to it and be as open as you can, wherever you are. It's almost a relentless pursuit of information.

Another point that I sometimes make in class is that of overcoming any mystique in the setting. Suppose that you're going to be studying nurses. Well, maybe it doesn't really feel like there's too much mystique there. Then you say, "Well, what if you study some hookers?" People seem to think that there's a sort of deviant mystique there. Now, when you're actually doing the research. You can't spend your time saying, "This is a hooker! This is a hooker! Oh, my gosh! Oh, my gosh!" You have to put that aside, just like you would if you were studying a nurse or a teacher or the person next door. So, you just say, "So, tell me about your business, the things you do." You can't let that mystique or aura get in the way.

Say you're studying scientists. It's the same thing. You have to recognize that they are people first and foremost. They're doing things and you don't have to understand all the technical features of their roles. They don't expect you to be scientists. They've spent a lot of years studying things and working on these projects. They don't expect someone to come in off the street and suddenly be an expert in their area. If you're interested in what they're doing and how they got started, the dilemmas they had, concerns with staying on top of the field, accessing technology, now they can tell you about those kinds of things. Usually they're quite

happy to do that. Once again, they don't expect you to be them… You have to put that mystique aside for whatever group you're studying. If you can't do that, it tends to generate problems for your whole interview. Say you're studying executives and you're all in awe of executives, it's going to be tough! It's not a big deal that they're executives. You're not trying to be one of them. You're just there to learn about them.

Steve: I ran into the "mystique" issue when studying computer hackers. I got the idea to study this group of what, I thought, were computer criminals while working for the Department of Justice. But, when I started the research and was meeting with people that called themselves hackers, none of them fit this deviant stereotype. So, I kept looking. However, I kept finding that the people I met with weren't fitting my initial definition of the hacker. I realized fairly soon, though, that I had gotten caught up in this sort of deviant mystique that surrounded their subculture and therefore had to adapt my perspective.

Bob: That's a really good point. More generally it means that even when you think you know things about the field you should try to put those aside as much as you can and try to get their explanations of things.
    Now, sometimes people will say, "Well, you know." You really have to get past that one. If you're a student, you might say, "I think I understand what you mean, but my instructor wants to hear everything from the people themselves. Would it be possible for you to explain that a little more fully?" If it's me, I might say, "I think I know what you mean, but it would really be helpful if you could explain this. I'm putting this study together for other people who need to know. So, it's probably better if they hear it in your words and not mine. That way it'll sound more natural and more authentic." They often like that idea – i.e., that it's in their own words. It's something you really have to watch because there's an easy tendency to want to appear smart when you're the interviewer… The idea is not to try and impress people with what you know, but rather to get them to explain things to us.

Steve: I guess this comes up a lot when doing interviews with people you know well. They'll say things like, "You remember when. You know this." I guess then it's up to you to get them to help you refresh your memory by talking about those things.

Bob: Or, they'll say something like "As you know," like everyone should know this. You really have just say, "I'm really not that sure about that. Could you tell me a little how that works?" Or, "What's involved, so that I'm a little more certain." It's also a good idea to get them into explaining things early. A lot of times they'll use certain terms as if everyone in the world would know the meaning of these terms. You have to ask them what they mean when you don't understand the terms. Certain words or phrases in this or that setting could be very common, but they're words that outsiders don't understand a lot of the time. Or, certain words could be used in different ways. Even though it may seem like any bozo would know, you need to ask just to ascertain exactly what it is that's going on.
    When I'm doing an interview, I try to be the best student that this person has ever had. I'm curious. I like to know things. It's like an apprenticeship for me. Which really it is, because I'm there to learn from them. It's not a bad idea to say, "Even as we're doing the interview, I'm sure I'm going to have some dumb questions. I hope you don't mind, but I need to know what's going on."

Steve: I guess it also shows your humanness, which makes it easier for people to relate to you. It gives people an extra level of comfort. You had talked a little bit about some examples from the field. Were there any other sort of interesting examples from field that you can recall that were, say, particularly enjoyable moments or trying times when maybe you felt the research wasn't going to go any further?

Bob: I'll speak a little more generally. A big thing in the field is maintaining composure. That is, don't get stressed out over things. Don't get anxious about things. Don't get annoyed about things. There may be times when people are rude to you. Again, we don't have the privilege of pride. Be as nice as you can to people and treat them as well as you can. But also try to be mindful of your own emotions. This is not the place to be discordant with their viewpoints. You may be talking with somebody about politics and they may be making statements that you think are totally ludicrous. But remember, as a sociologist, their viewpoints are not ludicrous; they're interesting, important actually. You put those other definitions, your personal views aside. Or, they might say things that sort of hurt you in a way, but that doesn't matter because you're not there to defend anything or to get hurt. Just keep going as if it was the most natural thing. If you start getting uptight or annoyed, the interview goes down the tubes.

Steve: What do you do in a situation if you get the sense that someone is just stringing you along? Maybe they're just telling you something that they think you want to hear.

Bob: I did an interview with a city economic developer and it was like he did it for the camera. Everything was good. Everything was polite. Everything was technically correct. It was somewhat unrealistic, but nevertheless that was the interview that he wanted to give me. So you try asking for details, but again here's someone who is an accomplished city politician – mindful of his words, not going out on any limbs. I did the interview and thanked him, but I couldn't do much with it because it had that quality to it. It was like a public relations document. You realize, though, that it is their job and people have been stung and they've dealt with newspaper reporters that have created all sorts of problems for them. This in turn has created all sorts of problems for ethnographers. And maybe some ethnographers have been pretty ruthless or inconsiderate or moralistic and they create problems for others, too. We just have to recognize that there will be these kinds of concerns. You also don't know if they're getting heat from others in their job. In this case, he was a very nice guy and set up other people to speak with me. But, from him, it was really a stereotypic presentation-type interview.

Steve: So, there are some things you can take from it, but you don't really worry too much about getting the "real" goods?

Bob: It's a public relations statement. Really that's what it was. So, I have a really nice example of a public relations statement that someone would give you. It didn't really deal much with the activities or dilemmas. The other people in the same office, though, did indicate that there were these sorts of things going on. And, as the manager, most certainly he would have been aware of it. Also because he's been in the field for awhile.

Steve: That was what he wanted to give you.

Bob: Yes. Well, I really couldn't get around it. If people seem uncomfortable with me for some reason or if the interview just seems like it's not going anywhere I'll just say, "Maybe I'll just ask you another question and we'll call it a day." That's not something I like to do… But I'm not going to come away empty handed if I can help it. I try to be thorough when I'm in the field. I'll try this angle and that angle...

And other things will happen. You could be doing a nice interview – nice in the sense that the person is talking and explaining things rather fully– and they get a phone call or we get interrupted somehow and that's it. So, you pack it up and maybe you can give them a call tomorrow. Sometimes that works out. Sometimes you lose the connection with people. When you're doing an interview you're developing a bond with somebody. Sometimes those interruptions will break that bond.

Steve: At the opposite end of the spectrum, how do you call it quits when doing an interview?

Bob: Sometimes you do it based on the time they have. Maybe they have to pick up their kids at this time. They can't leave their kids walking around the school ground for two hours. Other times, we'll just go until we're kind of exhausted. There have been times where I've done these two and three-day things and it has worked out well. They just feel so comfortable that I can hang around.

In the marketplace study, there were some people that liked to be interviewed in the store. Okay, great. Maybe I'm talking to the manager and she might have another couple staff people, but now another customer comes in the store. So, the manager says to me, "I'll just give this person a hand." She does, but meanwhile I can watch how she relates to this person and I can relate to what she's doing. Then she'll come back and we'll talk about this person and their style and how typical it was or wasn't. We can talk about some other things. Then maybe a staff person comes over and they have a question about this or that. This is fine. We're doing well and getting lots of stuff. I can say, "It's been a fun day. Can I come back tomorrow?" "Well, sure come on back. We open at 9:30 and I'll be here." "Okay." I remember doing this in a women's dress shop. People are coming in and out and I'm sitting there with her, right next to the ladies' change room. At first I felt a little bit uncomfortable, but she (manager) didn't seem uncomfortable, so why should I worry? We're just going on with the interview. I imagine that they have other salespeople, salesmen, coming in that might sit there and talk… That's where they sit.

Gaining Entry into a Field Site

Steve: In terms of gaining entry into a certain setting, can you recall experiencing any significant obstacles?

Bob: The one research project that I started and didn't, actually couldn't, complete was one on illness and wellness. The problem wasn't finding people to talk to. The problem was really me. I did a couple interviews and I found that when they were talking about their pain and operations, I was feeling a lot of pain. When I'm doing interviews, I try to put myself in that person's situation, think about it, and take the role of the other. Here, taking the role of the other was really quite painful and I

realized that this was not the study for me. So, thank you to Kathy Charmaz for being able to write, *Good Days and Bad Days*. It's a wonderful study. I don't know how she did it, but she did it. To go back to the earlier question about the SI community, here's another person that means so much. But, that was a project that I bailed out on. I think it's an important study and studies like that need to be done, but it wasn't for me.

Steve: Again moving to the opposite end of the spectrum, have you conducted a study that was really easy to get into? Perhaps there was a key informant that came along and helped you out.

Bob: Well, all the studies that I've done have tended to be big projects and I didn't plan them to be that way. In the card and dice hustler study, I met C.R.D. Sharper. Otherwise it never would have happened. Then later on, in the hotel study, Styllianoss Irini came by and that wouldn't have happened if I hadn't done the card and dice hustler stuff and became familiar with that lifestyle. That was another project that I didn't think I'd be doing. But later on, as it developed, it seemed more and more worthwhile to do from the point of view of studying deviance.

Along the way, toward the end of the hotel study, I also realized that when we had studied a lot of businesses. The hookers are businesswomen. We had the entertainment business and hospitality industry and other things. I thought, well, this is very interesting. Has anybody done an ethnography of this sort on the marketplace? It must have been done. So, I looked around and couldn't find much of a sustained sort. I thought maybe I'll do this, but it wasn't as if I had this fascination with it. It was there and it was interesting… And you can't understand contemporary society without understanding the marketplace. It's a whole set of activities. I realized the marketplace consisted of a whole set of social processes. It wasn't just setting a price and collecting money. It was a whole lot of things. After that, I started the study of consumer behaviour. That again was sort of a natural extension.

With regards to the marketplace work, as well, I kept running into these economic developers. People would go to trade shows and they would sell cities like somebody else would sell shoes or factory products or some travel programs. Here are these people selling cities. They want businesses to locate in their cities. So, this was another interesting idea, but I didn't have an intense desire to study it. It was just something that would take us into so-called "macro" sociology. It's not just cities doing this. It's provinces, states. It's countries. Economic activity is a big, big deal! I knew that we could start to show just how profoundly relevant symbolic interaction is to economics.

It's economics, politics, all of those things. If some major auto manufacturer is interested in locating in your community. It's a city matter. It's a state or province matter. It's a national thing, often. They all might get involved. It's a big deal. Then you have your developers, realtors, and bankers. There are just so many things going on. I realized that with this study I could do something like I did with the hotel community. We have all these subcultures and we could show how they interact. This effectively is the community and I could do this on a bigger scale, sort of like a live, super complex Monopoly game.

Those are two ethnographies (consumer behaviour and economic development) that I've not finished. They're well on their way and I have lots of material. I've been away from them for a few years now. But, it would be really easy to go and do some more interviews. Then you have that other data from before that

you could compare it to. You see, the problem of collecting something right now is that you don't have comparison points with the past, whereas I have lots and lots of stuff.

After reading Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and realizing just how incredibly good this text was I realized that I had to make a transition. I really debated about this in my mind because I realized what I would be leaving behind. At the same time, I also recognized that somebody needed to do this study on Greek material and connect it with the present day material, contemporary scholarship. If someone were going to do it, it would have to be somebody like me. There didn't seem to be a lot of people willing or interested in doing it.

I thought, "Well, there are lots of people who can do ethnographies, how many can do this other work?" Almost no one has this particular mix of backgrounds and interests. So, that is where I went. Looking back, I would do it again. Even though I think those two studies – the one on consumer behaviour and the other on economic development – are really important I don't think they compare to the Greek project. It just has so much potency!

But, whether others will believe it or not, we'll find out in time. Maybe in a thousand years from now somebody will say, "There's something here. There's something worthwhile." And some one else might say, "No, no. It's a thousand years old. What value can it have?"… We can give things to those who follow but we can't determine what they will do with these things.

Steve: I'm curious about this, so maybe others will be to. Your earlier work is fairly well situated in the field of deviance. How did you become interested in deviance studies?

Bob: I think most people experience some kind of intrigue with the concept of deviance, especially students in psychology and sociology. So I had that general interest, but it was sort of an interest in social psychology and group life more generally. I remember as an undergrad taking a course in abnormal psychology. It focused on finding out what it is about the person that made them deviant or strange. I was quite interested in this material, but I never really followed it up.

Later on, I was certainly glad that I didn't because as an interactionist you realize that the strangeness is not in the subject matter. The strangeness is in the eyes of the audience. That was one of the sociological insights that I had to acquire. For me, in sociology at least, it was deviance as an instance of social psychology or a more general set of social processes. It wasn't that persona-fixated approach.

Data Analysis

Steve: How do you approach the analysis of your data?

Bob: I think that if you're in the field the first thing that you'd really like to consider is, "What's going on here?" It sounds rather funny, but I really think that it's an excellent place to start. I immediately bring in this concern with activity. So when I say, "What's going on here?" I really mean, "What are the things that people are doing? And how are they going about doing those activities?"

That's where I like to start when I interview people. I like to ask, "Can you give me an idea of the sorts of things that you do?" Then my job, in part, as I'm talking with the people there, is to get some idea of what the central activities are for people in that situation or role.

In doing that, I'm actually framing my analysis because the analysis is going to revolve around the things that people do… Then I try to take those activities apart, piece by piece, and see how these take place and what the major variants are at each point in the process…

Later, when I'm writing things up and doing more sustained analysis I will be saying, "How does this compare with other people's work?" For example, how does it compare to Howard Becker's jazz musicians or Jack Haas' high iron steel workers, or Billy Shaffir's study of the Hassidic Jews? I was rereading Billy's study a little while back. It's very good!

When I'm in the field, though, I really put those things in suspension because, first and foremost, I want to know from these people what they think they're doing, how they go about doing it, and all the things that they find difficult, easy, boring, frustrating, repetitive, unique - the whole range of things. How do all of these people enter into those activities? How do they adjust? As much as possible I like to have people tell me about instances because I need the instances to see what's going on.

I can observe some things, but their stocks of knowledge are so much more extensive than what I could observe even in a very extended period of time. I try to let them tell me about their experiences, ask about instances and things they did and didn't do, things they thought about but didn't do, things that might have worked out differently than what they had initially anticipated… There are many important things you simply can't observe. I'm trying to follow the natural sequence of things along.

In terms of giving the analysis some overarching order, I look at how these activities seem to fit together. Can I give it some sort of natural flow? But again any order you give it – we use the term "natural history" – may not be the precise way things work on all occasions, but nevertheless this is the more common set of ways things work out. We want to be attentive to that.

When I'm collecting the data, I focus on the full range of activity – all the variants. I'm not trying to focus on something that I think is more fascinating or alluring or intriguing that will knock somebody's socks off. The idea is to get the whole package!

If there's something that's alluring, that's fine, but we also really need to know about the more mundane things and the things that they might be more inclined to take for granted or think inconsequential. I'm after the full range of activities and how these things fit together. Also, over time, do people change the ways in which they become involved in this or that or how they do these things?

Steve: Has it changed for you, over time, in terms of how you go about your analyses?

Bob: Probably the biggest change was when I was doing *Road Hustler* where I was working with C.R.D. Sharper, I think it was there that I became so attentive to the importance of activity. Then doing the hotel study it was so helpful to use that same frame, except recognizing that instead of one set of actors there were a number of sets of actors – subcultures embedded within the broader hotel sub-community. The focus was on realms of activity, which became a more and more central theme.

Activities also allow you to make comparisons because you can say, "How did people get started with this? When were they likely to continue or drop out? How did they deal with ambiguity and challenges?" You have things that you can compare both within and across contexts. Hopefully then you have some material on parallel activities, either from the literature or your own research, which you can compare with other categories of people and people in other settings.

Steve: Since the idea of generic social processes came along a little later on was that something for you that became a more central organizing feature in your work?

Bob: Yes, very, very centrally. The idea was to develop comparisons and to follow things through on a process basis. So, you'd say, "How do we move from this point to this point?" Then, as we look across cases and instances, can we see parallels such as where things are similar and different? Then, how can we begin to specify the elements that seem to be more consequential at this point and that point in the broader process? It really is a comparative analysis procedure.

In the last few years, since working on the Greek material, and I think this procedure (analytic induction) is a product of Aristotle more so than anyone else, I've really been stressing comparative analysis. That's what Glaser and Strauss were talking about, of course. Blumer also talks about that. The great value of comparative analysis became, I suppose for me, even more crystalline in reading Aristotle. That is, we only know things relative to that with which we compare them. So, notions of knowledge are derived from the comparative processes and the inferences that we make.

Steve: I can see that even in the type of advice you've given me with my own research. Instead of focusing on one religious community you've suggested that I compare the activities and processes of different religious groups such as the Mennonite, Catholic, and Jewish communities. Is this the type of advice that you give your students?

Bob: Sure, very much so. I was just going over Danny Jorgensen's book, *The Esoteric Scene*… that looks at the occult – at people's involvements in tarot card reading and such. It's largely a participant observation study where he builds on his experiences or, more centrally the experiences of his wife who became more involved in this first, and he provides various field notes and such things.

It's a very thoughtful study, but one of the things that I made note of as I was going through this book is that he doesn't really do much comparative analysis. He talks about the literature on the occult, but he doesn't really talk about other religious involvements and he doesn't talk about other subcultures in which we also find concentrated points of devotion such as ballet, drug use, or motorcycle gangs. He misses out on that.

So when he concludes the book he doesn't contribute to the broader generic understanding of religion or subcultures. Instead, he looks at the question, "What about the occult in the modernist world?" He sort of goes off on this and is more nebulous in the process. That is why I try to get people to make those comparisons. It also means that you can see a lot of things.

Even if the contexts are different, you have some comparison points. A lot of times, too, people have struggled to articulate certain concepts. Also, people may re-engage the same concept over and over again just calling it by some different name, but they don't make the connection. Our scholarship is not as productive then, as when we can look across these studies and see if there is something that transcends those particular substantive contexts.

Steve: Does this relate then to one of the goals you stress for sociology, that is it is to be a cumulative discipline? What do you mean by this?

Bob: I believe that we really need to develop concepts that have a transituational and transhistorical quality. We need concepts that address the nature of human group life anywhere, any place, any time, and for any group. That I think is really important. It's not unique to me. Herbert Blumer and Georg Simmel were talking about that. Aristotle was certainly so attentive to the generic features of human association. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, he has a couple of chapters on friendship where he asks how friendships become constituted, intensified, and what sorts of things might create problems for friends. If you're looking at relationships, you can go back and look at what he had to say. Cicero also writes on friendship and asks, "What is this friendship thing?" There's also Ovid on *The Art of Love*. Hopefully, in bringing together those resources and the studies that people might do these days, we can develop a more adequate appreciation of what friendships are and more broadly what relationships are.

Steve: So, cumulative in the sense that we're not just working with one piece of data or one field site. We're bringing together past with current materials to inform our understanding of a certain feature of human life. When we bring them together we have something better than what we could have had if we had just focused on one site of study.

Bob: Yes. That is what Glaser and Strauss emphasized in "grounded theory," the potential to develop these concepts. Also, each time you encounter a study – one that you do yourself or one that someone else has written, assuming it's fairly detailed and attends to process – you can take your concepts and assess them relative to this new body of material.

Hopefully, in developing the analysis, you can make adjustments, looking for things that are more common or something that needs reworking or further examination because you're finding a number of contradictions here. In that way you're engaging scholarship in a more comprehensive sense.

It can't be all about *me* and *my* ethnography. It really has to be an ethnography that people in the community can share somehow. Then it takes on some genuine worth. If it's just me, on my own, maybe I can learn things and feel like I was creative or expressive. But, if it can't be compared with other things in some ways, it doesn't have much of an enduring value.

Steve: A key feature of the analysis is, obviously, coding the data. Are there any techniques that you use for data coding? Perhaps you could share some insight into some of the practical techniques that you use.

Bob: I do focus so much on activity, but even as you study activity, people are going to be talking about identities, relationships, dilemmas, in-group out-group relations, perhaps stigma, and a lot of those sorts of things. I like to have everything transcribed and make a hard copy of that and read it over and make little notes to myself on what this is and what that is. You can do something very similar on the computer by inserting tags here and there. I like to work with the hardcopies myself. I have all my statements coded so that I know where they're from. I'll put an identity tag at the beginning of all the major breaks within the text. I used to go and take an exacto knife and cut all these things up in pieces. Then I'd physically sort things out. Now, I do the same things with separate files on the computer. For example, if I find stuff that deals with identities it goes in the "identity" pile. Here is something else on

influence work, put it in that section. Here's something that most directly seems to deal with emotionality…

So you get all of these things in each of these different files where you can print them out and see what you have here or there… Now, in actuality, you'll have many things that deal with two or more of these things in various ways, but I try to sort things in terms of the major emphasis of the particular statement. Usually the statements I work with are fairly extensive. If you have mostly one-liners, to my mind, it's garbage. If you're getting one-line answers, you need to go back into the field. So most of these things will be fairly extensive. It will be people telling me about this, when, and how. I try never to ask "why," but ask people to tell me more and give me instances and such.

So I build up these piles of materials and then I will go through, say, the material on emotionality and try to see what these people are telling me about emotionality. What are the variations? What are the major themes? Is there some sort of flow to it? What are the majof points in the process? What is the range? I don't have pre-established categories. Even where I might have written on some sub-processes, say on a GSP relating to emotionality or influence work, I try to put that in suspension and concentrate on what I have before me. Later on, I might make connections with what I had written. For the time being, though, I want to see what I have here as a package unto itself. I want to make comparisons within.

It's not hypothesis testing and I'm not trying to find illustrations of things that I might have talked about or somebody else has talked about. Rather I want to see what I have here and, as much as I can, screen those other things out so that they don't interfere with that. Then I will go through and write things up around those themes… Once I know what I have here, then I can so more direct comparisons with other things, but first I need to see, in some detail, what is here.

The other thing that I find really useful, even as I'm doing the analysis, is to keep doing interviews with people in the field because it gives me a chance to ask more about the things I'm considering, ambiguities that I'm running into, or things I missed. It's rather inevitable.

You might think that you're pretty conscientious and thorough as you do a study, but when you go over that material you're going to find that you missed things. Some of them are going to seem so obvious that you'll think, "How could I have missed this?" Nevertheless, it happens. Things that now look very obvious, earlier on you might have been focusing on other things. You just didn't attend to them. Now you're reading through your material and it strikes you that you need to learn more about this or that thing that you've uncovered. You want to go into the field and be able to ask people about those things. Of course, whenever I'm doing an interview I'll try to get as much as I can about everything else as well. I find that so useful. Even in the last stages of writing, I'll still be doing interviews.

The other thing that I do, which may sound rather funny, is that I read ethnographies while I'm working on my analysis – because people talk about similar and different things. Maybe they didn't develop their study in what I think is the best way, but seeing what they did it's now easier for me to think of a better way of developing something. Or, I might be struggling trying to sort something out and here's an ethnography, say, by Jackie Wiseman or David Karp. They have come across something very similar and they've addressed it, but in more viable terms. So I ask myself if this fits with what I'm doing. I think it's very good to keep reading ethnographies and to keep doing interviews even when it feels like you're down the homestretch with your analysis. I think that when grad students take longer to complete their projects it's sometimes because they've limited themselves too much

to what they already have and they feel like they have to force this into some boxes. They're not making use of the fuller set of resources they have.

Some people also think that since they've done a certain number of interviews that they shouldn't have to do anymore. It's like somehow they've hit their number and no one should force them to do anymore. Where with me, it's not about being forced. Many of the studies I've done, like the marketing study where I did over a hundred interviews, I never became saturated. Some people say that you should go until you've run out of things. Well, I've never run out of things. There are always more things to learn about. The more you know about something, the more you can follow it up. I don't think that it's good advice to tell people to do a set number of interviews or just go until they've become saturated with information…

Now, you can't just go on forever, so time becomes an element, but you still do as much as you can. The interviews really keep your mind flexible. It's an opportunity to ask people about things. You might wonder how common something is. You've seen other cases of this sort, but in your data you only have one or two cases, but perhaps you really didn't pursue it and now you can ask a few people in the field if this is something that seems more common overall. They can give you an idea. You still have to check everything out, but at least you have this chance to talk to people in the field about things. That's so good!

Conducting Ethnographic Research

Steve: It's obvious that you're very thorough in your approach to research. Sitting here as a grad student I wonder, "How does Bob Prus overcome the practical limitations?" How do you find time to do what you do? What are some strategies that you use?

Bob: I'm sometimes really reluctant to start new projects because I know I have a tendency to follow everything up as much as I can. That often means that things just become more and more extensive. For example, when I started the Greek project it wasn't with the intention of staying in that area, but I thought I should learn a little more about this literature because I was running across Plato's and Aristotle's names every now and then when writing the text on power. These usually were very oblique and superficial references. I didn't know the Greek literature thought but I should at least take a look at it. It turned out that it was so good that I just couldn't leave it alone. I realized that this is really, really consequential material!

With the hotel study (*Hookers, Rounders, and Desk Clerks*), I had no intention of doing this as a full study but something to learn about a little bit since I was teaching courses on deviance. Then as you learn more you say, "You could develop this and this and this." I would've done many more studies, but I didn't have the time or energy to do them. There are many things that I've been tempted to do. I'm never bored with sociology or ethnographic research. It's like a continual learning experience. Plus, I really do enjoy reading ethnographies.

I think that what happens, in part, is that over time you develop a stock of knowledge that makes it easier for you to more quickly digest a lot of materials. More recently, with the Greek project, I realized that once I had read a lot of Plato and Aristotle I knew the basic parameters of Western social thought for the next 2,500 years. What I didn't know was which of their ideas might be picked up and pursued and debated and which might be lost and which things might be emphasized more selectively or where people might misconstrue their materials. Those sorts of things I didn't know. But it meant that I could go and read a lot of authors that would come

later like Cicero, Augustine, Aquinas, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Emile Durkheim, and many other authors because the issues that they and we deal with are the same basic issues that the Greeks struggled with. Postmodernism also turns out not to be something new. There were Greeks that talked about the impossibility of knowing anything, totalizing relativism, and the multiple viewpoints we could take on these things. The basic premises of pragmatism go back to Aristotle as much as anyone.

Once you have that core, you can absorb materials so much more readily because you have reference points to locate them on. So, you're reading Jean-Jacques Rousseau and you realize after awhile that Rousseau was basically a Platonist. Once you've established that you can ask yourself, "What is he doing with these ideas?" Other people come along and you recognize that they have this or that notion of Aristotle's *Categories* or something. To know Aristotle's *Categories* is such a useful thing! That's been very helpful!... I have to write something up on that too.

Likewise, if you know, say, Herbert Blumer and a couple ethnographies, you can go to one of our conferences and you can connect with a lot of materials that are there because you have that base. If someone were to come without that, all of these things would look so different. For us, we can go there and our research can be different in certain ways, but we understand the common themes of the theoretical, methodological, and conceptual literature that ties these things together. There are certain sources that are just so valuable to know, which can save you a great deal of time and anguish. It allows you to have sort of an analytic fluency.

The other thing is that the more you write, the more fluent you get with writing. For me, I do a lot of re-writing. I sometimes have people tell me, "I really like the way you write." And I'll say, "No, no. You really like the way I *re*-write." I tend to go over things and if I can find a better way of saying it I will. I try to be clear and direct, define my terms, and be thorough. That's the other thing I suppose. Once you think that way, then with the projects that you work on you're able to bring that into play in each case. You can say, "What are the issues at hand? What are the central emphases? What's going on here?"

When I read a book, I will usually flip through it to see what the book is about overall. I'll go to the table of contents, scan the introduction, and look at the different chapters. Some books you might decide early that they're not worth reading, but if something looks good then put some time into that book and really make it your book. Learn whatever you can from that author. That's part of it.

Another part of it, I think, is that any area can be interesting. Whatever people are doing, it's the people that make it interesting. It's not whether they're playing cards, riding motorcycles, or whatever, it's really the people and how they actually do the things that they're doing. That's the interesting part to me… With students, if they come to me, I'll tell them that I don't really care so much about what they study, but do it from an interactionist viewpoint and I'll be happy. The other thing that I mention to people, especially students, is to pick something that's accessible – something where you can readily go and talk to people. There are just so many things that one can study. To me, everything, anything, can be worthwhile to study if you take the time to examine it carefully and try to be as thorough as you can be. When you're there, just keep going as long as you can.

I suppose, to get back to your question in another way, I've also been quite fortunate to have good health. It's like many other things, if you're feeling healthy or if you tend have more stamina and energy things go better. That's part of it, too. So, here's to good health! But, another thing is "do you have a vision of what you want to accomplish?" What you might be able to contribute to scholarship?

To me, the emphasis is on the study of human knowing and acting, to help open that up to everyone. That's why I've been able to pursue the Greek project and other things with such intensity. I know that a lot of people don't care about Greek scholarship or what we can do with it; they just want the latest, whatever that is. But I realize that Greek scholarship is so important and I need to do what I can to create a greater awareness of this material, because of what we can do with it.

Juggling Multiple Projects

Steve: I know you recommend working on multiple projects rather than keeping something on the backburner while you focus all your time on one study. I think many people, myself included, find it difficult to focus on anything other than the one main project that they're doing.

Bob: The big challenge I have is trying to delimit the projects I'm working on. In a sense, though, they're all kind of related because they all deal with people and the things people do, but some are obviously much more theoretical and conceptual and others have more of an ethnographic quality. On a given week I really don't know how many different things I might be working on. Another thing is that I've found that as you work on something here and there, even occasionally, eventually you can develop something that's more extensive, more worthwhile overall… I will often have an idea that might come to me when I'm having a shower or driving someplace. I'll jot it down, take a look at it, and maybe add a few more words to that at another time. Later, I'll be doing other things and I'll pick this up again and maybe write down a few more thoughts about it and stick it back in the file.

Steve: Organization is obviously key.

Bob: Yes. I really don't know how many computer files I have. I wouldn't want to count them. Many of them are in various states of development. With a lot of them, I'm sure I'll die before anything else happens to them. In the meantime, I'll have many other things that I'll be working on and things that I'll start. It's just an ongoing process, but it's nice to have that change. It keeps your mind active and you start to see connections. Again, this comment earlier about reading other people's ethnographies while you're doing your own, I think it's so good! It's also good to know when during the day is your best time for writing. Then when you're a little wrecked or weary, you can do some reading or pull out something else you don't need to work with very seriously. For me, it would be really boring to work on just one small project for an extended period of time. I've done that occasionally because I've had to. Generally speaking, though, I really like the ability to move back and forth between different projects in a given day.

Mentoring Students

Steve: What sort of advice do you give to students who have just started on their undergrad or masters thesis? Maybe they've done a bit of other qualitative work and they know it's a huge mountain to climb. For some students they'll put it off because they're finding it too daunting and are having a hard time getting started on it. Is there any advice that you give to students when they're first starting out their projects?

Bob: You sort of hope that they will want to get at it. There's a line from Meredith Wilson's s *The Music Man* that goes something like, "There's no point warming up if you're not going to get in the game and pitch." I really do believe that. I tell them to try to find a project that they'll feel comfortable with. I'll often ask people about the sorts of things that they're interested in. Whether it's playing golf, getting involved in dance, going to bars, or whatever, try to find something that they have an interest in. Still, it should be something where the interest is not going to be so pronounced that they lose their sociological focus. Nevertheless, that would be one way of getting them involved in it.

Sometimes people say that you shouldn't do research in an area that you have some experience or greater familiarity. I don't agree with that. It's not that there's anything wrong with going into a new area. It's just that, wouldn't it be better to go into an area with which you already have some familiarity? But, be mindful of what you already know and watch that that doesn't trip you up where you take too many things for granted. That can be a big problem. My own viewpoint is: "Go and do it! Don't wait around. Little elves aren't going to come and do your project for you."

I think that if you're encouraging someone to go to grad school, you would look for someone who has that sense of dedication or application and persistence. That becomes so important. It's not a matter of how brilliant somebody is. It's really a matter of staying with something, being patient, and not trying to be brilliant along the way, but just trying to learn as much as you can about things. What you'll find, over time, as you're going over your materials and working with it, you'll have a lot of insights – things that people have pointed out to you, things that you've observed, things that you've compared. So, the project takes on it's own brilliance. Just concentrate on doing a good job – be thorough, collect your materials, take your time, and relate to the people.

Steve: That also speaks a lot to the sort of mentoring that you do. What are some of the things that you stress in mentoring new, young scholars to go on to pursue this area of research?

Bob: Something that occurred to me a few years ago is that you don't want to wait until graduate school to develop graduate students. Ideally, you want to develop graduate students while they're undergrads so that when they go to graduate school they already know what they're doing. You're sort of preparing people for the Masters at the undergrad level. When they're Masters students, you're preparing them for their Ph.D. When they're doing their Ph.D., it's really for a lifelong program of study. That is just something that occurred to me more recently. I wasn't bright enough to think about that years and years ago.

When I teach my undergrad courses I mention this to my students. I'm not sure what they think because they may be in a second year course, say. I tell them, "I'm going to teach this course like you're all going to graduate school." Now, I know they're not all going to do that, but that's what I tell them. I tell them, "If we don't teach it at that level, no one's going to be ready to go to grad school and we really need that. This country needs good grad students a lot more than it needs some more lawyers." I've been more explicit in doing that the last few years.

I try to make sure they have a very good sense of theory, the intellectual community, and the research so that when they go to other schools they can go and talk to instructors in the area of symbolic interaction and be very much at home.

That's sort of my idea. When you're finished these second year courses, you should have something that you can take with you. I'm not just there to get them through the course and give them their grades. Rather, I try to give them something that they can take with them. They know who Blumer, Goffman, and Becker are. They know the core of the field.

Subcultural Mosaics

Steve: I'd like to hear from you a bit about the concept of "subcultural mosaics." At what point and how did you come to developing this idea?

Bob: I realized that I never could have written the book on subcultural mosaics without having first done *Symbolic Interaction and Ethnographic Research.* The reason I couldn't was because I needed to establish a base where I talked about what symbolic interaction was, how it developed, its variations and premises, and how it was similar and different to positivism and postmodernism. I also realized that the generic social processes, as we talked about them in the *Symbolic Interaction* book, had great utility. I think of them as a magic carpet that you can get onto and get dropped off any place and you have all these incredible resources to start with. What about perspectives, identities, relationships, emotionality, collective events, and such? Wherever you are in a church, a hospital, a playground, or an airplane factory – it doesn't matter. You can start to ask, "What are people doing? How are they making sense of things?"

But I also recognized that students seemed to be having trouble thinking generically. They're so used to thinking in terms of substantive fields. Someone is interested in crime. Another person's interested in family. They then go and read the literature in those substantive areas and limit themselves, typically, to that. I thought I should write another book – one that opens up the whole world for people to study. It would be built around the earlier 1996 book. The idea is that we could present people with a whole series of topics that they could connect with, but to locate those in process terms and to give them a sense of how they could bring generic social processes into studies of religion, politics, manufacturing, science, whatever. Basically, anything that people do, we should be able to study that. So the idea with the subcultural mosaics book was to set things up in those terms.

Subculture is a term that we've been using in the social sciences to refer to these life-worlds. It was also becoming more evident to me that we have all these life-worlds in a community. It's not a new idea. Anselm Strauss talks about it. Blumer talks about it earlier. There's Georg Simmel's idea of "webs of association." The idea is that communities or societies aren't these homogenous blobs, but rather they consist of all of these groups that are interacting with other groups. Some groups are bigger, some are smaller, some last longer, some are very fleeting. They have varying connections, affinities, disjunctures. There can be a lot of isolation in some cases, but nevertheless, this is what community is.

That was really the idea of *Subcultural Mosaics.* All societies consist of these subcultures and they overlap, impinge on one another, they can be in conflict with one another, but they also can cooperate, ignore, do anything they want essentially, with respect to one another. That was the idea. Then to give people some resources that they could use to study anything that people do in these life-worlds. When I say "anything" I really mean *anything* that people do.

The first few chapters in the book basically set up what symbolic interaction is. What are the premises? What are the generic social processes? Then we get into the substantive applications and provide some literature that people might look up, but it's all process-oriented. The last couple of chapters are written with Mary Lorenz Dietz and Billy Shaffir. The idea in these chapters were to indicate two things: First, how one might go about doing an ethnographic study in more extended terms, but still just a chapter. And second, how one might do an analysis of those materials. What we ended up doing, in writing those two chapters was to let everybody speak about what they did. So, it's sort of like mini-ethnography in a sense. We don't really talk about it that way, but it has some of those qualities. You can see where we do tend to have somewhat different kinds of emphases and yet all of us are doing ethnographic research. It's good for people to see some of the differences as well. Yet, we were writing it together as a package that somebody less familiar with the area could build on. We did the same with the last chapter in terms of how one might analyze these materials. The book was written with the idea that somebody, like a conscientious student, could learn to do a lot of these things on his or her own.

Quantitative Research, Positivism, & Postmodernism

Steve: It definitely does have that quality to it. It also brings in a nice experiential touch when you introduce quotes from Mary and Billy. Also in the subcultural mosaics (1997) and the text on symbolic interaction (1996), you do get into some of the debates within the discipline. Perhaps we could discuss some of your disaffections with the quantitative approach and positivism.

Bob: Oh my, disaffections! Where do we start? I went to graduate school at the University of Iowa and it was a very quantitatively oriented school, which was good in some ways because I did achieve some fluency with what it was that they were doing. As a student I didn't appreciate that so much because I really wanted to study people a little more. But I really didn't know how to go about doing this because I didn't have a background in this area. It was really only when I finished graduate school that I became more competent in that regard. Having worked with the encyclopaedia salespeople for a while and realizing that they had knowledge of people that sociologists didn't have, I didn't have great confidence in quantitative analysis. But, it was something to be done so I worked my way through my M.A. thesis and then the dissertation, largely from a quantitative viewpoint. The more research that I did, though, the more convinced I became about the shortcomings of quantitative analysis. It didn't seem to have that sense of realism that you could develop by spending time with people. Of course, Herbert Blumer makes the case as strongly and as clearly as anybody on the limitations of variable analysis -- that it doesn't look at people as agents. It doesn't recognize their capacities to interact, to think, to adjust, to learn, to teach, and to act.

Very recently, I've become more explicitly critical of quantitative analysis. Tony Puddephatt and I wrote a little paper examining the notion of causality that went back to Plato and Aristotle, and then Mead and Blumer. We wanted to see what they had to say about the ways in which people deal with things and generate effects. Then we compared that with contemporary notions of causality from a positivist standpoint -- essentially, variable analysis. We indicate some of the limitations of quantitative analysis.

Scott Grills and I have been working on another paper, called "The Myth of the Independent Variable." Basically, we ask, "What are these things that people call

independent variables? Can they possibly enter into the causal process?" In part, the argument is that you can have constructs or concepts such class, age, gender, race, and religion, but how do these things actually produce or generate particular effects such as crime, broken homes, educational attainment, or happiness? The overarching argument that we make is that these variables at best might be seen as social categories.

You can talk about things like gender in terms of male and female, different ethnic divisions, and social classes. Then you say, "Given that they're categories, how can they cause anything?" Age doesn't determine anything. Gender doesn't determine anything. It's just a definition that people put on a situation. That, in itself, can't do anything. So then the issue becomes, "What are these things?" People do talk about gender, age, class, race. To a lot of people, these seem to be important things. Scott and I are not saying that they're not important things, but what we are saying is that they're social categories rather than causal things. Even so, how can social categories enter into things?

We make the subsequent argument that what you really have with these social categories are vaguely implied realms of activity. So, people can organize their lives, act towards others, and think about others in terms of these categories. Those are the elements that are important. We're basically into some sort of subcultural contexts because, just like you could talk about a drug or thief subculture, you could presumably talk about male and female subcultures. Again, in broad terms. Just like the drug subculture encompasses many, many variants. You could have a sports subculture in general terms. Then talk about divisions within. Once you do that you can start to ask, "What about people's perspectives, identities, and relationships as they pertain to these particular subcultures?"

We're not saying that there's no reality in the variables that sociologists use. What we are saying is that they don't have a causal quality to them as variables. At best, they represent social categories and the social categories, at best, represent these rather vague enacted realms of behaviour. The idea, though, is that those enacted features of human group life are not being captured by the variables… To do that, you have to really go into the levels where people live and do things. When you do that the whole notion of causality looks so different from the way it's framed in mainstream social science, in variable analysis.

Another point, one that we didn't develop in the paper, but one that I was thinking about and likely will, is that if you have something like crime or suicide – the dependent variables – those are basically like residual elements or the end products. So, mostly quantitative researchers start with the end product and work backwards to see what might connect, correlate, with that somehow?

As a scientist, that type of "looking backwards," doesn't have great appeal to me. You might have to do that sometimes, but you'd really like to follow the process through and see where things start and how they develop and then how they end up. Just to start at the end and, somehow, more or less fantasize to explain how it arrived here in this state doesn't have much appeal to me.

The broader issue yet is if you have something like age, race, and crime, what exactly is the connection? How is it that race could enter into crime? Race is a construct, a designation. A construct can't do anything in itself. People typically do variable analysis and then they develop another little theory, what Robert Campbell calls "paratheory," to account for the correlations because you can't connect the dots very directly. There is this matter of trying to establish the linkages or connections between what you claim to be an effective independent variable and some residual end-state.

There's another problem. You have something like race. I think most people will say that people don't really change their race over the years. Even though you can have different categories of race or different categories of gender and you find that people in this category or that category commit more crime or have a higher rate of suicide or come from broken homes, how can this be a causal factor? It's a constant for all those people. But they're only committing suicide once. No one seems to raise these sorts of issues with regards to quantitative analysis. Even if you're looking at crime, it's not like these people are involved in crime 24 hours a day for their whole lives. It's a more sporadic thing -- even if they're systematic criminals, maybe a livelihood for them. But they're not just doing that, they're doing other things, too. Is race the cause of those other things, too? Partying, going to church, buying certain kinds of clothes, say? With class, race, or age, if those are constants within the categories, how can something like that be an explanatory concept? Especially if it doesn't do anything. It doesn't act. What's the connection with cause and effect? How can it be a viable cause?

If anything, we argue for the importance of looking at people as causal agents. Look at the ways in which people as minded, purposive, reflective beings enter into this process and engage other people who are bringing their views into play as well, how they're defining each other. We end up with a very different conception of society, but nonetheless a critique of variable analysis.

Does variable analysis have a reality? We make the inference that these variables at best reflect social categories and the social categories at best vaguely reflect what people do. But it's there, in these realms of activity, in the actual instances of things, that all these things take place. But that's so far removed from variable analysis! The people who use variable analysis don't think in those terms anyway.

Instead, the reality of variable analysis is to be found is the ways in which social scientists have reaffirmed the viability of this perspective by stressing it as a methodology, legitimating it and objectifying it, and promising solutions to people in agencies who want quick fixes to various problems. The reality is in the acceptances, the funding, the books that are published, and the courses that are taught. That's where the reality is. It is not in their research per se. That's a rough, roundabout explanation of that article.

Steve: Do you see any sort of value in the quantitative approach?

Bob: It has value – we do say this in the paper, too – in terms of descriptive statistics. It can be very useful to people making plans of various kinds to know how many males and females you have in a typical school. You might be in the airlines industry and knowing proportions of your passengers you could roughly estimate what the average weight might actually be. You could do things of that sort. So, just the straight descriptive statistics have practical kinds of values. But, to use them as explanatory concepts, that's the problem.

Steve: Say I'm doing a quantitative project which relies on a large dataset. I'm looking at an issue related to crime and I find that in running some analyses certain neighbourhoods seem to have higher crime rates. Is that worthwhile?

Bob: Sure, that certain categories of people might have higher crime rates than other categories. That can be worthwhile to know, but now what are you going to do with it? It doesn't explain the crime rates. To explain that, you really need to ask the

types of questions that we do. You can ask, "What are these variables? What do they refer to?" But you really need to investigate the connections to see how things are linked to those categories in more direct terms. For that, you need to study instances as these take place in process and engage in comparative analysis.

Steve: This is interesting because as an undergrad we're taught that we use qualitative research as exploratory research and that we use quantitative research to explain things. Basically, what you're saying is that we should almost look at this the other way around with qualitative research being useful for both exploratory and explanatory research. To do a qualitative research project well, though, takes time. It's maybe a little dirtier than doing a quantitative study.

Bob: That's another thing. Quantitative analysis does offer that allure. It's relatively easy and quick.   You can introduce some formula and run things through the computer and it looks like "real science." People will buy that stuff because they want scientific explanations. They just don't realize that the level of explanation is almost the antithesis of science. If you went into a courtroom and tried to prove that age, race, or class caused crime, what kind of case could you possibly make? They want to see how things connect. If you're going to claim that something is the causal agent it has to connect in pretty direct terms. The researchers can't give you that because there are no direct terms of connection. Oddly, very few people have challenged that.

　　In Durkheim's later works, including his statement on *Moral Education*, he talks about the impossibility of reducing a complex, living thing like society to variables. This sounds funny because Durkheim, of course, is one of the principal architects of the positivist tradition in sociology. In his later works, though, he makes very little reference to his earlier studies. It is as if he didn't do them. Every once in awhile he will say, "It would be nice to have some data on this," but he seems to be asking for descriptive statistics not sustained variable analysis. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, he makes the argument that you're much better to study one case in great detail than to study a massive number of superficial cases. This again is rather interesting. That is the problem and, of course, it's mainstream. But, that's where the money is right now, has been for quite a while. A lot of people gravitate towards it.

Steve: You wrote a paper in the early 1990s called, "The Interpretivists are coming" which is obviously a bit of controversial piece. In it you make claims about the entrenchment of quantitative methodology and positivism within mainstream sociology, and given that entrenchment it's difficult to change the focus of a discipline that's built around that. So, you've engaged yourself quite centrally in these sorts of debates and have taken, arguably, a polemical approach to some of your arguments. Some might be thinking the same sorts of things that you're saying, but hold back on their opinions. You seem to be comfortable about pushing forward and making a case. Was this something you just decided that needs to be written? Not that you're the only one that's making these claims.

Bob: I realize that it's not always a popular position to take, but I also recognize that it's very important that some people at least in our tradition make statements of those sorts. It makes it easier for others in our tradition to do what they're doing. They can take more moderate positions without being the outliers. At the same time, I firmly believe in these things. I'm not really interested in making accommodations that to

my mind are inauthentic. So, I've made those statements. The debates are very interesting and it looks like I'm getting more into them.

Lorne Dawson and I spent some time debating with the postmodernists. But we realized that the postmodernism really wouldn't be that consequential over the longer period of time and that the central debates are really with the positivists. I have more confidence in the positivists than the postmodernists, but nevertheless those are the people we're debating with.

What I appreciate about the positivists, actually, is their interest in doing science and trying to be good scholars. I think that they fail in terms of the methodology and assumptions with which they work, but I can nevertheless give them credit for their sincerity. The postmodernists, I believe, are quite contradictory at base. If you were a real postmodernist and you believed that nothing had any truth-value, why would you bother saying anything? They want to dispense with other forms of knowing, but typically do so to promote their own agendas. Often it's more of a Marxist agenda, but sometimes it's more of an emotional, expressive, personal agenda. To my view they, at base, lack sincerity.

So, where do we go? The mainstream resistance is there and I realize that. I think it's something that's going to last for a very long time. At the same time, though, I think it's important we try to maintain the viability of interpretive, hermeneutic, pragmatist, interactionist kinds of scholarship because it has such a level of authenticity. If we're going to make more genuine contributions to the community, that has to be the core – some form of pragmatist emphasis.

Blumer's Concerns with Intimate Familiarity

Steve: Bob, Krzysztof Konecki has seen some of the materials we discussed earlier and sent me a few additional questions. Let's talk about these because they add some important dimensions to the interview. First, he asks about Herbert Blumer's use of the term "intimate familiarity." Blumer stresses the necessity of achieving intimate familiarity with one's subject matter but he doesn't explain it all that fully. How do you think researchers might pursue intimate familiarity and what are the benefits and limitations of Blumer's emphases?

Bob: Sure, a good question, indeed! It's a tough question, or set of questions, too. But the concept of intimate familiarity also is so important for comprehending Blumer's scholarship and Chicago-style interactionism. Sometimes, we make the concept more explicit in our work but other times I think those who work in this tradition also treat it more implicitly, which isn't that good.

For many people, the quest for intimate familiarity may be exemplified by their emphasis on extended, open-ended, pluralist or non-prescriptive ethnographic research – where one examines things as fully and carefully as possible, mindfully of the viewpoints and practices of the people we are studying. And that's what Blumer intends, to get right in there and learn what is going on by sustained ethnographic inquiry, especially open-ended interviewing, where you connect with the ethnographic other in these highly detailed terms. That is so basic! Still, for Blumer, something more is involved.

Blumer wants to encourage an empirical attentiveness to the instances. But the instances are to be approached in process terms, wherein researchers focus on the emergent or unfolding features of people's activities. For Blumer, activity is not a thing as much as it is a process. Activity is something in the making – so his

emphasis on the forging of activity; the interpreting, defining, anticipating, initiating, monitoring, assessing, adjusting process. Tom Morrione, who worked with Blumer in his later years, talks about these things in the text they developed together (*George Herbert Mead and Human Conduct*).

So, you see, its not just ethnographic research, it's a very particular, focused type of inquiry. It's an activity-oriented inquiry and analysis. All the other concepts, say perspectives, identities, relationships, and so forth are best known through activity, through the ways the people do things in emergent, ongoing, interactive terms.

Steve: Do you know where Blumer picked up concerns of this sort?

Bob: I don't know exactly where Blumer gets this emphasis. In part, it's from Mead, whose text really should be called *Mind, Self, and Society in Action*. In part, it's from Charles Horton Cooley and his emphasis on sympathetic introspection, which really approximates Chicago-style ethnography. Blumer talks about this in his dissertation in 1928. He contends that Cooley's method of sympathetic introspection is the essential methodology of social psychology. In part, too, it may come from Robert Park. Still, as far as I can tell, Park was much more effective as a teacher or mentor than a researcher per se. Also, Blumer was part of an intellectual milieu where people were doing ethnographic research – so Nels Anderson, Clifford Shaw, Paul Cressey, Ed Sutherland, and Blumer's own studies of the movies which are very good but so often overlooked.

While I'm on a roll Steve, I need to mention something else. I made a little note to talk about Blumer's notion of "joint activity." That's so important in this regard as well. All of the things that people do as individuals, that are meaningful in any way are only meaningful because they are connected with the group, with group life. Blumer is adamant about that! He most definitely is not a psychological reductionist.

The study of human behaviour, for Blumer, cannot possibly be understood apart from people's participation in the group. So it's not people as separate individuals with attitudes and dispositions who act in this or that way. It's people with minds that are generated from their association with others and who then mindfully do things as participants in the world of the other. This is where Blumer is going with his concept of intimate familiarity. We need to see exactly how people fit their activities together with others in both temporally situated terms and in sequentially informed terms.

So, it's intimate familiarity with people as participants in human group life -- and to achieve that, we need to participate in that life-world with them. We need to become one with them in that sense. You can't do that with a questionnaire or with some kind of experiment. As a social scientist, you need to talk to people, spend time with them, see how they do things, see how they make sense of things on an ongoing basis. It's that sustained interpersonal contact and openness, whereby experientially you become one with them, at least as much as you can. That's the idea, to strive for that.

Steve: I wanted to ask how, or in what way, does this emphasis on intimate familiarity fit with Blumer's generic processes or what you call generic social processes?

Bob: I'm glad you asked that, Steve. That's another part of Herbert Blumer's emphasis on intimate familiarity. It's not just collecting all this information on activity as instances but it is to use these instances as comparison points, to subject these to

sustained comparative analysis, looking for similarities and differences, so that we might derive some process-oriented concepts that capture the nature of human group life.

Blumer stresses the point that we need concepts if we are to have anything approximating a social science. Still, it is not just concepts per se but concepts that attend to what people actually do and how they go about doing these activities. For Blumer, as well, this will be an ongoing process as we reformulate more preliminary notions or sensitizing concepts and reassess their viability relative to other instances of ethnographic research and strive to reformulate these in more knowing and precise terms. It's theory built up from examinations of the instances but theory that is to be continually reassessed and refined relative to other instances of ethnographic inquiry.

Steve: I think that covers several aspects of Krzysztof's questions, but how does Herbert Blumer's emphasis get played out on a contemporary basis?

Bob: Unfortunately, not very well. While some people really do share Blumer's concerns, most ethnographers haven't even thought in these terms. A lot of that is what you might call "rip and run" or self-serving, expressive ethnography. It's not conceptually informed. It's not very thorough. It's not attentive to the ways that people actually do things. It's inattentive to the ethnographic literature. We have materials going back to the 1920s in the Chicago tradition. It's an incredible set of resources, there is so much there that can be used as comparison points in developing subsequent analyses. With the literature, if you don't know what has been done, what kinds of comparisons can you possibly develop? Also, if you don't know how to do comparative analysis, and that isn't taught much in the social sciences, you wouldn't be able to make much use of this material. So a lot of contemporary qualitative research is trendy, moralistic, shallow.

And the postmodernist, neo-Marxist, expressive, poetical emphases that some have promoted over the past twenty or so years, like Norman Denzin, Laurel Richardson, Andy Fontana, and their associates, have only added to the messy quality of this literature. It's affected the overall quality of what we have termed symbolic interactionism as well, because of the linkages these people have drawn to this tradition.

Steve: Can you elaborate on that a bit more? What about qualitative research more generally?

Bob: These people can do whatever they wish, of course, and if they want to pursue Marxist agendas of sorts or engage in various modes of expressivity, that's their prerogative. However, my objection is that they not call it symbolic interaction because the postmodernist, neo-Marxist, and poetical-expressive emphases badly misrepresents the scholarly tradition associated with George Herbert Mead, Herbert Blumer and Chicago-style ethnography.

But it's not just the people I've referenced. A lot of so called qualitative research or ethnographic inquiry is pretty dismal. This is because many of these people have pursued a more moralist, expressive, sometimes self-aggrandizing version of ethnographic inquiry. It's quick, it's easy, it's entertaining. The standards are minimal. A lot of people like that. It's very self-serving.

And it's not just in sociology but also in anthropology and other variants of the social sciences. It's not that these people are not bright or incapable in general

terms. And they can get all excited about whatever they like, but in my view it will contribute very little to future scholarship. It'll go down in history as our version of the dark ages. So, lots of huffing and puffing, lots of moralism, expressivity, egoism and emotionality, but not much of an enduring quality. And it's harder for younger people to sort these things out. Because so much of that is what they are getting exposed to. That is what they're being taught. It's often presented as exciting, hot, and the wave of the future. However, if we are going to give something worthwhile to subsequent generations, we need to strive for the sort of quality that Blumer is stressing with his emphasis on intimate familiarity.

Analytic Induction and Grounded Theory

Steve: Krzysztof also asked about Florian Znaniecki. He noted that Znaniecki wrote a book on analytic induction. Are you familiar with this text? How does it differ from Glaser and Strauss's grounded theory? Another question one might ask is how far back does this emphasis on analytic induction go? Earlier you said that it goes back to Aristotle.

Bob: I have to admit that I don't know enough about Florian Znaniecki to comment on his work. I've long suspected that Znaniecki is more pivotal to social theory than is W. I. Thomas, for instance, but I do not know Znaniecki's works well at all. I'm going to check up on him because I've been learning more about the ways that pragmatist scholarship has been engaged in Europe over the intervening centuries from the Greeks onward, including two seemingly unlikely sources -- Wilhelm Wundt and Emile Durkheim, who in their later works much more closely approximate central features of American pragmatism. Florian Znaniecki may provide us with some other links with the pragmatist tradition.

Glaser and Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, I really like that book. It is a somewhat broader frame of reference, but it's generally very consistent with Blumer's emphasis on intimate familiarity and generic processes. Of course, Glaser and Strauss build on analytic induction or attempts to derive basic features of things from examinations of the particulars but they also offer a more explicit sociological emphasis than does Plato or Aristotle for instance... Dialectic analysis, which we associate with Plato, is based on the methodology of knowing things through sustained comparison of similarities and differences. The Greeks appear to have practiced this long before Plato wrote but he is the best-known dialectician.

Steve: So what is the connection between Plato and Aristotle and analytic induction?

Bob: Aristotle was Plato's student. Clearly, he learned much from Plato. However, Aristotle insists on the examination of particular instances as a means of generating inferences and concepts rather than the sorts of hypotheticals that Plato uses in his comparisons. As well, Aristotle much more consistently focuses on the humanly known and enacted world than does Plato, than do the speakers in Plato's texts. Plato never speaks for himself in his texts. But with his speakers, he tends to shift between the ideal, divinely known world and the sensate, humanly known world. So sometimes Plato appears to be a theologian and an idealist, sometimes a structuralist. But he also emerges as a relativist and a pragmatist in his texts. Sometimes he talks as if all knowing were divinely enabled or that is the ultimate reality but at other times he talks as if reality is more entirely a human construction

and religion is just part of that. I think that's why the philosophers like Plato so much. They can debate endlessly about his texts.

Aristotle is best known for syllogistic or deductive logic but he insists on the primacy of inductive reasoning and instruction for knowing. So while people require sensations for knowing, they learn to think inductively or how to make comparisons and draw inferences from others. For Aristotle, comparative analysis and memory presupposes language and associated instruction. If someone is interested in Aristotle's considerations of inductive analysis and learning, an excellent source is Sister Mary Michael Spangler's *Aristotle on Teaching.* Unfortunately, the philosophers concentrate mostly on Aristotle's syllogistic or deductive logic. That was a big part of the reason that John Dewey is so critical of formal logic. It's just so limited. It's inattentive to the ways that people reason things out in practice, how they come to know the world they engage in on a day to day basis.

So Glaser and Strauss are not the first to employ comparative analysis in the study of human group life. Still, they more pointedly maintained a sociological standpoint. Interestingly, Glaser and Strauss don't talk very directly about the formulation of generic social processes. Not like some of the interactionists have done. Glaser and Strauss stop short of that. Now in his own work, Anselm Strauss does more of that, he is more attentive to generic processes. So I would say that the focus on GSPs is a natural extension of the emphasis that they take in promoting grounded theory. The purpose really is to generate concepts and for Strauss, especially, it would be generic social processes of a Blumerian sort. You'll see that in his 1993 text, *Continual Permutations of Action.*

Toward a Public Sociology

Steve: Some people have suggested that a problem facing sociology is that we've become fragmented. We have so many different theoretical viewpoints and methodologies that the discipline has become too fragmented. They argue that if we don't watch ourselves we're going to become so fragmented that nobody's going to take us seriously.

Bob: There are a lot of variations of sociology and I would certainly not want to defend many of them because I don't think they have much viability with regards to a more sustained study of the human condition. I think that if we don't maintain a pluralist kind of emphasis concerned with developing "the sociology of any group or anybody" that we will lose some of whatever advantage we might have had as a discipline.

It is fragmented and a lot of times people become very concerned about promoting a viewpoint, but they don't stop to present the premises with which they're working. I think it's very important to define the basic premises or assumptions with which you're working so that people can make decisions at the foundational level about whether they agree or disagree with whatever you're saying.

Likewise I think it extremely important to define your terms of reference so that people you're trying to communicate with will have a sense of what you're talking about. Again, the postmodernists have essentially refused to define their terms of reference. To my mind that's not very good scholarship. Those are some of the problems. If you're taking partisan viewpoints, that also detracts from the viability of sociology as an approach to the study of the human condition.

Steve: It doesn't really seem to me that we're going to become more centralized in terms of an approach to studying social behaviour. Some people have made the alternate argument that fragmentation is good and is actually what fosters a viable sociology because it encourages different viewpoints so that we don't become stuck in our thinking about the way in which people do things.

Bob: There are those that would say let a thousand flowers bloom. I'd say let's be mindful of which flowers are blooming and which do not make contributions to the garden or the produce that we're trying to create in our garden. I do not take the viewpoint that all approaches are equally viable or valuable. I think, again, people need to try to – at least for the discipline it's important – define their terms of reference. Without that, people, from my viewpoint, are not engaging in very good scholarship.

Steve: It's obvious that, in terms of a direction for sociology, you would encourage our discipline to move towards the interpretivist, pragmatist, interactionist, and ethnographic approach to studying human group life. What are some of the ways in which you think we can encourage this more within our discipline? Is there a strategy?

Bob: No, I don't have an overarching strategy. I will write a paper called, "The Intellectual Canons of Public Sociology." Do you like that? I was thinking about that, working on that a little today.

Steve: Sort of like where public sociology stands and how it has developed?

Bob: I think we need to establish some scholarly criteria for public sociology. I'm reluctant to get into this because it's another project. I'm sort of like the little Dutch boy trying to plug all the holes in the dike. I only have so many fingers. But that had crossed my mind, Steve. We could argue that public sociology, which of course all sociology is presumably public, should be concerned with being pluralist, impersonal, and non-partisan. Also, defining our terms of reference and premises. And developing things that aren't just for this or that substantive sector of the community, but really are for the public as a unity. And emphasizing the authenticity of the things we generate, to be consistent with the things that real living, breathing, thinking, acting people do. Our studies should have some enduring quality. We should be able to connect the past and present. We should be developing concepts that are not just for today, because there's always tomorrow and today will soon be tomorrow. We need something that's enduring. It also has to be something that has sincerity, not something that we develop to be trendy, to have appeal, to get funding, or to entertain or even to please the public. It needs to be something that, over the long term, people tend to refer to. These are some of the kinds of ideas that I have. But that's for another day…

Concluding the Interview

Steve: Well, Bob, we've dealt with quite a range of issues, taking us all the way from your very early education, through to your introduction to interactionism and ethnography, and to your feelings about the discipline more generally. I've really appreciated you taking the time to meet with me over the course of the three

interview sessions. It really takes me back to my days at Waterloo. Of course, we could go on, but I think we've got a lot material here.

Bob: I agree. For my part Steve, I've very much enjoyed talking with you about these matters and am very grateful to you for the interest you've taken in my work as well as your more enduring interest in interactionist scholarship. Thank you so much for taking the time to do this interview with me. You introduced a number of very important matters and I hope the readers will find our commentary stimulating…

Still, having said that, Steve, maybe I can end on a different note… your dissertation, on the Old Order Mennonites. I'm very interested to see what you learn from that study. I don't have any particular intrigues with the Mennonites as such, but the things you are investigating, especially the matters of change and continuity and education, these are important things! Not just for the Mennonites but for groups more generally. All the more established religious communities will experience similar things and also those in the newer, trendier spiritualist stuff, too -- which actually isn't that new for the most part because it also builds on old concepts and practices, like reincarnation and souls and astrology and things like that. And these things are important, not just for religious groups but for subcultures of all sorts. That to me is the intellectual payoff, what we can do with ethnographies like yours when we locate the basic processes, these recurrent themes, in comparative, broader conceptual terms. That's what we need Steve, and I'm really glad that you are part of that process.

Major publications

2007 "Human Memory, Social Process, and the Pragmatist Metamorphosis: Ethnological Foundations, Ethnographic Contributions, and Conceptual Challenges." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* (in press).

2007 "The Intellectual Canons of a Public Sociology: Pragmatist Foundations, Historical Extensions, and Humanly Engaged Realities." In Lawrence Nichols (ed.) *Public Sociology*. Transaction Press. (in press).

2007 "On Studying Ethnologs (Not just People, *Societies in Miniature*): The Necessities of Ethnography, History, and Comparative Analysis**."** *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* (in press).

2005 "Terrorism, Tyranny, and Religious Extremism as Collective Activity: Beyond the Deviant, Psychological, and Power Mystiques." *The American Sociologist* Volume 36 (1): 47-74.

2004 "Symbolic Interaction and Classical Greek Scholarship: Conceptual Foundations, Historical Continuities, and Transcontextual Relevancies." *The American Sociologist* 35 (1): 5-33.

2003 *The Deviant Mystique: Involvements, Realities, and Regulation* (Robert Prus and Scott Grills). Westport, CT: Praeger [Greenwood] Press.

2003 "Policy as a Collective Venture: A Symbolic Interactionist Approach to the Study of Organizational Directives." *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 23 (6): 13-60.

1999   *Beyond the Power Mystique: Power as Intersubjective Accomplishment*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.

1997   *Subcultural Mosaics and Intersubjective Realities: An Ethnographic Research Agenda for Pragmatizing the Social Sciences*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.

1996   *Symbolic Interaction and Ethnographic Research: Intersubjectivity and the Study of Human Lived Experience*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press

1994   *Doing Everyday Life: Ethnography as Human Lived Experience* (Co-edited collection, with Mary Lorenz Dietz and William Shaffir). Toronto, Ontario: Copp Clark Longman.

1991   *Road Hustler: Grifters, Magic, and the Thief Subculture* (Robert Prus and C.R.D. Sharper). New York: Kaufman and Greenberg. Reprint of the 1977 edition of Road Hustler [178 pages], with an extended epilogue [325 total pages]

1989   *Pursuing Customers: An Ethnography of Marketing Activities*. Newbury Park, California: Sage.

1989   *Making Sales: Influence as Interpersonal Accomplishment*. Newbury Park, California: Sage.

1980   *Hookers, Rounders, and Desk Clerks: The Social Organization of the Hotel Community* (Robert Prus and Styllianoss Irini). Toronto, Ontario: Gage.

1977   *Road Hustler: The Career Contingencies of Professional Card and Dice Hustlers* (Robert Prus and C.R.D. Sharper) Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books (D.C. Heath).

Citation

Kleinknecht, Steven (2007) "An interview with Robert Prus: His Career, Contributions, and Legacy as an Interactionist Ethnographer and Social Theorist." *Qualitative Sociology Review*, Vol. III Issue 2. Retrieved Month, Year (http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org /ENG/archive_eng.php)