Piecing Together the Meaning of "Dirty Work"

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Abstract: I reflect upon Dr. William Shaffir's influence on my approach to ethnographic research and my study of homeless shelter workers. Dr. Shaffir introduced me to his own brand of the craft of qualitative field work, but also introduced me to important sociologists and ideas in the symbolic interactionist tradition. Most central was Everett C. Hughes' notion of "dirty work," which helped shape my research focus. Building from Hughes' concept, but expanding it with Shaffir and Pawluch's (2003) social constructionist approach to occupations, I was better able to conceptualize the process of how workers themselves piece together the meaning of "dirty work." Beyond gaining these conceptual insights, I also reflect on Dr. Shaffir's teaching philosophy of qualitative methods, that is, the importance of learning by doing. I conclude with some thoughts regarding Shaffir's perspective on the wider ethnographic task of describing, *in situ*, members' understandings and definitions. Following Everett Hughes, I call on interactionists to give more attention to "dirty work" as a generic and transcontextual process.

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I am deeply honored to have been given the opportunity to contribute to Dr. William Shaffir's Festschrift. I have learned a great deal from him both through his lessons at McMaster University, and his writings on qualitative research. As a recent student of Dr. Shaffir, I discuss the influence of his work, and his approach to sym-

bolic interactionism more broadly, in shaping my investigation of "dirty work" among homeless shelter workers.

In order to write this essay, I have asked myself how I could share my own benefits from William Shaffir's teachings and writings with others, as clearly and succinctly as possible. I also want to demonstrate a sociological perspective for describing "dirty work" from the viewpoint of occupational members, in my case, those who work with the homeless. Like the many ethnographers contributing to this special issue of *Qualitative Sociology Review*, I have virtually absorbed his perspectives on field research and learned to tailor them usefully to the realm of work and occupational life.

Everett C. Hughes' enduring interest was in what he termed "dirty work," viewed as a part of "deviant occupations," counterposed to more legitimate or noble occupations and professions. This definition implicitly presupposes a definition of what "deviant occupations," "in fact," are. Although the assumptions we bring to "deviant occupations," and those who do "dirty work," may be an inevitable part of our sociological enterprise, I propose eschewing assumptions about "objective characteristics" altogether. I came upon this approach by reading Dr. William Shaffir and Dr. Dorothy Pawluch's (2003) "Occupations and Professions" in the *Handbook of Symbolic Interactionism*. They write: "rather than focusing on the objective characteristics of occupations and their interrelationships and place in the larger social structure, symbolic interactionists view occupations subjectively, as groups of workers constructing meanings" (Shaffir and Pawluch 2003:894). This means researchers ought to focus on how occupational members decide who they are and what they are about; what services they

are providing; what they deem objectionable about their work; and how they deal with client problems, among other issues.

Following this social constructionist approach, the meanings attributed by occupational members to the work they do becomes the heart of the matter. As such, what occupational members so name (as, say, "dirty work") constitutes the object of study. The definitional activities surrounding such forms of work, as observable collective enaction and interaction, are grounds for ethnographic inquiry. Following W. I. and Dorothy Swaine Thomas' famous theorem, importance is placed on the "definition of the situation," and what groups of workers themselves conceive as real and important (Shaffir and Pawluch 2003). What is to be considered "dirty" has to be defined by occupational members as such in the first place, and occupational members only. In this way, ethnographers of "dirty work" can focus on the definitional activities and processes whereby occupational members select, assess, and sort what aspects of their work are disagreeable and objectionable, rather than analysts presupposing, or worse, imparting, the overall "deviant status" and associated "dirty" elements onto the occupation.

As a narrative process, this paper expands on William Shaffir's influence on me during my Master's thesis work. I begin by discussing the ethnographic lessons learned, teasing out the pragmatist theme of *learning by doing*, which underlines Shaffir's approach to passing on the craft of ethnography. For me, doing ethnography was, to quote Herbert J. Gans (1968), a "traumatic introduction." I go on to explain the ways in which I used William Shaffir's work (and the symbolic interactionists who influenced him) in order to weave a particular approach

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to studying the "dirty work" of people who work with the homeless.

"A Traumatic Introduction"

During my undergraduate studies in sociology at Concordia University, in Montréal, Canada, I took my first field research course. A lot of that class focused on reading and rereading field research methodologies writ large, such as their epistemology and ontology. Much of it focused on "thinking about" field research rather than "doing" field research. With William Shaffir's field research course, which I took in the winter of 2017, reading became less important than doing. Read what you can, be selective, but make sure to engage with the field, with people's actual "doings," above everything else.

I decided to do ethnographic research in homeless shelters in a large Canadian city to study the workers there. I had initially devised an interview guide prior to entering the field. During an office meeting with Dr. Shaffir, he would just tell me "go into the field." To invoke one of Howard Becker's memorable phrases of "people doing things together," I soon learned that ethnography itself was a collaborative and collective process in which ethnographers made sense of other people's "doings" or "interpretations." It was thus almost counterproductive to predesign an interview guide before entering the field. I had to learn from what was going on there. Moreover, I learned to reflect on the process of accomplishing fieldwork. How did I do it? How did I establish a presence and accomplish rapport? One soon realizes that accomplishing fieldwork becomes an intersubjective accomplishment with others. I now see ethnography as such a process: a process through which anything, including matters of fact and concern, have been put-together, interpreted

and understood *in situ*. It is a social and collective process, requiring the complex joint efforts of the many people involved. Ethnography is a practical accomplishment (Shaffir and Stebbins 1991; also see Prus, Dietz, and Shaffir 1997).

My early experiences of entering the field reminded me of Herbert J. Gans' experiences in Everett C. Hughes' "Introduction to Fieldwork" course. No one talked much about participant observation, we just did it and Dr. Shaffir would listen, in a narrative process, to our ethnographic experiences. It was a "traumatic introduction." As Gans (1968:301) recalls, "Everett Hughes gave us some words of introduction and of instruction, but good father that he was, he quickly pushed us out of the nest and told us to fly on our own." The same can be said about Dr. Shaffir. I am sure many contributors to this Festschrift would attest to the fact that William Shaffir was "our Hughes" (Kelly and Adorjan, this volume; Low, this volume).

The first lesson I learned about doing ethnography is that it is a very daunting experience. In this first instance, the participant researcher is at the margins of those he or she is studying, or at least, I was. I knew nothing about working in a homeless shelter. I knew nobody who did. And in part, that is what seized my curiosity. Who was helping these people? Being in a marginal place in relation to those we are studying requires the ethnographer to take on a role, which, in effect, requires a performance. This performance is not always consistent with his or her real feelings. I always envied those who seemed to enter fieldwork settings with ready ease. For me, entering the field was plagued with the worst of anxieties. Dr. Shaffir constantly reassured me that this anxiety had more to do with the nature of ethnography than with me. He also said that, although the

experience of anxiety never fully disappears, it can be managed. Managing a convincing self-presentation could, indeed, mitigate, if not reduce, the experience of anxiety altogether. Since I was in a position of marginality, I had to make sure that my impressions worked, otherwise they would shun me. I took on the role of the naive learner and tried to exude a personable and professional image. As Shaffir (1991:74) himself wrote, "I have learned to cope with mild states of anxiety and uncertainty and now accept these as part of the field research adventure."

In *The Positive Functions of Poverty*, Herbert J. Gans (1972:278) argued that the existence of poverty ensures that "dirty work" is done and that many economic activities which involve dirty work "depend heavily on the poor." The poor and the homeless provide "jobs for professional and paraprofessional 'poverty warriors'" (Gans 1972:278). Without the poor, many occupations and professions would expire. Poverty directly produces work for various occupations and professions which serve the poor as their clients or "shield the rest of the population from them" (Gans 1972:279). As Gans (1972:279) writes:

> As already noted, penology would be miniscule without the poor, as would the police, since the poor provide the majority of their "clients." Other activities which flourish because of the existence of poverty are the numbers game, the sale of heroin and cheap wines and liquors, Pentecostal ministers, faith healers, prostitutes, pawn shops, and the peacetime army, which recruits its enlisted men mainly from among the poor.

The unintended consequences of poverty, therefore, are the proliferation of responding occupations and professions. Penology, criminology, social work,

social services, caseworkers, poverty activists, sociologists, journalists, and public health depend on the existence of poverty. The image of the "poverty warrior" who lucratively benefits from the suffering of the poor and the homeless is a stigmatizing typification. During my early days of entering the field, I learned that this was the view that many outside agencies had of homeless caseworkers. I had initially visited a community legal clinic in James Town to speak with one of its representatives about the problem of "gentrification" in the city. The representative explained to me, quite judgmentally, that "James Town is a huge poverty industry. The homeless shelters in the city," she said, "are a big business." I knew then that I had to interview caseworkers who serve the homeless. My assumption was that these workers were "expert in their own lives" and that they knew what they were all about. I soon learned that caseworkers were often irritated with images of them as part of a lucrative poverty industry. As one caseworker reported, "when dealing with poverty, I really get offended when people say, 'Social workers don't want poverty to be fixed because then they will be out of a job.'" From Shaffir, I learned to focus on people's experiences and their interpretations of reality.

Dr. Shaffir would listen more than he would speak. He had a great deal of intellectual respect for his students and would listen attentively as they expressed their thoughts in the classroom. He was, from my perspective, very non-directive. Although he provided us with some readings, students soon learned that it was about reading with a purpose. At least that's what I did: if it was interesting and relevant and useful to me, I read it. Why read something that is not directly helpful to what is happening in the field? We were as responsible for the process of learning as he was. He never imposed his *teachings*

onto us. He was not doctrinaire. I do not even think we can effectively say that he had *teachings*. He did not impose a path on us. Ethnography, for William Shaffir, was an iterative process. The one lesson that stands out as most important to me is that of learning by doing, which lends focus and purpose to the pragmatic reality of ethnography.

Learning by Doing

It was very refreshing that Dr. Shaffir did not teach his students any rigid "method," since this had to be worked out in the field, nor did he push any one "theory," since concepts had to emerge out of our research process. There is the commonplace notion that the teacher is more likely to play the role of a patron than a companion. That, for me, was the lesson. Finding the appropriate theory and method for a particular study is not something one can teach. As I had learned, there was nothing better than *working from the ground up*. Yet, William Shaffir gave me ideas that helped to shape my investigation. He told me to read Everett C. Hughes' (1958) *Men and Their Work* and the idea of "dirty work," and so I did. From this, I learned to reflect about what I was learning in my research project and to use that to shape the next steps I took in the field.

For John Dewey (1958), learning is a part of real life, which is the natural outlet of learning by doing. Learning by doing seems to mean learning on as needed basis. We learn because something has caused us to want to know. We learn because we doubt. We learn from everything we do. According to Dewey (1958:46), "education is not an affair of 'telling' and being told, but an active and constructive process." But, of course, doing's counterpart is reflection. Rather than being a matter of telling and being told, like the great teacher Dr. Shaffir was, he

rarely set constraints on my motivations to learn by doing. He would provide a subtle nudge here and there, but he was endlessly affirmative and encouraging. A rare combination of brilliance and approachability. I always felt like he had trust in me. Learning, therefore, appears to be more of an active, constructive process, namely, a cooperative process of learning from everyday situations with the necessary condition of the application of useful ideas and concepts—as analytical tools—to the interactive setting. Ethnography, therefore, is active learning rather than the application of methodological rules. Such learning, surely, is complemented by the use of one's analytic faculties in a process of understanding and describing the meaning of situations. Construction, not instruction, is an active, ongoing process of learning. Learning by doing, therefore, is an important form of practical induction. We learn by reflecting on our ethnographic experiences. The way we acquire knowledge about the things we should learn to do is by doing them. That is the lesson I received from Dr. Shaffir. We learn the craft of ethnography by doing the ethnographic work we must learn to do. I can now say that students learn by constructing their own understanding of ethnographic encounters and experiences by building on what they already know, consciously and unconsciously, to constitute a perspective of the social world.

I once overheard William Shaffir say—as he was speaking with my supervisor—that, "My students…I never tell them what to do…they find out how to do it themselves." Dr. Shaffir was on my supervisory committee. I read his work closely and we would speak together about my thesis work. When I mentioned my potential doctoral topic, he said, "Interesting…but how are you going to get in?" Shaffir asked the right questions. No easy answers,

because, there were no clear answers to many of the problems of ethnography, only better ways of doing things. In *Doing Ethnography: Reflections on Finding Your Way*, Shaffir (1999) recounts a parable, as told by the Rebbe, of a man who had been wandering in a forest for many days, not knowing the right path out. The young man went for a walk in the woods and upon his journey, eventually recognized he had become lost in its depths. He wandered alone. He wandered scared. Eventually, he encountered a woodman. Shaffir (1999:676-677) writes:

> "How long did you say you have been lost in the forest?" inquired the woodman. "For three days," the man cried. "You say you've been lost in the forest for three days?" asked the woodman. "Just look at me. For ten years I've been wandering the depths of the wood, unable to find my way out of the maze." At this, the man who had lost his way burst into tears, saying, "Now I see there is no hope." The woodman said with a gentle smile, "Still, you have gained something by meeting me. From my experience in wandering through the forest for ten years, I can at least teach you one thing of great value—I can show you which are the paths that do not lead out of the forest."

Stories connect profoundly to our lives. They speak to us on different levels. Sometimes we have to hear or read a story many times before we discover its meaning. According to Shaffir (1999:677), "this fable is surely apt for those of us who pursue ethnographic research and guide students through it." You could have a variety of great ideas, but at the end of the day, it came to the pragmatism of ethnographic research: could you get in or not? How would you manage to overcome the practical, social, and emotional dilemmas that you encountered along the way? How would you convince those you wanted to study to take part in your research? How do you establish a presence in the field? Nobody can teach you that. There is no precise theory that can lay it all out. Yet, we can learn from others' past experiences and gain wisdom from their mistakes. But, in the end, whatever path one takes must be accomplished, not just talked about. That, for me, was Dr. Shaffir's greatest lesson, "Sure, a great idea, but now what?"

"Dirty Work" as a Social Construction

We often remain silent while others manage the work of incarceration, death, garbage, and helping the homeless. Everett C. Hughes (1971:343) argued that work becomes "dirty" when it "in some way goes against the more heroic of our moral conceptions." Dirty work can be physically distasteful, morally "dirty," or socially and personally disreputable. Dirty workers "perform the lowly tasks without being recognized among the miracle workers" (Hughes 1971:307). In this way, it is best to view work as a collection of various activities, some of which "are the 'dirty work' of that trade" (Hughes 1994:62). Dirty work may be dirty in several ways, being merely "physically disgusting" or a "symbol of degradation, something that wounds one's dignity" (Hughes 1994:62). Much of Hughes' concern with "dirty work" was with the cleaning up what was morally and physically dirty and its consequences for the ongoing process of everyday life. Hughes was chiefly interested in the "social drama of work." He often assumed the "dirty" aspects of work to be an objective element of the situation, from which such social dramas might unfold.

Yet from Shaffir and Pawluch's (2003) writings on the sociology of work, and Dr. Shaffir's (1999:684) advice to describe reality as it is experienced and

"expressed by those whom we study," I emphasized the lived processes of work. Shaffir writes (1999:684-685), "my own position, crystallized over a variety of research, is that the most credible understanding of social phenomena requires the researcher to discover the actor's definition of the situation—that is, his or her perception and interpretation of reality." Elsewhere, Shaffir (2011:39) recalls the "Thomas dictum," which is "a reminder that reality is socially constructed, and that people respond as much, or more, to the meaning a situation has for them than to the objective features of that situation." This roots back to W. I. and Dorothy Swaine Thomas' (1928:572) concept of the "definition of the situation," namely, that "if people define their situations as real, they are real in their consequences." I attempted to understand how caseworkers in homeless shelters define and make sense of what they do. Ethnography, therefore, is a descriptive practice that is attuned to meaning. Rather than ascribing "dirty work" to the occupation in question, I was interested in the social contexts in which "dirty work" is identified, defined, and then dealt with. "Dirty work" must be understood in its naturally occurring context.

By understanding the caseworker's "definition of the situation," I learned to understand "dirty work" as a subjectively derived category, and thus a social construction rather than an inherent property of the work itself. As Dr. Shaffir told me, "priests deal with street workers that come for confession, but this doesn't mean that priests' work is dirty." Over time, through social interactions among members of an occupation, a consensus emerges as to how to define which tasks are the most objectionable. Therefore, I focused on the "occupational culture" of those who work with the homeless, to better understand the justifications, definitions, and explanations of

"dirty workers" with respect to their occupational activities. These definitions give their work significance, for "each construction serves to proclaim the occupation's legitimacy" (Satzewich and Shaffir 2009:207).

I learned that "dirty work" does not merely result from dealing with vulnerable populations or unsanitary conditions. We can learn to be more reflexive and aware of the assumptions we bring to the table and work to correct many of these assumptions by learning from the perspectives of the other. If caseworkers do not experience the "dirtiness" of working with certain "stigmatized" clients, then we cannot claim it to be real. Instead, what they *designate* as "dirty" is dirty. This is far from a denial of reality. It is a call to respect members' definitions. Therefore, phenomenologically, one must begin with the experience of work and only from there lead into what occupational members themselves designate and define as "dirty work." By naming such "dirty work" as a fully definitional entity, I hope to draw careful attention to occupational members' definitions, not our own.

Sociology has accumulated a long list of concepts to designate the "cultural" in our understanding of work and occupations, and "social reality" more broadly. These include norms and values (Parsons 1968), tools and toolkits (Swidler 1986), sense-making and accounts (Garfinkel 1967), excuses and justifications (Scott and Lyman 1968), frames (Goffman 1974), as well as narratives, themes, strategies, or myths (Lévi-Strauss 2013). These concepts serve as useful representations of culture, but more importantly, point to how people define situations and do things together. They indicate something that was clear in William Shaffir's interactionist work, that is, people's interpretive capacities and procedures for

social action and interaction. Social reality is built continuously *in situ*, often with skepticism towards taken-for-granted assumptions about shared values and the givenness of social situations. What we call social reality or everyday life exists precisely because people engage in social relationships and actions, the result of people "doing things together" (Ben-Yehuda et al. 1989). Actions, responses, and reactions to what we are doing—in this case, "dirty work"—are embedded in these interactions. I followed Dr. Shaffir in trying to understand people's interpretations of reality: people making sense of the meaning of what is going on, using sense-making tools such as stories and frameworks to communicate it, and strategies to decide what to do next are the processes that constitute social action, interaction, and order. These processes are assembled and put together by people's collaborative activities in the making of social worlds.

Rather than overestimating "dirt" as a source of disgust, we should understand that our senses are never culturally free, or naturally given. While pedestrians may "sometimes go so far as to cross the street in order to avoid anticipated interaction with the homeless" (Snow and Anderson 1993:199), as avoidance rituals, the reality of caseworkers tells a different story. Social constructionism draws attention to what people conceive to be real and what is taken for granted while conducting everyday life. Those definitions, as they relate to occupational worlds, come to be sustained by occupational cultures and institutions and are explained by social and symbolic understandings.

In using this framework, I sought to grasp how caseworkers working with the homeless defined their organizational mission. The focus was on what they said. Our interpretations, as sociologists, should be about understanding the interpretations of our informants. All our stories, as ethnographic descriptions, are precisely that, stories: a combination of selected data into consistent narratives that reflect members' understandings. If one believes something to be real and acts upon it as if it is real, then there are consequences in the "real" world. Schopenhauer (1901:15) had asserted that "it is not what things are objectively and in themselves, but what they are for us, in our way of looking at them, that makes us happy or unhappy." Before Schopenhauer, Epictetus claimed that "men are not influenced by things, but by their thoughts about things" (cited in Schopenhauer 1901:15). The definition of the situation, however, implies that there is no private and exclusive correspondence between what is "objectively real" and people's definitions of that "world." Schütz (1962) referred to "multiple realities" to convey how the same "situation" or "object" can possess different meanings to different actors involved. Goffman (1974:43-44) extends pragmatist (e.g., William James) and phenomenological (e.g., Alfred Schütz) insights on "multiple realities" to consider the various ways actors "key" frameworks to mean "something quite else" for the participants involved. Goffman's *Frame Analysis* (1974), therefore, provides fertile ground for exploring the ways in which occupational members frame and reframe their "dirty work" in ways that are meaningful to themselves. Workers, when confronted with work they identify as "dirty work," must ask the question, "What is it that is going on here?" Some cognitive reframing work must be achieved. These reframing strategies become important sense-making practices to explore—in studying "dirty work"—illuminating the meaning-making processes whereby occupational members transform their first order experiences of "dirty work" into second order experiences and realities.

Piecing Together the Meaning of "Dirty Work"

Entire occupations do not constitute "dirty work" in themselves. Rather, workers identify and define "dirty" elements or components within them. Doctors, typically seen as high-status professionals, also have elements of "dirty work" in what they do, for example, dealing with "alcoholics" (Strong 1980). In my own study, homeless caseworkers perform different tasks, and among them, there are those that are regarded as most disagreeable. Therefore, I focused on the experience of "dirty work," those aspects of working with the homeless which are defined by shelter staff as objectionable and the ways in which they managed the experience of their "dirty work contexts." Namely, I paid attention to how such "dirty work challenges" are mitigated, ameliorated, and overcome.

Working with the homeless is often seen as "dirty work" in two respects. First, it is seen as morally dirty, given the nature of the clientele. Caseworkers often worked with down and outers, addicts, those with mental health issues, and sex offenders, and often had to deal with client aggression, verbal abuse, and the unexpected drop-ins from undesirables. Second, the work can be seen as physically dirty, in that workers have hygienic responsibilities to deal with. Caseworkers must assist clients who need help with bathing, duties that involve contact with bodily fluids and other potentially infectious materials, assistance with personal hygiene, handling soiled laundry, CPR, and cleaning toilets, among other tasks. Some caseworkers objected to the "custodial work" that they were required to do as part of working in a homeless shelter. Although they pointed to hygienic issues, they also detested the work of cleaning dirty units, bathrooms, and doing laundry, tasks viewed as illegitimate, and hence, "dirty work." Many joked about not doing the laundry and spoke about the label of disrespect attached to such work. They should be working as caseworkers, not janitors.

My aim was to follow their lead during the interviews and informal conversations throughout my participant observation research. I wanted to understand the way they defined what they saw as objectionable and rewarding parts of their work. Once they began to speak about "dirty work" or "shit work" (Emerson and Pollner 1976), I sought to understand how they managed these aspects of their jobs on an everyday basis. I found that caseworkers developed strategies of reframing in order to get on with their work and provide legitimacy to their professional identities. When working with homeless sex offenders, for example, caseworkers often referred to their occupational ideologies of remaining "non-judgmental," a concept I developed as "non-judgmental egalitarianism." Moreover, I learned about the importance of dirty work through the use of humor.

Once having defined "dirty work," those in the relevant occupations may reframe the meaning of their work, developing terminological definitions to make the work appear less dirty, concealing its repellant features, sometimes sloughing it off onto members of other occupations. As an example, caseworkers often referred to the homeless as "clients." The way caseworkers use language to define *What is happening?* holds significance in understanding their definitions of the situation. Defining the homeless as "clients" and "guests" are strategies that caseworkers use to humanize their "clientele" that outsiders tend to dehumanize and bring respectability to their occupations. This serves to dignify human beings who are too often denied that dignity. This

reframing also has consequences for their occupational images, since caseworkers are framing (and thus redefining) their work as noble, valuable, and transformative. It is people who do the work that decide what is clean or dirty, and therefore, attention to their interpretations is cardinal. Van der Geest (2002) recounts an experience he had with Mr. Atia, a night-soil collector in Ghana, during his ethnographic research. Mr. Atia saw his work as "clean work" and was aware that people needed him. He knew his value and "had his price" (van der Geest 2002:203). Despite the "dirty work" involved in certain occupations, workers may show great pride and self-esteem in the work they do. Caseworkers, for instance, underscored the "heroic character" of their work as transformative and, as one informant said, the "emotionally and spiritually fulfilling thing of helping." Success stories became emblematic symbols of their work.

Conclusion

My hope in this essay is to reveal how my analytic constructions of "dirty work" were guided and sustained by William Shaffir's teachings, and to reflect on how I learned to think like a constructionist. I have tried to be as candid as possible about the many influences Dr. Shaffir had in shaping my decisions and thinking in constructing an understanding of "dirty work." "Social forces," "social structure," "theory," and "society" have often been used to explain social phenomena, rather than being the very phenomena we must explain. In a circular and tautological way, sociologists of the "social," mainly of the structuralist stripe, employ the taken-for-granted meanings of ready-made, already-assembled analytic concepts, using "the social to explain the social" (Latour 2005:3-5; Schneider 2018:13). Latour (2005) has recently argued that there are no ready-made groups, only group formations. The aim is to study the making of group life, and thus paying attention to interactions between and among people as they do things together and generate new definitions and realities within these ongoing processes. Groups are assembled and re-assembled, they form and they un-form. Society as conceived *à la* Durkheim does not exist. We do not have a durable, external entity, but rather, following Becker, we have only activities and interactions that make the kind of stuff we (later) define as "society."

From Dr. Shaffir's introduction into the world of symbolic interactionism, social constructionism, and ethnomethodology, I have come to recognize the shortcomings of invoking "social forces," "structure," or "society" as referents to explain *What is it that is going on?* Instead of this, we should be describing, *in situ*, how members' understandings of such issues are built out of and play out in social interaction. Concepts like "force" or "field" are difficult to empirically ground. People doing things together is observable in both an empirical and homely sense. For instance, "occupational *social worlds*" resonates more with people than technical uses of "field" or "force." As Pawluch, Shaffir, and Miall (2005:1) have argued, "any question about society, 'big' or 'small,' is ultimately about people interacting with each other. Whether the issue is changing gender relationships, corporate deeds or misdeeds, class structures, or the school performance of children from cultural minorities, it all comes down to one thing—people doing things together." It is through social action, speech, and communication through which we create and express, in Wittgenstein's (2009) words, predictable "forms of life," through which we become accustomed, and from which we sort and make meaning of the world around us.

I thus learned how to focus my research on how members construct accounts and frameworks about what they do and thus, what they make of the realities they encounter. William Shaffir, I have come to learn, constantly put knowledge and meaning at the forefront of sociological analysis. His work emphasizes the primacy of the symbolic, through members' subjective understandings and lived experiences. This requires a keen attention to the accomplishment of ethnography, following Becker's (1986) recommendation to study people "doing things together" (see also Plummer 2003).

New orthodoxies in sociology are emerging, however. These put "social inequality," "activism," and "public sociology" to the fore of sociological analysis (Harris 2006; also see Schneider 2018; Adorjan 2019; Nichols 2019; Pawluch 2019). This is, to my mind, very disconcerting. Politicizing sociology as an ideological instrument, and advocating mostly for left wing causes, is contrary to our craft of ethnographic description. If a descriptive science becomes simply ideology or political advocacy, it ceases to be a descriptive science. Recently, especially with quantitative methods, we have witnessed an obsession with the overspecialization and sophistication of research techniques at the expense of content and substance, what Peter L. Berger (2002) dubs "methodological fetishism." I am instantly reminded of Husserl's (1970:6) assertion that "merely fact-minded sciences make merely fact-minded people." The preoccupation with methodological fetishism, for Berger, goes too far. Positivist objectivism abstracts from everything "subjective" that we can reasonably ask if we are even studying human beings anymore. I have learned to strive to be apolitical when it comes to sociological activity.

As Hughes (1971:viii) wrote in his preface to *The Sociological Eye*, "Some say that sociology is a normative science. If they mean that social norms are one of its main objects of study, I agree. If they mean anything else, I do not agree." Hughes sought to bring an "informed, enlightened understanding of the world to those who would listen" (Strauss 1996:274). While some sociologists "theorize out of existence" (Garfinkel 1967:72-73) peoples' activities and interactions, producing them as "cultural or judgmental dopes," I have come to learn to not worry more than participants do. This, however, does not mean that we should avoid developing strong, sensitizing, and resonating concepts and completely eschew theoretical debates (Puddephatt, Shaffir, and Kleinknecht 2009). According to Blumer (1969:168), citing Kant, "perception without conception is blind; conception without perception is empty." As Puddephatt, Shaffir, and Kleinknecht (2009:6) persuasively argue, "some kind of theorizing is germane to all social scientific work, notwithstanding the various ranges of explanation, description, taxonomy, and the level of application intended."

William Shaffir assiduously emphasized the importance of experience, curiosity, and imagination that comes with *entering* and *learning from the field*, as a practical achievement. The important thing is that it is not preconceived methods or theories that should decide the ethnographic problem to be examined, but rather the issues that stimulate our curiosity in the field that should decide the ways we go about exploring them. The sociologist's ambition is to find something that is unexpected, not to generate predictable outcomes through the application of a politically slanted theoretical framework.

Many case studies of "dirty work" have been accomplished and more certainly should be done.

Everett Hughes, however, was also interested in focusing on the commonalties of a broad variety of experiences in order to account for social reality. This means looking for generic processes that cut across a range of empirical cases (Blumer 1969; Chapoulie 1987; Prus 1987; Shaffir and Pawluch 2003; McLuhan and Puddephatt 2019; Puddephatt and McLuhan 2019). Hughes (1970:149-150) reflected on his students who studied janitors, factory workers, furriers, and the like and recognized an emerging comparative frame of reference, where he became convinced:

> That if a certain problem turned up in one occupation, it was nearly certain to turn up in all. There is no absolute virtue in studying one kind of work rather than another, if the inward frame of one's mind is comparative. The essence of the comparative frame is that one seeks differences in terms of dimensions common to all the cases. If one becomes over-enamored of a particular occupation, he is likely to describe it in terms which suggest that it is not comparable to others. If he seeks common dimensions, the differences between occupations becomes clearer, and more impressive.

Hughes thus emphasized "that generic themes were common to all work" (Shaffir and Pawluch 2003:895). Physicians, priests, janitors, nurses, firefighters, steel workers, musicians, scientists, recycling workers, night-soil collectors, all of which constitute different occupational universes, are "faced with similar kinds of tasks and problems to which they must adapt and respond either as individuals or collective to continue their work" (Shaffir and Pawluch 2003:895). Yet, mapping these similar kinds of tasks and problems has fallen by the wayside. Hughes insisted on comparisons and encouraged sociologists studying occupations and professions (and "dirty work") to develop transcontextual similarities (and difference) in the ongoing processes of work and occupational life. Such an undertaking is certainly worthwhile. As Hughes (1994:61) wrote, "until we can find a point of view and concepts which enable us to make comparisons between the junk peddler and the professor without intent to debunk the one and patronize the other, we cannot do our best work in this field."

I have learned a great deal from the interactionists and constructionists I have thankfully chanced upon at McMaster University.[1] Dr. William Shaffir in particular, taught me *how to think, not what to think*. Dr. Shaffir's approach to education, sociology, and life has been, in short, deeply moving and intellectually stimulating. He is a man of few words and I've come to learn that can be the best quality in an ethnographer; to listen; to accommodate a perspective other than your own. Shaffir's style of humor was affiliative. His style conveyed real mirth and fun, his well-timed jokes a great reliever of tension, all of which embodied and expressed an entire worldview. I count it my good fortune to have studied with William Shaffir.

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