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## Over-Complexifying Social Reality: A Critical Exploration of Systematicity and Rigidification in Ethnographic Practice and Writing

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## Over-Complexifying Social Reality: A Critical Exploration of Systematicity and Rigidification in Ethnographic Practice and Writing

### Abstract

Qualitative methodological development has produced canonical tendencies that over-complexify and fix a fluid and lived social world. Meanwhile, critical theory has produced critiques on methodology but without enough attention to the qualitative tradition. I bridge these gaps by using an Adornoian position to interrogate the concepts of systematicity, rigidification, complexification, and their problems in ethnographic research and qualitative methodology. I conduct an urban ethnography and autoethnography of the metropolitan blasé as a public attitude of indifference to articulate an alternative, quotidian approach to ethnography that better captures social embeddedness, meaning-creation, and how contexts should drive data collection, analysis, and method-selection.

### Keywords

Adorno, blasé, complexification, ethnography, systematicity, qualitative research methodology, writing, critical social theory

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Qualitative methodological development has produced canonical tendencies that over-complexify and fix a fluid and lived social world. Meanwhile, critical theory has produced critiques on methodology but without enough attention to the qualitative tradition. I bridge these gaps by using an Adornoian position to interrogate the concepts of systematicity, rigidification, complexification, and their problems in ethnographic research and qualitative methodology. I conduct an urban ethnography and autoethnography of the metropolitan blasé as a public attitude of indifference to articulate an alternative, quotidian approach to ethnography that better captures social embeddedness, meaning-creation, and how contexts should drive data collection, analysis, and method-selection.

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## Introduction

### A Brief History of the Modern Tenets of Ethnography

In reaction to the sociological stance in the 1960s that argued the need for firm *a priori* theoretical orientations, grounded theory methodology (GTM) posited the discovery of concepts and hypotheses could occur *after* data collection, rather than *before* (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser, 1978). While GTM distinguished itself from ethnography by studying the experience of a phenomenon, rather than its nature, both overlapped enough to propound an inductive approach to data collection (Janesick, 1994, p. 223). This inductive approach to conducting research has held firm in qualitative research practices throughout the years. Early data collection in ethnography, participant observation, and GTM converge on the practice of description: methods of data collection focus on thick description or the procurement and regurgitation of as much information as possible (Geertz, 1973, pp. 9-10).

But today, this canonical practice in ethnographic research has adopted a new tendency. Ethnographic analysis has been made systemizable by a consensus that qualitative fieldwork data requires analysis and remodeling (Berg, 1998; Brewer, 2000). In the process, systematicity has shifted our attention restrictively towards the proposed entwinement of data collection and analysis characteristic of GTM (Crang & Cook, 2007, p. 2; Glaser, 1978). Methodological inquiries on the practice emphasize, for instance, the need for systematicity in ethnography in order for it to be named a "proper science" (Aunger, 1995), but without critically evaluating what it offers to improve ethnography. Similarly, ethnographers are also prompted to digest data into "more sophisticated," integrated categories (Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001, p. 161), but without assessing what emerges from such a complexified reality.

Recursivity is another tenet of ethnography, which essentially refers to how a researcher's findings and analyses during the course of a project actively feed back into their

ideas and decisions about the project's design and methodology (Davies & Dwyer, 2007). But even though recursivity is deemed indispensable in ethnography, suggesting a bottom-up approach to data collection and analysis, the processes of interpretation and writing fail to escape systematicity in ways that betray a tendency to "over-complexify" the social world. In doing so, the tendency toward systematicity abandons impressions by which sociological reflections are made accessible—low-level nuances unamenable to theory, but crucial to the creation of meaning per social embeddedness, garnered from a site. At the same time, the abandonment of impressions encourages conceptual thinking—the practice of parceling theories into concepts and applying them deductively (see Ivinson et al., 2011)—as part of the current mainstream tradition of systematized ethnographic and qualitative inquiry. Thus, a great deal is overlooked within these methodological developments, now accepted as canon in ethnographic research practice. Rather than over-simplifying a complex and ambiguous social reality, we are over-complexifying a situated and lived social world teeming with social relations and meanings. We are deconstructing the world, before constructing it anew, and fixing the fluidity of social life from the way we collect and analyze data through to how we write our results (Au, 2018).

### **Problematizing the Modern Tenets of Ethnography: An Adornoian Approach**

In this article, I flesh out how systematicity, rigidification, and complexification arise in ethnographic research practice and writing. To this end, I draw upon critical social theory, which has generated the most activity along this strand of thought, embroiled in overarching critiques launched against positivist methodological approaches (Adorno et al., 1975; Mottier, 2005; Smith et al., 1996). Even within critical social theoretical engagements, however, popularized attention to quantitative methods as positivism has overshadowed the importance of interrogating positivist tendencies in qualitative methods.

Theodor Adorno, in particular, is credited with designing and propounding a staunchly qualitative program of research concurrently with an indiscriminate attack on quantitative approaches (Jung, 2013). This assertion is not without warrant. It gains credence from Adorno's praise for qualitative research as a "refined, discriminating" approach that produced an "abundance of specific, concrete insights" and "detailed information" on individual cases (Adorno, 2000/1968, p. 74), and again from his critique of quantitative research itself for the criteria it adopted (Adorno, 2000/1968). Adorno further suggested, in accordance with his "radically sociological" perspective (Benzer, 2011, p. 72) that the social whole could be unearthed through minutiae, that the "seemingly individual" case or datum had "general value"—that is, a smaller sample could still serve to uncover the wider social context of the functions in question (Adorno, 2000/1968, p. 75). However, these assertions prescribe for Adornoian thought a form of identity thinking he himself spited, failing to properly account for Adorno's fundamental negative position: non-identity thinking or "consciousness of non-identity" (Adorno, 1973/1966, p. 17) immanent to negation to highlight "the impossibility of capturing in subjective concepts without surplus what is not of the subject" (Adorno, 1982/1956, p. 147).

Thus, bringing scrutiny to bear on Adorno's popularized disdain for quantitative research, it emerges that it was the standards that quantitative agendas imposed on social reality, and the hierarchical reorganization of its content, which Adorno rejected. These standards included formalizing text items into "units" (Bauer, 2000, p. 133), in addition to prioritizing the establishment of "mathematical stringency," "reliability," and "generalization" as criteria and standards for research (Adorno, 2000/1968, p. 74). His indictments of quantitative research further derived from an emphasis on the problems of various forms of "method-guided research." In method-guided research, method selection for social research is

not modeled after phenomena but predetermined by ideologically held notions about the universality of one form of method (Benzer, 2011, p. 56). Just as how it is “only a particular” quality formed within quantitative research that Adorno *rejects*, it is “only a particular” quality within qualitative research that he *admires*—the “qualitative *richness* of material [rather than quantitative] reduction to as few categories as possible” (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2006, p. 880).

### **Critiquing the Modern Tenets of Ethnography: Applying an Adornoian Approach to the Blasé**

Theoretically drawing on Adorno and methodologically using both ethnography and autoethnography, this article examines the metropolitan blasé to performatively open dialogue on systematicity, rigidification, and complexification as they appear with empirical ethnographic research and writing practices, whilst charting a way forward to avoid these problems. Autoethnography and ethnography have notable differences. Autoethnography is to use the self to investigate the social, often involving the regular documentation of personal experiences and reflections while one is a member of a group of interest (Hayano, 1979; Taber, 2010). On the other hand, ethnography is to investigate the social with a stronger focus on documenting the relational practices, interactions, and dialogue of the group, while minimizing the focus on intrapersonal emotions of the self insofar as the self is conceived as a tool (a participant observer) to gain access to the group (Ellis et al., 2011).

However, as Leon Anderson (2006) observes, as autoethnography became more popular over the past several decades, its practices began to take after the mainstream ethnographic paradigm, such as becoming a “full member in the research group or setting” (p. 375) and being “visible as... a member in the researcher’s published texts” (Anderson, 2006, p. 375). As a result, there has been a growing “blur” of the boundaries between the two (see also Atkinson, 2006), by which calls have been made to treat autoethnography as an *ipso facto* part of ethnography (Taber, 2010).

Although more critical styles of autoethnography have recently come forth (Atkinson, 2006), for the purposes of this article, the critiques I make will refer to the style of autoethnography whose boundaries are “blurred” and take after that of mainstream ethnography. Furthermore, I will be conducting both autoethnography and ethnography. Given the psychological foundations of the subject matter (the metropolitan blasé), the combination of both autoethnography and ethnography is particularly useful, as will be demonstrated.

The metropolitan blasé has gone completely neglected by social theory and sociological research for its superficiality as a concept—its apparent lack of theoretical depth. Originally described by Georg Simmel (1976/1903) as an attitude of general indifference, the blasé is theorized to arise as a natural psychological response to the mass stimulation that metropolitan environments emotionally generate through media and the co-presence of others:

The psychological foundation, upon which the metropolitan individuality is erected, is the intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli... Lasting *impressions*, the slightness in their differences, the habituated regularity of their course and contrasts between them, consume, so to speak, less mental energy than the rapid telescoping of changing images, pronounced differences within what is grasped at a single glance, and the unexpectedness of violent stimuli ... the metropolis creates these psychological conditions—with every crossing of the street, with the tempo and multiplicity of economic, occupational and social life ... (Simmel, 1976/1903, pp. 409-410, italics added)

Thus, the blasé is an indispensable social process for study, given its constitution of social reality and contexts that we experience continuous immediacy with. Further, it is this very quality—of being superficial—that makes it the ideal topic with which to contextualize a dialogue between Adornoian negative position and problems with contemporary ethnographic methodological practice and writing. The blasé as an ephemeral, superficial, yet universal routine of metropolitan life cannot be fleshed out with conventional ethnographic research practice and analysis, and instead requires the use of a quotidian approach. A quotidian approach is most suitable as it is grounded on formulating impressions, brushes with social reality, that could access the “out-of-the-way details,” “lasting impressions,” and minutiae of everyday life that comprise the blasé. Adopting such a quotidian approach to study the blasé thus draws attention to variation in details as a simplifying manipulation (Adorno, 2000/1968, p. 84), opening dialogue on the problems of insensitivity to social reality and complexification of data, and reimagining this dialogue with Adornoian thought.

### **The Objectives of the Article**

Against these backdrops, my core aim is to underscore the significance of the relationship between method selection and the research context, rather than the relationship between data collection and analysis/theory like in GTM. That is, in empirical research, the selection of methods should proceed from the context of a research topic, as opposed to the reverse: method-guided research cannot exhaust empirical social research. I first tease out and critically engage with practices now deemed standard in ethnographic and qualitative practice and writing: systematicity, rigidified data collection and analysis, case studies, the constant comparative method, thinking in terms of concepts, and organizing findings into narratives. I then show how they alter and distort social reality through systematicity, rigidification, and complexification. Throughout, I set up a quotidian approach as a new means of conducting and interpreting qualitative research that best explores social reality without distorting it. A quotidian approach relies on “impressions” that illuminate the social embeddedness of situated contexts, and its application in a combined autoethnographic and ethnographic study of the blasé as an ephemeral, poorly understood, yet undeniably present quality in social life. Next, I detail the public squares in London selected as field sites for my study of the blasé, after which I analyze my findings to make sense of the blasé as a metropolitan phenomenon itself, and to explore the merits of a quotidian approach versus a rigidified and systematized research agenda.

There is much theoretical uncertainty that clouds (i) the nature of the blasé, taken to be a default public attitude of indifference in cities. This, in turn, is bound up in (ii) an uncertainty about how indifference actually emerges from the overstimulation wrought by metropolitan environments. I address these inquiries concerning the nature of the blasé by focusing on and exploring three empirical questions: how is the blasé manifested and operated within a public space? Under what conditions does the blasé break? What does this mean in terms of indifference in metropolitan city life? Finally, I discuss the implications of this article for interpreting Adornoian thought on qualitative methodology and its insights for future design and practice in qualitative and ethnographic research and the particular vision of social reality constructed and interpreted in the process.

## Re-Evaluating the Tenets of Data Interpretation

### The Constant Comparative Method and Inflexible Thought

A constant comparative method of data analysis prescribes rigid strategies for coding and making sense of data in ways that push analysis toward procedural thinking. The pre-determination of three sets of coding—open, axial, selective (Corbin & Strauss, 2008)—urges the parceling, systematization, and hierarchical reorganization of social reality into homogenized parts conformed to a rigidized coding paradigm. This logic diagram is consisted of "identifying a central category about the phenomenon, exploring categories of conditions that influence the phenomenon, the actions or interactions that result from the central phenomenon, the conditions that influence the strategies, and the outcomes of the strategies" (Robson, 2011, p. 149).

Bearing this in mind, ethnographic recursivity—the shuttling between the use of predefined coding categories for analysis and developing newly identified codes for analysis (LeCompte & Schensul, 2013)—becomes a process of fitting observations into categories predetermined by theory. Like the constant comparative method, the only promise of flexibility (induction) that truly remains is the slight re-purposing of the original theoretical categories to accommodate for "anomalies" (Kuhn, 1962; Lakatos, 1978; Popper, 1963).

In a similar vein, thought must not follow a deductive chain, must consistently interrupt itself, and must return to the smallest of phenomena in order to decrypt empirical phenomena from within. The reverse, confronting them with measures from without would ultimately distort them (Adorno, 1998/1963, 1969, pp. 28, 32-34). For these reasons, the promise for capturing slight details held by mass description (Becker, 1998, p. 83) is unraveled by its coupling with recursivity (Becker, 1998, p. 85). Despite recursivity's promise of realizing the dialogical ideals of reflexive science—between the virtual and the real, the observer and the participant, local and extralocal forces, and the development of theory—it deductively imposes theory on research data. In this manner, it mortgages the method's potential to fully grasp the intricacies of social phenomena. That is, recursivity only resembles constant self-interruption. But any analysis that reconstitutes parcels of information into a hierarchy of themes *exclude* the slightest of phenomena that are otherwise crucial to relatable picture of social reality. Moreover, thought that beckons the deductive irruption of theory forecloses possibilities of understanding phenomena from *within*—with the intimacy of a situated context. The procedure is redolent of a trend in early twentieth century aesthetics, tending to "form general synthetic concepts on the basis of only a few characteristics... of a school, a period, etc., then to proceed by deduction from these generalizations to the analysis of individual phenomena" (Lukacs, 1971, p. 13). Recursive and constant comparative analysis, then, do unto their data what aesthetics did to artwork: forcing their subjects "into a conceptual straitjacket" and "distor[ting] them" (Lukacs, 1971, p. 13).

### Narrative Organization and Systematicity: Considering a Quotidian Approach

This hierarchical reorganization of data into a narrative complexifies, rather than simplifies, social reality, for three reasons: (1) the global theme that emerges from analysis, though cloaked in a deceptively simple form, is the product of a series of abuses and distortions of social reality. A global theme is but the result of data broken down into codes and subcodes (Brewer, 2000, p. 111). (2) That is, analysis within recursivity proposes the same procedures to different problems, which essentially reduce the phenomena to units or "breaks up" things into smaller parts and explaining the whole in terms of relations between the parts (Robson, 2011, p. 412). The danger here, painting a more complex picture of social reality, lies in the

schematic reconstruction of relationships and individuals into formalized units. Here, every relationship becomes defined by the same indicators and criteria, shifting attention away from the differences in their social contexts. (3) The reorganization of social reality to form an overarching narrative is arbitrarily decided by a researcher arriving from the outside. Researchers fashion social phenomena into narratives using abstract social theoretical presuppositions. That people in my fieldwork only joined in to watch dancers when others had already begun to do so would look upon the event in terms of in-group homophily designed into a space by city planners. (4) In the same breath, then, people are transformed from subjects into objects, where their actions are reframed as expressions of an abstract theory. Thus, theoretical deduction necessarily overshadows (any defense for) personal agency. The dangers of this position are found in social estrangement: the social world we occupy—and now, even our actions—are made foreign, no longer recognizable to us (Adorno, 1967/1955, p. 69), producing a "de facto reified, solidified, integrated society exempted from individual resistance" (Benzer, 2011, p. 38). Within such a world, phenomena become treated by the researchers and researched alike as immutable, a point to be taken up further later.

Mistaking these admonitions for an attempt to excommunicate theory altogether would be fatal, for sociological insight depends on "theoretically analyzing empirical materials" (Benzer, 2011, p. 78). Moreover, none of the admonitions against unsystematicity alter the caveat that observations and facts are untrustworthy, since they are always subjectively reconstructed (Adorno, 1975/1955, p. 185). Taking observations without filtering them ultimately reifies the social relations between subjects of study, failing to assess how these relations condition individual subjective opinions. The practice culminates, once more, in social estrangement. It is here that theoretical analysis is key to resolving the untrustworthiness of subjectively reconstructed facts.

Indeed, reflexive science aims to circumvent the issues aforementioned by orienting itself around dialogical ideals, all of which push toward a development of theory constituted of a dialogue between theory and itself (Burawoy, 1998). The employ of theory, for Burawoy, is to be treated as "not only... dialogue between participant and observer, but also among observers now viewed as participants in a scientific community" (p. 16). The dialogue of theory between researchers and researched would augment both parties' reflexivity, shedding light on the conscious and unconscious motivations behind subjective reconstructions of observations. Furthermore, since recursivity entrusts theory to the researcher *alone*, it forces ethnography into the model of positive science by creating "distance" between researchers and researched and insulating the former from the latter (p. 28). The formation of categories represents top-down theorization *during* data collection, which injects *detachment* into our existing forms of engagement. This detachment inevitably produces biases, as the theories we draw on influence us to look for details that best reflect them and dismiss details irrelevant to them—details which could otherwise produce a clearer, comprehensive picture of a social phenomenon.

Yet, what is the "comprehensive whole" of a social phenomenon? While no isolated sensuous data exists to which one can point and say "*voilà*—that is society" (Adorno, 2000/1968, p. 35), there are situations where society can be "[felt] on one's skin" in individual moments. It is these situations of proximity between individuals and their social context that enable "preliminary, poor, but sociologically relevant, perceptions of the whole" (Adorno, 2000/1968, p. 49).

A quotidian approach is grounded on this premise. It relies upon, and so sensitizes researchers, to recording, accounting for, and analyzing impressions or quotidian encounters that can be "felt" in tiny stretches of time within a setting. That impressions allow us to "feel" society is not idle philosophical language. It strongly resonates with the quality of social or relational content of embeddedness (DiMaggio, 1992) and the embeddedness of meanings in networked spaces (Lamont, 2000). In other words, impressions give access to nuanced

understandings of how we come to be influenced by social relations, and by extension, how we produce meaning, within a given setting. Furthermore, impressions carry analytic value by better enabling the inspection of protentions within the same tiny stretches of time that they occur—conceptual acts of perpetually re-assessing action based on immediate influences in a social setting, per action theories (Mische, 2009).

Thus, these impressions or personal, quotidian encounters offer three interrelated advantages over predetermined methods: (1) by refusing the application of predetermined devices, we can circumvent the problems of method-driven research (like systematicity) and apply methods and knowledge production *specific* to the social context of interest (Benzer, 2011, p. 77). In doing so, researchers acquire a proximity and immediacy to the empirical content of different phenomena. Social analysis, after all, requires its saturation with factual content. (2) Primary confrontations with social life "offers initial glimpses of the social whole that sociology is ultimately concerned with" (Benzer, 2011, p. 77). The prescient awareness behind impressions (Adorno, 2000/1968, pp. 36-37) or intuition generated from an initial encounter with a social phenomenon cannot be underestimated nor separated from unsystematicity. The utility of quotidian insights in uncovering "a social whole" presupposes a position where deep, penetrating insights of the social layers of a phenomenon are quotidian in the first place. This lays the foundation for impressions as units of analysis—immediate, yet close encounters that require researchers to feel, before they think, as a data collection tool. (3) Impressions offer two further methodological improvements to fieldwork investigations of social settings: (a) they allow us into the minutiae and cultural milieu of a social environment, its occupant social relations, how these relations produce and interpret meaning with members and their social environment. And in doing so, (b) they enable a finer level of analysis to understand how individuals, as they are influenced by social relations, coordinate and enact their actions in the field.

The methodological implications of a quotidian approach center on the complete integration of a researcher into a social environment. But qualitative fieldwork admonishes against this position or "going native" and the risks it entails, in this case, the researcher always loses the ability to observe, due to overidentification with members (Gold, 1958). This tendency, however, is overstated, for the assertion that opinions dispensed by in-group members are somehow disassociated from analytic reflection would simultaneously extend to discredit interviews. It could just as easily be argued that the social reality depicted by interviewees' reflections are without analysis and thus, always inaccurate—which is, obviously, untrue. What may be anticipated from "going native," though, is the adoption of a structured set of biases that impedes sociological analysis by introducing selective data collection (Robson, 2011, p. 328). However, this is ultimately no different than how deductive theory in recursivity aborts potential layers of social reality by dismissing details.

Indeed, key distinctions can be drawn between these two processes of developing biases that throw into sharp relief the errors behind the "going native" judgment. (1) Biases from deductive theory extend beyond collection to breach the realm of interpretation. The premature judgments deductive theory summons within us during data collection are carried with us till writing, publication, and beyond, distorting social reality in irreversible ways. Biases from "going native," by contrast, can begin and end with participation in the field. In other words, "going native" makes us see an environment like native occupants would. The only things this position would blindside us to are perspectives informed by distant, theoretical lenses. Doing so, however, would better allow us into the social embeddedness of a space, feeling the impressions that emerge, and understanding meaning-production within these spaces. In stark contrast, deductive theory, or the commonly suggested distant researcher-participant role (or "going researcher") would blindside us to perspectives held among native occupants. Thus, whereas "going native" would shape our criteria for recording observations with a lean towards

social embeddedness, "going researcher" would shape our observations with a predilection towards theory and higher levels of abstraction. And when we depart the field to reflect on our notes, we would discover that observations generated by "going native" concern intimate, even mundane, details that paint a closer picture of the social environment. On the other hand, those generated by "going researcher" would be preoccupied with premature judgments about meaning and social relations, calloused attempts to generalize it across other contexts, and ultimately a shallow understanding of the site and its people.

(2) In a similar vein, the selective data collection driven by "going native" would likely uncover details significant to a social phenomenon and its environment. That is, because "going native" would mean becoming an in-group member, then they would be more likely to produce quotidian insights. As a result, what we decide to record and observe become closer approximations of what fellow in-group members would also deem important—more so than if we recorded details according to propositions of an abstract theory articulated *outside* the environment of interest. Thus, which roles researchers are to adopt should be flexibilized. We should "shuttle between" different roles, at varying levels of participation during fieldwork within a single social setting (Au, 2017) to allow for proximity. It is in drawing closer, not farther, that we can appreciate the nuances ignored between the cracks by researchers that leave impressions upon us. Impressions can be signs and parts of meanings created within the social relations, which are invested in a social setting that does not exist in isolation, but as a situated part of society.

### **Ethnographic Writing and Relationality**

Writing can also realize the aforementioned tendencies by reifying what might otherwise be fluid, subjective, relational qualities of an ethnographic excursion. Reification, according to Adorno, consists of the presentation of social relations as "being[s]-in-itself" (1967/1955, p. 69). The presentation of research, explaining the selection of participants and framing your position and narrative (Wolcott, 1990), accomplishes this in two ways:

(1) When you write about your positions according to typologies of observer roles, the conclusions of your reflexivity are predetermined, and as are its constrictions. Defining your positionality in terms of complete participant, participant-as-observer, observer-as-participant, or complete observer (Gold, 1958) and complete-member-researcher, active-member-researcher, peripheral- or member-researcher (Adler & Adler, 1994, pp. 379-380) reifies these stages in participation, forcing conformity to characteristics of engagement allowed within each stage. A defense for the "overlap" that exists between these stages is insufficient. To illustrate its dangers, consider Whyte's (1943) extensive, classic study of the social structures within the stigmatized Cornerville. Cornerville was commonly and publicly seen as financially poor, plagued by mental health problems, and altogether burdened with every social stigma imaginable at the time. But, as Whyte's (1943) ethnography reveals, there are layers of social structures at work that coordinate and shape behaviors and actions among its residents—structures with characteristics unique to Cornerville, but which could be found anywhere else. To explore this dynamic, Whyte essentially inducted himself into a local gang, and recorded the transformations in the group over time, all the while participating in their activities.

(2) Writing about a social environment, particularly one in which its boundaries converge with those of an institution, expresses another kind of reification that concerns the community of study itself. Framing the findings of an ethnographic or participant observational study within a community without extending beyond its context narrows the locus of research. What results is a sense of exclusive specificity to your findings that betrays the imperative of sociological analysis to understand society. Specificity is thus imparted onto the presentation of a study through constrictive framing, restricting the relevance of research findings to the

conditions of a particular community. In terms borrowed from the sociology of knowledge, this invites conceptual thinking or micro-theory, rather than theoretical thinking or big theory (Ivinson & Davies, 2011).

For instance, Das and Das' (2007) study of illness among the urban poor is framed, as many studies are, as an application of concepts. The concept of illness narrative, at best, enjoys a repositioning within the limits of their ethnographic fieldwork. However, it nevertheless comes short of an engagement with the role of illness as the node between culture and political economy in "organized systems" of concepts or big theory. Indeed, Ivinson and Davies (2011) note:

[the] growing recognition that, once again, we need big thinking using big theoretical ideas in working on local problems ... [which] provides immense resources for thinking ourselves out of crisis because, in contradistinction to micro-theory, we are able to contemplate global transformations in ways which otherwise would remain unthinkable. (p. i)

Thus, conceptual thinking is engaged in a dialectical relationship with the deductive application of theory. So long as the crux of ethnographic research and its presentation is preoccupied with "concepts," theory will remain positioned to enter research by irruption in deductive forms. Social research studies, in their disjunctions, will remain consisted of piecemeal efforts that attempt—and fail—to enhance our understanding of society.

The promise of the case study as a mode of ethnography (Robson, 2011, p. 146) is insufficient to stymie this problem. It is not enough that an ethnographic site be remodeled as a "case" of a larger class of similar cases. This framing is only concerned with one theoretical construct—the skeleton on which all other cases are flesh. It still falls short on understanding the broader society in which these cases are located. In her ethnographic study of advocacy after Bhopal, Kim Fortun (2001), recounts how she purportedly could not study Bhopal for its own sake or confine its understandings to it alone if it were to have sociological significance. She aimed instead to describe, through Bhopal, specific mechanisms "that connect geographically dispersed actors and that grant these actors differential possibilities for working well within these systems" (p. 7). These, in turn, were undergirded by an attempt to understand how "historical perspective is built into law, policy, bureaucratic initiative, civic action, and commercial endeavor" (p. 7). The principles Fortun purported to uncover were *not* about Bhopal or even some larger class of similar cases that it might be taken to represent. Rather, they were about processes that make up and are buried in a situated context part of the social fabric of society—processes drawn from and which feed the lived world beyond the research, and all the boxes it comes to be packaged in by researchers.

### Methods and Context

The nature of the metropolitan blasé demanded unconventional modifications to ethnographic practices in my methodological approach. Chief among them included my role in the field, which was, and coincidentally the only one available within this project, a participant-as-observer (Adler & Adler, 1994). In this role, I would observe the daily interactions and surface-level engagements among all occupants and passersby of these urban spaces. Second, the methodological approach was purely ethnographic observation. I did not take initiative to seek interaction with other occupants or passersby. This better replicated the indifferent attitudes of the blasé for my own experience—to carefully bring upon myself those same forms of socialization open and foreclosed to local passersby subject to and who demonstrate the blasé. In doing so, autoethnography became an integral mode of analysis that further

accommodated for the interplay of my self-engaged with "cultural descriptions mediated through ethnographic explanation" (Ellis, 2003, p. 38; see also Ellis et al., 2011). More importantly, autoethnography constituted a mode of reflexivity (Landy et al., 2016) through which symbolic meanings represented by the actions and conditions that mediate the blasé can be measured against my own interpretations and participation experience (Au, 2017).

For my field sites, I chose to visit Piccadilly Circus and Leicester Square in the city core of London. Located in the heart of Soho, a popular entertainment and nightlife district, these two sites were the largest public squares in London that regularly attracted many visitors, passersby, locals, and tourists, every other day for a duration of two months. During each site visit, I would spend between three and five hours sitting and documenting my observations at various locations. I made an effort to remain mobile within a site, shuttling between different locations, so as to not attract suspicion by remaining in one place. The first site, Piccadilly Circus, is close to major entertainment areas in the West End of London and notable buildings that include the London Pavilion and Criterion Theatre, among others. Bracketed with glowing neon signs and home to the Shaftesbury memorial fountain, the circle regularly attracts hosts of tourists and locals alike as a major traffic junction and popular meeting place. People often perch atop the steps of the fountain: some of them alone, others in company; some of them eating, others in conversation. The second site, Leicester Square, is a pedestrianized square nested amidst strings of a variety of restaurants and the London Chinatown. Two interconnected areas comprise the Square: a garden area and a street area, both of which are partially bordered by an elevated lawn and a stone ledge leaning towards the latter. From the center of the garden, the Shakespeare fountain overlooks a ring of benches teeming with wanderers, passersby, and litters of pigeons. The street area is even busier. A river of people flowing through the street from Covent Garden, Piccadilly Circus, and Chinatown—with Leicester Square at their intersection—is a common picture from midday onwards. Brilliant rainbows of light rain upon the crowds from a neighboring multi-level candy store (called "M&M World") on the north side of the street, before which caricature artists offer seats to passersby interested in self-portraits. A police vehicle can often be found across the store, with a lone officer standing in front of the van, sweeping the river of passersby, wordlessly. Interrupting this mass of people at the edges of the Square are street performers, largely young men and women who sing and promote recordings of their work, play music, dance, clap, and perform stand-up comedy. These sites provided the ideal environments—metropolitan areas inundated with both people and media—with which to unearth the conditions that break the blasé, and, by extension, the conditions that facilitate its construction.

This method selection anticipates criticism on several accounts, which I will attempt to address here. First, my decision to not conduct interviews invites a charge of insensitivity to norms, habitus, taste, and behaviors ingrained in individuals from cultural backgrounds. These elements, it may be said, mediate individuals' interpretations of the blasé, perhaps even in more complex and fragmented ways for the global tourists who visit London. But to study the blasé does not require a penetration into such norms. An analogy would make clear the qualities encompassed by and level of abstraction associated with the blasé. If we were to imagine a restaurant, the blasé would not be what individuals order, how they order, what they converse about, or even how they sit, but with how they hold a fork. That is, how the practice of holding a fork is universal within all restaurants of a certain class, how it is effortless to adopt through mimesis, yet how imperceptible it remains within this setting. The conditions that facilitate this universality, adoptability, and imperceptibility which exemplify the blasé are what must be studied. The blasé, after all, is hypothesized to simply be a default attitude of indifference in a city—something universal, yet difficult to see.

Second, it invites the charge of failing to spend enough time in the field. By the end of the two months of my field participation, I discontinued attendance to circumvent the issue of

being recognized by local vendors and performers. Also, I achieved saturation with the themes I uncovered in the research data—people repeatedly demonstrated the same tendencies, supporting the same conclusions and a structuration of practices that was now visible. Moreover, as aforementioned, interacting with individuals would break the blasé in ways unnatural to the practices and schemas of the urban spaces. By becoming another individual—a participant-as-observer—under the influence of the blasé, I augmented my ability to construct an autoethnographic account.

## Examining the Field

### Maintaining the Blasé: Non-Participation and "Watchedness"

At Leicester Square, youth smoked on the stone ledge bordering the park, looked at their phones, stared into the distance, or watched one of the neighboring street performers. When in the company of two or more, individuals appeared more relaxed. They engaged in conversation amongst themselves, and rather than staring into the distance, they looked at specific people in the crowds, following with them with their eyes and turning their heads. It appears, therefore, that people do not watch others when alone, and only feel comfortable enough to do so when in company. At Piccadilly Circus, people stood around the statue at a distance, taking pictures and selfies; people near the statue were leaning on it but not sitting; some people were eating; others were checking their phones, and smoking; again, people who were in the company of others were busy chatting and appeared more consciously observant (moving their heads more, staring at specific people rather than a general direction), compared to those by themselves, who stared fixedly into the distance (in one-direction). Some people passing by had their hands in their pockets, listening to music, not looking at others. On other days, there were fewer people taking pictures and more people sitting down on the statue.

From these interactions, we can infer a new definition of blasé, from a default general feeling of indifference in public: rather than the actual refusal to take in new information, it is the need to *appear* to refuse to take in information. Although both produce the image of a distant, uninterested person, they have several important differences. (1) Actual refusal to take in new information implies a motivation drawn from physical environment and a personal reaction to the multitude of others (i.e., too many people and too much to take in, so I close myself off). By contrast, appearing to refuse to take in information implies a motivation drawn from qualities of this multitude, becoming an emulation of others (i.e., too many people uninterested, so I will habituate and produce the appearance of closing off). (2) The appearance of closing off is easier to penetrate than closing off. (3) The appearance of closing off as an emulation of others introduces a whole set of social norms governing what constitutes acceptable behavior.

Measuring these interpretations against my own experience as I sat on the same ledge, after a short amount of time, I felt a sense of awkwardness. I felt out of place and undesirable. Public company or some activity seemed integral to a positive social image, and I, being by myself, was falling short of this standard. I checked my phone in an attempt to dissuade the inference that I was not doing anything. Being conscious of this feeling, I wondered what would happen if I tried breaking the unspoken schema of eye-contact. When I was walking through Leicester Square and Piccadilly Circus, I constantly made eye-contact with people without looking away—all of them looked away, then darted back at me, then away again (before we passed each other by); no one maintained consistent eye-contact. One woman passing by glanced at my phone, noticing that I was jotting notes down on it, and shot me a suspicious look, before walking off hurriedly. This gives credence to blasé as appearance, to which is attached norms that center on appearing occupied (i.e., phones, music, staring) or ways that

“nullify” our presence in public. It follows, therefore, that immersion in a densely populated setting conditions its occupants with the feelings of “inescapability” and pervasive, constant surveillance. Links can thus be drawn to my (and others’) apparent fear of being seen as unoccupied: the perception (and reality) of constant surveillance impress upon occupants of urban spaces the need to remain occupied at all times. Through this, we constantly regulate our performances and keep vigilant of the perceived stigma of loneliness as undesirable.

In front of “M&M World,” when people stopped walking, they engaged in the same publicly atomizing activities (i.e., checking phones, etc.) and gravitated to the corners and the periphery of the store and public signposts to check their phones or talk. These practices ensured that they were not watched, and that no one mistook them as unoccupied or as being on the watch. “Watchedness” is stratified across different public locations, peaking near the centers (monuments/centers of public spaces that attract attention), and depressing near the peripheries (corners and boundaries of spaces/buildings). Watchedness prompts atomization by stimulating norms on how to manage our presence, which can only be broken by interaction. It appears, thus, that we cope with perpetual sense of “watchedness” and surveillance by (1) remaining mobile (dislocating your presence); (2) appearing occupied (nullifying the attention of our presence); and (3) seek out the places where watchedness is low (hiding our presence).

### **Breaking the Blasé: Interaction and Presence**

At the east corner of Leicester Square, musicians consistently occupied the space to perform. Only once was the space occupied by a stand-up comedian. Otherwise, the space was empty. I witnessed four musicians during my time there, who alternated shifts to perform for the crowds. Consistently across all of their performances, no one stopped or gathered around to listen to their music, except for the fourth one, who performed at 7pm—peak hours that attracted the most tourists and passersby. A couple of people gathered when he started *talking*, not *singing*, to introduce his next song (which was a cover). Only afterwards did people gradually gather to listen and record his song. By contrast, individuals seated on the stone ledge (which was behind the musicians) began watching the musicians at the outset of their performance.

That people only felt comfortable watching others at a distance, even musicians meant for public watch, implies two levels of engagement we are committed to: watching and interacting (even with our “presence”). Presence gains credence as an interaction from observations in the caricature stations, where no one stood to watch the drawing: it presented too intimate a setting and isolated an experience to allow for comfortable observation without coming across as an intrusion into private space. Bound up in this second form of engagement, interaction, then, is a veiled sense of threat that must be nullified prior to engagement. The precondition for interaction in metropolitan spaces, which is seen by default as a threat or invasion of personal space, are social cues that nullify this threat. People only gather (who interact by investing their presence) when others gather because “there’s evidence that the threat of interaction is nullified” (it is safe to stand and watch without being intrusive). To this effect, the people who first stood and gathered in front of the fourth musician only did so when he cast an interactive “prompt.”

At the west corner of Leicester Square, different groups of dance performances occurred every thirty minutes. I witnessed five different dance performances and one magic show. They acquired more attention than musicians by consistently casting interactive prompts: using a mic to announce the start of a show and telling told crowd to “come closer,” to be louder (“come on guys, this is a high-energy show; if there’s no energy, there’s no show”), and to be comfortable (“if you like something, then clap; if you don’t like something, then [still] clap”). For one dance, the crowds grew so large and dense that there was no space to see what was

going on from the back, yet still new people came to the back, attempting to catch a glimpse. During individual performances, fellow dancers would clap and suggest for the crowd to join in, eliciting cheers and applause. Dancers often pulled in kids to perform alongside them, and then finished by soliciting "applause for (name of child)." Before the finale, they often noted that "Leicester square doesn't pay them, neither does the government; this is our livelihood, and it helps me pay rent"; "a street performer means we'll do anything for the money, so please, two pounds, three pounds, ten pounds, a hundred pounds, anything you can give"; and "don't run away, if you liked the show, then help fill these hats!" Moreover, some dancers approached targeted members of the crowd with the hats, which usually earned a donation.

Thus, through engaging prompts that both encouraged participation and nullified its threat and awkwardness for the crowds, the dancers successfully involved adults. Using children, they attracted donations and involvement by forcing an investment of personal space from their parents. Directly approaching audience members produced more funds because the audience members could no longer deny their investment or their interactions: they had stayed the whole time, and were now publicly recognized for it; from being surrounded by people, we infer we are being watched, which provides us cognizance of how others are aware of us in the same capacities we are aware of ourselves: it may be for this reason that audience members feel compelled to offer money. That people approached a gathering (a sign of interaction) without knowing its content (the dancing) demonstrates a natural inclination toward interactions, not atomization. Ultimately, it is the case that we *appear* blasé (indifferent) more often than we *are* blasé.

By Shaftesbury fountain in Piccadilly Circus, a Spiderman-costumed man distributed flyers—a child ran up to him and asked to take a picture with him. After doing so, the parents proceeded to talk to the costumed man. Combining the observations of children and the dancers, it may be inferred that offsetting the atomization implied by the blasé occurs in a structured process consisted of (a) conveying an interactive prompt, (b) investment of personal space, (c) receipt of interactive prompt, and (d) establishment of two-way interaction.

Within the public squares, this process was manifested in two key elements: (1) the presence of children. By approaching people, children became their parents' personal investment in a social situation. (2) The performative invitations to engagement from public dancers. The observers, by stopping and standing close to the dance scene, inadvertently invested themselves in the dance, and became susceptible to further prompts for interaction, such as clapping along. Moreover, the dancers, by explicitly prompting interaction, performatively established it.

## Discussion

### Uncovering the Importance of the Blasé in Modern Life

Unpacking the blasé as the default attitude of indifference in city life, we come to realize it is more universal, more elusive, and more socially embedded than anticipated. The blasé is sustained by my (and others') apparent fear of being seen as unoccupied, the need to remain occupied per the reality of constant surveillance through other occupants of urban spaces. What results is a forced self-regulation of our performances to circumvent the perceived stigma of loneliness as undesirable. Yet, penetrable by prompts of interaction, the blasé conceives of interaction or proximity as a threat to personal space, the fear of which lies not just in being invaded, but in being seen as an invader by the watching masses natural to city-life. The precondition for interaction to occur is social cues that nullify this threat. Like with the prompts initiated by street performers, social cues offer us a moment of social acceptance to interact without disrupting the balance between solitude and belonging. Thus, as a quality of

metropolitan city life, the blasé thrives not as an attitude, but as a practice of regulating attitudes and appearances located within the unity it creates between universal opposites. It thrives in the balance between co-presence and solitude, making the want to belong contingent on the want to stand apart. These characteristics, by virtue of their simplicity, are universal in their own right within a city. By living between their interstices, fashioning unities from opposites, the blasé lives out of sight, but among us.

### **Performatively Critiquing the Modern Tenets of Ethnography: The Merits of a Quotidian Approach**

My fieldwork site illustrated the actionization of a quotidian approach, grounded on impressions that allow access into the meaning-creation processes and social embeddedness of social relations and settings. Ethnographically, the conditions for membership were met by the liberality behind its boundaries. Criteria for membership in a city is attributed to residency. Membership in the social setting relevant to the blasé process only consisted of being a member of a metropolitan city, that being London, in this case. The questions I raised before data collection were broad enough to allow for refinement and change: how is the blasé manifested and operated within a space? What does it say about indifference in metropolitan city life? Using a quotidian approach, my method first consisted of mass description (Becker, 1998) or the recording of every detail, for whose significance I could not yet determine without recursivity and systematicity. Without the intent to answer a general, malleable question, I reflected on every detail with new theoretical purchase. The awkwardness that I felt by observing others while sitting alone, warding away others by making eye-contact, and being absorbed into the participation that performers elicited, were all instances of society being "felt under my skin." These instances came to me in impressions of awkwardness and commonness, solitude and belonging, distance and proximity. Being a full member of the space in which I was studying and without the detachment that theory would have brought, I was rendered naked and vulnerable to the emotional incision of my experiences. This, in turn, inspires a re-evaluation of how my embarrassment on a bench bracketing Leicester square spoke to deeper, normative discomforts in city life beyond this instance, from the way we are watched to how we stigmatize loneliness. Indeed, the flexible reach of this sociological analysis would not have been possible had I allowed theory to prematurely interrupt and restrictively structure my research design, fieldwork, and analysis with a recursive, systematized, detached (or "non-native") approach.

A constant comparative method that shuttles between abstract concepts in a predetermined reality and actual observations from the field would have missed the nuances of the blasé. A constant comparative method, for instance, would have understood how individuals gravitated towards spaces of "low-watchedness" as a result of city-design as an abstract, predefined concept. It would assert that people did so because the entirety of Leicester Square and Piccadilly Circus themselves were designed this way—to manipulate people's psychology and influence where they would go (Whyte, 1980). However, building generalizations to introduce an entire school of thought—the psychology of city-design—limits and threatens sociological insight. Repackaging my observations in terms of the psychology of city-design forecloses engagement with why and how atomization and indifference exist and operate as universal characteristics of metropolitan city life by treating this phenomenon as *a priori* quality. Returning to the restaurant analogy, asking how and why diners use forks in a restaurant can inspire a sociological evaluation of the fork as a part of restaurant life, but not if the practice is prematurely attributed to the obvious fact that the restaurant had provided the fork on the table in the first place. Deductively proceeding from generalizations of city-design during data collection would have led me into a search for further characteristics in the

psychology of city-design. Per the practice of constant comparative analysis, I inevitably would have neglected "irrelevant," but otherwise important details and forcibly extracted interpretations from existing details to invite more thought inspired by city-design. In sum, rigidly defined standards allow things beyond their scope to escape, culminating in an insensitivity to empirical details (Adorno, 2000/1968, p. 84).

Similarly, writing and relationality play into this process. My study of practices of atomization and indifference within Leicester Square and Piccadilly Circus would lack theoretical purchase if framed as a study of these two places alone. From performing dancers successfully inviting passersby to stay and watch, the absence of watchers for performing singers, who did *not* invite interaction from passersby, the aversion of eye-contact or other indicators of interaction with passing strangers, I uncovered principles in the social scripts that extended beyond Leicester Square and Piccadilly Circus. These scripts helped to unearth how mobility in non-places work, or places whose primary function is passage into other places (Auge, 1992). We can analyze the values and rules espoused in these social scripts to create inferences about metropolitan city life itself. That the precondition for interaction to occur is social cues that nullify this threat, moreover, speaks to the social life of cities—including other places—more than that of simply non-places. In this case, the blasé or indifference is our default public attitude in cities, thick enough to resist interaction with strangers, but penetrable by prompts for interaction.

### **Moving Beyond Systematicity, Rigidification, and Complexification in Modern Ethnography**

The themes across the above methodological discussions, driven by a fundamentally negative position, shed light on the ideals with which Adorno held within qualitative methods, and on which grounds he lambasted quantitative approaches. For Adorno, non-identity, fluid thinking must respect the context of research enough to adopt not only an open approach to the selection of methods, but an unfixated approach to how we collect and process data within our chosen methods. In replying to the reproach that he offered "no binding rules of behaviour for sociological cognition," Adorno et al once wrote "he who wishes to nestle up to the structure of his object and thinks of it as something in itself moving does not have at his disposal a mode of procedure independent of it" (Adorno et al., 1976, p. 48). Ethnography and participant observation have their merits as sensitizing devices to the need for an inductive approach to empirical research and analysis. However, contemporary emphases on systematicity and recursivity ultimately overshadow any such effort with deductive theoretical irruptions "from without" that bias data collection and foreclose alternate possibilities of understanding materials. In so doing, they fail to place theory in dialogue with itself to decrypt phenomena with the proximity and closeness of being within. Moreover, understanding social reality, Adorno asserts, prescribes the need "to balance the demand for empirical investigation with the requirement that the result be meaningful" in a "planned but unsystematic way" (Adorno, 1958, p. 67). At the same time, the possibility of a step-by-step approach to sociology is to be rejected (Adorno, 2000/1968, p. 5), borne out of a denial of any final determination of sociology as a discipline and its concept of society (Adorno, 2000/1968, pp. 28–29, 103).

For Adorno, an illuminating example of a planned, though unsystematic, strategy through which social phenomena can be better understood from the inside was Kracauer's (1998/1930) study of white-collar workers (see Benzer, 2011, p. 57). Kracauer readjusted his observations depending on the phenomena under study, circumventing systematicity without losing order. To this end, he conducted research in a planned, but unsystematic way. He used interviews, but without standardized schemata, to flexibly draw closer to the "conversational situation" and adapt his approach to the phenomena. In this manner, he obtained proximity to

the phenomena to understand the context in its own terms without misrepresenting it by subsuming it into an abstract theory.

Mainstream ethnographic and qualitative research appear congruous with the interests of sociological analysis by offering proximity and immediacy to the site of a social phenomenon and environment (Benzer, 2011, p. 77). But their current tendencies towards systematicity, rigidification, and complexification rigidly break down social phenomena in predetermined ways—labeled interpretation—and rigidly build them back up in hierarchical narratives—labeled presentation. Doing so over-complexifies social reality to the effect of distorting and misrepresenting it. As such, ethnographic research and writing require guidance away from reifying roles and social settings, and method-driven research. We must move towards a new approach that can access the immediacy of quotidian encounters; an approach predicated on feeling impressions as units of analysis. Impressions help to access social embeddedness, formulate theoretical thinking above conceptual thinking, thinking from within rather than from without, and context-driven research—all of which fluidly combine in our research like they do in the research field as a situated part of a larger society.

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### Author Note

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