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Ethnography, interaction and ordinary trouble

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A B S T R A C T ■ With the increased popularity and spread of sociological ethnography, one of the core elements of classic Chicago-style fieldwork – an abiding commitment to examine ongoing social interaction – has sometimes slipped from sight. One fruitful way of increasing sensitivity to and insights into interactional processes is to look at ordinary, small troubles, the often fleeting moments of upset and disruption that arise routinely in many interactions and are often quickly resolved, leading only to small adjustments and changes in life circumstances. By way of example, this article analyzes the ordinary troubles that arise between college roommates, focusing on two distinctive interactional features of these troubles: the obscuring of action components in low-visibility responses, leading to the appearance of passivity or inaction; and the varying and often shifting normative accents that can mark responses to ordinary troubles.

K E Y   W O R D S ■ interaction in ethnography, ordinary troubles, low-visibility responses, normative accent

For some years Jack Katz and I have been teaching ethnographic fieldwork at the University of California, Los Angeles. We are also co-editors of the 'Fieldwork Encounters and Discoveries' series published by the University of Chicago Press. In both endeavors we emphasize the central place of social interaction in ethnographic fieldwork. Many graduate students come

to our classes with strong interests in gender, class, race and ethnicity, and immigration, but with little interest in the interactional processes through which these social phenomena are expressed and play out in specific situations. Students tend to focus on 'big' macrosocial factors and minimize or marginalize the 'small' interactions and tensions arising in daily life. Even when they construct ethnographic accounts of specific communities or compile life histories of immigration, careers, or residential choices, they ignore or fail to give close attention to fine-grained analyses of interactional processes. We maintain that close concern with social interaction distinguishes contemporary Chicago-style fieldwork and ethnography. While many approaches to ethnography are only occasionally or marginally concerned with interaction, most of the ethnographies that we associate with the recent Chicago tradition, starting with *Street Corner Society* (Whyte, 1943) and running through *Streetwise* (Anderson, 1990), *Feeding the Family* (Devault, 1991), *Gender Play* (Thorne, 1993), *Kitchens* (Fine, 1996), and *Sidewalk* (Duneier, 1999), are interaction-rich as opposed to interaction-impoverished.

Sensitivity to interaction gives ethnography a number of distinctive qualities. Most fundamentally, paying close attention to interactions forces the fieldworker to scrutinize processes in social life, encouraging the researcher to treat social happenings as active 'doings'. Interaction-rich ethnography rests on and incorporates microscopic, detailed accounts that feature local particulars and variations; it discourages reified accounts and too-easy generalization. Close attention to interaction deepens appreciation of variation and unpredictability, highlighting agency and contingencies rather than statically deterministic outcomes. Interactional detail not only makes theoretical explanations more nuanced; it also makes ethnographic accounts more trustworthy, more difficult to fabricate, reducing the risks of misrepresenting social life and staying closer to the concerns and priorities of people as they act in natural settings. Interaction-rich accounts can bring to the center of sociological work two additional matters of particular interest to contemporary ethnographers: the appreciation and analysis of emotions, both subtle emotional undercurrents and dramatic emotional outbursts and transformations; and the processes of inquiry and interpretation that generate our data and findings, which are matters of critical importance since forming relations with others through interaction is fieldwork's core method.

It is important to note here that producing interaction-rich ethnography is not strictly a matter of observing naturally occurring events, although observation is a key resource. Many meanings, background experiences, and emotional currents may not be directly expressed and are not readily visible in particular interactions. To appreciate these dimensions of interaction often requires interviewing, that is, talking to people about what they

are doing with others. For example, Jack Katz's (1999) analyses of road rage necessarily rely on reflections and first-person accounts provided by the actor. But the interviews he employs are directed to drivers' doings and the in situ provocations of their conduct. Their generalizations about why drivers cut them off are treated as generalizations they produce in the emergent event, not as causes of the emotional process itself.

Ethnographers attend to and analyze interactional processes in a variety of different ways: for example, through focusing on Goffmanesque concerns with face, self, and stigma; on the ebb, flow, and transformation of different emotions; on the production of skill, competence, and aesthetically valued objects. Another widespread but more neglected strategy to foster increased sensitivity to and insights into interactional processes involves documenting the kinds of ordinary troubles that arise in the settings and worlds under study. Wherever there is social and normative order, there will be troubles, and a focus on the interactional processes through which these troubles are expressed, recognized, and addressed helps us understand what those orders mean and how they are sustained (Emerson and Messinger, 1977).

Ethnographers and sociologists have regularly noted and analyzed many kinds of troubles. But commonly these are serious, dramatic, and extreme troubles, those producing grand conflicts, significant violence, dramatic emotional outbursts, and/or consequential offenses that are taken to legal or other authorities. While there is a solid qualitative research literature on killings (Duck, in this issue; Luckenbill, 1977) and on the occurrence of physical force in familial and interpersonal relations, there is significantly less on everyday differences and squabbles that do not produce such extreme outcomes, as ethnographers and sociologists generally have neglected these minor, mundane troubles. I urge fieldworkers to pay close attention to the ordinary, small troubles that mark everyday life in any society: fleeting troubles that in many instances are quickly resolved and come to nothing; parochial troubles that are resolved locally and situationally, producing only small adjustments and changes in life circumstances; pragmatic troubles that involve not grand moral issues but commonplace responses such as 'making do', living with or around disturbance and upset.

Several theoretical suggestions about how to approach and examine ordinary troubles are available. Everett Hughes's (1971: 306) concern with the moral division of labor keyed on the processes whereby dirty work and disreputable troubles – matters involving some 'human mess' – are shifted by high-status, reputable practitioners 'into the nether regions of the un-respectable'. Harold Garfinkel's (1967) famous 'experiments' showed how minor changes in orientation and behavior, such as acting like a boarder in one's own home, could generate moments of profound confusion and disorientation. Erving Goffman (1963, 1971) called attention to the

structure of 'situational improprieties', particularly those interactions occurring in public places that tended to generate distinctive 'remedial interchanges'. Following Goffman, Sherri Cavan (1966) proposed the notion of 'normal trouble' as a way of understanding the local order of drinking establishments. Indeed, it has proved very fruitful to look at how actors in a wide variety of institutions, including schools, courts, and drug treatment programs, develop and depend upon routine ways of handling situations and actors who create trouble.

While a sociology of troubles exists as a field in its own right, I argue that a more general focus on troubles will be useful for ethnographers, regardless of their substantive concerns. There is real value in studying mundane trouble in any social setting and substantive area. Focusing on interactional moments involving 'glitches, disputes and trouble cases' (Llewellyn and Hoebel, 1941) directs attention both to how ordinary routines and social order come to be stressed and challenged and to how people experience and deal with those stresses and challenges, sometimes maintaining and sometimes changing that order. A focus on mundane troubles provides a general strategy for cultivating and developing the rich interactional materials and sensitivities that produce good ethnography. Research on the workplace, on social control settings, on informal social relationships of all sorts, can effectively get at key interactional processes by looking at the commonplace troubles that arise in and characterize those settings and relationships.

Getting at processes of interaction by looking at ordinary troubles can be a complex and subtle matter. First, while many troubles are clearly observable, marked by overt complaints and clear-cut responses, others are obscured or hidden, generating no overt behavior or obvious reaction. Yet it is important to understand these hidden, low-visibility troubles and the distinctive interactional processes that they involve. Second, while it is tempting to conceptualize troubles as specific normative infractions, violations, or offenses, the processes of defining and responding to troubles, particularly at the initial stages, are looser, more open, and more variable. What kind of rule or norm infraction characterizes any particular trouble, or indeed if and how rules or norms and their violation are relevant at all, is often an emergent product of ongoing responses to trouble.

I explore these issues by considering my own recent work analyzing troubles that arise between college roommates.[1] While college roommate troubles are marked by a number of distinctive features (especially the relative equality between parties who have a physically close relationship of fixed, relatively long-term duration), my concerns are more general: roommate troubles provide a convenient place to develop ways of appreciating interactional processes that give social life its distinctive, organized, and normative character.

Ordinary roommate troubles

Adjusting to college life can be challenging, difficult, and stressful for many young people. Relations with roommates are often sources both of camaraderie and support, but can also generate a variety of ordinary, mundane problems. Roommates regularly reported the following kinds of normal troubles: contention over the use of space, sometimes in shared sleeping quarters, at other times in common areas; complaints about noise; disagreements about washing dishes and cleaning; tensions over the use of the phone or TV; discontents concerning another's use of one's personal possessions; problems arising from different sleeping and wake-up hours; embarrassment over sexual activities occurring in the room; awkwardness with girlfriends or boyfriends always being present and/or sleeping over; and disagreements over the use of parking spaces assigned to the unit.

Analytically, troubles begin when someone experiences dissatisfaction, irritation, upset, or discontent with some act or attitude on the part of another. For example:

> From what I knew of her, I thought she was a cool person and stuff. But after a little while, some stuff *really started to annoy me* . . . I noticed that I did all the chores. She wouldn't do anything. I always have to take the trash out. She would just keep piling stuff on top of the trash can and things would be falling on the floor. The floor would be all gross and stuff. (77, emphasis added)[2]

> Every once in a while when he's on the phone, which is for one or two hours, he inconveniences the apartment and *I get upset at that* – his phone call – only because it lasts so long. (23, emphasis added)

Initial discontents may be articulated or specified as the troubled party reflects on and interprets the sources, nature, and implications of the upsetting behavior or situation. Troubles become interactional phenomena when a party takes some step to deal with or respond to such a discontent or upset. I categorize these responses into three categories:

- *managerial responses*, in which a troubled party unilaterally responds to a discontent and/or its implications in ways that avoid or minimize confrontation;
- *dyadic complaints*, where a troubled roommate directly complains to and confronts the other, usually in cautious and modulated fashion, in attempting to induce the other to change or correct the troubling behavior. These complaints are marked by an expression of upset or discontent and/or a proposed remedial or corrective action; and
- *distancing and extreme responses*, involving either systematic avoidance and/or strongly antagonistic or punitive actions taken toward the other.

Some responses may resolve troubles: a complaint 'works' as the trouble-maker agrees to and implements the proposed remedy. But others work only temporarily, or not at all. When initial efforts provide neither respite nor solution, roommates often try other responses. As a result, roommate troubles frequently move through complex response cycles: sequences of trouble and response, continuing troubles and further responses, some proving at least temporarily successful, others failing. For the most part, response cycles are not tightly sequenced: although many roommates attempted managerial responses before turning to direct complaints, others complained to the troubling party as an initial response. While those who employed extreme responses did so after having failed to end the trouble using other responses, the types of prior responses and the order and persistence with which they were used varied widely.

The sections that follow examine two features of the interaction involved in these relational troubles. First, many managerial responses have low visibility, which makes it difficult to appreciate the action components of what from the outside seems like inaction. Second, many responses to these ordinary troubles are not strictly or specifically rule-oriented, but rather invoke a variety of different kinds of norms and moral evaluations, displaying varying and shifting normative accents.

Low-visibility responses

In comparison to the directly confrontational qualities of dyadic complaints and extreme, punitive responses to troubles, unilateral managerial responses tend to be private, indirect, and subtle.[3]

Troubled parties often deliberately implement managerial responses in ways that are hard to detect. Interactionally, these responses tend to be of low visibility or even invisible, not only to observers but even to the troublemaker who is their object. Consider these examples:

A woman described handling recurring tensions with her roommate 'by trying to make changes in my character that would make her feel more accepted'. (161)

I would be home with her and her boyfriend would be there watching TV and they would be doing very obvious things while I was in the room. He would feel her up and she would have her hand in his pants while I was in the room. I would get up and leave when I realized what was going on. (27)

Sometimes the TV playing until 2:00 in the morning is a little frustrating. [But] it is no big deal. I just put my walkman on. (19)

> I had a set of teaspoons, half of 'em are gone cuz they mysteriously went
> down the disposal, and she never offered to replace them. So I ended going
> out and getting a new set, and hiding them so she couldn't use them ... So
> little things just started to build up and finally I just couldn't handle it any
> more. (31)

Managerial responses reduce visibility by avoiding or minimizing direct
confrontation, not directly expressing discontent or proposing some
remedial change but rather pursuing responses that often remain unknown
to the troubling party. In the first instance, a troubled roommate responds
by trying to make an internal psychological change, transforming her own
feelings and perspectives on the trouble. In the second, a roommate with-
draws from the troubling situation, using immediate avoidance as a solution
that can be passed off as just normal absence and respect for privacy rather
than as an expression of discontent. Similarly, in the third instance, putting
on one's own earphones avoids any direct, confrontational complaint about
late-night noise. In the fourth, hiding personal items to prevent the other
from borrowing or using them does not entirely avoid signaling grievance
and upset, as the other is eventually likely to notice the change and to under-
stand it as a corrective action. But even here the response is fundamentally
preventive and indirect in character, and the issue is not usually brought up
explicitly.

   Indeed, the appeal of managerial responses to roommates often lies
exactly in their unilateral, non-confrontational character. These responses
involve actions that the troubled party can implement on his or her own
initiative, not only without informing or consulting with the troubling party
but also without directly communicating upset, discontent, and the desire
for remediation. Consider, for example, the almost seamless subtlety of this
(unsuccessful) preclusive action described by a woman disturbed by her
roommate's sexual activities in their small dorm room:

> Well, I didn't try to solve it directly by ... telling her 'don't bring guys in the
> room' but tried to do it by sleeping in my room before she could bring the
> guy in. But it didn't do anything 'cause she would bring the guy in and sleep
> with him anyway with me there so I didn't really confront her about it. (170)

Here a troubled roommate seeks to structure the situation so that the other
will act differently by visibly establishing a line of activity presumed to be
incompatible with the activity the other is about to engage in.

   In sum, in many situations an upset roommate can undertake preventive
or corrective actions on his or her own, in largely indirect and non-
confrontational ways, sometimes without the knowledge of the other
person and usually without his or her acknowledgment. The invisibility or
low visibility of managerial responses means that many of these actions are

also difficult for an outside observer to detect; indeed, they are easily missed or discounted (as, for example, in analyses of informal social control; see Black, 1998; Horwitz, 1990). Low-visibility interactional strategies and tactics need to be identified and explored in any trouble setting.

Moral accents in trouble responses

Rather than treating troubled interactions as arising simply from differences in norms and involving responses to specific rule violations or moral offenses, a focus on ordinary troubles encourages appreciation of the processes whereby troubled parties appeal to and invoke different norms and moral evaluations. Not all troubles are propelled by deeply moral or moralistic concerns implicating fundamental issues of 'right and wrong' (Black, 1998) from their very outset; rather, troubled situations can develop in different normative directions and take on different moral accents as different responses are tried and fail. Some troubles may ultimately come to be interpreted or framed as specific moral wrongdoing, as particular offenses involving distinctive kinds of rule violations and moral infractions. But others, including most roommate troubles, are initially interpreted or framed in terms that ignore or minimize normative and moral infractions, and only when responses fail to resolve them do the parties shift toward morally accented evaluations of normative wrongdoing.

Roommates typically locate the beginning of troubles in an initial, embodied experience of being viscerally 'bothered', 'annoyed', or 'upset' by something the other is doing. These experiences are not understood in terms of norm violation or wrongdoing, and they involve little or no moral blaming. Consider this example:

> It looked like the movie *Single White Female* you know? One day she shows up with the same haircut that I had at the time and she tells me, Do you like it? I just didn't answer her. (165)

This trouble is not framed in terms of offense, of rules or norms violated by the other, but rather in terms of sensitivity to or upset with a certain kind of cloying dependence; the troubled party expresses irritation with the other, not distinctly moralistic feelings of having been wronged by her. It is hard to imagine how anyone would formulate this trouble as a 'normative violation'; it is merely annoying.

Roommates rely on three interpretive framings and practices that initially minimize or avoid highly normative and moralistic formulations of and responses to the irritations and upsets of ordinary troubles. First, roommates often understand troubles as the product of differences between their personal habits, beliefs, sensitivities, or 'likes' and those of the other.

Consider the following accounts framing troubles as matters of personal preference:

> I'd be annoyed at times … like, I thought she would cling on to me and follow me around sometimes. Not that I thought that she like, oh needs me or anything, but certain times when I felt like she's kinda clingy … It bothered me … Everyone linked us together. I would get annoyed every so often. But I didn't feel it was, like, too big to mention … *it was just me*, I would get annoyed at her. (79, emphasis added)

> In terms of the kitchen, [our] timing is different. For me, if you use it, then you wash it right away and put it away whereas for him, he'll let it soak and whenever he has time, he'll wash his dishes. He doesn't have the same timing as I do … It's not a violation really, if anything it's a violation of my expectations. (133)

In these instances the discontented party makes no claim that the behaviors at issue are always, invariably, or even deeply problematic, only that at this time and place she or he experiences them as disconcerting or upsetting. In the first case the discontented party formulates her annoyance at the other's 'clingy' tendencies and at being 'linked . … together' as products of her own distinctive sensitivities ('it was just me'), explicitly recognizing that other people might not react in the same way. In the second, the discontented party reports and honors the other's competing version of how to handle dirty dishes. The difference is not a principled one, a matter of violating some sort of clean-up rule, but an optional matter of timing.

Personal preferences frame discontents as products of legitimate differences that come from special sensitivities, particular upbringings, ingrained feelings and habits, not as violations of specific normative standards. In these instances discontented roommates implicitly understand their situation as one of 'normal variation' (Matza, 1969), that is, of expected differences in how people feel and what they do about everyday matters: how clean they keep their living space, how sensitive they are to 'dependency', how openly they have sexual relations.

Second, initially roommates' underlying concern often lay in pragmatically fixing, remedying, or ending the trouble, not with highlighting and punishing a moral infraction or a normative violation. For example:

> I'd put food in there (refrigerator) and one night I walked over there and Doug and Bill were eating some of my food and I said, 'You know, they were mine. I don't have a car, so I can't get more. I'd appreciate it if you not eat it. You know, go ahead and finish that up, I'm not going to stop you now, but you know, don't eat it in the future.' (153)

Here there is tacit recognition of infraction, but the infraction is explicitly played down, or combined with an account of how it produces significant

personal inconvenience as grounds for appealing for a future change in behavior.

Third, in many circumstances roommates initially interpret the bothersome or upsetting consequences of the troubling act as unintended by the other. For example:

> It started when she started typing her papers really late at night, and because I'm a light sleeper, things like that really disturb me. *Not intentionally, I just can't sleep*. I can't sleep with the light on usually or with the noise in the background … (70; emphasis added)

Here the troubled party emphasizes her personal sensitivity in depicting her roommate's disturbing study practices as the incidental byproduct of legitimate concerns and activities. Similarly, leaving dirty dishes in the kitchen is not initially understood as an act intended to offend or upset the other, but rather as a product of different cleaning-up practices or, perhaps, of surface personal characteristics like 'sloppiness'. Not attributing intentionality to disturbance or bother eliminates or reduces moral blaming and related attributions of wrongdoing.

However, if efforts attempting to remedy troubles fail, interpretations prioritizing personal preferences and normal variations, presumed lack of intent to disturb, and the pragmatic priority of preventing the trouble in the future give way to more explicitly evaluative and even moralistic concerns. Particularly when a troubled party has directly complained to the other and the problematic behavior continues, he or she increasingly evaluates the other as knowingly inconsiderate and disrespectful, and perhaps even as now intentionally seeking to provoke and offend. Consider the change in tone and evaluation in the late-night paper writing instance when the troublemaker 'did the same thing' after the prior complaint:

> She hasn't been considerate towards me … You know if you were to type a paper at night and your roommate's sleeping, you would at least not print it out until the next day. Well, she had printed it out and she'd printed it out a few times and if she didn't like what she'd printed out she'd rip it up and put it in the trash can and you know tearing paper makes noise. You just don't do that when someone next to you is sleeping. I just could not understand why she was doing these things. (70)

Here the trouble is increasingly framed in moral, normative terms, as inconsiderate behavior and perhaps even deliberate efforts to make noise and disturb.

In general, roommates initially approach and deal with troubles in a pragmatic and expedient fashion, seeking to live with and around the trouble and the personal discontent it generates. They may attempt to manage the trouble and its consequences without making a direct complaint

to the other. Even when they do actively display discontent and complain to the other, their concern is corrective or remedial, aimed at inducing the other to change their troubling behavior. Responses and remedies are situationally specific rather than principle- or rule-oriented, seeking a practical solution that works even if it is not the ideal or most fair outcome, and even if it involves extra effort or work for the troubled party.

With the persistence of troubles even in the face of a series of response efforts, trouble tends to be moralized, framed as intentional norm violation; what was earlier seen as normal variation comes to be understood as intentionally harmful and hence as deliberate wrongdoing. Rights and principles may be invoked, as the other's actions are now seen as products of choice and responsibility, and hence as direct expressions of the actor's deeper self or fundamental character.

Focusing on small, ordinary troubles allows us to appreciate and examine these processes of normative framing as the moral accent given to particular acts changes and evolves with interactional efforts to deal with the trouble.

Conclusion

Ethnographic fieldwork is costly in time, energy, and emotion. In order to get the most out of these commitments, fieldworkers should mine the subtleties and complexities of the interactions they observe. One way to do this is to attend to and document the emergence and development of mundane troubles. While I have focused on ordinary troubles in one specific relationship, the same sorts of trouble-related interactional moves will be found by close examination of other settings, including the daily lives of people struggling with poverty, radicals organizing social movements for revolutionary change, and business people trying to move up organizational hierarchies or to monopolize an important segment of the economy. Analyses of these kinds of phenomena, which some may find more significant on political or moral grounds, will be more fruitful and nuanced if they include and build on descriptions of the interactions of how mundane troubles arise and are handled.

In addition to improving the empirical base and the analytic depth of ethnographic work, documenting the subtleties involved in ordinary troubles also holds promise for increasing the credibility of our research. Closely considered accounts of the interactional processes surrounding ordinary troubles give readers grounds for evaluating the accuracy and truth of descriptions and findings. Ethnographic work without interaction detail risks appearing to the reader as a product of a tacit conspiracy to manipulate interpretation by hiding the interactions through which the social life

it addresses must have been performed for fear that the author's favored explanations will appear false or irrelevant to readers who can construct their own interpretations. Taking an interaction-oriented approach holds particular promise for efforts to strengthen what Michael Burawoy (2005) and others call public sociology. Sociological work will be more successful to the extent that it produces research that the general reader, using standards of evidence that are part of common culture, find convincing and compelling. The interactional detail provided by careful examination of ordinary troubles can be a valuable resource for persuading readers that our accounts are credible, thereby encouraging the acceptance and use of our sociological insights and analyses.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1   The data for the analysis includes 184 first-person accounts of problems with roommates collected by undergraduate students in sociology classes, mostly between 1993 and 1996. The bulk of these accounts (154) involved interviews with friends and peers about the problems of living together in dorm rooms or apartments; the remainder (30) included first-person written accounts of students' own experiences with a roommate problem. The interviews and accounts included in this data set were selected from the larger set of class papers on two primary grounds: they included transcripts of tape-recorded interviews, or presented material that was particularly rich, unusual, or revealing.
2   Interview or paper identification numbers are indicated in parentheses. Names have been changed from those included in the original reports.
3   See Emerson (2008) for an extended consideration of the varieties and characteristics of managerial responses.

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