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*Unexplored  
Realities*

by

Florian Elliker

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Rewolucji 1905 r. 41/43, 90-214 Lodz, Poland

tel. (4842) 635 52 63

email: [office@qualitativesociologyreview.org](mailto:office@qualitativesociologyreview.org)

[www.qualitativesociologyreview.org](http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org)

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# Unexplored Realities in Qualitative Research

**Florian Elliker**   
University of St. Gallen, Switzerland

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**Dr. Florian Elliker** is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of St. Gallen (Switzerland). His publications and research projects deal with populism, experiences of precarity and marginalization, the use of consciousness-altering substances, the sociology of knowledge approach to discourse ethnography, and qualitative methods and methodology. With Niklaus Reichle, he organized the conference “Unexplored Realities,” at which most of the articles in the thematic section of this issue were presented as keynote addresses. He is the former coordinator of the ESA research network 20 Qualitative Methods.

**email address:** [florian.elliker@unisg.ch](mailto:florian.elliker@unisg.ch)

**This** thematic issue is premised on the assumption that studying ‘unexplored realities’ is one of the key strengths of qualitative methods and research approaches. In sociology, qualitative research approaches have undergone a thorough revitalization in the past 40 years, after a long hiatus during which they have not disappeared entirely, yet have been marginalized, despite having contributed core methodologies to the discipline from its very beginning. This revitalization has brought along an enormous diversification considering epistemologies, methodologies, research

interests, and empirically studied domains of social reality. The resulting compartmentalization of qualitative research into various communities focused on a particular research approach or a specific paradigm is ambivalent. While specialized in-depth discussions allow for further development of a particular research methodology and approach, what is often lost out of sight is the broad range of empirical findings, the epistemological diversity, and the myriad of potential theoretical insights—particularly when research communities do little to engage in serious intradisciplinary discussions across research approaches. What is also needed are attempts to shed light on common themes and ongoing concerns of the various strands of qualitative research, keeping qualitative methods vital and relevant through a continued dialogue—focusing on the commonality of qualitative research as constituted through shared activities and not uniformity.

As a theme, “unexplored realities” is such an attempt. It sheds light on what qualitative scholars working with different premises in distinct fields may share—in one way or the other—when they engage in research activities. As a theme of the 2018 midterm conference of the ESA research network qualitative methods,<sup>1</sup> the notion of unexplored realities served as a starting point to dialogically explore the commonalities and differences in how qualitative scholars approach the study of social reality. At the conference, two key themes emerged, around which contributions and discussions often revolved. On the one hand, discussions focused on the empirical study of societal domains that are, for one or

<sup>1</sup> “Unspoken, Unseen, Unheard of. Unexplored Realities in Qualitative Research,” 06-08 September 2018, St. Gallen, Switzerland (<https://qualitative-research.ch/en/unexplored-realities/>). The conference was financially supported by the Swiss Academy for the Humanities and Social Sciences (SAGW/ASSH).

the other reason, hidden, concealed, marginalized, neglected, or out of sight from public or academic attention. On the other hand, the discussions turned to elements that are, again, for various reasons, methodologically underutilized, little explored, neglected, or particularly challenging—amongst others, studying and using new technologies and the various senses available to us. Continuing these discussions, the focus on the senses constituted the theme of the following midterm conference in 2020, titled “Seeing and the Other Senses.”<sup>2</sup>

The four articles in the thematic section of this issue are based on some of the keynote addresses of these two conferences. In two cases, they consist of updated previous publications that report from empirical research projects. Patricia and Peter Adler present a study of the practice of self-injury, and Ross Koppel demonstrates the relativity challenge of health-care information technology. The other two articles are more conceptual in character. David Howes elaborates on sense-based research, and Wolfram Fischer expands on the sensual construction of body and biography. The following section briefly introduces these four diverse articles by relating them to the two above subthemes that emerged when discussing the notion of unexplored realities—social domains that are little explored empirically and the sensory dimension of qualitative research that still shows potential for further exploration.

### ‘Hidden’ or ‘Unexplored’?

When we presented the conference theme at the network meeting at the midterm conference in Cra-

<sup>2</sup> “Seeing and the Other Senses—Making Sense of the Senses through Language. Opportunities and Challenges in Qualitative Research,” 26-28 August 2020, Kassel, Germany (held online due to measures to contain the COVID-19 disease).

cow, Poland, in 2016, we first chose the term ‘hidden realities.’ The notion of a reality being ‘hidden’ was controversially discussed—ethnomethodological scholars argued that any socially relevant phenomenon needs to be perceived by the involved actors of a given interactional situation. Anything hidden from the actors will not shape their interaction and is thus not *socially* relevant in that situation (although it may be relevant within the subjective reality of an individual). And if an entire social setting is only little known in public or amongst scholars, *this* is the very phenomenon to examine: How is this setting accounted for? How do others deal with the fact that there is little knowledge about that reality?

For others working with participant observation, the notion of hidden or unexplored realities also proved counter-intuitive at first. As soon as we start connecting to individuals formerly unknown to us, as we start becoming a member of relatively obscure settings, these settings are, strictly speaking, not ‘hidden’ or ‘unexplored’ anymore—at least for the researchers involved. We cannot be sure about the existence of phenomena that we do not perceive directly. But, as soon as we experience certain phenomena, they cannot be labeled hidden. And, of course, if we abstract from the researcher, there is always *somebody* involved in the hidden reality. Thus, it is never strictly hidden or unexplored as long as it is populated by actors. Understood in a strict sense, hidden or unexplored realities appear not to be the adequate notion to label what we are dealing with as qualitative researchers.

## Unexplored Spaces and Practices

These issues become less problematic when ‘hidden’ or ‘unexplored’ are defined less strictly. This enables us to ask questions such as: *For whom* are certain

realities hidden or unexplored? Why are they kept secret? Why do they remain in relative obscurity? Why are they not explored by outsiders? Why do we not hear voices from these social realities? And why has not yet more research been done on them? What can we learn about society in general by studying them? And should we, indeed, bring attention to settings or phenomena that the involved actors might not want to be exposed to or explore? These questions sensitize us to new developments and spaces that have gone largely unnoticed, be it because they are not recognized in their nascent status, be it because there is an uneasiness in thematizing them, or be it that the current public discourses and discussions make it difficult to see them. And who would be better positioned than qualitative researchers to venture into these blind spots of our contemporary discourses?

Accessing unexplored realities can be a particularly intriguing endeavor, as it entails venturing into the unknown, exploring a space known to only a few. It is also a particular strength of qualitative research, as it is mostly through personal contact that one can build trust and rapport to study what typically remains concealed or inaccessible. Studying these realities not only advances scholarly theories and concepts but may produce knowledge that provides a broader public outside academia with an understanding that is more complex and differentiated and one that is—in many cases—grounded in first-hand experience. The grounding in first-hand experience is gaining more relevance in an increasingly mediated world in which ‘alternative facts’ are more easily spread than ever, in turn, rendering the discussion ever more pertinent regarding how to produce ‘robust’ knowledge and findings—inviting us to cultivate the corresponding methodological strengths of qualitative methods by keeping the



discussions on the various moments of reflexivity in qualitative research alive.

The notion of unexplored realities not only points to little-known social realities but also to those aspects that remain understudied both in well-known and hardly known social realities, namely, social forces and action patterns that rest on and consist of a large body of tacit or implicit knowledge. While the notion of social structure and its correlates on the micro- and macro-level of analysis form an important core of sociology as a discipline, at first sight, they often seem strikingly intangible in everyday life. This is another classic strength of qualitative research—getting symbolically and, at times, literally ‘in touch’ with these implicit yet nonetheless relevant elements of everyday life—the study of which is much harder, if not impossible, if one stays behind one’s desk. While explicit rules—through sanctions and institutionalization—may constitute powerful forces, they are also out in the open for contestation and negotiation. Implicit or tacit structures may, however, be as powerful as the explicit ones, partially because they remain unrecognized by (some of) the actors and thus operate outside their attention.

Some argue it may even be the qualitative researcher’s main task to describe the “silent” aspects of the social (Hirschauer 2001). Why do we need, we might ask, an ethnographic description of what has been already communicated, of what the actors are expressively aware of? Participant observation could consist in transposing that which remains silent into a medium accessible to scholarly debate and an extra-academic audience. Through a long-term presence in and active engagement with the field, an ethnographer can experience and, in some sense, ‘test’ which aspects—patterns, conditions, and un-

derstandings—are more evanescent and which elements prove to be resilient over time. It is through the prolonged sharing of the everyday life-worlds in which the phenomena of interest are manifest that we come to experience structures that may otherwise remain unrecognized.

In light of current developments, this may be somewhat counter-intuitive—contemporary societies seem to be in a process of becoming ever more talkative. We live in ‘interview societies’ and in societies in which much of what happens seems to be recorded on video and audio and made accessible to very large audiences in an abundance of digital spaces. Many of our contemporaries seem to share aspects of their lives on social networks that would not long ago have been considered very private matters. There are, in other words, plenty of so-called ‘naturally occurring’ data we can use for our purposes. Yet, many experiential domains remain not only not externalized but are not transposed into the medium of the digital. And qualitative research methodologies enable us to explore these aspects through interviews and participant observation.

Thus, qualitative research is perfectly suited to explore unexplored realities and tacit forces and to convey some of the findings and understandings to a larger audience. This may also entail giving a voice to individuals who live in marginalized settings and are not heard in mainstream society, that is, to raise awareness about their existence and thematize their marginalization. This, in turn, immediately raises the question of how to represent these voices and realities, particularly if—in an ever more talkative society—providing knowledge through qualitative research not only consists of reproducing everyday statements but of abductively gaining insights that shed a different light on the actions in the field than

the perspectives of the actors do, without neglecting or devaluating their explicit articulations and emic perspectives. What should be represented that is encountered in the field, and how so? How do we negotiate this representative aspect when we discover processes with which the actors in the field or society at large are uneasy?

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Of the four articles, the study on self-injury by Patricia and Peter Adler and Ross Koppel's investigation of reality construction in medical care settings can be considered in an almost ideal-typical way concerned with unexplored realities. When Patricia and Peter Adler set out to study self-injury, the practice was little known, both in the wider public and the social sciences, and the actors involved in the practice were often uncertain whether their actions were highly idiosyncratic or shared by a few or many others. When 'exposed,' the available frame was predominantly one of medical problematization, implying a range of consequences, both in treatment and the corresponding self-understanding and identification of the involved persons. Over time, however, this mostly isolated practice had become a more well-known phenomenon, largely due to digital technologies both making it easier to connect to others who engage in self-injury and increasing the available representations of self-injury. Thus, a process in which often concealed and isolated subjective realities have become more well-known social phenomena, undergoing a moral passage from a medicalized to a voluntarily chosen deviant behavior. The study also demonstrates that some realities are structured in a way that makes the use of participant observation difficult, if not impossible, as the co-presence of a researcher could potentially have unwanted consequences for

those engaged in the practice and their immediate social environment. The article also invites us to reflect on the ethics of what scholars should shed light on and expose, and how to do so. As the Adlers discussed in another article (Adler and Adler 2012), the psycho-medical framing of the practice in terms of research ethics by institutional review boards had almost rendered a sociological investigation of the practice unfeasible in the sense that they would have needed to expose the involved actors in ways that would have led to fundamental and mostly unwanted changes in their lives. The Adlers convincingly demonstrate that understanding this little-known reality from the perspectives of the actors without a medicalized normative interference adds to a scholarly understanding of the practice and provides a wider extra-academic audience with insights into relevant yet hidden 'pockets' of the societies they live in.

While entirely different in character and the involved actors, Ross Koppel also faced ethical issues throughout the research he and his colleagues conducted in hospitals, as they discovered that the little-understood reality of the day-to-day use of healthcare technology at times had dramatic effects on patients' lives. Populated by many more actors than the setting of self-injury and by a range of complicated digital realities, the microcosmos of electronic health records (EHR) and other IT systems used in hospitals is little or not at all understood by the patients and understood only narrowly and pragmatically by the involved clinicians. Through long-term ethnographic investigations of a range of hospital settings, Koppel and his colleagues reconstructed the often-implicit patterns with which the involved actors transpose their perspectives into the EHR, developing models or scenarios of how differing perspectives can

misalign to produce distortions in comprehension and treatment. The article demonstrates how the largely implicit patterns of this little-explored reality can be discovered through long-term ethnographic fieldwork, contributing an understanding thereof that connects to but goes beyond and adds to the understanding of the involved actors.

David Howes and Wolfram Fischer focus on aspects of social realities that have traditionally been less explored in social science research than other aspects—the sensory dimension of social realities and the intersection of biographical constructions with bodily experiences. Howes shows that particularly exteroceptive senses other than sight and hearing have posed difficulties in both conceptualization and empirical investigation, emphasizing that senses must be considered as constituting a multimodal experience that, in turn, is fundamental in the social construction of reality and in constituting co-presence. The article proposes ‘participant sensation’ as a research approach that both considers sensory experiences in their own right and in their relevance in constituting (social) phenomena that have conventionally been studied by registering them via sound and sight. If, in qualitative research, the researcher is the ‘research instrument,’ participant sensation requires the explicit broadening of those aspects of the researcher’s experiences that one considers being empirically relevant for data analysis. Wolfram Fischer more specifically thematizes the senses in that biographical research needs to consider how the construction of biographies is linked to both the experiences and the construction of the body. Both articles invite us to conceptually reflect on the role of sensory experiences and to empirically ask which senses need to be involved in the study of a particular domain of social reality.

## Unexplored Senses

It has become commonplace to notice that contemporary culture is more concerned with sensory experiences. Over the last decades, sensory experiences have become an explicit focus of what people seek concerning leisure activities and the qualities of the built environment, and the cultural-technological artifacts they are surrounded by in their everyday lives. Consequently, large domains of contemporary industries have become concerned with crafting and aestheticizing the manifold sensory dimensions of the products and services they sell. A new service class rose with a strong commitment to fashion and alert to and engaged in producing more rapid transformations of style. Much of the work members of this class do as cultural intermediaries—in media, advertising, and design—has been and is symbolic and aesthetic. Recently, however, we witness an increase in experiences sought after and sold as being more ‘authentic,’ in contrast to what has been described as ‘postmodern’ development that has chiefly been concerned with bricolage and pastiche, with playfulness and ‘fun,’ as well as with aesthetically stylized surfaces, the latter not only but often being perceived in mediated forms. ‘Authenticity’ in this context does not necessarily (but also) indicate experiences that are ‘not contrived’ but rather in which the individual is sensorially involved in more encompassing ways—for example, in contrast to those digital media in which reality is primarily perceived through seeing and hearing. Thus, while the visual and acoustic senses remain key senses in everyday life, other senses have shifted into focus—at least amongst those classes, milieus, and population segments in which such experiences had previously taken on ‘postmodern’ characteristics.

Of course, ontologically and epistemologically, everyday life is and remains a fundamentally embod-

ied experience, all senses being vital in one way or the other, irrespective of the above developments. Any type of sociological research and imagination must thus, to some extent, consider the sensory dimensions of everyday life when developing empirically corroborated, more theorized accounts of it. Qualitative methods and social science research methods in general have developed a preference for the visual and auditory senses, probably also (but not only) because they are central in expressing written and spoken language. Sight and hearing are important in communication and interaction, and have historically proven to be highly effective senses in the natural sciences, and the technologies to reproduce visual and auditory sensations have become widely distributed and sophisticated since the advent of photography and sound recording in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

However, sensory dimensions seemed to have posed difficulties to be considered in a methodologically robust manner, not at least since the dominant medium of the social sciences has long been language—in its auditory form as oral discourse, but particularly in its specific visual form as a written text. If “a medium is a medium is a medium, [then] it cannot be translated. To carry a message from one to the other medium always implies subjecting it to different standards and materialities” (Kittler 1987:271 [trans. FE]). Given this premise, the specific qualities of sensory experiences are lost when transposing them into text—the account of these experiences becomes a linguistic description. Of course, language is a key medium of social life, and there are good reasons to believe that robust accounts of the social organization of daily life can be given by focusing on language. After all, the actors’ subjective consciousness remains mutually transcendent in everyday life. Often, relatively ‘thin’ linguistic

externalizations of comparatively ‘rich’ internal experiences and meaning are sufficient to coordinate interaction and generate mutual understanding.

However, if sociological accounts are to take sensory experiences seriously in their non-mediated form, challenges arise on various levels, particularly concerning collecting the data and conveying the corresponding analyses to scholarly and lay audiences. While much of this is often handled pragmatically in the sense that spoken and written language remains the central medium for data analysis and the presentation and discussion of results, including the reflection of how language relates to non-linguistic domains, sensory qualities have become more important in the presentation of results, particularly in the context of performative social research. In terms of data analysis, the technical restrictions in registering sensorially experienced reality still pose significant challenges. While visual and auditory experiences can be recorded selectively, tactile, olfactory, and gustatory dimensions are much harder to register in forms accessible for data analysis, requiring—maybe—a reconsideration of what it means to collect data *beyond* the registration of reality in technological media. And internal sensations are, by definition, only accessible to others through externalization, be it by the actors using externalizing means themselves or through technological devices.

Qualitative methods and, particularly, forms of participant observation grounded in first-hand experience have an important role to play in both providing methodologies to empirically study everyday cultures in a sensorially encompassing way and—by drawing on reflections of the challenges that arise in this endeavor—in advancing the theorization of the relationship between sensory experiences and the

various forms of media they are transposed into. In encountering actors and everyday social settings in person, researchers experience these settings in sensorially encompassing ways, enabling them to literally *sense* what senses are important for the actors involved in these settings. This also enables them to use their sensory experiences both as data of how these settings are experienced and as indications of where and how to engage in further data collection (in collaboration with the other actors). Importantly, it provides them with what Max Weber (1978:5) called an “emotionally empathic or artistically appreciative quality [as] basis for certainty in understanding” in contrast to a “rational” understanding. In other words, they acquire knowledge to not only evaluate in rational terms how evident both their and others’ accounts and interpretations are but in emotional or sensory ways.

In “striving for clarity and verifiable accuracy of insight and comprehension” (Weber 1978:5), much of social science has followed Weber’s suggestion to focus on rational evidence, given its comparatively ‘higher degree’ of intersubjective clarity and logical intelligibility, in its ‘ideal’ form manifested in “logically or mathematically related propositions” (Weber 1978:5), expressed and contained within the medium of (linguistic) sign systems. On the other hand, “empathic or appreciative accuracy is attained when, through sympathetic participation, we can adequately grasp the emotional context in which the action took place” (Weber 1978:5). Qualitative methods enable researchers to develop such an understanding. And if this type of research aims to create a sensorially encompassing way of understanding—however imperfect—in academic colleagues and the audience interested in the academic findings, the use of other media than the language may play a crucial role. This is not to say that a fo-

cus on this type of evidence should replace rational evidence, but rather complement it—and foster a discussion on how language and related sign systems as dominant media of rational evidence relate to ‘appreciative’ evidence. Given the long-standing predisposition of sociological research and thinking to prefer rational evidence, other forms of evidence may be perceived as comparatively more ‘fuzzy,’ ‘ambiguous,’ ‘diffuse,’ et cetera, constituting a challenge considering that Wittgenstein’s dictum that “whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent” (Wittgenstein 1922:7) remains a fundamental part of sociological socialization, with the effect that other ways of articulating findings are experienced not only as ‘insufficient’ but also as ‘uncomfortable.’

The widespread and still increasing distribution of computer-powered devices and their interconnectedness have given rise to a variety of digital media that have come to play an important role in our everyday life-worlds. These media are, in various ways, media of connection and disconnection. Through the relative ease with which they enable visual and oral communication, they have facilitated the maintenance of social relations by increasing the frequency of mediated interaction. Yet, while these media allow the registration and transmission of auditory and visual dimensions of reality in previously unknown quality and thus ‘increase’ the sensory range of mediated interaction, many everyday sensory experiences are not (yet) transposed into the realm of digital media. There is, thus, a disconnection in a double sense. On the one hand, the materiality of our everyday experiences, their ‘tangible’ character and ‘unavoidable reality accent’ of happening and existing seem to be rendered less relevant or significant in an age where digital media become a ‘reality on their own’ to the extent of dominating our sense of reality, this presumably

being one of the reasons for an increased longing for ‘authentic’ experiences (as mentioned above). On the other hand, digital realities may come to dominate material, lived realities even more than the traditional media, as everyday actors are immersed in these media in a more encompassing way. A scholarly investigation of social reality thus should not only focus on these digitized domains but also consider in more encompassing ways lived, sensory, and embodied experiences—and how everyday understandings and practices are transformed as they become intertwined with digitized and interconnected media.

Such an understanding should consider the aforementioned notion that carrying a message from one to another implies subjecting it to different standards and materialities. Instead of adhering to the notion of translation that is oriented towards the idea of reproducing an equivalent meaning, the notion of media transposition might be more adequate, not aiming at representation, but (re)production. In other words, a phenomenon or epistemic object is produced again in a new medium, and thereby—necessarily—certain characteristics and properties are lost, and others are gained. Nowadays, cultural practices are empirically transposed into a variety of different media. Not only should empirical studies reflect upon these processes but use this as potential to gain a more diverse idea of cultural practices as their epistemic objects.

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The four articles address the dimension of the senses and the interplay of digital(ized) realities and sensory experiences in various ways. David Howes and Wolfram Fischer both consider the role of the senses explicitly. Howes elaborates on theoretical

frameworks and methodological approaches for studying the senses and demonstrates in a historical discussion how the senses have been considered in the context of the Scientific Revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth century and the Cognitive Revolution of the mid-twentieth century. He elucidates how the study of the senses has conceptually and empirically focused on specific aspects in such a way that has hindered the development of an encompassing understanding and consideration of the senses. The sensory turn in the human sciences and the development of the interdisciplinary field of sensory studies can be seen as an attempt to develop such a more encompassing theorization and empirical investigation of the senses, resonating with the wider societal shift to emphasize sensory and aesthetic experiences. Sensory studies centrally hinge on the sensorium, that is, the human sensory apparatus, and qualia—those aspects of the material world contingent on human perception. Including the extension of the senses via (technological) media, the sensorium is also conceived of as an operational complex that partially and importantly consists—in contemporary life-worlds—of digital technologies and realities, the sensorium thus in itself regarded as continuously involved in both a range of ‘media transpositions’ and in processing ‘multi-media’ perceptions. Methodologically, these aspects are studied using ‘participant sensation,’ overall constituting an approach of ‘quali(a)tive’ inquiry. Participant sensation explicitly focuses not only on seeing and hearing—particularly not only on written and spoken language and visual signs—but on those other senses that are more difficult to register for data analysis and the presentation of research results. In explicitly considering the relationship between the senses and meaning-making, it urges us to face the challenge of how to deal with those aspects not easily transposed into language.

It emphasizes that co-presence consists of having a “sensory effect on each other” (Simmel), an effect experienced in a multimodal manner. Howes concludes by presenting case studies in which the researchers have expanded the conventional limits of using the senses, involving the development of a ‘more-than-human sensorium’ of the researcher or (re)constructing the epistemic object in ways that allow for a multi-sensory experience thereof.

Connecting to this broader conceptual and empirical development of the sensory turn, Wolfram Fischer elaborates more specifically on the interplay between the senses, the body, and biography. In bringing together specific strands of biographical research and conceptualizations of the body and mind, he develops a processual model that considers how the body is sensually constructed. He discusses the various conceptual, empirical, and methodological implications for biographical research, indicating how existing methods conventionally used for biographical research, such as the narrative interview approach, could be extended.

Studying the practices of self-injury, Patricia and Peter Adler report from an in-depth empirical investigation of a social phenomenon in which the body and a particular way of sensorially experiencing the body play a fundamental role. Self-injury as an empirical phenomenon of study is one in which both participant observation and participant sensation are hardly feasible methodological choices. The article demonstrates how such a fundamentally embodied practice can nonetheless be thoroughly investigated through interviews and written communication and invites us to reflect on the practical and ethical limits of existential involvements of the ethnographers. Self-injury is, furthermore, a practice that is intertwined with the constitution

and construction of the involved actors’ self-understanding. The Adlers show how this entanglement of self-injury and self-understanding has changed over time, the practice undergoing a ‘moral passage’ from being understood and framed as medicalized behavior to a voluntarily chosen deviant behavior. This transformation is linked to the rise and use of digitally mediated communication and spaces such as website postings and internet groups, extending, amongst other aspects, both the range of actors with whom those who practice self-injury can communicate and the mediated representations and discussions of self-injury.

Ross Koppel’s work on the three realities in health-care institutions—the physical reality of the patient, the clinicians’ mental models of the patient’s conditions, and the EHR—focus on the various transpositions that take place between the respective ‘media’ in which these realities manifest. These medical settings are social realities in which the interaction and relation between the various actors are fundamentally shaped by a digital actor—the EHR. On the one hand, his study shows how bodily conditions—sensorially experienced by the patients and represented in medicalized terms by the clinicians—are not simply transferred but transposed into the digital EHR reality, both the transposing and the EHR structure imposing constraints on the process and the results. On the other hand, the study shows how this transposition process operates under distinct *empirical* expectations, namely, those of ‘correct’ or ‘adequate’ representation of both the physical reality of the patient and the clinician’s mental model thereof. Seen from the patients’ perspectives, these expectations become relevant insofar as the transposition of EHR representations back into specific medical treatments have corporeal consequences of a considerably higher reality accent than their digital correlates.

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# Quali(a)tative Methods: Sense-Based Research in the Social Sciences and Humanities

David Howes   
Concordia University, Canada

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## Keywords:

Sensory Turn; Sense-Based Research; Participant Sensation; Quali(a)tative Inquiry

**Abstract:** This paper begins by tracing the sensory turn in the human sciences—most notably, history and anthropology—which, in turn, gave rise to the interdisciplinary field of sensory studies. The latter field is articulated around the concept of the sensorium (defined as the entire sensory apparatus, including the extension of the senses via diverse media, as an operational complex) and the notion of qualia (defined as those aspects of the material world, such as color and sound, that are contingent on the human perceptual apparatus—in contrast to the inherent or elementary properties of materials, such as number or form, which are not). Sense-based research in the human sciences is tied to sensing and making sense together with others. Its methodology of choice is sensory ethnography, or “participant sensation.” This method departs from the emphasis on observation in conventional qualitative research, as well as the latter’s reliance on such verbocentric methods as the questionnaire or focus group. Sensory ethnography highlights the primacy of the quali(a)tative dimensions of our being together in society. It extrapolates on Georg Simmel’s point: “That we get involved in interactions at all depends on the fact that we have a sensory effect upon one another” (as cited in Howes 2013). In part II of this paper, a critique is presented of the diminution of the quali(a)tative in the context of the Scientific Revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, the cognitive revolution of the mid-twentieth century, and the scientization of the senses in the Sensory Evaluation Research Laboratory. These revolutions are problematized for their lopsidedness: the privileging of the infrasensible over the sensible and elemental (or atomistic) over the phenomenal in the case of the Scientific Revolution; the neuronal over the sensual and social in the case of the cognitive revolution; and, the unimodal (or one-sensation- and one-sense-at-a-time) over the multimodal, as well as the reduction of “significance” to the statistical, in the case of the research protocols of the sensory science laboratory. The paper concludes by presenting the results of a series of case studies in sensory ethnography that push the bounds of sense by leading with the senses and bringing the quali(a)tative back in.

**David Howes** is a Professor of Anthropology and Co-Director of the Centre for Sensory Studies at Concordia University, Montreal. He has conducted field research on the social and cultural life of the senses in Papua New Guinea and Northwestern Argentina, the sensori-social life of things in the museum, and the growing sense appeal of commodities in late capitalist society. His latest book is *The Sensory Studies Manifesto: Tracking the Sensorial Revolution in the Arts and Human Sciences* (2022).

**email address:** david.howes@concordia.ca

In July 2014, the interdisciplinary social scientist Helen Holmes organized a networking event at Manchester University, with the support of a grant from the British Academy. The event was called “Taking Turns”: there were three keynote speakers and approximately 50 attendees. The first to take a turn at the lectern was the sociologist Tim Dant, author of *Material Culture in the Social World* (1999) and *Materiality and Society* (2004), who had been invited to address “the material turn.” Next up was the social psychologist Margaret Wetherell, author of *Discourse and Social Psychology* (1987, with Jonathan Potter) and *Affect and Emotion: A New Social Science Understanding* (2012), who spoke about “the affective turn.” The third speaker was the present writer, an anthropologist by training. On the strength of my two books, *The Varieties of Sensory Experience* (1991) and *Sensual Relations: Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory* (2003), I was asked to trace “the sensory turn.”

In my talk, I began by noting the aptness of the title of the event. I observed that research in the humanities and social sciences had undergone a series of prior turns, such as “the linguistic turn” of the 1960s and ‘70s, which introduced into the human sciences the idea of society as “structured like a language” and culture “as text”; “the pictorial turn” of the 1980s, which gave rise to visual culture studies and underscored the rising importance of “visual literacy”—that is, the increasing salience of visual communication in the contemporary “civilization of the image”; and, “the corporeal turn” (or paradigm of “embodiment”) of the 1990s, which sought to overcome the long-standing split between mind and body (in the Western tradition) by tabling such constructs as “the embodied mind” and/or “mindful body.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> On the linguistic turn, see: Surkis (2012); regarding the pictorial turn, see: Mitchell (1994); and, for an account of embodiment as a paradigm for research, see: Csordas (1990; 1993).

I proposed that the sensory turn, which came over anthropology in the wake of Paul Stoller’s *The Taste of Ethnographic Things: The Senses in Anthropology* (1989), both encompassed and sought to correct for the biases and excesses of these prior turns—namely, the verbocentrism of the linguistic turn, the ocularcentrism of the pictorial turn, and the spurious unity imposed on the sensorium by the corporeal turn. I argued that the latter turn had the pernicious effect of deflecting attention from the multiplicity of the senses due to its insistence on the unity of mind and body *tout court*. I was particularly critical of phenomenology, with its supposition of “the pre-reflective unity of the senses” and “the synergic system” of the body (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Ingold 2000). The centrifugal tendencies of the sensorium are no less worthy of investigation than the centripetal, or so-called synaesthetic, in our estimation.<sup>2</sup> Whereas, according to the phenomenology of perception:

my body is a ready-made system of equivalents and transpositions from one sense to another. The senses translate each other without any need of an interpreter...Synaesthetic perception is the rule. [Merleau-Ponty 1962:235, 229]

I played up the fact that “translation” is just one possible relation among the senses: there are also relations of domination and contestation (e.g., the stick half in water that looks crooked to the eye, but feels straight to the touch), anticipation, complementarity (e.g., “the male gaze” vs. “the female touch”), and so forth (see: Howes 2022:26-27). This led me to suggest that the sensory turn was more in the nature of a *revolution* by virtue of its holism (in that it takes *all*

<sup>2</sup> It can help to think of the sensorium as a “collideroscope,” following McLuhan (1962). See further the “collideroscope” entry in the Picture Gallery on the Sensory Studies website (<http://www.sensorystudies.org/picture-gallery/>).

of the faculties equally seriously) and dedication to enucleating diverse *heterarchies* of the senses (in history and across cultures) that not only depart from the conventional Western hierarchy of the senses but embody radically different enumerations of the senses (both beyond and beneath the canonical five) as well.

In the ensuing discussion, it was interesting to observe the points of overlap between the three “turns.” For example, Tim Dant was critical of the emphasis on “the symbolic” and the focus on consumption in material culture studies, and sought to shift the onus onto materiality and a corresponding focus on production (see: Dant 2009). This dovetailed with the emphasis on multisensoriality and “making sense” in sensory studies. Margaret Wetherell observed that the affective turn also took leave of “the symbolic” due to its focus on intensities and “being affected.” Furthermore, it emerged that the affective turn intersects with the sensory turn on account of their common focus on the notion of “feeling”: this term, “feeling,” sounds in both the sensory register (as tactility) and the register of emotions (as affectivity). Wetherell was also highly critical of affect theory, though, particularly as expounded by the philosopher Brian Massumi (2002), both for the flimsiness of the science on which it is based and for its psychophysical conceit. By psychophysical conceit, we mean the way Massumi pretends to be able to drill down to the putatively pre- or infra-cultural and sub-cognitive level of sensation (e.g., vibration is said to subtend the sense of hearing). I share her reservations about the superficiality of affect theory. Already in 1889, Franz Boas exposed the fallacy of psychophysics in his article “On Alternating Sounds” (see: Howes, Geertz, and Lambert 2018); or, as Henri Bergson (1991:103) observed in *Matter and Memory*: “Perception is never a mere contact of the mind with the object present...

it is impregnated with memory-images which complete it as they interpret it.” The consensus appeared to be that the affective turn (after Massumi) had been a turn for the worse, or cul-de-sac (see further Howes 2022:157-158).

In this paper, I present a genealogy of the field of sensory studies. The latter field emerged out of the sensory turn in history and anthropology, and the subsequent marriage or confluence of these two approaches (i.e., sensory anthropology, sensory history) as proposed by Alain Corbin in “Histoire et anthropologie sensorielle [History and Sensory Anthropology]” (1990). Sensory studies leads—or, if you prefer, “leans in”—with the senses (in place of, say, language or cognition): it is articulated around the concept of the sensorium (on which more in a moment). I go on to describe how these sense-based approaches open space within qualitative research for the quali(a)tative—that is, for sensing and making sense together with others alongside (or in place of) observation, questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, et cetera (i.e., the conventional instruments of qualitative research).<sup>3</sup>

This paper, then, detours into an investigation of the great ontological transformation in the Western episteme during the Scientific Revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the invention of “sensory science” in the 1930s. The current “sensorial revolution” in the human sciences is framed as a counter-revolution to the Scientific Revolution in the so-called natural sciences and the cognitive

<sup>3</sup> *Making Sense in the Social Sciences* (Northey, Tepperman, and Albanese 2018), now in its seventh edition, contains chapters on how to use qualitative and quantitative data, and is a standard guide for students. Its title sounds promising, but is actually grossly misleading. The book is sense-less (from the standpoint of sensory ethnography), even if it does teach students how to write well.

revolution in psychology; it is also shown to be at loggerheads with sensory science. This paper concludes with an examination of how the work of contemporary sensory anthropologists and sensory historians is pushing “the bounds of sense” and in so doing demonstrates the tremendous potential of quali(a)tative research for re-envisioning—or better, sensualizing—qualitative research.

## The Sensorium

The sensory turn is articulated around the concept of “the sensorium.” In the early modern period, this term was used to refer to the brain as “the seat of sensation,” but also extended to the circumference of perception, as in the following usage (quoted in the *Oxford English Dictionary*), which dates from 1714: “The noblest and most exalted Way of considering this infinite Space [referring to ‘the Universe’] is that of Sir Isaac Newton, who calls it the *Sensorium* of the Godhead.” Another quote, which dates from 1861, brings out how this concept also had a social dimension: “Rome became the common sensorium of Europe, and through Rome all the several portions of Latin Europe sympathized and felt with each other” (as cited in Howes 2020:21). The implication of the latter quote is that perception is a two-way street: the senses are media, rather than receptors.

It is to the media theorist Walter J. Ong that we owe the retrieval of the concept of the sensorium, which had retreated from the interface between self and world to the neural pathways leading from sense receptors to their terminus in the cortex due to the rise of psychophysics in the nineteenth century and the subsequent rise of cognitive neuroscience.

Ong reversed this trend by highlighting the significance of the socialization and technologization of

the senses in a section of *The Presence of the Word* (1967) that was subsequently reprinted under the title “The Shifting Sensorium” as the lead chapter in *The Varieties of Sensory Experience: A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses* (Howes 1991). In a contemporary article in *American Anthropologist* entitled “World as View and World as Event” (1969), Ong argued that the term sensorium should be used in place of “world view” since the latter term could not meaningfully be applied to the cosmologies of “oral societies.” Unlike literate societies, where words figure as “quiescent marks on paper,” in so-called oral societies, where speech is the dominant medium of communication, words figure as dynamic *events*, which are also soundful. Ong further proposed that “given sufficient knowledge of the sensorium exploited within a specific culture, one could probably define the culture as a whole in all its aspects” (Ong 1991:28). How so? Because “differences in cultures... can be thought of as differences in the sensorium, the organization of which is in part determined by culture while at the same time it makes culture” (Ong 1991:28).

Building on the work of Ong (and his mentor, Marshall McLuhan), what the sensory turn—or rather, *revolution*—stands for is a cultural approach to the study of the senses and a sensory approach to the study of culture. The senses are treated as both object of study and means of inquiry. The rise of sensory anthropology and sensory history since the 1990s, and the interdisciplinary field of “sensory studies” that has emerged out of their confluence (see: “Introducing Sensory Studies” by Bull et al. 2006), has challenged the monopoly that the discipline of psychology formerly exerted over the study of the senses and sensation/perception. Western perceptual psychology is predicated on the assumption of the privacy or interiority and

uniqueness of individual sense experience. Alternately, under the guise of neuroscience, it directs attention to the neurological underpinnings of perception. Either way, the guiding idea is that perception goes on “in some secret grotto in the head” (Geertz 1986:113). By contrast, sensory studies *outs* the senses. It avers the indissociability of the social and the sensible (Laplantine 2005). Perception (read: “making sense”) is a *public* activity. Hence, Constance Classen’s (1997:401) affirmation: “sensory perception is a cultural, as well as a physical, act...sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell are not only means of apprehending physical phenomena but also avenues for the transmission of cultural values.” Following Classen, perceiving is best conceptualized as a form of “worlding” (Stewart 2011), and it is always and everywhere conditioned by the prevailing “sensory regime” (Corbin 1990; 2005).

## Participant Sensation

The methodology of choice within anthropology for investigating the sociality of sensation is sensory ethnography (Pink 2009; Rhys-Taylor 2017; Howes 2019; Lynch, Howes, and French 2020), also known as “participant sensation.” François Laplantine (2015:2) aptly captures the gist of this approach in the following quote from *The Life of the Senses: Introduction to a Modal Anthropology*: “The experience of [ethnographic] fieldwork is an experience of sharing in the sensible [*le partage du sensible*]. We observe, we listen, we speak with others, we partake of their cuisine, we try to feel along with them what they experience.” Participant sensation departs from the conventional anthropological method of participant observation by abjuring the status of the observer and concentrating on sensing and making sense together with others—the sharing of the sensible.

In other disciplines, such as history, which must rely on written documents, the trick is to “sense between the lines” of written sources to reconstruct the period sensorium (Classen 2001; 2012). The Medieval historian Richard Newhauser (2014) coined the term “sensology” to refer to this approach.

Another possible name for the sense-based mode of inquiry that concerns us here is “quali(a)tative research.” This term, quali(a)tative, sounds rather awkward, on purpose. Like the term “differance” (a play on difference and deferment) introduced by Jacques Derrida (1982), it forces one to pause or do a double take and wonder: What is the (a) doing there? For all its awkwardness, this term is to be preferred to the more conventional term, qualitative research, on account of the way it underscores the fact that we are dealing here with *qualia*.

The concept of qualia stems from the distinction between the “qualities” of the material world and the “properties” of the material world. *Qualia* refers to those aspects of materials that are dependent on the human perceptual apparatus, such as color (humans perceive only a fraction of the electromagnetic spectrum; infrared and x-rays are off the human scale) or sound (the range of human hearing is from 20-20,000 Hz, which excludes so-called infrasounds). *Property* refers to the intrinsic aspects of materials, such as figure, number, mass, motion, et cetera. In other words, qualia are modality-specific whereas the properties of matter are amodal.

This distinction has a history. And, it is important to be mindful of this history since it goes to the root of the qualitative/quantitative dichotomy in the natural sciences no less than in the social sciences.

## The Great Ontological Transformation in the Western Episteme

According to the Aristotelian worldview (i.e., classical science), the universe was composed of four Elements: Earth, Air, Fire, and Water. Each Element was distinguished by a different combination of qualities (or humors): the wet and the dry, the hot and the cold. Thus, Earth was classified as cold and dry, Water as cold and wet, Fire as hot and dry, and Air as cold and dry. Furthermore, the senses were understood to be distinguishable by reference to the Elements. According to Aristotle, Water was the element of sight (because the eye contains water), Air—the element of hearing, Fire—the element of smell, and Earth—the element both of touch and taste, due to the latter being classified as “a mode of touch.” This cosmic understanding contrasts with the modern understanding of the senses as localized in their corresponding bodily organ (eye, ear, nose, etc.).

Each sense was further supposed to have its “proper sensible” (e.g., color in the case of vision, sound in the case of hearing, etc.), and those qualities of the material world that were perceivable by more than one sense (e.g., form or number, which can be perceived by vision and by touch) were referred to as the “common sensibles.”

In the seventeenth century, a switch occurred: the proper sensibles (i.e., qualia) were recast as “secondary qualities,” and the common sensibles came to be conceptualized as “primary qualities” (i.e., the elementary constituents or properties of matter). This switch was already envisioned by Galileo (Piccolino and Wade 2008), but it comes down to us mainly through Locke, whose reflections on this score were inspired

by the new “corpuscular philosophy” championed by the chemist Robert Boyle. The switch was subsequently ontologized (circa 1869) by the Russian chemist Dmitri Mendeleev. He dissolved the four Elements of classical physics into the 63 (now 118) elements of his Periodic Table of Elements, wherein the elements are distinguished based on their atomic number and recurring chemical properties alone. Mendeleev’s discovery effectively pulled the rug out from under the fundamentally qualitative, profoundly sensuous cosmologies of premodernity and substituted the predominantly quantitative, abstract, and infrasensible understanding of the “really real” that comes out of modern physics.

The new suprasensible understanding of the elementary structure of the universe was not well received by the poets or others of a (lingering) premodern sensibility. As Constance Classen (1998:5) observes in *The Color of Angels: Cosmology, Gender and the Aesthetic Imagination*, the “new science” propounded by Locke and Boyle (which was anticipated by Galileo and substantiated by Mendeleev) transformed the cosmos from “a vibrant universe of sense,” a wondrous tapestry of sensations as during the Medieval period, “into what Alfred North Whitehead has called ‘a dull affair, soundless, scentless, colorless [in its elementary constituents]; merely the hurrying of material, endlessly, meaninglessly.’” During the late nineteenth century, various artistic movements, such as Symbolism and the Arts and Crafts movement, arose to challenge the scientific worldview and reached back to the Middle Ages for their inspiration. But, they were denounced as decadent and outmoded (see: Classen 1998:119-121). The die was cast. Henceforth, the phenomenal world was but an epiphenomenon of activity at the atomic level.

## Sensory Science

Beginning in the 1930s, however, an attempt was made to scientize the senses and render them useful for commercial purposes—most notably, product development in the food industry. The science of sensory evaluation (also known as sensory analysis, sensory science) was born. The practitioners of this science call themselves “sensory professionals.” Their science involves assessing the sensory qualities of products in development using discriminative tests, descriptive tests, and hedonic tests, all of which are rooted in the protocols of psychophysics.

Ensclosed in cubicles within the sensorially neutral confines of the Sensory Evaluation Research Laboratory (neutral in the sense of being uniformly lit, colorless, and muffled), the sensory professional analyzes the qualities of products one sense-at-a-time and one-sensation-at-a-time with the aid of blindfolds, ear defenders, nose clips, et cetera. The results of their analyses are then tabulated and subjected to statistical analysis to arrive at the ideal (which is to say, normative) “sensory profile” for a product before it is visited on the public.

This research is not qualitative; it is quantitative through and through. Any trace of subjectivity is eliminated, along with any element of sociality, in the interests of controlling the “variables” in play. For example, panelists seated at desks within their respective cubicles are instructed not to utter a peep since an inadvertent “ooh” or “aw” might influence other panelists’ perceptions. Above all, panelists are instructed to “be spontaneous” in their judgments since if they were to reflect on their perceptions or converse with each other, their assessments would no longer be strictly psychophysical, they would be personally and socially *meaningful*. [Semantic tests

are notably absent from the battery of tests deployed in the Sensory Evaluation Laboratory: in other words, the sense of the senses is screened out.]<sup>4</sup>

Steven Shapin (2012) characterizes sensory evaluation as one of the “sciences of subjectivity” that forms part of the “aesthetic-industrial complex.” In scientizing, the senses sensory evaluation protocols also objectify them, as is apparent from the following quote from *Sensory Evaluation Techniques* (2010), one of the standard textbooks in the field. The authors affirm that the key to sensory analysis is:

to treat the panelists as measuring instruments. As such, they are highly variable and very prone to bias, but they are the only instruments that will measure what we want to measure so we must minimize the variability and control the bias by making full use of the best existing techniques in psychology and psychophysics. [Meilgaard, Carr, and Civille 2010:1]

Elsewhere (Howes 2015), I have challenged the methodology of sensory science, questioning whether the firewalls between the senses it institutes really work and problematizing whether the asocial environment it creates for purposes of analyzing and perfecting the “sensory profile” of food and other products has any bearing on the enjoyment of the senses in everyday life. Who wants to dine in a sensorially sterile cubicle?

The disciplining of the senses within the confines of the Sensory Evaluation Research Laboratory is worlds apart from the liberation of the senses that doing sensory history or doing sensory ethnography enjoin. We need to explore what these methods

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<sup>4</sup> For a further social scientific examination of the laboratory methods of sensory science, see: Teil (2019) and Lahne and Spackman (2018).



bring to the analysis of the social life of the senses. But, first, let us take one last detour, this time through the field of cognitive science.

## Sensuous Cognition

Danièle Dubois is a prominent scholar in the field of cognitive psychology in France, with the added distinction of being one of that field's most ardent critics. She directs the Paris-based Languages, Cognitions, Practices, and Ergonomics research team of the Centre National de Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) and is the lead author of the book *Sensory Experiences* (2021).

In her introduction, Dubois notes how, in the history of psychology, the behaviorist revolution upset psychophysics; then, the cognitive revolution toppled behaviorism. Now, she suggests, within cognitive psychology, there is another revolution afoot: the sensory revolution. By leading with the senses instead of, for example, "the categories of the understanding" (as defined by Kant), Dubois and her colleagues invite us to put our skin (and other senses) in the game. Thus, Dubois and company do not defer to "the brain" as "revealed" through an MRI scan or Kant's *a priori* categories, much less Descartes' *esprit*. Indeed, Descartes famously "called away" his senses to arrive at the truth of his existence and cogitations (Synnott 1991), whereas Dubois and company *embrace* the senses.

Dubois beseeches her fellow psychologists to recognize that there is more, much more to "sensory processing" than signal recognition or "information-processing." This word "information" abstracts and also flattens the senses: "information as abstract conceptualization of a stimulation" (with the idea of stimulation being left to the natural sciences to

define) is fundamentally amodal and, therefore, at odds with the multimodality of sense *experience* as we humans know it, Dubois and colleagues (2021:34-37) argue.

According to Dubois, sensory processing involves "sensing" first and foremost. The term "sense" is rich in meaning. It includes in its spectrum of referents both sensation or stimulation *and* signification, both feeling *and* meaning (as in the "sense" of a word). The implication is that human beings sense and make sense of the world, and this process goes on at the level of the senses themselves, whatever their localization in the brain might be. The French term *sens* covers the same semantic field as the English word "sense" and also encompasses "direction" (as in *sens unique*). The senses may, thus, be understood as giving our thinking (read: meaning-making) direction.

Dubois and colleagues are highly critical of cognitivism and advocate a kind of *sensitivism* in its place. This brings the senses back into our understanding of cognitive processes (by treating them as agents rather than passive receptors) and thereby challenges Cartesianism, the "neuromania" of cognitive neuroscience (Tallis 2011), and also the computationalism that has come over cognitive psychology in the wake of the *révolution numérique* (in French, digital revolution in English)—the idea of the mind as programmed like a computer (see: Nudds 2014).

I admire the way Dubois and colleagues ardently refuse to reduce the deliverances of the senses to the idea of "information" or conceive of cognitive processes on the model of "computation," or assimilate our understanding of how the senses function to sensor technology (the mechanization of the senses, which harks back to Descartes). I particularly

admire the way their approach abjures quantifying qualia (as in the psychophysical paradigm) and concentrates instead on the *qualification of qualia*—that is, on investigating how qualia are categorized, evaluated, lived, and communicated through “discourses.” This focus on the categorization of sensations shifts the onus from the private and subjective to the public, for categories are *collective* representations. This move has the effect of bringing not only the senses but also the social back into our understanding of the understanding. There is a strong synergy between Dubois’ sensory cognitive psychology and sensory anthropology, as the following sections will show.

## Techniques of the Senses

The anthropology of the senses could be seen as an outgrowth of the anthropology of the body. It has a long, if interrupted, history. It can be traced back to a seminal essay by Marcel Mauss entitled “Body Techniques” (1979).

By “techniques,” he explained, “I mean the ways in which from society to society [people] know how to use their bodies.” The body is our “first and most natural instrument.” Mauss went on to list a series of examples of different cultural styles of walking, running, swimming, dancing, jumping, throwing, digging, and even sleeping (e.g., dozing while riding a horse like a Hun or the use of wooden headrests in Africa), and concluded that “there is perhaps no ‘natural way’ for the adult” to perform any of these actions (Mauss 1979:97).

Mauss might have gone on to adduce evidence of cultural differences in the ways of seeing, hearing, touching, et cetera, but he stopped short. The anthropological record was not yet robust enough to war-

rant such a thesis, it seems. The German sociologist Georg Simmel was alert to this, though. In “Sociology of the Senses” (1997:110), he surmised: “That we get involved in interactions at all depends on the fact that we have a sensory effect upon one another” (i.e., social intercourse is always mediated by sensory intercourse). By way of illustration, Simmel pointed to how his contemporaries adopted what he called “the blasé attitude” to cope with the barrage of sensations typical of life in the modern metropolis (i.e., filtering sense impressions by creating “intellectual” distance), how the smell was invoked to police social boundaries, and the different social and cognitive styles of blind people and deaf people.<sup>5</sup>

The insights of Mauss and Simmel into the techniques of the body and senses lay fallow for much of the twentieth century, at least in English-speaking academia. It had to await the sensory turn of the early 1990s for their insights to be retrieved and worked into a general sociological theory of the ways of sensing (Howes 1990; Classen 1997; 2001; Vannini, Waskul, and Gottschalk 2012). There was some stirring before that, however. For example, Mary Douglas reprised Mauss’ essay in the 1960s, although, in her work, the emphasis is more on the body as a model for society than as an instrument. Familiar examples include the way a king or other leader may be referred to as the “head” of society while workers are referred to as “hands,” and so forth.

In *Purity and Danger*, Douglas devoted considerable space to the analysis of body rituals. For example, she

<sup>5</sup> Marx believed that the senses could not come into their own until capitalist private property relations were upended and extirpated, but we cannot wait for that moment to arrive. For us, “the time of the senses” (Bendix 2005) is now. See further *Beyond Revolution: Reshaping Nationhood through Senses and Affects* (Lamrani 2021) and the chapter on “The Deep Experience of the Senses” in *The End of the Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South* (Santos 2018).

proposed that body rituals “enact the form of social relations and in giving these relations visible expression they enable people to know their own society” (Douglas 1966:128). If, for instance, a given ritual expresses anxiety about the apertures of the body, this should be interpreted as testifying to society’s concerns over the maintenance of its internal and external boundaries.

In the early 1980s, Douglas’ approach to the body in society was criticized by Michael Jackson (1983a:143) for how it treated the body as “simply the passive ground on which forms of social organization are inscribed.” In other words, the body becomes an “it” in Douglas’ schema, a “medium of communication” at the disposal of a “reified social rationality” (Jackson 1983b:329). This stance, Jackson argues, contradicts our prior experience of the body “as a lived reality,” or what Lawrence Kirmayer (1992) has called “the body’s insistence on meaning.”

Building on Jackson’s work and the phenomenological philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Thomas Csordas (1990) introduced the concept of “embodiment” (in contradistinction to “the body”) as a “paradigm for anthropology.” In doing so, he turned Douglas’ approach on its head. The body is “the existential ground of culture,” Csordas argues, and our experience of the world is mediated by diverse “somatic modes of attention.” The latter are defined as “culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one’s body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others” (Csordas 1993:138-139).

### Somatic Modes of Attention

This notion of “somatic modes of attention” was deployed and developed in exemplary fashion by Kathryn Linn Geurts in her masterful analysis of

the sensorium of the Ewe-speaking Anlo people of southeastern Ghana in *Culture and the Senses: Bodily Ways of Knowing in an African Community* (2003). Geurts goes to great lengths enucleating the Anlo-Ewe understanding of sensory processing that is given in the verb *seselelame*, which means “feeling in the body, flesh, or skin,” or to put a finer point on it, “hear-feel hear-feel at the flesh inside.” The term bridges the distinction between perception as cognitive and sensation as somatic, which has bedeviled Western perceptual psychology and also encompasses emotion. Here is how one of her interlocutors explained it (in English): “You can feel happiness in your body, you can feel sorrow in your body, and you can feel other things, like cold. *Seselelame* describes all these things because it is ‘hearing or feeling in the body’” (Geurts 2003:40-43). In a later part of the same interview, Geurts’ informant referred to the experience of going to the theater: “You go and watch it, and you feel something inside. You hear music, see the actors act very well, and you feel something inside. You applaud, get up and dance or shout something. That is a feeling and it comes through *seselelame*” (Geurts 2003:185). Significantly, *seselelame* also connotes intuition, feeling ill, or feeling inspired, and disposition or vocation. This term is as polysemous as it is polysensory. It embodies a whole “theory of sensory integration” (Geurts 2003:194) and an equally comprehensive theory of “how we know what we know” (Geurts 2003:179), which is at the same time a theory of the sociality of sensation.

Geurts’ *Culture and the Senses* is noteworthy for the range of cultural domains it examines to arrive at an understanding of the Anlo sensorium, from the language of the senses to childrearing practices, from clothing to religious rituals, and from the body in sickness and in health to origin myths. Hers is a to-

tal sensory ethnography (see: Howes and Classen 1991).

Geurts found that Anlo attach a premium to the sense of balance. For example, the fetus is pictured as already practicing the art of balance on its “seat” (the placenta) in the womb. Children’s limbs are massaged from birth to inculcate flexibility, both in the body and mind. The Anlo have a proverb: “When in the village of the toads, squat as they do.” This adaptability has been the secret of their success. Even though they are a minority and have suffered much persecution, many Anlo have risen to occupy positions of importance in Ghanaian society.

In a chapter entitled “Toward an Understanding of Anlo Forms of Being-in-the-World,” Geurts relates an incident that nicely exemplifies what Laplan- tine means when he defines sensory ethnographic research as involving “the sharing of the sensible.” It was a moment of profound revelation for Geurts when all of the threads of her research into the Anlo sensibility came together, and she experienced what it means to be Anlo in a deeply visceral way.

The moment came when she was listening to a storyteller recount the migration myth of the Anlo. The Anlo once lived in the neighboring nation of Togo. A tyrant there made their lives unbearable, so they resolved to escape, led by the ancestor Tɔgbui Whenya. After a long and arduous trek, they arrived at the place they now call home, Anloga (or “Big Anlo”). It was there that Tɔgbui Whenya collapsed, saying, “I am rolled or coiled up from exhaustion and cannot travel further.” At the utterance of these words, Geurts found her body curling inward, along with the bodies of all the other members of the audience. Upon reflection, she realized that this kinesic behavior, this curling inward, is echoed in the very name

Anlo (pronounced *AHNG-low*), which “requires a formation in the mouth and a sonic production that triggers a rolled-up or curled-up sensation that resonates through the body” (Geurts 2003:117). This effect in the mouth and on the body is best understood, Geurts argues, in terms of iconicity (a concept she borrows from Feld [1996], which refers to the resonance of perceptual schemas across modalities).

Some years later, Geurts spoke about the incident by phone with an Anlo friend living in Houston, Texas. “You know how the term Anlo literally means to roll up or curl up in the fetal position?” she asked. “Yesss?” her friend answered. “What does it mean to you to be part of a people whose name means ‘rolled up?’”

In her lengthy response was the phrase “resentment and respect.” She said that curling up in the fetal position is something you do when you feel sad, when you are crying, when you are lonely or depressed. She said that being Anlo meant that you felt that way a lot, but you always had to unroll, or come out of it, eventually, and that gave you a feeling of strength. I told her that I had used the phrase “persecution and power” [together with “resentment and respect”] in one discussion I had delivered about the name Anlo...and I asked if that fit what she meant. She confirmed that it did. [Geurts 2003:118]

Thus, probing the Anlo sensibility enabled Geurts to arrive at an understanding of Anlo affectivity, as articulated around the sentiments of resentment (or feeling persecuted) and respect. This affective disposition and form of being-in-the world is given in their collective appellation (*AHNG-low*), in the toponym for their homeland (Anloga) and in the migration story that relates “their ancestors’ escape from slavery and migration to the coast, and then their as-

cendance to a position of influence (and resentment) in contemporary Ghana” (Geurts 2003:118). What is particularly noteworthy about Geurts’ analysis is that it delves beyond the concept of embodiment (or unity of mind and body) to arrive at an understanding of *emplacement*, or “the unity of mind-body-habitus” in Michael Jackson’s terminology (see further Howes 2005:7 and Pink 2009:25). This agrees with one of the elementary tenets of sensory studies: “the senses mediate the relationship between mind and body, idea and object, self and society,” and individual and environment (Bull et al 2006:5).

Much has transpired in sensory studies scholarship since the term “sensory studies” was coined in 2006. Let me describe two case studies, or *études sensorielles* (it sounds better in French) for the reader’s delectation.

### The More-Than-Human Sensorium

Mark Doerksen is a recent graduate of the Ph.D. program in Social and Cultural Analysis at Concordia University, Montreal. He defended his thesis, entitled “How to Make Sense: Sensory Modification in Grinder Subculture,” in 2018. In his thesis, Doerksen reports on his field research in Canada and the United States in a subculture of the body modification movement known as “grinders.” Grinders are not satisfied with the normal allotment of senses. They implant magnets in their fingers to be able to sense electromagnetic fields. Doerksen followed suit so that he could sense along with them what they experience.

There is no dedicated vocabulary for electromagnetic sensation; nor are there any medically-approved procedures for fashioning an “nth sense,” as Doerksen (2017) calls it. Grinders must, therefore, improvise, or “hack,” as they say. They practice DIY surgery, which exposes them to many risks because no medical professional would aid them in their quest (and would lose their license if they did).

The grinders’ reports of their experience of an otherwise insensible dimension of the material environment (e.g., microwaves, electronic security perimeters) represent an intriguing opening beyond the bounds of sense, as most humans know it. Here is how one grinder described his experience with a trash compactor:

My favorite thing I’ve ever felt was actually during when I had my first implant. So it was still super fresh, not really sensitive, but at my old job we had this trash compactor in the back of the store, and every time I would take out the trash...just walking into the vicinity [he would get] this buzz...

I like to say it feels like you’re walking toward this super powerful object, but, I mean, really you are. That is what you’re feeling because there is so much electricity going through that [appliance]...as if it were some mystical artifact or something that was the energies emanating from it. I haven’t yet, but I still want to go back now that I have a fully healed one on my finger just to feel what it feels like at peak sensitivity. [Doerksen 2018:136]

Grinders could be likened to the X-men of Marvel Comic fame, only instead of their supersensory powers being the result of some genetic mutation, they develop their sensory prostheses, such as the magnetic implants, and also ingest chemicals and follow strict dietary regimes in their explorations of the far borderlands of sense perception. Doerksen found that grinders tend to have a superiority complex and are also deeply distrustful of many

social institutions, especially those of the academic-industrial complex, yet even though he could have been seen as a representative of the latter complex, these sensory anarchists accepted him into their ranks and shared their (extrasensory) wisdom with him.

## Archaeology of Perception

Michel Foucault coined the concept of “the archaeology of knowledge.” It highlights the ruptures or discontinuities in “the advancement of science.” In *The Birth of the Clinic* (1973), for example, he put forward “an archaeology of medical perception.” There he documents how the doctrine of signatures was displaced by the “speaking eye” of “the physician’s gaze” that took its definition from the invention of the anatomico-clinical method of “opening up corpses” and performing autopsies à la Bichat.

Had Foucault not been so preoccupied with the relations between signifiers and signifieds he could have provided a much richer, multisensory account of the practice of medicine before the great rupture (as discussed in the above section on the Great Ontological Transformation in the Western Episteme). For example, in *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century: The Religion of Rabelais* (1982), Lucien Febvre had earlier pointed out that:

It is interesting to see that Paracelsus, in insisting that medicine be preeminently a matter of physical observation, had recourse to a whole set of acoustical and olfactory images that are somewhat surprising to us. He wanted it to be “no less resounding to our ears than the cascade of the Rhine or the roar of waves on the Ocean.” He wanted the nostrils to be used, too, to “distinguish the smell of the object under study.” [Febvre 1982:43]

Modes of treatment were no less saturated with sensation than the techniques of diagnosis. Determining the etiology of a disease and its treatment relied on touch and hearing, smell, and even taste (Howes and Classen 2014 [chapter 2]). What caused Foucault to miss all this and focus exclusively on the physician’s gaze supplanting the doctrine of signatures?

There is a genealogical explanation. Foucauldian poststructuralism descended from Lévi-Straussian structuralism. As is well known, the latter approach was inspired by Ferdinand de Saussure’s Structural Linguistics and, in turn, inspired numerous studies, which treated everything from fashion (Barthes) to the unconscious (Lacan) as “structured like a language.” While disrupting many of the certainties of Lévi-Straussian structuralism, Foucauldian poststructuralism, nevertheless, remained rooted in a linguistic-derived model, whence his description of diverse epistemes as “discursive formations,” and the proposition that *il n’y a pas de hors-texte*. But, the senses are “beyond text” (see: Cox, Irving, and Wright 2016), and to write a veritable “archaeology of perception” must surely involve attending to them.

## Sensory (Re)Construction

Sheryl Boyle is a recent graduate of the research-creation stream of the Interdisciplinary Humanities Ph.D. program at Concordia. She was also an associate professor of architecture in the Azrieli School of Architecture and Urbanism at Carleton University, Ottawa, and served as the Director of the program throughout her studies.

Boyle’s Ph.D. thesis (2020) proposes what she calls “sensory (re)construction as a way of knowing.” Its focus is on Thornbury Castle, built by Edward Staf-

ford, the Third Duke of Buckingham (1478-1521) between 1508 and 1521. The Duke's household was one of the largest and wealthiest households in England at the time, and he brought together scores of live-in artisans (masons, carpenters, cooks, gardeners, etc.) over the thirteen years.

Approaching the building as an "epistemic site" (after Rheinberger 1997), Boyle's thesis is laid out in three layers. The first layer has to do with the setting, which she (re)constructs using "works of the pen" (historical texts, chronicles, letters, and diagrams). It is not just the physical setting that concerns her, though, but the cosmology of sixteenth-century England, when all sorts of humoral and alchemical notions were in the air, and the air itself was of material interest. For example, Thornbury Castle was oriented to the winds so that its walls and apertures could channel the healthy air from the Northeast and dispel bad air. This was an important consideration at the time due to the prevalence of "Sweating Sickness," which was understood to be brought on by stagnant air.

**Figure 1. Courtyard of Thornbury castle oriented to capture the healthy north-east winds**



Drawing credit: Sheryl Boyle.

The second layer has to do with the objects, methods, materials, and tools, such as mortar and pestle, that were used by the artisans. But, Boyle's research is not confined to reading about these items and building up a mental picture: she learned how to fashion and became quite adept at (re)making them. For example, she (re)constructed the recipe for building mortar. The term recipe is significant here, for it turns out that the process of building was conceptualized at the time as analogous to cooking. Boyle devotes a fascinating chapter to the resemblances between the ingredients and processes of making building mortar and preparing *blancmange* ("white-eat") with mortar and pestle: quick lime corresponds to capon breast, water or casein corresponds to almond milk, a loaf of tuff corresponds to a loaf of bread (used as a setting agent), sand corresponds to sugar, and a fragrant spirit (namely, rosewater) was used in both concoctions. Mortar filled in between bricks, while *blancmange* was an *entremets* served between the dishes at a banquet (to "open" and "close" the stomach). This was all very sensual and very alchemical (e.g., the emphasis on the qualia of whiteness).

**Figure 2. Roses and bee boles punctuating the walls of the privy garden at Thornbury castle**



Images credit: Sheryl Boyle.

The third layer has to do with practices. One of the parts of this layer involved Boyle (re)making four elements of Thornbury Castle in her studio: a wall, a window, a chimney, and a trestle table. [The latter was a work table and a dining table at once, and it was intended to serve as the centerpiece at the oral defense of her thesis.] Each such (re)construction project involved combining different artisanal skills and creating a different, multi-sensory “epistemic object.” For example, her (re)construction of an oriel window involved drawing on the skills of a confectioner, gardener, and plasterer. True to the original meaning of the word window (namely, “wind eye”), Boyle constructed a panel (in place of a pane) and impregnated each of its 24 squares with the scent and flavor of flowers and honey (reflecting the fact that the façade of Thornbury Castle was dotted with boles containing beehives, and climbing plants that wafted their fragrance through the “wind eyes”). The squares of the panel were also tintured like stained glass. Boyle’s “windows” are not for looking, they are for smelling and imaginatively tasting: that is, they are designed to bring the environment in rather than seal it out behind glass.

**Figure 3. Verso (underside) of the drawing/table for interdisciplinary tools used by the artisan to manipulate luminosity, color, fragrance, and sweetness—four alchemical qualities**



Note: Small working areas are left in each quadrant, creating a social space for discussion and exchange, before folding along the quadrants and transporting them to the next site.

Artwork credit: Sheryl Boyle.

To fully appreciate what Boyle accomplished in her work as a scholar *and* maker, a word is in order about the requirements of the research-creation stream of the Interdisciplinary Humanities Ph.D. program. According to the tenets of this program, it does not suffice for a student to write a thesis. The student must also stage an exhibition, be it a performance or (as here) an installation artwork. Furthermore, the creative component cannot be a mere illustration of the thesis, nor the thesis a mere exegesis of the artwork. The two components have to speak to each other so that the resulting contribution to the advancement of knowledge is both material and intellectual, sensible and intelligible—or, in short, a multimodal exchange.

Boyle’s 312-page thesis and the four (re)construction projects that accompany it constitute a brilliant, highly redolent, textural, and flavorful enactment of sense-based research in architectural history. Throughout, the accent is on buildings conceived of as processes or “events” rather than such surface features as their form or style (see further Bille and Sørensen 2017). It is an exercise in the “archaeology of perception” that brings the sense(s) of the past to life (see further Karmon 2021).

### Multimodal Anthropologies

Sheryl Boyle’s sensory archaeology of Thornbury Castle in “Fragrant Walls and the Table of Delight: Sensory (Re)Construction as a Way of Knowing, the Case of Thornbury Castle 1508-21” (2020) represents an extension back through time of the methodology of participant sensation—that is, of sensing and making sense together with others. It also resonates with the increasingly widespread interest in “multimodal anthropologies” (Collins, Durnington, and Gill 2017) within anthropology. The latter term evokes



how anthropologists have taken to experimenting with a wide array of sensory techniques to generate data and diverse media to communicate their findings. This new focus on sensing culture contrasts with the fixation on “writing culture” (Clifford and Marcus 1986) that came to a head in the 1980s when experimenting with one’s writing style was all the rage (for a critique, see: Howes 2003 [chapter 1]).

*A Different Kind of Ethnography: Imaginative Practices and Creative Methodologies* (DKE) is exemplary of the new stress on multimodality. In their introduction to DKE, the editors Denielle Elliott and Dara Culhane (2017:3) advise the reader that: “In each chapter of this book, you will find participatory exercises that invite you to write in multiple genres, to pay attention to embodied multisensory experience, to create images with pencil and paper and with camera, to make music, to engage in storytelling and performance as you conceptualize, design, conduct, and communicate ethnographic research.” The six chapters that follow each focus on a different means of investigation, or mode of perception-action-expression and communication: “imagining,” “writing,” “sensing,” “recording and editing,” “walking,” and “performing.” It bears noting that even the chapter on writing goes well beyond the old and rather prosaic notion of writing as “thick description” (Geertz 1973): this chapter includes a discussion of drawing and poetry as research methods, and when it does turn to discuss writing, the examples cited, such as Kathleen Stewart’s *Ordinary Affects* (2007), are far from dry. Stewart approaches writing as a form of “worlding,” which captures “emergent perceptions” (see further Stewart 2011). With the publication of DKE, the sensorial revolution in anthropology came of age. It set a new bar with respect to the conduct of quali(a)tative research—research that takes the senses as both subject of study and means of inquiry/expression.

## Conclusion

This paper has traced the genealogy of the sensory turn in the humanities (history) and social sciences (anthropology). In addition to giving birth to the two subfields (history of the senses, anthropology of the senses), this turn introduced a range of new ways of going about research (sensing between the lines, sensing and making sense together with others). The confluence of these two disciplines, in turn, laid the foundations for the emergence of the interdisciplinary field of sensory studies (as defined by Bull et al. 2006 in the inaugural issue of *The Senses and Society*), and this field has continued to expand and attract researchers from a wide array of disciplines, such as religion (Promey 2014), archaeology (Hamilakis 2014; Skeates and Day 2019), architecture (Karmon 2021), classics (Butler and Purves 2013; Betts 2017), and art history (Jones 2006; Deutsch 2021).

It would be interesting to explore the similarities and differences between the theory and methodologies of sensory studies and other paradigms that foreground the senses (e.g., the “Philosophical Anthropology” of Helmuth Plessner (2019), the “aesthetics of atmospheres” of Gernot Böhme (2017), or “the sociology of the body and modernity” of David Le Breton (1990). But, that investigation will have to await another paper. As for phenomenology (i.e., Merleau-Ponty 1962; Ingold 2000), let us just let sleeping dogs lie. The message I want to leave the reader with for now is that “the time of the senses” (Bendix 2005) is now, particularly as regards the conduct of qualitative research. Through contemplating and putting into action the notion of *quali(a)tative* research, as exemplified by the work of Classen, Stoller, Geurts, Doerksen, and Boyle, qualitative research stands to be transformed into “sensuous scholarship” (Stoller 1997).

At a yet grander, metanarrative and multimodal, level such a turn would lead us to recognize that the “sensorial revolution” within the human sciences beginning in the late twentieth century—with its stress on the quali(a)tative—figures as a *counterrevolution* to the Scientific Revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the cognitive revolution (*révolution numérique* in French) in the psychology of the mid-twentieth century—with their stress on the quantitative and neurological. Sensory studies avers the primacy of the perceptual, the sensible, but not in the way phenomenologists do. Sensory studies scholars are attuned to the multiple ways in which the senses are “relationally produced” and their work brings us closer to the day when the senses may be hailed as “directly in their practice theoreticians” (Marx cited in Dawkins and Loftus 2013:665).

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# Sensual Construction of Body and Biography. Suggestions to Mutually Improve Deficient but Widespread Body Concepts and Biographical Research

**Wolfram Fischer**   
University of Kassel, Germany

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Lived Body; Embodiment; Embedded and Enacted Mind; Integration of Senses; Critique of Cartesian Dualism; Biographical Structuring; Self as Product and Producer of Interaction; Bodily Constitution of Biography; Gestures; Sensual Research Techniques; Video-Based Interaction Analysis

**Abstract:** Against the backdrop of an increasing interest in visual methods in social research, this paper examines some theoretical foundations of human (inter-)action by reflecting on the interplay between senses, the body, and biography. The main purpose of the paper is to combine an integral, non-Cartesian concept of the self as body (respectively the lived body as self) with biographical research—thus enriching research on the body, as well as on biography. Criticizing the Cartesian split of body and mind, classical phenomenological (*Leib*) and recent concepts of the body (“embodiment”) are sketched, resulting in a processual model of the sensual construction of the lived and living body in its environment. Given the interplay of bodily foundations of the self and processes of biographical structuring, so far, distant fields of research are converged. Some suggestions for conceptual improvements, an attentional shift to body aspects, respective research topics, and the extension of methods exceeding the narrative biographical interview in biographical research are indicated.

**Wolfram Fischer** is a Professor Emeritus of sociology at the department of Social Work at the University of Kassel, Germany. His teaching covers a wide array of interpretative research methods based on phenomenological and interactionist assumptions. Theory and empirical tools of biographical research, as well as video analysis of interactions, have been developed. Special interests are chronic illness and health behavior, body and biography, theory-practice relations in helping professions, and the narrative construction and representation of selves in interaction.

**email address:** [wfischer@uni-kassel.de](mailto:wfischer@uni-kassel.de)

## Introduction: Seeing and Feeling Bodies?

You learn the most about life if something you did not expect happens. Talking about human senses, you can ‘look,’ to begin with, at the visual. What happens if you lose your eyesight?

To start with a playful scene, children—and in former times, even adults—used to play blind man’s buff. Blindfolded and with arms wide open, one stumbles around to eventually catch one of the other seeing playmates. Then, you have to guess whom you grabbed to be ‘redeemed’ and take off the eye bandage. Though one important sense of the ‘seeker’ is deliberately switched off, this game is fun for all because one is not helpless but able to move and orient oneself by means of other senses (hearing, touching, smelling, a feeling of your moving body), and, finally, one is able to recognize the caught playmate by hugging each other, which is fun for both sides.

If you prefer more dramatic answers to cope with losing eyesight, you may study the experiences of persons as presented by the neuropsychologist Oliver Sacks (2011 [esp. chapter 7]). For example, a man who was reported to have lost not only the ability to see but whose visual imaginations and recollections became faint and who eventually became completely nonvisual. In compensation, his other senses, particularly hearing, became much more intensive and allowed him to experience the world around him much more subtly and with intense and new characteristics. He felt not impaired but enriched. A new sensual center seemed to have created a new perceptive identity. Another person coped with adult blindness by reinforcing his visual imagination, constructing a virtual visual reality more emphatic than the world he had lost. To sum

up the different cases, Sacks presents a remarkable shift from impaired visibility to refining the other senses, including proprioception and kinesthetics, thus allowing orientation for many human activities and experiences. Recognizing objects, identifying persons, and feeling situations and space can be achieved by the concert of the other senses in action, motion, and interaction, allowing full interaction with others and the world *without* the—usually thought of as crucial—ability to see.

Neurologically speaking, according to Sacks (2011), the brain’s sensual areas are not separated and directly bound to stimuli transferred by specialized receptors, but are connected and interact in many ways. In the event of sensual damage or loss, the interaction of sensual areas is reorganized according to the needs and the active life of the person in their environment. The structural plasticity of the brain makes a possible adjustment to future bodily (and social!) changes—as in the case of blindness—and, in reverse, the active living of the person shapes the brain, including perception, that is, ‘reading,’ making sense of, and turning into action whatever sensual data it gets.

However, this neurological account may be strongly criticized from the viewpoint of other strands of neuroscience and by cognitive psychologists. They may have a different notion of the issue of sensual integration, orientation, and acting in a changing world. Focusing on the brain’s ability *to construct* complex worlds from relatively poor sensual data leads them to neglect what is ‘really out there,’ the person’s conduct, living in their surroundings. What counts are *representations* of the brain, the *world as a model* by the brain: at its best, perceptions are hypotheses about the world (Roth 1997:270). Have neuro-constructivism and representationism

not brought about a lot of puzzling new knowledge compatible with MRT results and fitting to physical conceptions of the body, seeing the body (including its sensual apparatus) as a machine-like object of observation and experiment? Are we all not used to this split between inner (subjective) and outer (objective) entities without realizing that we are true disciples of Descartes? Tacitly, we may build our research questions along this split, taking sides with either the 'inner' or the 'outer' world, and neglecting the respective other, thus jeopardizing the crucial point: how living persons organize themselves (including their body) when interacting with and acting in their environment? To follow my argument, the reader should be sensitive to this.

This, then, is the main thesis that I shall unfold in this paper: the different human senses are integrated by the lived and living body (German *Leib*). Living means an ongoing process of confrontation and interaction of the individual and their surroundings, thus shaping the sensual and kinesthetic functions of the brain, constituting the body as a person being able to move around, wish, act, experience, reflect, interact, and communicate with others. This process constitutes a person with a self. This implies, *in general*, spatial and temporal orientation, being situated on a horizon of past and future, being able to reflect on your affairs and actions, knowing 'who you are,' *in particular*, the development of a specific person, being recognized by others, being able to live in their natural, social, and cultural environment. This *conditio humana* is processed in actual everyday life and *biographical structuring* (biographical work). The paper argues to combine an integral, non-Cartesian concept of the self as body (respective, the body as self) with biographical research, thus enriching research on both body and biographical methods.

To unfold such a complex thesis and corroborate the mutual gain of converging two different research traditions in the few pages of this paper, I shall first discuss some widespread, but shortsighted dualistic concepts of the body and mind, including its sensual functions (Section 1). Instead, and this will be the main focus of the paper, we need a holistic research model that meets the requirements of the living person in their lifeworld, a concept that understands the subject and self in the living body ("embodied") and interacting persons "embedded" in their environment (Section 2). The paper then focuses on biographical work relating to the concept of the lived body (Section 3). To conclude, some consequences and suggestions for research methods will be alluded to (Section 4).

Thus, the main concern of this paper is conceptual. The concepts of the living body and biographical structuring are seen and shown as related to each other and feeding into each other. Only the direction of future research can be indicated in this sense; the demanding task of clarifying sub-concepts and presenting empirical methods and research results cannot be achieved here. This implies research work for many and for a longer time, as well as an intensified interdisciplinary discourse. Nevertheless, hints and starting points for research will be indicated in parts 3 and 4. The theory will not be developed from empirical data; rather, data-gathering will be encouraged in a sensual and living-body-sensitive frame of inquiry. I address a wide audience of students and scholars of sociology, social work, humanities, and body professions, including psycho- and somato-therapists. I know from decades-long teaching in these disciplines how widespread and deeply rooted a trivial, everyday split between body and mind determines observation and research: a bias that



has led to disciplinary profiles and communication problems between disciplines (often at the expense of patients and clients of professional care) that are seldom criticized. In this paper, I shall remind of classical and reinforce recent non-Cartesian embodiment concepts of the living body (*Leib*) and relate this to biographical research. I am not alone in the wide open and do not pretend to preach a new message, thus I assume specialists in the sociology of the body or the recently developed and flourishing sociology of senses may not find too much new in this article except the perspective for biography.

The methodological background of my paper is a phenomenological discourse on the living body *as my zero point*, sparked by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) (Husserl 1952:109f.; 1966:297ff.; 1980; 2004) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1962) (Merleau-Ponty 1966), psychiatrically substantiated by Erwin Straus (1891-1975) (Straus 1956), a rich strand of philosophical anthropology by Helmuth Plessner (1892-1985) (Plessner 1970a; 1970b), recent discourse on embodiment (cf. early overview Wilson 2002), and psychotherapeutic perspectives, for example, by Thomas Fuchs (\*1958) (Fuchs 2017; 2020a). Methodical and research-wise (Section 4), I owe much to socio-linguistic text-analytical tools, concepts, and techniques of symbolic interactionism.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Body and Mind: A Dualistic Model and Some of Its Consequences

Beginning with the body rather than single senses, some common and scientific, but misleading concepts are discussed. They see the human body as an object like other objects in the world. The box-

like bodily object is viewed as a special case, evolutionary and biologically created, inhabited by the individual; you may call it the mind or self. In a simple notion, this box has two translucent windows, limbs to move, touch, and grab, and other sensual devices to investigate the outer world. The basic model is the machine, moving and behaving in some environment (like a self-driving car). Besides energy, it needs some program and sensory equipment to get around without bumping into other objects or bodies. The main senses available are *viewing* to identify objects in near or far space, *hearing* to identify things by sounds, *touching* to identify objects and surfaces, *tasting* to identify categories of edible objects, and *smelling* to decide if objects or atmospheres are friendly or hostile. All these distinct senses are seen as functional to orientation and self-location of the body in a friendly or unfriendly surrounding (including other bodies comparable to my own).

At first sight, this conceptual approach seems plausible, yet it is reductionistic, neglecting important issues of human conduct and resulting in many problems.

There are issues related to (a) the internal organization of the body, (b) the relation to oneself and others, and (c) the relation to the world in general. In all respects, the dualistic inside/outside concept fails to fully relate to the processes of human living: acting, experiencing, understanding oneself, interacting and communicating with others, building symbolic and ritualized systems of meaning (with language and discourse as a top priority), and experiencing and shaping a shared reality and world.

Let us consider some of the major shortfalls in this Cartesian framework.

<sup>1</sup> In this respect, I owe more than I can express to Anselm Strauss, who accepted me as a member of his working group in San Francisco, 1980–1982.

- A. If you consider the body as a box-like object, the main problem arises from asking whom the agent is steering the movements and acts of this object. Metaphorically, who is the captain or helmsman navigating the vessel? As for the internal processing of different senses and external sensual data, what is the *integrating principle* of the different senses giving us a continuous spatial and temporal unity of what we call our world?
- B. A classical answer was given by the philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650); he considered one's *own thinking* as an undoubtable fact, the *cogito*. Consequently, he distinguished between two (and only two) substances (!): thinking and extended things, the *res cogitans* and the *res extensa*. Like other objects, the body belongs to the sphere of *res extensa*, but only because *animated* by the *res cogitans* can it perceive and decipher all kinds of sensual data (e.g., as pain when stepping into an open fire). In Descartes' opinion, the soul is the helmsman of the vessel. The driver of the chassis (interestingly, also "body" in English) is the thinking substance, the ego, and its will; thus, the subject epistemologically outranked the object. A bifurcation of scholarly cultures, namely, those dealing with the inner (e.g., consciousness philosophy, psychology, cognitive sciences, humanities) and the outer world (e.g., natural sciences, modern science-oriented medicine, neurology studying the brain as an object), eventually gained momentum. The benefits of this difference are immense (e.g., optimizing, modifying what is naturally given, creating all kinds of artifacts through sciences, understanding brain processes), but the costs are high (individuals may feel poorly recognized and not respected by institutional development, lifeworld and applied science may turn into opponents, and the concept of consciousness may vanish or become an obscure *ghost in the machine* (Ryle 1949).
- C. Being the subject in charge of my objective body, I can, maybe I have to, reflect on what I am doing. In other words, I start relating to myself. The initial original split between subject and object is repeated in a split between "I" and "me," leaving open how they are connected (cf. the influential solution in Mead 1967). A Pandora's box is opened: an endless debate about the modern subject and identity, its modification, and hybridization continues today (cf. Fischer-Rosenthal 1995; Fischer 2017; Reckwitz 2019; Bamberg, Demuth, and Watzlawik 2021). Furthermore, can it be that my body is just another object in the world? This seems to contradict the evident knowledge that I cannot escape my body. If I touch my body, I do not feel my skin as some other object, but I feel *myself* (as I do by scratching my head when I am baffled). The next problem is closely related. If the subject is in their objective perceivable body, what about other bodies? What about my fellow humans? I obviously treat them as subjects and not objects, but how can that be? *Intersubjectivity*, self-evidently given in everyday conduct, is hard to explain if you start with the cognitive ego in an objective body. Explaining intersubjectivity by the conclusion of analogy does not work if I am myself imprisoned in a body as an object, just as little as empathy, psychological help construct, or "reciprocity of perspectives" (e.g., Schütz 1971:11). Empathy and taking the role of the other or talking of the "alter ego" is begging the question because what should be explained is assumed. Consequently, if we have good reason to believe in intersubjectivity, we have to revise the premises of the inner and outer reality; the Cartesian concepts of self and the body as sub-

jective and objective realms must be overcome to reflect the conduct and interaction of persons encountering each other in a shared space and in a socially readable, that is, more or less congruently definable, situation by both sides.

- D. A final complication is that the subject/object split implies an outer world independent of subjects. This ignores that the 'world' as a natural and cultural surrounding is not only perceived but is populated, shaped, and changed for the better or worse by people, their cultural institutions, and their common imagination. Looking at the world 'as is,' independently from people, falls short of recognizing the involvement and entanglement of persons in the world and their impact on it. This *ecological turn*, not older than some decades, is a major result of observing global natural resources and their endangerment by human action. Climate change, risk society, pandemic developments: their management and prevention reflect the involvement and responsibility of acting and suffering persons. The recent Covid-19 pandemic is an illustration of this in many respects. Simultaneously, the 'world' is shaping the subject. Nature and society have an impact on what we are, want, like, and dislike, our dos and don'ts. In short, the notion of the subject as independent from the world is a fiction obscuring the real development, competencies, and abilities of persons.

All of this amounts to abandoning, or at least avoiding, such sometimes comfortable and ingrained dualistic notions of inner/outer realities. The crucial question is whether we can find some—monistic or dialectical in the Hegelian sense?—post- or pre-Cartesian concepts for persons in their sensual and bodily competencies, in their conduct, interaction

with others, and their responsible and formative relation (in agency and being shaped) to their natural and cultural environment?

Such concepts would have to solve some of the just-mentioned difficulties. They would recognize that the body of an individual is not just there, given by birth and shaped by evolution, simply 'inhabited' by the person using it but recognize that the body is more than a 'box,' that it is growing, developing, and changing during its lifetime: the person and their body grow up with and through each other. Simultaneously, such concepts would do justice to the ecological relationships of persons.

## 2. The Living Body: Moving, Interacting, and Shaping the Self and Its Brain

It may be helpful to take a personal perspective to reach a non-Cartesian concept of human conduct (including sensual functions) in relation to others and their environment. In 'real life,' I *visually* do not experience the color 'red,' but I am pleased by the roses in my garden; I do not have an *olfactory sensation*, but upon stepping closer, I am enchanted by a delicate fragrance. Upon reaching out and touching the stem, I do not have a *tactile sensation*, but I shrug back, feeling a sharp pain in my finger from the prick of the rose; I do not *taste a flavor*, but sucking my finger, I taste blood.

Or, to give other examples, I do not *hear* a melody, but I am awakened by the very same blackbird every morning, telling me that it is time to get up. I do *not only hear* your words, but I *see your face*, telling me that something is wrong or signaling to me that you are joking. I do not have a *tactile experience*, but hugging you, I feel your tension, squeeze your hand, and feel the relief of us both. Washing my face after

a long day, I sometimes throw water on my glasses; I obviously treat them as part of my body. Riding a bicycle, playing the piano, or writing an SMS, I do not think about how I use these objects (unless some problem comes up), but they seem to be part of myself and my bodily competencies.

These randomly chosen examples could be endlessly continued. They all prove the *unity* of me and my sensual body in my world. I am integrated as a person in my body (*embodied*), and I am *embedded* in my environment. We always experience ourselves, others, and a consistent world (unless some problem comes up) through proprioception, our emotions, kinesthetics, and sensual perception. The latter is, of course, not restricted to the proverbial ‘five senses,’ but entero- and exterior-perception are much more complex and constitute our body as a whole in its surroundings. Moving around, acting, and always being in a spatially, temporally, and culturally defined situation are bodily defined in a non-Cartesian sense. I, myself, and my body cannot be separated in any actual undertaking. I cannot leave my body; I am bound to it.

Husserl (1952) named the body the “zero point” of my coordinate system. So, am I my body? In a sense, yes. I feel myself as my body. But—and here the difficulties arise—in a way, I am not. I cannot be reduced to my body, and in many aspects, my body is alien to me, and I am not in charge. I can be surprised or disappointed by my body. In case of disease, I may feel that my body is against me. Many important functions of my body are unknown to me and cannot be influenced by me. Yet, I cannot get rid of my body, “the lived body is a total-organ for itself” (Husserl 1973:507).

This notion of a deep ambivalence has inspired philosophers, psychologists, and psychiatrists since the

first third of the twentieth century, without falling back on a mind/body dualism.<sup>2</sup>

Helmuth Plessner—biologist, philosopher, sociologist, one of the pioneers—even found the *conditio humana* in the double role of the body. He saw the basic human “eccentric positionality” (Plessner 1981) in the double role of the body, the existence of the person “as a body *in* the body” (original German: “*als Leib im Körper*” [Plessner 1982:238]).

The German language distinguishes between the animate or living body, *der Leib* (related to the English *life*) and *der Körper* (from the Latin *corpus*) as the material body. Accordingly, in the German phenomenological tradition, *Leib* is used when the lived and living<sup>3</sup> body, including the first-person perspective (‘I am and I feel *myself* in my sensations’), the conscious, and the self-reflexive body is addressed. Accordingly, *Körper* means body in an objectified and instrumental sense (Plessner 1982:238).

In philosophical anthropology—resonating up till now in body discourses (cf. Fuchs 2013; 2018)—Plessner (1982:238) is attributed the basic dictum: “I *am* my living body (*Leib*), but I *have* it as body (*Körper*).”<sup>4</sup> Plessner (1982) studied many sensual phenomena. Extraordinary is his interpretation of laughing

<sup>2</sup> This early German body/*Leib* discourse became rather differentiated and is philosophically and psychiatrically demanding. The further development of this research in Germany was interrupted due to the forced migration by Nazi Germany of its major scholars in the 1930s. International reception, especially in the English-speaking world, was and is barely existent, partly because of the language barrier, partly due to the dominance of positivistic and more science-oriented research cultures.

<sup>3</sup> To differentiate in English, one has to use clarifying adjectives; instead of the common translation of *Leib* into English as “lived body,” I prefer “living body” or “animate body” to signify the process quality of corporeality.

<sup>4</sup> Original: “Ein Mensch *ist* immer zugleich Leib...und *hat* diesen Leib als diesen Körper.”

and crying as human bodily expressions beyond language or other symbolic utterances, which are usually thought of as human privileges. Laughing and crying are seen as spontaneous *bodily answers* to situations we cannot cope with otherwise (e.g., in verbal expression and communication). The body takes over when we fail to comprehend a situation and thus maintains and exemplifies our unique and ambivalent human position. Similarly, one can interpret the disease as the answer of the body to a situation not to be coped with otherwise (cf. the case of a woman with cancer [Fischer 2013]). Plessner also sees the reason for developing culture and communication in symbolic systems, mainly language, in the basic eccentric position of humans trying to fix themselves in a natural, self-constructed, and self-reflexive surrounding. Though talk in interaction is not possible without the body, verbal communication, literacy, and textuality seem to become independent and form their own sphere of mind independent from the lifeworld. Husserl (1973), who was very sensitive to the lived and living body as the basis of the human condition, criticized in his later works the neglect of *body and lifeworld* as the main problem of the modern age focused on the limited rationality of mathematics and sciences.

At the beginning of this body discourse, other empirical evidence of the deficit of the Cartesian mind/body split appeared in the aftermath of the First World War. Psychiatry had to deal with traumatized patients. For example, former soldiers refused to resume their previous work or occupation, although available; they became stuck in a depressive mood or saw no sense in any kind of work. This so-called pension-neurosis was psychiatrically interpreted as the mental inability to perceive the available world correctly, but following the patients' war experience (Straus 1930). Other war veterans were bodily trau-

matized. They had lost an arm or a leg, but maintained the feeling of a more or less complete body image. They sensed the lost limb as still being there, felt itching, pain, or a distorted shape where there was no body part anymore. This puzzling sensation could not be explained in the dualistic mind-body model with sensory impulse conduction from receptor to brain. Only a unified concept of mind and body where the animate body, the self, still maintained the old pre-lesion situation, could explain the phenomenon. Thus, discussion about the riddle of the *phantom limb* or *phantom pain* supported an integrated model of the mind in the body and the body in the mind (Merleau-Ponty 1962:98; Breyer 2018).

Based on his critique of Cartesian dualism, the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty developed in the late 1930s an integrated concept of humans as a "being in the world." Seeking a third way between what he called intellectualism and physicalism, he further developed Husserl's concept of the lived body (depending on a transcendental ego) as *corps propre* into an empirical interrelationship between the living person and their world. The phenomenology of perception is not a sensually supported activity of the subject (or *cogito*) as opposed to the world (as an extended physical substance), but perception is always bound to the person's situatedness and living in the world. Similar to Plessner, he stressed the ambiguity of a human's position in the world; the tactile sense became a *pars pro toto* for the human condition: touching your hand results in the ambivalent feeling of sensing *yourself* and simultaneously sensing some alien object. Being a subject as an actor *in* the world and an object as the flesh *of* the world produces a continuous tension that cannot be reconciled. There is a constant interchange between living persons and their world, their lifeworld, shaping each other, but not reducible to one another.

Georg Simmel, one of the forefathers of the interactionist tradition in sociology, reflected as early as 1907 on the sensual bases of any interaction. According to him, sensual impressions “lead into the subject and out to the social world”; senses create feelings, emotion, knowledge, and the construction of the social world. For example, looking into each other’s eyes is pure interaction (*Wechselwirkung*); facial expression narrates the person and the human (Simmel 1993:279-282).

Together with pragmatist concepts in the tradition of George Herbert Mead and symbolic interactionism, this notion of the living body in its ambivalence, theoretically and practically related to the partial availability of the world, has become quite influential in recent phenomenological sociology (Schütz and Luckmann 1989), empirical research like ethnomethodological conversation analysis (Goodwin 1995; Have and Psathas 1995), and the new sociology of knowledge (Berger and Luckmann 1966).

Also starting in the 1930s, with more of a focus on human sensual achievements, their special functions, and possible unity, Erwin Straus, psychiatrist and philosopher, studied the “sense of senses” (Straus 1930; 1956; Fuchs 2015). Phenomenologically distinguishing between experience and event, he painstakingly analyzed the special functions of the senses on the premise that one does not experience distinct and contingent qualities of things or events, but a temporally and spatially consistent world. As a psychiatrist having to deal with ‘mental disorders,’ he had to practically assist patients to find their way back to a ‘normal’ world. Trying to find out what was wrong and how this came about, he argued that sensual data did not lead to certain reactions or maladaptation. Rather, the individual would “extract sense” out of the

perceived situation, framed by their active and inquiring relationship to the incident and according to their individual previously experienced stories and preconceptions. Thus, Straus elaborated on the imminent role of the lifeworld (Husserl), shaping the person in their bodily skills, including perception and action, thereby partially constructing or influencing the world in turn.

Whatever the differences in the works of these classical scholars—and others like them who cannot be sketched here—of the unity of senses and the mind, they all concur in rejecting simple stimulus-response models of sensual experience and refuse the Cartesian split between inner and outer realities. Rather, the interrelation of the lived and living body and its lifeworld—its social, cultural, and natural surroundings—is elaborated in theoretical and therapeutic-practical terms. The common denominator is the living body, that is, a body oscillating between the sensual self and the body as part of the lifeworld and nature. The self and its lifeworld are constituted via proprioception, perception, kinesthetics, moving, and interaction. Gestures as pre-symbolic expressions of the body and language are crucial to making sense in interaction, but in principle, they have their limits. Thinking is not an activity of the brain but of the person (Straus 1956:112-294). Being in ‘my’ specific world (biographically, culturally, naturally) is a condition framing, but not completely determining myself. The world as is—is not independent of human action.

With a few exceptions in phenomenological philosophy (Ricoeur 1996; Waldenfels 1999; 2000), sociology (Fischer 1982; 1986; 2003; Fischer-Rosenthal 1993; 1995; 1999a; Alheit et al. 1999), and psychiatry (Blankenburg 1971; 1982; Fuchs 2000a; 2000b), this phenomenologically inspired tradition seemed almost

lost or reserved for special interests in the last third of the twentieth century.

However, over the last three decades, a wide array of developments in the philosophy of the mind, cognitive sciences, neurology, brain research, artificial intelligence, and robotics have brought back the living body and animated corporeality.

Ethnography and anthropology have always had a primary focus on body themes, concepts, and practices in observing and understanding other cultures (e.g., Douglas 1978; Stoller 1989; Howes 2003), which seemed to be of little interest to mainstream sociology. However, interactionist sociology, which focused early on different types of bodywork (e.g., Strauss, 1984), has recently developed, together with interdisciplinary approaches, a creative strand of a “sociology of the senses” (Vannini, Waskul, and Gottschalk 2012).

Furthermore, social change in the use of visual media, as well as the availability of audio-visual recording techniques in social research have opened fields of study previously barred to empirical studies and reserved for the implicit skills of people relating to each other and their world.

Besides the mainstream of the Cartesian paradigm in classical natural sciences and psychology still trying to explore the world and people in the frame of outer and inner realities (constructionist or representational models of the world in the brain), a counter-movement of *embodiment* developed.

Given their different disciplinary origins, the details are complex, even controversial, but it is possible to briefly characterize some of the main issues (Wilson 2002; Robbins and Aydede 2008; Fingerhut,

Hufendiek and Wild 2013:9-102; Madzia and Jung 2016; Durt, Fuchs, and Tewes 2017). The basic attitude seems to be the rejection of neuro-constructivism, as expressed by Fuchs (2020b:13 [trans. WF]): “Only as embodied, living beings are we real for each other. There is no communication or empathy between brains, though neuroscientists like to assert this. We only learn empathy in bodily contact with others, in *inter-corporeity* (Merleau-Ponty).” In the following section, I follow the so-called philosophical 4E approach(es): in contrast to neurological cognitive sciences (operating with constructions and representations of the world in the brain), the mind and intelligence are seen as *embodied, extended, embedded, and enactive*.

### Our Mind Embodied

First, I question the still common (obviously Cartesian) categories of mind, body, and world, along with their divisions and unities. How is the body present in the mind, be it in metaphors, meaning, imagination, or reasoning (Johnson 1987; 2017; Lakoff and Johnson 1999)? Rejecting the idea of the mind as representing the world, John Haugeland (1995) argues that the world is there, and intelligent behavior is developed in senso-motoric and social skills, which are necessary for dealing with the environment to survive or achieve whatever goals may exist. Mind as respective intelligence is not to be located in the brain as part of the body, but exists in the interaction between the lived body and relevant parts of the world intimately related to the body *and* world. Cognition is always situated, as the body is always in a given situation.

A speciously simple and familiar bodily sensation such as pain is not understood if it is reduced to a stimulus-response process. Whatever the cause

of the pain may be, it is sensed as immediately and intimately relating to myself, asking for action, irrespective of the location in my body. If my hand touches something, I not only bodily feel some qualities but I know what kind of object is there and how to act. If I use a stick to explore my way (e.g., the white cane of the blind), I do not feel something in my brain or in my hand holding the stick, but I perceive the surface or some obstacle in front of me, letting me know if I should stop or how to proceed to avoid harm.

Structural properties of our body influence the mind's possibilities. The upright bodily position and a movable head with eyes "in front" produce a visually wide perspective with a flexible horizon and constitutes the (potentially dangerous) knowledge of being seen and techniques of showing, masking, "hiding your face," and positioning yourself to others (Blumenberg 2002; 2014:779). The upright position implies making the hands free and open to focused touch, tactile explorations of others and the environment, goal-oriented manipulations, and the use of tools—all essential skills to get along in the world and create a lifeworld. Accordingly, the structure of the bodily apparatuses of hearing, smelling, and tasting open up specific aspects of the world we live in, constitute and actively construct our lifeworld (perceiving the sounds of nature, spoken language, music, favorable scents, or those to be avoided, food, and drink).

Embodiment is of great importance as implicit or tacit knowledge of bodily skills and competencies. Mostly learned and achieved from childhood onwards, walking, controlling bodily excretions, whistling, singing, biking, swimming, playing a musical instrument, handwriting, sports or physical exercises, and dancing are routinized competen-

cies and skills, which can be trained, but they work best when we do not think about them. Body memory as implicit knowledge also works in the case of trauma or unpleasant experiences (Koch 2011; Koch et al. 2012). The original traumatizing event may not be accessible anymore in recollection, but it may determine avoiding behavior, bodily expressions such as diseases or behavioral ticks, or may break through as uncontrollable aggression towards others or self-harming behavior when triggered. Psychopathological phenomena can be conceived as the dysfunctional embodiment with bodily, psychic, and behavioral characteristics (Fuchs 2000a; 2020b). For example, eating disorders are not about improper eating, but are best understood as the patient trying to control harmful or traumatizing events or persons in their lifeworld via their body. Paradoxically, the stricter the control of the subject, the more the body takes over, even up to a lethal point. Depression expresses a distorted relation of the patient to their world and living body. Addictions to substances or behavior depend on the person's relation to their lifeworld and quasi-automatic bodily reward systems, which can hardly be controlled by the subject.

Last but not least, gestures, all symbolic rituals, and, to a wide extent, natural languages and philosophical reasoning rest in bodily competence and experiences with human surroundings (Lakoff and Johnson 1999; 2004; Johnson 2017).

In sum, *embodiment* (as the most general characteristic of the 4E approach) is an encompassing, non-Cartesian concept signifying the living of the person in their social and natural environment. The lived body "as the nature we are ourselves" (Böhme 2019) refers to the world in a social and ecological sense *and* to myself as a cognitive, intelligent being,



but not completely in charge either of the world or my body.

### **Our Mind Extended**

This discourse strand tackles the problem of whether the mind is localized in the brain or external objects or media. Obviously, the latter is the case. Turning spoken communication into written language, writing, literacy, and materialized textuality is an early example of the extended mind and is crucial for the development of culture beyond orality. Even simple mathematical tasks can be better solved using paper and pencil. Medieval master builders used to draw sketches in the sand, not to mention modern architects using CAD software to plan the shape of the building, but also their actions, temporal coordination, and control of the different trades involved. In the contemporary modern world, we can find endless examples of materialized and shared planning systems in industrial production, public services, and governance. In everyday life, we are used to all kinds of memory aids, ranging from shopping and to-do lists, mailing lists, telephone directories, maps on different scales for hiking or driving, and including our smartphone with the individualized and general provision of information for immediate needs and on demand.

The development of artificial intelligence has produced more puzzling phenomena. How can virtual realities using different technical devices visually presenting spatial and perspective flexible impressions be integrated with a holistic perception and the real actions of persons? And more puzzling, is it possible to recognize visual or other artifacts in proprioception as my own, as parts of myself? The experimental rubber hand illusion (the touch of the visually present rubber hand feels like my hand be-

ing touched [Botvinick and Cohen 1998]), or even out-of-body experiences like feeling myself out of my body can be read as extreme examples of the extended mind.

### **Our Mind Embedded**

This aspect of cognition is related to the extended mind, but refers to more public and general aids for cognitive and actional orientation. A simple example would be traffic and road signs. They help us to routinely act in situations where individual negotiations would fail. But also, institutions (family, religion, organizations), cultural norms, and conventions for types of situations, which have to be learned growing up in a specific lifeworld, are part of our cognition and acting. The organization of shared work processes helps to produce ideas and products, but also may prevent imagination and the development of new products. Religious or cultural rituals provide orientation in certain situations, but can turn into fundamentalistic modes of paternalism and even terror.

Discussing the embeddedness of the mind reveals an ecological dimension of humans, which depends on their highly regulated environment, and by the same token, this environment is shaped by human cognitive abilities and (social) actions.

### **Our Mind Enacted**

This strand of philosophy of cognition explores the intimate relationship between the mind and acting, especially in shaping social relations and the material world. Starting in the early 1990s, cognition biologists like Varela (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1991) redefined living processes by taking into account the interaction of the organism with and in its environ-

ment. Cognition is seen as dependent on the structural coupling of world and organism, *and* cognitions are dependent on the activities of the organism towards the world. Lived body (experience) and the actual living body (organism) are interrelated, though in tension (as the older philosophical anthropology already stated, see above). Cognition and perception are embodied actions: they shape and even create neurological possibilities of perception and regulate actions according to environmental requirements.

In this view, senso-motoric skills are the source of higher cognitive, perceptive, and actional competencies. Alva Noë conceptualizes seeing and other perceptions as senso-motoric explorations of the world (O'Regan and Noë 2001; Noë 2002; 2012). While moving the body and eyes, visual contingencies and irregularities are shaped in interaction with the world until they make sense. Visual, vestibular, tactile, and proprioceptive information is used to adjust viewing as a sense-making process. For example, the visual perception of the world, distinguishing above and below, is a cognitive achievement given the upside-down image on the retina. The proof is the experiment using reverse glasses: after a while, perception is corrected according to the natural posture of the upright body with its usual field of vision. Thus, perception is developed as a skill to interact with the environment. This skill is not explicitly known by the individual, but is an achievement available and used in practical action. The concepts of the lived (experience, biography) and the living (organism) body are brought together in interaction processes. The physical presence (corporeal proximity) of being in a situation and co-presence with other persons (intercorporeal presence and resonance) is studied under the premise that nothing is just there or simply given, but has to be achieved by active sensual explorations and interactions. The

resonance of present bodies in a (typical) situation is a skill and capacity achieved in numerous interactions. By this argument, the problem of intersubjectivity is solved in practical action (cf. to resonance in psychotherapy [Broschmann and Fuchs 2019]). Empirical studies in developmental psychology support this thesis of gradually achieving interactive skills of resonance (Group B. C. P. S. 2013).

In comparing the older classical discourse on the living body, one is surprised that these seemingly almost lost conceptions are resurrected in the actual embodiment discourse in the basic aspects of the integrity of the person in its relation to their body, to other persons, and their lifeworld. The older *Leib* discourse and the embodiment discourse seem to move in the same direction. The older tradition can still deliver basic insights and concepts; to me, the more recent discussion presents mainly interesting empirical details and a strong interdisciplinary approach. The recent development of sensual sociology studies (including cultural anthropology) follows in its interactionist heritage non-Cartesian concepts of the body. Besides dealing with a wide area of sensual experience, these studies encourage unorthodox ethnographic approaches by taking into account the sensual impressions of both, the researcher and their interactants.

Before turning to the next section of this paper dealing with biographical structuring, we need to discuss two more primary bodily conditions. First, the role of emotion and feelings, and second, the frame of space and time.

### **Emotion and Feeling**

Academic conceptions of human conduct are, first of all, rational concepts. Although, to give an ex-

ample, Max Weber's notion of *action* requires the "subjective intended meaning" (as opposed to sheer behavior) and is open to the agency of the person, the intention is categorized consistently as rational. When it comes to social action, the basis of society in his line of arguing, there is little room for non-intentional conduct as 'usual,' routinized behavior without asking or being aware of alternatives and justifications, unwanted consequences of one's deeds, and even acting in contrast to explicit intentions (like the very moment you decide on a diet, you start eating like crazy). One may, however, assume that these non-intentional and speciously irrational modes of acting overtake the rational-intentional type in the Weberian sense, and thus make up most actions. This being no secret in everyday understanding of people's motives has recently found support in psychological and neurological explanations. Inquiries into the integrating principles in conduct in specific situations concerning the source of the agency have led to the central role of emotion and feeling in the person. Emotion and feeling are before rational arguing and conscious reflexivity. According to Antonio Damasio (1999; 2010), emotion and feelings as controls of behavior are caused by the organization of the brain and personal desires and intentions. All sensual data are filtered and determined by this emotional mechanism of 'feeling what happens.' Developing this further, emotion and feeling became, for Damasio, the center of the self, constituting interaction processes. In other words, my ability to interact with others and the world, using all my senses (seeing, being seen, showing, hearing, touching, being touched, kinesthetics, proprioception, etc.), using my whole body, using language and gestures, identifying cultural practices, and perceiving a meaningful world is *rooted in emotion and feeling*.

## Space and Time

What can we consider to be some of the most elementary achievements of sensual activities of the living body in an early lifetime?

The infant moves around (turning the body, crawling, eventually walking), using and building up all sensual skills of touching, tasting, smelling, hearing, and seeing. In this process, a spatial reality shared in interaction with the other significant persons is constituted.

Senses can only function if they distinguish between 'now,' the moment the sensual data are produced and delivered, and 'before' and 'after'; that is, senses need memory and expectation. Whatever the organic details might be, the living person must be and, in general, can sense time. Husserl (1966; 2001) dealt with this problem of temporality all his life. He distinguished the temporal evidence of the person having a pre-conceptual knowing of 'now,' the present impression related to a 'before' (*retention*) in memory, and the 'next' (*protention*) expectation. The actual process in time cannot be reversed: it is always in the same directed 'flow.' This concept of inner time consciousness is seen as the basis of any temporal perceptions and constructions. Any temporal objects, like music, listening to sequentially ordered language, or the experience of unfolding events, can only be perceived in this frame of the inner time consciousness. Acting, observing acts or processes, recollections from personal history (biography) to societal history, and expectations on a small-scale expectation are realized in this form. Different from this phenomenological time (as it appears for perception) is time in classical physics, which is linear time in a continuous space. The time of the living body is phenomenological time integrated by the self.

This is the systematic reason for the importance of biographical structuring.

### 3. Biographical Structuring: The Living Body in a Double Temporal Horizon

Ontogenetically the individual body and its senses are not just naturally acquired by birth but are built up over time. I and my body are constructed over a lifetime. Of course, some aspects of growing up and old are phylogenetically shaped, and due to human evolution. But, the building of the person, including bodily development (and physical disintegration) over a lifetime goes hand in hand with interaction processes with others and encounters and experiences with my surroundings (Fischer-Rosenthal 1999b). Already in early childhood, memories start to become self-reflexive and form an individual self (Nelson 1993; 1996). Closely connected to the bodily process, the integrated self, including bodily and mental memory, emerges and is maintained and modified over a lifetime. “The living body (*Leib*) is bearer and expression of the individual biography; it has and knows its (hi-)story. We call this memory of the living body” (Fuchs 2020b:185 [trans. WF]). To put it bluntly, the existence and actional competence of the person is the living body, including all sensual dimensions in their ongoing biographical structuring and structure. The individual memory is, at first, embodied in my daily practices without conscious access on my part. Explicit knowledge about my competencies comes later. [This is of immense practical meaning, especially when it comes to trauma or unfavorable experiences.] Through this lifelong process, my embodied self and my orientational structure are developed. In an ongoing interaction with my lifeworld, I am positioned in the world, and my lifeworld is constituted and constructed. According to my bodily and social com-

petencies and the resources of my world (including artifacts), I can move around, act, and interact with others and the world. I develop a practical (implicit) and theoretical (explicit) understanding of what is going on (to a certain extent), follow my goals, and cope with unexpected events.

I understand myself in spatial-temporal terms: that is, I know where I am and how to move and orient in space; I know about my past and have future expectations. I am situated on a double temporal horizon of the past and future. Accordingly, if I cannot tell my name, where I am, and what day it is, I am seen to be confused, and psychiatric help may apply.

I call this ongoing process *biographical structuring* (Fischer and Goblirsch 2006; Fischer 2010a; 2019; Fischer-Rosenthal 2000). In practical action, by doing, an orientational structure is found and secured, constantly confirmed, or modified.

One can distinguish biographical structuring on a *societal macro level* and the *micro level of the person*.

On the *macro level*, the development of modern societies produces many risks and liberates people from traditional orientations. By the same token, more load is put on the individual. Eventually, a biographizing process (*biographizism* [Alheit 1996]) can be observed. Since the eighteenth century, biographical forms of self-description have become more salient. Biographical literature had already started its career (Corsten 2009; Fetz 2009). The common denominator is that you are what you became, not which group you belong to. In social allocation, biographical patterns are developed that give orientation, but also function as inclusion or exclusion devices. Persons orient themselves in decisions (e.g., about raising a family, occupational training, or professional and

organizational processes) according to biographical patterns provided by social institutions and organizations (Alheit and Dausien 1985; Dausien and Kluchert 2016; to modernity and biography cf. Fischer 2018a).

On the *micro level*, biographical structuring as individual competence and achievement are the focus. The person uses available biographical patterns from society to orient and position themselves in society. Positioning in interaction is closely linked to biographical structures of self-description and attribution of the other. The micro process of interacting constructs biographical structures over a lifetime, thus constructing the identity of a person (Lucius-Hoene and Deppermann 2000; Fischer 2006). The *basis of this agency are bodily competencies*, as sketched above in the previous section, and temporal orientation on the double horizon of the past and future. These bodily competencies are unnoticed, taken for granted and obscured in language-oriented sense-making, exaggerated: sense ousts senses. However, many little failures of everyday life, like slips of the tongue, manual clumsiness, stumbling, and losing balance, to name a few, as well as functional losses in disease, bring back the bodily base of the self and, in turn, create all kinds of conversational normalizing practices to silence such unwanted bodily utterances. This can be a starting point for researching the 'normally' invisible (see part 4 below).

Over the course of many studies, the role of memory turned out to be more of an active constructing mechanism for actual needs than a simple recording archive of past experiences (Brockmeier 2015). Similarly, the orientation towards a future expectation is constantly modified according to present needs (Fischer 2018b). Both insights are crucial when em-

pirically analyzing and reconstructing narrative biographical accounts; one must always be aware of the present situation (biographical and interactional; I call this the *interpretation point*) of the narrating person to correctly assess narrated memory and expectations.

Biographical structuring serves as a stabilizing mechanism in uncertain times and mobile societies by providing a self-concept that has developed in the past. This includes bodily experiences and ritualized body practices. Biographical structures serve as an integrating frame of contingent (pleasant, unpleasant, or critical) events by providing reliable expectations, that is, orientational structures for oneself and the interacting persons.

Over the last 3-4 decades, a rich research scenery based in Europe, which has spread internationally, has been established. Theoretical concepts and empirical techniques, mostly based on socio-linguistic and hermeneutical reconstructions of biographical accounts and narrative interviews, have been refined. Numerous studies have been carried out on many subjects (cf. outline in Jost 2019). Recent significant handbooks inform about the state of the art and spark future research (Lutz, Schiebel, and Tuidler 2018; Jost and Haas 2019). Major national and international sociological associations have founded research committees and networks of biographical research, providing a showcase and inspiration for flourishing research. Last, but not least, helping professions have discovered biographical analysis and use it in social diagnosis and intervention (Fischer 2004; 2010b; 2011; Fischer and Goblirsch 2006; 2018).

This is not the place to go into more detail. However, despite this rich research tradition, which is mostly based on the interpretation of language doc-

uments and texts (transcripts), one misses a more subtle analysis of bodily activities and achievements in reconstructions of biographical structuring. The imperative following out of the above for biographical research then would be: Discover the hidden and exposed living body in the biographical reconstructions! Learn more from the discourse on the body in different disciplines! Raise more awareness for bodily processes and the part of the body in biographical experience and sense-making! Include sensual data in your analysis!

Given all this, what could/should result from the arguments in this paper for practical research, methods, and topics?

#### 4. Research Consequences

I see two lines of argument. One addresses the broad field of biographical research. The question would be whether this tradition can be enriched and made more accurate as to the bodily constitution of the person by developing improved concepts and techniques of discovery. The other addresses traditions of body research: how they could profit from the methods and results of biographical research. The mutual exchange of experiences and techniques could be interesting and is reasonable if one considers the oscillating structuring of a person in bodily (including mental), interactional, cultural, and environmental respects.

Here I shall focus on the first question.

Traditional hermeneutic analysis of language mainly looks at the meaning of utterances and—in the case of actual interaction—the function of speech utterances for understanding and the implicit or explicit goal of the interaction. In this type of anal-

ysis, the role of the body stays obscure despite its active role in speech and communication and despite being precisely perceived in fine grain by the interlocutors themselves. Focusing on language and conversation, the most obvious is overlooked: communication is an interaction of living bodies, bodily selves. The general advice to take this into account would be to use research concepts and pay attention to manifestations that can constitute the relevant ‘bodily data’ of speech. So, practically speaking, one has to produce protocols that transport bodily manifestations before and beyond language, *and*, when analyzing, one has to look more thoroughly for the function and meaning of direct or indirect signs of the living body in the talk. Many of them can be *heard* (and need *audio recording* in research), such as slips of the tongue and self-corrections, reception signals, prosody, stutter, filler words, conspicuous breathing, speech-disrupting phenomena such as laughing or crying, and finally all kinds of pauses with or without *uhms*. Other bodily manifestations—in addition, or only—can be *visually perceived* (and need *video recording* in research), like position and movements of the body, gestures, touch and bodily contact in interaction, gaze and (avoiding) eye contact, as well as a multitude of facial expressions capable of communicating feelings.

Biographical research so far has focused on narrative biographical interviewing and hermeneutic analysis as the main research strategy. To improve body-related and sensual research, one must open up to all kinds of ethnographic modes of research. “All humanistic methods from non-participant to participant observation; from more traditional to newer experimental strategies; and from all forms of interviewing to autoethnographic introspection can help us collect sensuous data” (Vannini et al. 2012:68).

Even the difficult-to-observe senses of touch, smell, and taste have been successfully included in recent studies (Classen, Howes, and Synnott 1993; Ochs, Pontecorvo, and Fasulo 1996; Wiggins 2002; Peynaud 2005; Drobnick 2006; Hennion 2007; Waskul and Vannini 2008; Waskul, Vannini, and Wilson 2009; Mondada 2019).

A totally new field of bodily parameters comes into play if we use the concept of the *extended body*. Detailed analysis is possible, asking in which situations and how artifacts are incorporated into our bodily actions and interactions to help perception, thinking, and doing (Strauss 1985; Schubert 2006; Kissmann 2014a; 2014b). In this respect, workshop studies and studies of situated talk in the style of conversation analysis are paradigmatic (Goodwin 1994; 2001; 2019; Goodwin and Goodwin 1996; Heritage 1997; Drew and Heritage 1998; Heritage and Maynard 2001). Looking at the widespread use of smartphones and digital social networks for communication, information, self-presentation, and, consequently, self-construction seems a promising research area for the merging of body and biographical structuring. The ever-present use of photos, pictures, icons, and video-takes, overcoming the barriers of situational space parameters in comparison to ordinary face-to-face interaction, seems to me of special importance deserving extended research and new access methods.

Of special interest are gestures. They are not simply accompanying talk and action but are pre- and paralinguistic modes of communicating (Tomasello 2008). Since the groundbreaking work of Kendon (1988), many studies have tried to understand the function and meaning of gestures in interaction (Goodwin 1986; Axtell 1998; LeBaron and Streeck 2000; Streeck 2009; 2014; 2019; Kissmann 2016).

In general, recent innovative methods of video analysis, which reconstruct the accomplishment of actions and interactions in a multimodal manner (Kissmann 2009; Deppermann 2018), should be integrated with data gathering and the analysis of biographical research. The key question should be how persons accomplish interaction, considering not only explicit language but also bodily and situational characteristics, and how this can relate to biographical structuring. The presence of bodily action, the 'now' (interaction in process, reference in 'small stories') must be connected more thoroughly with memory and expectation, the double temporal horizon of the past and future as represented in (auto-)biographical narratives (life stories, 'big stories'). In both respects, data-gathering and analytical tools are available: interaction analysis by video and biographical reconstruction of life stories by hermeneutics. In the case studies, the results of both techniques can be matched.

However, in my opinion, the main issue is less one of innovative methods, but conceptual. First, one must realize that many issues of personal conduct are bodily. Conventional biographical research in the frame of narrative accounts (critical Bamberg 1999; 2006; 2007) does not focus on the micro-genesis of identity in interaction (Bamberg 2008) and misses bodily activities (unless explicitly thematized), though they accompany us during our whole life and are crucial for the development of the individual. Narrative access makes the body invisible (unless it perturbs it) because it is taken for granted. This can only be compensated by research topics and strategies that explicitly focus on bodily activities. A wide range of *body practices*, like daily body care, selecting and preparing food and drink that you like and which match your (sub-)culture or religion, and the development of musical preferences

is intricately connected with the shaping of the person during their life. Doing sports (including body building), practicing fitness and wellness styles, yoga—all kinds of body modifications—even types of rest and relaxing are biographically motivated and anchored. Sexual practices and preferences are developed in interactions over one's lifetime. Growing old (*doing age*) and gender (*doing gender*) are both bodily and social and are rooted in bodily and symbolic acts embedded in societal discourses. Bringing up a child is not only an educational but also a constant and exhausting bodily effort for the parents, as well as for the child. Practices of showing and seeing, in general, the use of visual media (photos, videos, smartphones—see *extended body* above), are like a steady undercurrent of daily private living and public life; they transport all kinds of body discourses (including bodily dos and don'ts) in society. Bodily practices have turned into aesthetic practices promising exceptional experiences, emotional highlights, and satisfaction dependent on societal discourses (Reckwitz 2012; 2016).

Even dressing is a bodily activity representing a whole set of social distinctions, status, power relations, and cultural identities. Modifications of dress codes are a source of individualization in modernity; outfits can signify intentions and anxieties. The exposure of hands, feet or other body parts is culturally highly regulated and thus can be interpreted in single interactions.

In addition to focusing on the body in the analysis of situated interaction, the analysis of biographical accounts (e.g., narrative biographical interviews) should explicitly record bodily conditions and events. This is obvious in the case of talking about accidents, as well as acute, and especially chronic, diseases. Though some research has been done in

this respect (Fischer 1982; 2013; Fischer-Rosenthal 1999b), research along this line of investigating body and biography should be intensified. I consider the field of professionally dealing with illness, especially psychiatry, psychosomatic medicine, and therapy as a promising area of joint efforts in therapeutical practices and biographical research. Though structural institutional limits and different disciplinary approaches seem to restrict cooperation, casework with patients suffering from psychic disorders, as well as medical and sociological research, would benefit from such a combined approach. The same is true for other kinds of body topics: sports, dance, ergo- and exercise therapy, et cetera (Delow 2000; Abraham 2002).

In summary and as a key recommendation: in biographical research, bodily manifestations should be interpreted more than is currently the case. Besides increased attentiveness to the topic of body and biography, more multimodal video analysis and more subtle transcripts for the analysis of interaction are needed. The conventional hermeneutical reconstruction of biographical narratives can be enriched by the analysis of interaction, and vice versa. Since available research techniques in both fields are highly refined, training in crossover methods, while challenging, is worth the effort. A useful frame of reference for such a crossover of synchronous and diachronous analyses (e.g., in the style of conversation analysis) can be ethnographic modes of data gathering in field research and processes of sense-making in writing up observations and constructing concepts (Amann and Hirschauer 1997; Dausien and Kelle 2005; Gubrium and Holstein 2008; Hitzler and Eisewicht 2016).

Observing recent research on embodiment and phenomenological anthropology, I conclude that these



traditions could benefit from a rich reservoir of biographical research and the concept of biographical structuring, which so far—if I am correct—have not been considered at all.

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# The Social Transformation of Self-Injury

**Patricia A. Adler**   
University of Colorado Boulder, USA

**Peter Adler**   
University of Denver, USA

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**Abstract:** This research offers a description and analysis of the relatively hidden practice of self-injury: cutting, burning, branding, and bone breaking. Drawing on over 150 in-depth interviews and tens of thousands of website postings, e-mail communications, and Internet groups, we challenge the psycho-medical depiction of this phenomenon and discuss ways that the contemporary sociological practice of self-injury has evolved to challenge images of the population, etiology, practice, and social meanings associated with this behavior. We conclude by suggesting that self-injury, for some, is in the process of undergoing a moral passage from the realm of medicalized to voluntarily chosen deviant behavior in which participants' actions may be understood with a greater understanding of the sociological factors that contribute to the prevalence of these actions.

**Patricia A. Adler** (Ph.D., University of California, San Diego, 1984) is a Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the University of Colorado-Boulder. Her myriad research interests span social psychology, deviant behavior, sociology of drugs, sociology of children, sociology of sports, and the sociology of work and leisure. Along with Peter Adler, her most recent work is *The Tender Cut* (New York University Press, 2011). Together, they were the co-recipients of the 2010 George Herbert Mead Lifetime Achievement Award from the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction. Their edited text-reader, *Constructions of Deviance*, is now in its eighth edition.

**email address:** [adler@colorado.edu](mailto:adler@colorado.edu)

**Peter Adler** (Ph.D., University of California, San Diego, 1980) is a Professor Emeritus of Sociology and Criminology at the University of Denver. His work is informed by a symbolic interactionist perspective and ethnographic methods. Together with Patti, he edited the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* for eight years and wrote several books, including *Membership Roles in Field Research* (Sage, 1987), a treatise on ethnographic methods and how researchers locate themselves within their settings; *Backboards & Blackboards* (Columbia University Press, 1991), an insider's account of the subculture of Division I intercollegiate athletes; *Peer Power* (Rutgers University Press, 1998), research on the culture of preadolescent children, and *Paradise Laborers* (Cornell University Press, 2004), a study of hotel workers in Hawaii.

**email address:** [socyprof@hotmail.com](mailto:socyprof@hotmail.com)



**A**long a subterranean topic, the deliberate, non-suicidal destruction of one's body tissue emerged from obscurity in the 1990s and began to spread dramatically. Self-injury has gone by several names, though self-harm and self-mutilation have been the other most common appellations.<sup>1</sup> While any language may suggest an implied judgment about the behavior, and self-injury certainly invokes a more favorable connotation than self-mutilation, we employ this term since it was used by our respondents most frequently.<sup>2</sup> Although a range of behaviors may be considered self-injurious, including eating disorders, excessive laxative use, and extreme body modification, among others, we focus here on those specific behaviors that have been identified by the psychiatric and medical communities as falling into this specific syndrome: self-cutting, burning, branding, scratching, picking at skin or re-opening wounds, biting, head-banging, hair-pulling (trichotillomania), hitting (with a hammer or other object), and bone-breaking.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Terms that have been used include self-harm or deliberate self-harm syndrome (Pattison and Kahan 1983; Aldridge and Rossiter 1984; Grantz, Conrad, and Roemer 2002), self-mutilation (Waisman 1965; Favazza and Conterio 1988; Favazza 1996; 1998; Strong 1998; Ross and Heath 2002; Nock and Prinstein 2004; 2005), self-destruction (van der Kolk, Perry, and Herman 1991), self-cutting (Suyemoto and MacDonald 1995), self-injurious behavior (Shearer 1994; Herpertz 1995; Bowen and John 2001), self-wounding (Brooksbank 1985; Tantam and Whittaker 1992; Sharkey 2003), and self-injury (Solomon and Farrand 1996; Hodgson 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Radical feminists politically reject all terms for this behavior except self-mutilation because they believe other terms hide the violence and oppression directed against women (and those men) victimized by the hetero-patriarchal society. They use self-mutilation (and self-mutilation by proxy) to describe not only the behaviors described in this paper but also tattooing, piercing, cosmetic surgery, transsexual surgery, punk music, dieting, and high-heel shoes (Burstow 1992; Jeffreys 2000).

<sup>3</sup> While people may do a variety of almost unimaginable things to themselves, such as self-amputating, drilling holes into their skulls, intentionally making themselves ill (Munchausen Syndrome), and piercing, tattooing, or decorating their bodies in extremely radical ways, these behaviors fall outside of those clinically associated with the specific syndrome known best at the turn of the twenty-first century as self-injury. We, therefore,

Evidence of intentional self-mutilation traces back to Greek and biblical times (Favazza 1998), although throughout most of history there has been little awareness of the phenomenon; participants acted in a social vacuum. Somewhere in the late 1990s, public knowledge of self-injury began to rise, with depictions of it appearing in books, films, television shows, magazines, newspapers, and other media.<sup>4</sup> Several celebrities came out and admitted their self-injury,<sup>5</sup> and discussions of it flourished among teenagers. This burgeoning awareness, although limited in scope, spread rapidly through certain segments of society—adolescents, young adults, educators, doctors, psychologists, and social workers—leading Favazza (1998) to suggest that it had “come of age.” Greater public knowledge affected how self-injurers thought about themselves and were regarded by others. Early in the 2000s, Internet websites focused on self-injury began to appear, complete with public chat rooms and newsgroups where people could interact, anonymously, but with great intimacy. In this paper, we describe how the behavior, attitudes toward, and social meanings of self-injury have changed.

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restrict our focus to these practices not arbitrarily, but because they have been traditionally associated together in the medical literature and because they are performed by a consistent group of people. In other words, people who intentionally make themselves ill or who cut off their limbs are not the same people who cut or burn themselves, and people who undergo “body modification” to get tattooed or scarified come from a dramatically different etiology than people who self-injure, although members of both groups may carve words or designs into themselves. These are different phenomena practiced by different people.

<sup>4</sup> Some popular treatments that came to public attention leading up to or around this time included films such as “Girl Interrupted,” “Nightmare on Elm Street III,” and “Secretary,” television shows with episodes on cutting such as “ER,” documentary treatments on The Learning Channel, popular songs such as “Hurt” by Nine Inch Nails, “Crawling” by Linkin Park, “Back to the Coast” by Nikki Sudden, “Last Resort” by Papa Roach, and personal revelations from Richey Edwards, the guitarist and songwriter for Manic Street Preachers. See also Egan (1997).

<sup>5</sup> Some of these included people such as Johnny Depp, Drew Barrymore, Angelina Jolie, Christina Ricci, Fiona Apple, Richey Edwards, Courtney Love, Marilyn Manson, Shirley Manson, Elizabeth Wurtzel, and Princess Diana.

The literature on self-injury largely comes from a psychiatric or medical perspective and is often treatment-oriented in its focus (Brickman 2004; Cresswell 2005; Schoppmann et al. 2007; Gunnarsson and Lönnberg 2022). Systematic or rigorous studies of self-injury from a sociological perspective were rare up through the early 2010s (see: Hodgson 2004). Since many of these studies were conducted on individuals with a history of psychiatric treatment (Grantz, Conrad, and Roemer 2002), little had been known empirically about self-injury among people who are not clinical inpatients (Suyemoto 1998). Yet, most self-injurers never seek the help of mental health professionals (Conterio and Lader 1998), and a larger percentage of the incidences of self-injury never come to medical attention. The behavior is generally carried out secretly, as wounds may be superficial and easily self-treated (Gardner and Chowdry 1985). Many self-injurers are functional and thus remain hidden within society. We fill this void by shedding new light on populations about which little has been previously written: longer-term chronic users, youthful participants who have remained outside of treatment, and people who feel positive about their self-injury. This article draws from our major work on self-injury (Adler and Adler 2011), the first comprehensive ethnographic study on this hidden population.

Subsequent literature has built on our research. McShane (2012) drew on a qualitative sample of 25 in-depth interviews to write about how people who self-injure are affected by suffering, ritual, and stigma. Steggals (2015) used a cultural perspective to analyze self-injury as more of a practice than an illness and as a powerful cultural idiom of personal distress and social estrangement. Chandler (2012; 2016) applied a corporeal lens to argue that understanding self-injury requires engaging with widely

circulating narratives about the nature of bodies to see how they are separate from, yet containers of, emotion and how self-injury constitutes a form of emotion work, helping people to both contain and elicit emotions. McDermott and Roen (2016) used a combination of face-to-face interviews and online research to prioritize the perspectives and experiences of queer young people, offering a critical perspective on the role of norms—namely, developmental norms, gender and sexuality norms, and neoliberal norms—in the production of self-harming and suicidal youth. Brossard's (2014; 2018) in-depth interviews with 70 self-injurers challenges the idea that self-injury is a matter of disturbed individuals resorting to hurting themselves due to psychological weaknesses and difficulties. Rather, in the face of the daily tumultuousness of peoples' social lives, individuals use self-injury to attain a sense of control and maintain order—to calm down, or to avoid “going haywire” or “breaking everything.” His interactionist model delicately illustrates both the succession of activities leading to acts of self-injury and the trajectory that people follow over the evolving course of their self-injuring careers. Inckle (2010) offered a sociologically informed resource for people who hurt themselves and those who live and work with them. She then (Inckle 2017) applied a feminist analysis drawing on user/survivor perspectives to frame self-injury within societal contexts, highlighting the power of marking one's body to express extreme emotional turmoil. Alongside these titles stand the works of social and medical historians. Millard (2013) charted the rise and fall of various self-harming behavior in twentieth-century Britain, linking self-injury to the huge changes that occurred in mental and physical healthcare, social work, and the wider political environment. Chaney (2017) traced the history of self-harm from the 1860s to the present,

showing just how deeply entrenched this practice is in human culture.

Historically, self-injury has followed the broader moral passage of mental illness: viewed theologically as sinful and evil during the Middle Ages (Bissland and Munger 1985), self-injury was recast in contemporary times, falling under the rubric of the disease model (Conrad and Schneider 1992). We examine the psycho-medical portrayal of self-injury here and debunk it from a sociological perspective. Our analysis casts self-injury as a complex process of symbolic interaction rather than as a medical problem, with broader implications for its changed social definition from a psychological form of mental illness to a sociological form of deviance.

We begin by discussing the literature on self-injury and its grounding in the psycho-medical field. We then outline the nature and sources of our data. We examine the changing demographics of the self-injury population, the ways people learn to self-injure, the factors affecting how they do it, and the ways people embrace it as they collectively forge an online subculture. We conclude by discussing issues involving the meanings of self-injury in people's lives and the implications of these meanings for the social definitions and stigma surrounding this behavior.

## Psycho-Medical View of Self-Injury

Self-injury has traditionally been discussed within the parameters of the psychological and treatment professions. The canonical bible of the psychiatric field, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM: American Psychiatric Association 2000), initially listed self-injury not as a disorder unto itself, but rather as a symptom of several other disorders, most notably those having to do with impulse

control. It was lodged primarily within the “dramatic-emotional” dimension, and associated as an occasional side-effect of borderline personality disorder (BPD: inappropriate anger and impulsive self-harming behavior, see: Schaffer, Carroll, and Abramowitz 1982), antisocial personality disorder (the tendency to be aggressive, to have reckless disregard for personal safety, see: Virkkunen 1976), histrionic personality disorder (a pervasive pattern of excessive emotionality and attention-seeking behavior often enacted through physical appearance, see: Pfohl 1991), post-traumatic stress disorder (sometimes due to rape or war, see: Greenspan and Samuel 1989; Pitman 1990), various dissociative disorders (including multiple-personality disorder, see: Miller and Bashkin 1974; Coons and Milstein 1990), eating disorders (Favazza, DeRosear, and Conterio 1989), and a range of other conditions such as kleptomania, Addison's disease, depersonalization, substance abuse, alcohol dependence, and various depressive disorders (Bowen and John 2001).<sup>6</sup> However, the issue finally attained international significance, and was included in the 5th edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (2013:803) as a self-contained category of disorder, rather than as a symptom attached to other disorders.

## Effects

Self-injury was considered for many years a suicidal attempt, with users pathologized and regarded

<sup>6</sup> Some believe that self-injury should be clinically classified as a separate impulse-control disorder (Pattison and Kahan 1983). They argued that it should be defined as characterized by severe, uncontrollable impulses, major self-mutilation, onset in late adolescence, a low level of lethality, and repetitive episodes over the years, making it a continuing disorder rather than a dramatic point in life. Favazza (1998) proposed that it be classified and recognized in the DSM as the deliberate self-harm or repetitive self-mutilation [DSM/RSM] syndrome, and in this call, he was joined, thus far unsuccessfully, by others (Alderman 1997).

as weak. Most observers today, however, recognize it as a means by which participants seek a temporary form of relief and view self-injurers as capable or resilient (Favazza 1989; 1998; Favazza and Rosenthal 1993). Although it can be morbid and often maladaptive, our subjects overwhelmingly agree that it represents an attempt at self-help. They claim that their behaviors provide immediate, but short-term release from anxiety, depersonalization, racing thoughts, and rapidly fluctuating emotions. Self-injury, for some, can lead to the diminishing of tension, cessation of depersonalization (grounding), euphoria, improved sexual feelings, diminution of anger, the satisfaction of self-punishment urges, security, uniqueness, manipulation of others, and relief from feelings of depression, loneliness, loss, and alienation. It provides a sense of control, reconfirms the presence of one's body, dulls feelings, and converts unbearable emotional pain into manageable physical pain (Callahan 1996). As such, it represents an emotion regulation strategy (Linehan 1993; van der Kolk 1996) and a grounding technique to end dissociative episodes (Greenspan and Samuel 1989; Pitman 1990; Kennerley 1996). These effects usually (but not always) last the remainder of the day, with individuals experiencing relief ranging from only a few hours to several days or even weeks. Several told us that they continued to derive benefits after they self-injured by looking at or picking at the scabs for as long as these remain.

## Methods and History

The nascent idea for this research began in 1982 when a student of Peter's spoke to him about her cutting. Over time, we continued to meet people who cut themselves, which eventually expanded to include burners, branders, and bone-breakers. Becoming curious about the nature of this behav-

ior and its spread, in 1999, we began the process of applying for IRB clearance to research the topic. It took two years to obtain that permission, and there were extensive precautions and safeguards, updated yearly, that we had to follow in gathering data from this vulnerable population.<sup>7</sup>

This analysis draws on 135 in-depth, life history interviews conducted in person and on the telephone, which constituted the largest sample of qualitative interviews with non-institutionalized self-injurers ever gathered. Participants ranged in age from 16 to their mid-fifties, with many more women than men (85% women and 15% men), nearly all Caucasian. Due to the extremely sensitive nature of this topic and the gendered nature of participants, Patti took the lead role in gathering data. In searching for subjects, we began with a convenience sample of individuals who heard, on one of our campuses, through radio interviews, or through the grapevine that we wanted to talk with people who self-injured. We required those who were interested to contact us via email, preview the consent form on our website, and ask for an appointment. These interviews were

<sup>7</sup> We could not interview any people with whom we currently had a subordinate/superordinate relationship (current students) or minors who could not obtain parental consent. This excluded people under the age of 18 who had not revealed their self-injury to their parents, which our interviews with older people revealed to be well over two-thirds of the youthful population. We obtained proof of age from all subjects and both parents' and/or legal guardians' signatures for minors. We gave out a list of referrals to therapists who specialized in treating self-injurers to everyone. When we were doing face-to-face interviews only, these were concentrated in the greater Denver SMSA. As we branched out to telephone interviews, we expanded our therapeutic referral list to include individuals and treatment centers throughout the United States and posted it on our website. We ended up interviewing only two people under the age of 18 (with minor assent and parental consent forms), but over time our IRB requirements for interviewing youth became increasingly difficult to fulfill. We ceased accepting minors into our pool when we were told that our consent form wording must indicate that if parents were aware of their child's self-injuring and did not report that, we had to report them to the authorities.

conducted in our campus offices or at private places chosen by our subjects. Much to our surprise, dozens of volunteers stepped forward to be included in the study.

In addition, beginning in 2001-02, we began to explore the websites and public postings of self-injurers. We joined several Internet self-injury groups as overt researchers and became active participants in group discussions. Because of the intimate nature of virtual communication (King 1996; Mann and Stewart 2000; Chen, Hall, and Johns 2003), we formed several deep and enduring relationships with people in different friendship circles that lasted over the years, discussing with people the features of their ordinary lives, and rallying around them during their many crises. We worked, with others, on the difficulties of supporting people who were disembodied and distant. Together with them, we learned to discern the seriousness of people's suicidal threats, their claims of abstinence, their presentation of different personas under different pseudonyms in different groups, and the consequences of flame wars. We networked through bulletin boards, MySpace, and the hundreds of self-injury-related Web Usenet support groups.

We collected and analyzed 30,000 to 40,000 Internet communiqués and emails, including those posted publicly and those written to and by us. For this endeavor, we primarily used our Internet connections, like other cyber-researchers (King 1996; Waskul and Douglass 1996; Mann and Stewart 2000; Chen, Hall, and Johns 2003; Waskul 2003; 2004), as a means of recruiting subjects. The telephone interviews we obtained through these channels ranged in location all over the United States, Canada, and Great Britain. Of the 80 interviews we completed, 37 were with people who used the Internet in connection with their self-injury.

These interviews were unusually emotional and intense, lasting anywhere from one to four hours. Although some people were initially concerned about being judged by an outsider, the topic's intimate nature and our value-neutral stance led to the establishment of deep rapport rather quickly.<sup>8</sup> People began by telling the story of how they grew up, what their family lives were like, and how they discovered self-injury. Since much writing has associated self-injury with some past trauma, we were especially careful when probing about such events. Most people discussed their past verbal, physical, or sexual abuse, some traced their current emotional distress/pain to the relatively common traumas of adolescence, such as peer rejection or parental/sibling favoritism, but others insisted that their childhoods had been basically happy.<sup>9</sup> Over a dozen of these people have remained in contact with us, continuing to share their evolving ideas and life experiences. We have counseled these individuals on their educations, romantic involvements, parental relations, job searches, and traumatic experiences.

Following this natural history approach, the interviews then moved to specific concepts that evolved inductively over the course of the project (Becker and Geer 1960). At the end of the interview, Patti asked each subject what made them volunteer to come forward. Nearly everyone said the same thing: they wanted others who self-injured to know that they were neither alone nor crazy, and they thought that, by sharing their experiences with us, we would

<sup>8</sup> One person sent a thank-you note after the interview saying that although she had not known what to expect, she was deeply gratified to be able to talk to someone interested in, while knowledgeable and non-judgmental about, the subject.

<sup>9</sup> Although most people appeared to be very candid during their interviews, likely, some may not have confided completely about previous traumatic experiences.

write something that would shed light about self-injury for others.

Epistemologically, these conversations, relationships, and interviews are grounded in the value neutrality of the interpretive, Weberian tradition of the Chicago School. Rather than remaining strictly detached from our subjects, we became involved in their lives, helping them and giving voice to their experiences and beliefs, considered by some post-modern ethnographers and liberal feminists a form of advocacy. Yet, radical feminists view self-injury as violence against women and regard people who speak about it non-judgmentally (even in giving voice to others) as supporting the hegemonic order of patriarchal oppression (Jeffreys 2000). To the extent that we present our subjects' perspectives, our value neutrality is seen, then, as a moral relativism that ignores the inherently oppressive nature of self-mutilation. On the contrary, we maintain that we are giving power to people who have been mostly unheard and misunderstood.

## Social Characteristics of Self-Injury

The self-injurers we observed differed markedly from the descriptions in the psycho-medical model. Not only were they more diverse in their composition and character, but their thoughts and actions varied as well.

### Types of Self-Injuries

The psychological view of self-injurers is circumscribed, consisting primarily of the population seeking treatment. Clinicians and scholars suggest that this behavior starts in early adolescence, with most practitioners desisting after adolescence (Favazza and Conterio 1988; Favazza 1989; Suyemoto

and MacDonald 1995; Kiselica and Zila 2001; Hodgson 2004).<sup>10</sup> Girls are generally considered more frequent participants than boys (Favazza 1998; Kiselica and Zila 2001; Ross and Heath 2002).<sup>11</sup> Like eating disorders, self-injury is seen as located primarily among an educated, middle- or upper-class population (Kiselica and Zila 2001) that is disproportionately Caucasian (Ross and Heath 2002).

Prevalence estimates have been hard to formulate, with data based on inpatient psychiatric wards and emergency room admissions. The numbers of self-injurers have been approximated as ranging from 10 to 20% of all psychiatric inpatients, with 40 to 60% in the more concentrated adolescent population.<sup>12</sup> Emergency room data are more confusing to isolate, since most self-inflicted injuries consist of suicide attempts.<sup>13</sup> Psychologists then attempted

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<sup>10</sup> Favazza (1998) alone has suggested that it may persist for a decade or two (typically no more than 10-15 years), with periods of waxing and waning occurring intermittently.

<sup>11</sup> Some have noted as high a figure in their samples as 82% women (Hodgson 2004). At the same time, others have asserted that male participants are more plentiful or equal in numbers to women (Suyemoto and MacDonald 1995; Grantz, Conrad, and Roemer 2002; Tyler et al. 2003).

<sup>12</sup> In 1988, Favazza and Conterio found that seven to ten percent of the psychiatric inpatients they observed engaged in self-injury, while ten years later, Briere and Gil (1998) found an inpatient rate of 21 percent. Among adolescent psychiatric inpatients, this rate has been higher. Darce (1990) suggested that this more focused population was self-injuring at a rate of 40 percent, while DiClemente, Ponton, and Hartley (1991) guessed that it could be as high as 61 percent.

<sup>13</sup> The number of self-inflicted injuries appearing in official ER statistics is difficult to gauge because self-injury is clumped together with self-poisoning, the latter usually a genuine suicide attempt (Hawton and Catalan 1987; Sharkey 2003). Compounding this is the problem that some people do both (Hawton et al. 1997), as well as the larger issue that most episodes of self-injury go undetected, with practitioners ending up in neither psychiatric wards nor hospitals (Pembroke 2000). Setting aside these gigantic problems, studies of hospital admission in the UK estimated a substantial increase in rates and repetitions of self-injury in both genders during an 11-year study in the 1980s and '90s (62.1% increase in men and 42.2% increase in women), with estimates rising to the level of 400 per 100,000 admits per year by the late 1990s (Hawton, Fagg, and Simkin 1996; NHS

to extrapolate from these data to the prevalence of self-injury in the general population, offering guesses of between one and four percent of the at-large population, with up to 20% of the adolescent subgroup.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately we lack broad-scale epidemiological data from sociological surveys to help refine these assessments.<sup>15</sup>

### Structurally Disadvantaged Populations

More recent studies and our data have found the widespread practice of self-injury in broader populations. Self-injury has become much more common among those who suffer and lack control over themselves, such as homeless street youth (Ayerst 1999). Tyler and colleagues (2003) suggested that self-injury has increased in prevalence among this population due to their childhood family abuse, their

participation in deviant subsistence strategies, their street experiences, and their frequency of victimization. They proposed that these youth use self-injury to regulate the overwhelming emotions they experience due to their stressful life events, with some using it to becalm themselves, others turning to it for self-punishment, and others desiring the infliction of pain. In their sample, they found that 69% of the people they encountered had done it at least once, with no significant differences noted between men and women. Of their population, only 12% had ever received medical attention.

Self-injury also appears to be growing rampantly among prisoners, especially juveniles. The practice of self-injury in women's prisons has been discussed since the 1990s (see: Heney 1990; Babiker and Arnold 1997; Fillmore and Dell 2000; HM Prison Service 2001; Borrill et al. 2005; Kilty 2006). Its prevalence has also been noted among juvenile delinquents (see: Penn et al. 2003; Matsumoto et al. 2005). Matsumoto and colleagues (2005) found that in the juvenile detention facility they studied in Japan, 16% of the inmates had cut, and 36% had burned themselves at least once. Most of these studies reject the model of self-injury as solely arising out of mental pathology, arguing instead that it primarily represents a form of coping mechanism, a resistance strategy, or even a cry for help.

Like eating disorders, it has commonly been assumed that self-injury is a practice of white, wealthy girls (Brickman 2004), but as with eating disorders, we are increasingly finding self-injury among boys, men, people of color, and those from lower socio-economic statuses. Hanna (2000) found that while ER hospitalizations for whites were 56 out of every 100,000 admits, blacks were admitted at a rate of 39 per 100,000 people, and people of races other

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CRD 1998). By 2005, in an American study, McCraig and Burt estimated that of 438,000 ER admits nationally due to self-inflicted injury, non-poisoning accounted for 119,454 cases.

<sup>14</sup> In 1988, Favazza and Conterio used one county's rates for people displaying "emotionally unstable personality" (similar to BPD) and assumed that 1/8 of all BPDs self-mutilate during a year. This led them to estimate a prevalence of 212 BPD self-mutilators per 100,000 in the general population. To that they added the antisocial personality disorder people, the suicidal gestures and attempts people, the eating disorder people, and all the other disorders, giving them a total estimate that 750 out of 100,000 per year in the general population practiced self-injury. These figures are flawed because no one has an accurate sense of the population to which we can generalize the extent of these mental disorders, making the results difficult to generalize to more normative populations (Ross and Heath 2002). Briere and Gil (1998) ventured an estimate of four percent self-injury in the general adult population, the Priority Group (2005) speculated that 20% of all British adolescents engaged in self-injury, and Laye-Gindhu and Schonert-Reichl (2005) found that 15% of the adolescents they surveyed in a school had self-injured.

<sup>15</sup> Neither of the two major surveys of youth health, the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) nor the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), have questions about self-injury. When queried about the absence of these topics, one member of these epidemiological teams indicated that IRB restrictions prohibited their asking questions about such a sensitive topic in a broad survey instrument (Boardman 2005, personal communication).

than black or white were 73 out of 100,000. Our data supported the spread of self-injury to girls from rough inner-city backgrounds, especially those in the foster care system. Particularly vulnerable are homeless youth, prison populations, and people from the lower strata of society who suffer from structural disadvantages in society.

### Alternative Youth Subcultures

We also found a growing number of self-injurers who belonged to alternative youth subcultures. Some reported that they hung out with “the wrong crowd” and acted out or were drawn into counter-cultural groups. They were nihilists who delighted in showing off by burning or cutting themselves. Natalie, a 22-year-old college student, reflected on her junior high school friends:

Eighth grade was the point at which I really started getting sociable, identifying with this alternative subculture. It wasn't like I hung out with the freaks and the rejects and, like, the outcasts. I definitely was in the subculture of the stoners and the punks, and we hung out on the bridge, and I started smoking and doing drugs, and, um, at that point, I associated with more people who also hurt themselves.

Others joined similar groups as a mode of teenage rebellion, to shock their parents or town (see: Fox 1987 on punks and Haenfler 2006 on straight-edgers). For example, Maggie, a 25-year-old nurse, secretly self-injured as a youth to rebel against her family's strict Mormon beliefs.

Vanessa, a 20-year-old college student, noted that she was currently part of a group that engaged in both self-injury and decorative body modification. Lauren, a 21-year-old college student, had a circle

of lesbian friends that used self-injury in their rituals.<sup>16</sup> Men often self-injured by burning, shocking, or branding themselves as part of male homosocial bonding rituals.<sup>17</sup> Self-injury was also frequently practiced in sexual blood play. Finally, self-injury could be the province of young, trendy youth who did it to be “hip.” Cindy, a 19-year-old retail salesperson, recounted how people showed others that they were cool:

I know there's this one site you can go to, I think it's called blue dragonfly or something like that, where they actually sell self-harm bracelets, and if you have one of these bracelets, you're in the clique or something. You're supposed to wear them on your arms to cover your scars, and the more bracelets you have, the more advanced you are in self-harming. So, I guess it's something people can do to be cool.

### Typical Adolescents

Beyond these populations, a larger group consisted of teenagers suffering from adolescent stress. Although the psychological literature suggests that self-injurers come from backgrounds of abuse and neglect, many had unremarkable childhoods. Sally, a 22-year-old college student, asserted that she came from a close and contented family. Tracey, an Englishwoman in her early forties, noted, “I've been self-harming for 12 years. I've got no history of abuse, and my recollections of my childhood are happy, so why do I SI [self-injure]? Who knows?”

Sometimes, small events felt overwhelming to individuals going through the difficulties of adoles-

<sup>16</sup> See: Addington (2004) and Venning (2004) for the use of self-injury in lesbian circles.

<sup>17</sup> See: Bird (1996), Gallmeier (1998), and Raphael (1988) for a greater discussion of male homosocial bonding.



cence. Mandy, a 22-year-old college student, noted: “My stepfather used to make fun of my weight or call me ugly.” Another young woman believed that her mother liked her sister better than her, while a teenage boy became depressed when his father remarried, and the new wife brought in a stepbrother.

Some self-injurers rooted their unhappiness in peer social situations. Rachel, a 23-year-old college student with an intact, happy family, blamed her friends for driving her to self-injure:

It happened the first time when my group turned against me for some reason. They alienated me for a week straight, they started rumors about me. I didn’t go to any activities that week, and I didn’t even go to school. I was so sad, it just started. I was crying and so upset and couldn’t stop crying, and I just took a coat hanger, and that’s how it started.

Others turned to self-injury because they felt they had no friends, describing themselves as loners. Alice, an attractive 22-year-old college senior, noted:

I never had very many friends in school, I still don’t. I always felt pretty isolated, and I took that to heart, felt that there was something wrong with me, I’ve always felt like people don’t like me, and I don’t fit in, and I didn’t really know why.

Jennie, a 21-year-old college student, rooted her unhappiness leading to self-injury in a romantic relationship. “I guess I was having a difficult time in general, puberty, school. I had this boyfriend, it wasn’t the most healthy relationship, and I wasn’t getting along very well with my sister. So, I think I blamed myself for everything, and I guess I took it out on myself.”

Romantic traumas, while an occasional cause of girls’ self-injury, were a more significant factor cited by boys. Break-ups, fights, or other forms of rejection turned them inward to cut. Others from typical family backgrounds turned to self-injury due to school stress, over-commitment in extracurricular activities, and a driving sense of perfectionism. Sometimes, when people failed to meet up to their or their family’s expectations, they punished themselves. Sally, a 21-year-old college student, described her decision to self-injure:

It was a rough time for me. I got miserable. I just didn’t feel like confiding in my parents. They probably would have been a great resource of help, come to think of it, but I was at that age where I wasn’t comfortable talking to my parents about that sort of thing, and I felt no one understood. So my friend told me about her newfound technique, and I tried it as something that may unleash some of my stress. And it kind of was, which reinforced it.

Kantrowitz and Springen (2005) have suggested that this generation of adolescents faces unique pressures. They are more likely to be from divorced or unstable families, to abuse substances, to have eating disorders, to struggle with depression, and to commit suicide (Coleman 1987; 2004; Swift 2006). Some youth experiencing all these issues struggle to differentiate themselves from the crowd as having “real” problems. Dialogue from the HBO drama, “Six Feet Under,” in 2005, suggests that self-injury may be the currently popular form of expressing “teenage angst”:

**Patient:** Maybe I should see your supervisor [twirling her hair]. I don’t know if you’re ready for me.

**Brenda [therapist]:** You might be right. But, um, now that we’re here...

**P:** I'm a very complex person.

**B:** I'm sure you are.

**P:** I keep ending up in hospitals.

**B:** Really, well, tell me about that.

**P:** Well. A few times for anorexia. Twice for alcohol poisoning. Once I hit an artery. I'm a cutter [smiles]. And I keep pulling my hair out [frowns].

**B:** So I see.

**P:** It's all this pressure to be normal [crying]. And I can't. And nobody understands.

**B:** I think I do.

Many people continued self-injuring, either continuously or intermittently, into adulthood. Contrary to extant knowledge, roughly two-thirds of the "regulars" we encountered on the Internet were over 25, and half over 35. Melissa, a 39-year-old college clerical worker, described the people with whom she interacted on the Web daily:

They just do it and do it for all these years, and it just becomes a part of their life. For example, a woman on one support group, she's self-harmed for over 20 years, and not a single soul knows about it except the people she writes to on the Internet. She's not in therapy, she doesn't go to a doctor or anything, and she just continues to do it.

Many of our contacts saw self-injury as a "burgeoning epidemic." In 2005, Ross Droft, a suburban high school health teacher, estimated that out of the 3,800 adolescents in his school, 30% cut themselves. Hannah, a 19-year-old college student, discussed the prevalence in her former high school:

Among teenagers, it's so rampant. I'd run across people that I'd known for years, and I'd see them in the bathroom with their sleeves pulled up so they could wash their hands, and I'd glance over and see a little

mark that I could identify as injuring. And I'd be like, "Oh, god damn. Look at that! Another."

Cindy, the 19-year-old salesperson, summed it up by saying, "I think it's a very quiet epidemic. It's very hush-hush."

### Long-Term Chronic Users

Beyond these populations is a group of older self-injurers who have been cutting, burning, and picking at scabs for at least a decade. Most of these people started when self-injury was relatively unknown and engaged in the practice surreptitiously. Ranging in age from their late twenties to their forties and early fifties, most of those we located had reached out to join virtual communities. This strongly suggests that many older, long-term participants are still self-injuring in isolation, possibly unaware that there are others like themselves, or that self-injury is even a phenomenon (see: Adler and Adler 2005).

Differentiating people who stay with this behavior from those who relinquish it after a shorter period is difficult. They may appear, to others, to be no different from any other people. Danielle, a 35-year-old housewife and mother of three, commented on this in an email communication:

I think a lot of people think of SI as gothic or depressed kids who will go murder people, that we're that kind of group, and it's not for people, like me, who are educated or otherwise look normal, but they don't know.

Most people described themselves as similar to Danielle, but others were not as functional. Mary, a 42-year-old former university administrator, married with two children, had succumbed to severe

depression and had not left her bedroom for two years. Linda, a divorced 40-year-old former medical transcriptionist, had to quit her job and was now living on supplemental security and Medicaid. Others were similarly afflicted, not able to work and struggling with maintaining face-to-face relationships.

The reasons they gave for their self-injury varied as well. Some interviewees had a history of physical or sexual abuse, either in their childhood or early adulthood. Danielle, the 35-year-old housewife, had been repeatedly incested by her brother during adolescence. She remarked, "I know, in my experience, most of the cutters I've talked to are survivors of some type of abuse as a child." Linda, the 40-year-old former medical transcriptionist, married a man who ended up verbally and sexually abusing her.

Yet, others have no apparent severe problems. Amy, a 28-year-old bookkeeper for a private, non-profit foundation, came from a more sanguine background. "I think that I grew up pretty privileged. I never was abused in any way. I really can't, I think I had a pretty happy childhood for the most part. So I can't, most of my memories of my childhood I guess are fond memories." She differentiated herself from the self-injurers who had both "teen angst" and "serious mental problems," saying that she could not relate to either group. Trying to explain what prompted her to self-injure, she reflected:

I think that it's just, I like the way I feel when I do it. I like having it, just being able to think that I can cut later helps me, sort of, deal in the moment with things that might be stressful. I honestly can't understand why people wouldn't cut themselves.

Lisa, a 31-year-old librarian, expressed her frustration in trying to typologize older self-injurers:

Everything I've seen, I find inadequate. I read, or I talk to people, or I see stuff online where people say, "Oh, everyone who cuts themselves was abused as a child," or, "Everyone who cuts themselves would be a coke addict." Or, there are all kinds of connections, but I don't think that they're as clear as people say. Because I find that people are always trying to attribute it to one thing, and it doesn't seem that clear-cut to me.

Yet, all the self-injurers we encountered were troubled in some way. Some were repressed; some were depressed; some used it as a coping strategy. Denise, a 31-year-old salesclerk from Scotland, discussed her self-injury as "often ritualized, more severe, sometimes a part of daily life. I understood what motivated it, what benefits it brought, as well as the costs. I don't think of it as deviant, but as a coping mechanism [that's] gone wrong."

Many long-term self-injurers had been steadily engaged in this practice for 20 years or more. Others oscillated in and out of the behavior. Danielle quit for four years when she was pregnant and her children were young, but returned to it before the birth of her third child. Johann, a 38-year-old German man, had periods when he mostly abstained, although he reported that it was back to "often" again. He used alcohol or self-injury to "distract" himself from his problems, often when he got depressed. Danielle's greatest fear was that her daughter would learn about her self-injury and model the behavior.

Most people who had self-injured for a long period had no intention of ever stopping. Danielle thought that she was a bad person and would always deserve to hurt herself. Denise saw it as a lifelong tool for managing her depression. Amy expressed her attitude this way:

I think I'll probably always do it. I don't feel it's really a non-issue for me. I don't ever think about stopping. It's not something that I want to stop, but it's not something that I feel like I need to stop. So, it's just kind of what I do.

Yet, a few people had abated their usage after many years, either through therapy or with the help of online peer support and education. Younger, short-term injurers were more apt to mature out, but those who made it a significant part of their lives had a harder time relinquishing it. Many of these people remained in online communities, helping others, as a way of maintaining their abstinence (see: Brown's 1991 similar discussion of professional ex's).

## Learning to Self-Injure

In contrast to the psycho-medical literature's focus on *why* individuals self-injure, a sociological perspective addresses the influence of social structure, culture, and interaction on *how* people engage with it. A variety of social factors have influenced the way people initially came to learn about self-injury.

The nature of individuals' initial onset may significantly be connected to when they began the behavior. People who engaged in self-injury before 1996, about the time when it emerged more publicly, discovered this behavior on their own.<sup>18</sup> Alice, the 22-year-old college senior, reflected on her initiation to cutting:

**Answer:** And I don't really know why I started to do it. For some reason, it just was something that I think I just did almost accidentally for the very first time

I did it, I was probably 12 or 13 [note: 1992], and for some odd reason got some sense of relief out of it.

**Question:** How, accidentally, did you happen to do it?

**A:** I think I was just messing around with a sharp knife and just happened to inflict it, maybe just even out of curiosity, on one of my own fingers. For some reason, I don't know what it was, maybe the adrenaline you get out of it, if you're feeling down, it provides a sense of relief for you or something.

Many of these early people, like Alice, cut themselves while shaving, got frustrated and punched walls or trees, or fell and injured themselves, only to find that they liked the effect. Unaware that others self-injured, they learned it on their own and regarded it as their private, special way of making themselves feel better.<sup>19</sup>

Beginning in the mid-'90s, people often heard about self-injury before they tried it. Megan, a 19-year-old college student, recounted how she learned about it through the media:

**A:** I was, like, 11, I was in sixth grade, and I was reading one of those stupid magazines that, you know, all of the little girls want to read because they think it'll make them seem older, you know? I think it was YM or something, and there was an article about a girl basically talking about her cutting and why she did it and what it was like, and the aftermath.

**Q:** So that's nine years ago, so that's '96. What did you think of that?

**A:** Well, I don't know. The way she described it, it was like a way to deal with her mental anguish and these incredible emotions she was experiencing, and she felt a lot of self-loathing. So when I read that, I kind of

<sup>18</sup> This is a common characteristic of loners who lack a deviant subculture, see: Adler and Adler (2005).

<sup>19</sup> In response to being asked during the interview about the first time she ever heard of self-injury, one student replied, "Just when you mentioned it in class."

associated with her. I was like, “Well, hey, I feel that way too.” And kind of her description of the relief she felt after cutting herself kind of made me wonder how I would feel if I did that.

**Q:** So how soon was it after you saw this magazine article that you tried it?

**A:** Probably like the next day.

Joanna, a 19-year-old college student, noted that she heard about it in health class. One day, her teacher taught a segment on it, saying that it was “about stress and emotional problems and how people take out their problems.” Believing that she suffered from stress, she thought about trying it. Some, attracted by the allure and intrigue of non-conformity, may be drawn into deviance despite potential, recognizable drawbacks.<sup>20</sup>

By the late 1990s, people were more likely to have heard about self-injury from friends or acquaintances (Brossard 2014). Hannah, the 19-year-old college student, learned about it from a “cool guy.” In eighth grade, she was in a “pretty cool teen club” and a boy showed her his scars. Prompted by her response, he told her how he got them, and she was impressed. Trying it for the first time that night, she liked the results. In school the next day, he treated her as cool. He told her more about his scars and how to manage them. This became a special bond between them.

Although it was less common for people to cut together, the social contagion effect became more pronounced over time as groups of high school students self-injured and identified themselves through it (see: Coleman 1987 on clustering and 2004 on copycatting). Amber, a 20-year-old college

student, talked about how people she knew in high school self-injured because their friends were doing it:

But, I think my friend Julie got into a whole cutting thing because of Caitlin and I. She was the last of our little group that got into it. Just because we talked about it and she was going through some rough times, and then she turned towards it as well. I think this is going back to my ex-boyfriend who said, “I just want to define myself in some way,” because everyone else was doing it. I think it gives you a sense of belonging to do something other people are doing. So you’re in a group or something like that.

From their friends, people learned not only about how to do it but how to interpret it (Becker 1953). Joanna, who heard about it in health class, then learned more from talking to others. Over lunch, a friend casually mentioned that she wanted to cut herself right then. When Joanna asked her why she did it, the girl talked about how it made her feel and said it was “just such a relief.” Joanna, excited by this revelation, realized that her cutting produced an adrenaline rush that took away her frustration and replaced it with the sensation she was seeking. “That rush was probably the best part of the whole thing. And I didn’t realize that until I talked to them.”

By 2000, with the Internet emerging as more prominent, people began looking for information there. Websites sprung up that offered personal testimonials and medical facts about self-injury. Amber, the 20-year-old college student, noted, “I didn’t understand it, so I just Googled it and just read all I could on it to try and understand it.” Even though she found the descriptions graphic and disgusting, she was curious, so she cut herself on her ankle. From there, she slowly began to self-injure regularly.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Biernacki (1988), Faupel (1991), and Jacobs (1999) on drugs, Spradley (1970) and Wiseman (1970) on heavy drinking, and Lesieur (1977) on gambling.

People who came to self-injury because they were curious or they wanted to belong were much less likely to exhibit the impulse-disorder symptoms and pathological family backgrounds described in the psycho-medical literature. They learned that self-injury existed, how to do it, and how to perceive and interpret the effects, and they formed identities and social groups around it.

## Engaging in Self-Injury

People who liked self-injury practiced the behavior in varying ways. Psychologists believe that self-injury is most likely to occur because people cannot control their impulses, are histrionic, seek attention, need to alleviate frustration, and act in the here-and-now (Gunnarsson and Lönnberg 2022). We, too, found many who did it impulsively, ducking into school restrooms to cut in toilet stalls, self-injuring when they were drunk and depressed, or doing it whenever the mood struck them.

However, we also found people who self-injured in an *intentional, planned, and deferred* manner. Rather than being totally at the whim of their impulses, they debated, evaluated, and assessed the decision to self-injure, both in the initial phases of their involvement and in later returns to the behavior. This type of instrumentalism often drives people in purposive actions toward pursuing interests, objectives, and conveniences (Prus and Grills 2003).<sup>21</sup> We noted several ways that people self-injured in this more sociological form.

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<sup>21</sup> Whether the practice of self-injury occurs because of an impulsive urge or as the result of a conscious decision is a source of serious debate on self-injury websites. Many condemn people who do *not* do it out of impulse, arguing that the behavior is so bad that anyone who can resist the overwhelming urge to do it—should. On the other side are those who defend their behavior as rational and reject the irresistible impulse model. They advocate and defend the instrumental model.

Many people who followed the instrumental mode *delayed* their self-injury until they were ready to do it. People picked a convenient time because they could hide it better or they would enjoy it more.<sup>22</sup> Some waited until they could get away from parents, until summer was over and they could wear long-sleeved shirts, or until they felt they deserved it. Matt, a 20-year-old college student, postponed his self-injury while he let the desire build up. After waiting, he moved to self-injury without any trigger. Rather than seeking a release, he did it because it felt good. He described his thinking:

A: So this was a rational decision to me. I'd think about it and I'd always remember how good it felt to do it, so I'd keep doing it. I guess it's kind of the same way that I would do just about anything else. Delayed gratification, I guess.

Q: So you never sat down and weighed the pros and cons?

A: Well, a little bit. I'd know that I had to do certain things, like I'd have to make sure I was always wearing long sleeves or that I'd put something over it when I was asleep to make sure it didn't open up again and have, like, blood all over my sheets and stuff, because that would be bad.

Q: So that would be on the cons side?

A: Yeah, but, generally, I weighed the cons. The cons were pretty easy to get over, but then I guess the cons began to outweigh the pros when I started losing some of my best friends...So I was like, I have to stop, as much as I want to do it, I shouldn't. And so I made a conscious decision to stop for a while. The pros weren't good enough to outweigh those cons.

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<sup>22</sup> Prus and Grills (2003) have discussed people's hesitations to pursue lines of action due to general cautions, earlier personal experiences, and concerns about the viewpoints and reactions of others.

Like Matt, some people *weighed the benefits* of self-injury against the personal, physical, and social costs.<sup>23</sup> When they felt bad, they knew it would make them feel better. Others, thinking that this was an unhealthy way to deal with their emotions, brushed away their desires and resisted the urge. As they became unhappy, they re-evaluated their decision, finally deciding that the pros outweighed the cons.<sup>24</sup> Megan, a 19-year-old college student, discussed the thinking that took place before her episodes of self-injury:

I thought about it ahead of time. It was kind of like, "Wow, I really feel like crap, what will make me feel better?" And then it was like, "Well, I suppose I could cut myself, that made me feel better last time." Then I'd be like, "No, that's not a very good idea. That's not a healthy way to deal with your emotions." Then I'd brush those thoughts out of my mind. And then something else would happen, and I'd be like, "Well, all right, that's it. I can't deal with this anymore." I sat down and thought about if I wanted to do it or not and the pros and cons, and what the consequences would be.

After giving up self-injury during his senior year of high school, Matt made a conscious decision to re-engage. For him, the return to self-injury was not prompted by any specific event, but because he missed it. "I think I wanted to have that feeling again, that release that I could only get from doing that, that calming sensation. And I'm not sure if there was anything really all that upsetting going on at that time." At the time of our interview, Matt was still self-injuring.

<sup>23</sup> Akers (1985) has suggested that in learning deviant behavior, people are influenced by "differential reinforcement," weighing the balance of rewards and punishments attached to different behaviors.

<sup>24</sup> Becoming disinvolved and then reinvolved, or oscillating in and out of their activities is a common pattern in the practice of deviance (Adler and Adler 1983; Pryor 1996; Prus and Grills 2003).

Like Matt, Liz, a 25-year-old animal trainer who engaged in self-injury, thought ahead about her self-injury. She talked about her philosophy of *planning*:

A: I don't like being impulsive. I like making decisions, choosing how I'm going to live, how I'm going to do everything. It gives me a sense of control.

Q: How would you plan it? How far in advance would you start thinking about it?

A: Anything from a few hours to a few days. Depending on how long I can hold it off for.

Q: So then do you think like, "Thursday would be a good night for it," or how does that work?

A: Kind of, yeah. It sounds really weird just talking about it. Like I'll know what days I have to work with certain people, and I'll know that ahead of time and be like, "Well, OK, I know I'm going to be really stressed here, I might as well start thinking about it because I'm going to want to do it anyway."

So, unlike Matt, who deferred his gratification indefinitely, Liz oriented herself to specific days that would be good.

Another way of practicing self-injury non-impulsively was to do it *routinely*. Hannah, a sophomore in college, established a ritual for herself shortly after she began to self-injure. Nightly, she read for a while, injured, and then went to bed. The evenings were her time to reflect on upsetting things from the day, but this eventually became so routine that she self-injured every night, regardless of her feelings. Some described the release they got from self-injury as a sleep aid.

Finally, others made *bargains* with themselves about how and when they would self-injure. Lindsay, a 32-year-old nurse's aide, described her thinking process:

**A:** Like I'll sometimes think, "OK, well, I can't cut now, so I'll promise to cut on a certain date." Even if I don't feel like it anymore, I've made myself that promise, and to be able to trust myself, then I have to keep it...

**Q:** Is it more or less satisfying when you do it that way?

**A:** Then it's more like it's something that has to be done, and you do it because it has to be done. It's not something that you really look forward to, it's more like a chore, but you have to do it. And I've often done it sort of in rituals, too, where I've done it for so many different reasons and everything that, I don't know, it's just different all the time.

All these modes of self-injury eschewed the impulsive need to fulfill immediate urges and represented forms of conscious thought, decision-making, and planning. They show individuals' rationality, agency, and control over their behavior rather than pathological powerlessness.

## Embracing Self-Injury

Many participants regarded their self-injury negatively and were often torn between their desire to do it and their feelings condemning it (see: Adler and Adler 2005). This is particularly the case for people enmeshed in the psycho-medical treatment community, who embrace the individual pathology model, which results in individuals blaming themselves for "their inability to cope" with their suffering (Bareiss 2014:281). Some of the self-injury support groups on the Web had rules prohibiting people from speaking positively about the behavior. Those that fostered or "triggered" the behavior with photographs, suggestions for how to do it, or reinforcement were often forced to close. Yet, a percentage of the self-injuring population remained positively committed.

The first group took a *passively positive* position on their self-injury. Sue, a 28-year-old elementary school teacher, managed a neutral stance on her self-injury by never thinking about it. Marnie, a 51-year-old bank teller, eschewed thoughts about her self-injury as well. When asked about her future relationship with it, she stated that she focused her thoughts, instead, on the present. It just was not a part of her thinking process. Those who did think about it sometimes had thoughts of remorse or regret, but when they needed it, they were grateful it was there. They let nothing stand between them and the relief they wanted, and as long as they felt they needed it, they were committed to doing it, no matter what the consequences.

A larger (although still small) group expressed steady *actively positive* attitudes about self-injury. They took the "pros" that they weighed in their decision-making and forged them together into a more unified philosophy. These people represented an informal Pro-SI movement, similar to one fashioned for the Pro-Suicide and the Pro-Ana (anorexia) / Pro-Mia (bulimia) movements (see: Force 2005; Vannini, McMahan, and McCright 2005). Pro-ED movements view eating disorders as a lifestyle choice and not a medical or deviant issue. They have many web postings and sites that offer tips on how to avoid eating and hide eating disorders from friends and family, how to calculate Body Mass Index (BMI) and Basal Metabolic Rate (BMR), "thinspiration" pictures, reverse triggers, recipes, fasting suggestions, poetry, photographs of extremely thin models and actresses, and support for resisting recovery.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Anorectics and bulimics use these message boards, chat rooms, and communities (such as <http://ana.makeupyourmind.nu/>, <http://thinvision.conforums.com/>, [www.plagueangel.net/grotto](http://www.plagueangel.net/grotto), Shrine to ANA, Tricks of the Trade, Thinspiration, and others) to share diet tips and poetry, as well as to "vent" about their problems, related to their eating disorder or not. Close



The existence of a Pro-SI movement is still somewhat controversial. Eva, a 30-year-old cashier, disputed the existence of a Pro-SI movement. Although she acknowledged that people openly expressed support to others who did it, she distinguished between people who were “not willing to recover just yet” and more outright encouraged by the behavior. Some suggested that people hid their Pro-SI orientation because they found expressing these views unacceptable.

People espousing a loosely Pro-SI orientation began by accepting it as a *lifestyle choice*. Vanessa, the 20-year-old college student, expressed this philosophy:

It was on the *Today Show* or something, and they were doing this “seven-part series,” which is so beating a dead horse on self-injury, and they bring all these teenagers that are like, “I had a problem.” And they’re bringing all these psychiatrists and they’re like, “These kids, they need help. It’s a mental disorder.” I was like, “That is *so* not it.” It’s just, it’s a personal way of expressing emotion. It is a lifestyle choice; it’s just the way you choose to express your emotions. I mean, everybody has to have an outlet. You can go and do martial arts as your expression, or you can do art, or you can cut yourself. If some people view it as a problem, if a cutter views it as a problem, then yes, they should get help because if they view it as a problem, then it is a problem. I never saw it as a problem. I just saw it as the way that I chose to do it.

Bonnie, a 28-year-old shoe salesperson, compared self-injury to other *coping mechanisms*. “Some

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friendships sometimes develop between the people on a message board, who sometimes exchange phone numbers or even meet in person. What is most disturbing about these sites to outsiders, however, may be the vast archives of “trigger” pictures they contain.

people drink, some people do drugs, some people kill people,” she asserted. She regarded life as difficult, although manageable. Her way of dealing with issues was to self-injure, and she decided that she might as well take a positive attitude about it. Her perspective was, “It’s not a, ‘Oh my god, I just cut myself, I feel like shit,’ kind of thing. It’s a, ‘Oh, hey, this kind of stuff is going on in my life. How else can I deal with it?’” For Bonnie, self-injury represented an effective coping tool. “Yeah, I think it’s effective. I mean I’m not dead yet.” Bonnie rationalized that people who injured themselves were better than those who injured others.

Part of the Pro-SI attitude involved *rejecting the stigma*. Lance, a 28-year-old furniture salesman, explained how people could flip the stigma away from themselves and onto others. “Everybody knows that there’s a lot of really bad stigma, but a lot of our views are that once you get past that, they’re just getting after you or being upset because they don’t understand what’s going on. It could be a lot worse. So it’s *their* problem, not *your* problem.” By putting the problem onto others, he distanced himself from the stigma.

People were aided in their Pro-SI attitude by the *community* of people they encountered on the Internet. Cindy, the 19-year-old retail salesperson, noted that from going online, she found others doing the same things. That convinced her that she was not so abnormal and made her feel better. At Pro-SI sites on the Internet, people also found tips for improving their behavior. Cindy mentioned, for example, that she learned how to make a cleaner cut, so she healed with less scarring. Bonnie learned to view her self-injury as better than hurting others, and hence as a strength.

People espousing a loosely Pro-SI orientation also took a *long-term* orientation to the practice. Amy, a 42-year-old receptionist, asserted her intention to continue self-injuring forever. “Probably the only thing that will get me to change is if I die, that would be it.” Others noted that they could sustain it over a lifetime because they were not doing it to kill themselves, they were just doing it.

When people conquered the stigma and shame of their behavior, they became less fearful of showing their scars. Lindsay, the nurse’s aide, expressed the view, “Well, don’t be ashamed to show your scars, and people all just have to accept it, and you go out there, you know, stuff like that.” People who flaunt disreputable identities, what Goffman (1963) refers to as “minstrelization,” may engage in these displays as expressions of freedom or defiance (see: Sanders 1989 on tattoos and Wolf 1991 on outlaw bikers).

A final component associated with a Pro-SI orientation was its *progression*, the tendency for people to “notch up” their behavior, although this escalation may have preceded their more positive attitude. Many of these long-term self-injurers came to accept a level of bodily damage that might alarm non-participants. Amy, the 42-year-old receptionist, noted that she visited hospital emergency rooms often:

I think I was going for stitches 3-5 times a week... I circulated between the emergency room and some walk-in clinics, and I would do different parts of my body so that it wouldn’t look like I had so many stitches at one time.

Many Pro-SI people were older and had a wider range of experience with harming themselves and

its consequences. As a result, they learned to manage their self-injury by developing pseudo-medical skills. Liz, the animal trainer, learned how to take care of herself:

**Q:** And have you ever cut so much or so deep that it wouldn’t stop bleeding?

**A:** Yes. I’ve gone to the ER a couple of times for that, and, luckily, my boyfriend knew how to stitch, so I went to him a lot, too.

**Q:** What’d he stitch you with?

**A:** Just the same stuff that they do in the ER. You can get it pretty easily in Kentucky because of all the horses. We’d stitch up our own horses when something would happen. So we learned to stitch each other up.

Lindsay, the nurse’s aide, explained that she also learned to manage more serious injuries without medical intervention by tolerating a higher level of bodily damage. For her, just needing one layer of stitches became a relatively minor injury:

I won’t go to the hospital if I just need a few stitches. If I’m cutting a whole bunch of times, I won’t go to the hospital until I need between 45 and 50, unless it’s life-threatening or unless it’s really going to complicate my life later on.

People such as this often developed other adaptive techniques, moving their self-injury around to different body parts, and avoiding re-cutting or burning in the same area. As Mary, a 38-year-old salesperson said, “Okay, an episode on the leg now, the next episode, better go to the stomach.”

Embracing self-injury through the formation of a Pro-SI movement was impeded by the censorship of Internet sites that avoided condemning the behavior. Many people spoke about the high turnover

of such groups, message boards, and chat rooms where they have congregated. Liz, the animal trainer, offered her guess as to why these tended to disappear so quickly:

**A:** I think it has to do with the negativity surrounding it. Like with Pro-Ana stuff, they just take it off. Their web servers do, and I think they're probably doing the same thing with that...

**Q:** How do *you* find new sites?

**A:** Usually, one of the people from the sites before tells me, "Oh, hey, look there's one over here." And you're like, "OK, I'm coming." Or the email group I'm on will mention one.

Pro-SI attitudes only coalesced into a loosely forming movement with the greater communication between self-injurers facilitated by the Internet. These value orientations and behaviors stood in stark contrast to the impulsive and pathological psycho-medical model of self-injury.

## Conclusion

Although public awareness of self-injury is still far from universal, it has grown significantly. With this has come a dramatic shift in our understanding of the nature and social meanings attached to this behavior. For many years, the topic of self-injury was an arena dominated exclusively by psychological perceptions and explanations, but in the late 1990s and early 2000s, this behavior changed and expanded in ways that thrust it increasingly into the sociological realm. In this paper, we have discussed four ways that self-injury has become more of a sociological phenomenon.

First, our data show that self-injurers are more diverse than traditionally depicted in the psy-

cho-medical literature. Although the types of individuals who pass through psychiatric institutions comprise a portion of this population, they are augmented by a much larger group that has never been clinically treated or hospitalized. These non-institutionalized self-injurers, lacking the postulated psychological syndromes, have always existed, but have been notably growing in numbers since the 1990s. Traditional inpatient populations have been supplemented by three groups: the poor, weak, and powerless, who have high prevalence rates because they are structurally disadvantaged; older, long-term self-injurers who have emerged from their isolated pockets, finding each other on Internet chat rooms, websites, and newsgroups; and mildly disturbed, alienated, or typically angst-ridden teenagers and young adults.

Second, individuals have begun to "discover" self-injury in new ways, moving beyond the self-invention of the behavior so common before the 1990s. Psychologists consider self-injury a practice that emerges spontaneously in troubled individuals, yet we note the more widespread social learning of self-injury that has been transmitted through the media, health education, and peer group interaction. The psycho-medical disease model, postulated as universal, overlooks the way self-injurers use their customary and ordinary sociological decision-making processes. Self-injury incorporates individuals' social perceptions, interpretations, anticipations, and evaluations to plan and project lines of action. As Sutherland (1939) noted in differential association theory, the way people learn deviant behavior and the general needs and values that drive it are expressions of the same processes as all other learning, needs, and values. Like the artificial tanning discussed by Vannini and McCright (2004), self-injury represents, in part, a com-

plex social process of symbolic interaction rather than purely a medical problem.

Third, the way people engage in their self-injury transcends the psychological model. Not merely pathologically impulse-driven, contemporary self-injurers carefully think about, consider, defer, and plan their behavior (Brossard 2014; 2018). In his study of gamblers, Rosecrance (1985a) noted that the prevailing illness model portrays gambling as pathological, with habitual gamblers driven by compulsion, and unable to control their behavior. Gambling stands in the DSM III as an impulse disorder. Yet, virtually all investigations of gambling groups in natural settings have found little evidence of either compulsive or pathological behavior (Scott 1968; Oldman 1978; Hayano 1982; Rosecrance 1985b;). Like gambling, individuals describe their self-injury as intentional and instrumental, guided by the social meanings they attach to the behavior. They learn through subcultural and interactional venues to recognize and interpret self-injury as an acceptable, albeit deviant, way of dealing with anger, confusion, and frustration. Many self-injurers would like to quit, but those who still practice it recognize its benefits as a coping mechanism and a means of self-expression.

Fourth, we see the beginnings of a subculture coalesced around the acceptance of self-injury as a voluntary choice and lifestyle. Unlike individuals enmeshed in the psycho-medical world who tend to accept their identity as powerless and shameful, those who participate in cyber communities are more likely to feel empowered, in control, and able to assert their collective definitions of their behavior. Participants report that it forms, at least for some time, a component of their self-identity and a way of collectively com-

municating with and relating to others. People engage in the form of tertiary deviance (Kitsuse 1980), justifying and embracing their self-injury. Although the psycho-medical model individualizes the problem and deflects responsibility away from society, such as McCrea (1983) found with menopause and Beresford (2016; 2020) found with autism, our research, grounded in the perceptions and interpretations of participants, also highlights the role of interactional, cultural, and structural forces and their contributions to the social transformation of this behavior.

The social meanings and social processes associated with self-injury in the twenty-first century carry implications for somewhat of a moral passage constructing broader cultural definitions of this behavior, shifting it increasingly from the realm of mental illness to deviance. People who self-injure may be thought of by the public as emotionally troubled, and as individuals who engage in a non-normative and still stigmatized form of coping, but they are no longer exclusively viewed as suicidal or severely mentally ill. Although sociologists have more often documented the shift towards increasingly medicalized views of phenomena (Zola 1972; Conrad 1992; 2000; Conrad and Schneider 1992; Williams and Calnan 1996), the populations and behaviors discussed here invoke a demedicalized interpretation. Self-injury, thus, joins homosexuality (Fleishman 1983; Bullough 1993), gambling, eating disorders (Way 1995), and drug use (Elliott, Huizinga, and Ageton 1985; Marcos, Bahr, and Johnson 1986) as a behavior increasingly defined as characterized by voluntary choice (Redley 2003).

Mental illness moved from being seen in the Middle Ages as sinful to a medicalized definition

in the twentieth century, diminishing its stigma. Self-injury's movement in the twenty-first century from under the medicalized rubric of mental illness to the voluntary choice of deviance has further destigmatized it for some, particularly those in the helping communities. To be seen as ill is to be derogated; to be seen as self-healing is normal.

Some have questioned the notion that self-injurers have the free will necessary to enact voluntary choice (Burstow 1992; Jeffreys 1997). They regard people "damaged" by traumatic events as psychologically unaware of the forces unconsciously driving their behavior (Liebling, Chipchase, and Velangi 1997). Radical feminists, in particular, regard people's claims that their self-injury is voluntarily chosen as a form of false consciousness, conditioned upon them as victims of the patriarchal establishment. They would, thus, dispute the claims made by our participants as false constructions of a liberalistic/radical individualistic/libertarian perspective that fetishizes choice, since they are blind to the structural forces that impinge on and condition them (Strong 1998; Jeffreys 2000). We see this position as denying the ascription of agency to politically incorrect behavior.

Although the moral passage of self-injury has been slight rather than dramatic, we have seen two types of shifts: in its participants and its symbolic meaning. Writing about "tinydopers," we (see: Adler and Adler 1978) posited how marijuana smoking might shed its deviant connotation as it was transmitted between different populations; it moved from stigmatized outgroups to ingroup deviants, *avantgarde* ingroup members, normal ingroup members, and finally to children. Second, any progression from group to group is accompa-

nied by comparable shifts in the connotations associated with a behavior, as Matthews and Wacker (2002) noted in discussing the moral passage of new practices from initially being defined as deviant to becoming eventually more centrist. They outlined a pathway wherein new ideas move from the fringe to the edge, to the realm of the cool, into the "next big thing," and finally to social convention. Self-injury's passage has traversed both of these tracks (although far from all the way), spreading demographically from the mentally ill ingroup deviants to a wide range of non-extraordinary adolescents, nearly a sacred group. At the same time, its social meaning has symbolically migrated from the fringe to the edge, but is not acceptable to the mainstream. These changing social definitions have potentially profound implications for the lives of self-injurers. Mitigation of their social stigma has diminished self-injurers' rejection, isolation, and alienation. The trend toward demedicalization may help free them from being technical objects of the psycho-medical establishment and from its institutional control (Gusfield 1985). The changing social meanings of self-injury are carving out a space in society where participants may assert their understanding that self-injury is the product of their active choice and free will; that, if it is not normalized, it is at least becoming more widely known and less stigmatized; and that, if not common, it is at least a persistent uncommon behavior.

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# Healthcare Information Technology's Relativity Challenges: Distortions Created by Patients' Physical Reality versus Clinicians' Mental Models and Healthcare Electronic Records

Ross Koppel 

FACMI University of Pennsylvania, USA

University at Buffalo (SUNY), USA

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the inconsistencies or distortions among three medical realities: patients' physical reality (as reflected in clinical observations, lab reports, and other "objective" measures); clinicians' mental models of patients' conditions; and how that information is represented in the patient's electronic chart—the electronic health record (EHR). We created a typology based on the semiotic triangle of "symbol," "thought or reference," and "referent."

Differing perspectives (or realities) are illustrated with examples from our observations in hospitals and medical facilities, interviews with clinicians, IT personnel and IT vendors, computer logs, and error reports. Scenarios/models enumerate how the differing perspectives can misalign to produce distortions in comprehension and treatment. These are categorized according to an emergent typology derived from the cases themselves and refined based on insights gained from the literature on interactive sociotechnical systems analysis, decision support science, and human-computer interaction.

The scenarios reflect the misalignment between patients' physical realities, clinicians' mental models, and EHRs, identifying five types of misrepresentation: IT data too narrowly focused; IT data too broadly focused; EHRs miss critical reality; data multiplicities—perhaps contradictory or confusing; distortions from data reflected back and forth across users, sensors, and others.

Conclusion: With humans, there is a physical reality and actors' mental models of that reality. In health-care, there is another player: the EHR/healthcare IT, which implicitly and explicitly reflects many mental models, facets of reality, and measures thereof that vary in reliability and consistency. EHRs are both microcosms and shapers of medical care.

**Ross Koppel**, Ph.D., is a sociologist who focuses on applied sociology, research methods, and medical informatics. He is a professor of medicine and sociology at the University of Pennsylvania and a professor of medicine at the University at Buffalo (SUNY). His work on healthcare information technology addresses patient safety, IT usability, and workflow. His work is widely acknowledged to have altered the profession's understanding of how to improve human-computer interactions and their impact on patient safety.

**email address:** [rkoppel@sas.upenn.edu](mailto:rkoppel@sas.upenn.edu)

In sociology, we often compare differing views of reality. In medicine, however, there is an assumption that we shall eventually find the truth; and differing views will coalesce around this truth. This paper examines how differing perspectives of medical "truth" are altered when we add the electronic health record (EHR)—the digital system that combines the clinical perspectives (called physician or nurse notes, any clinician's notes) with assumed objective measures (the lab reports and other measures, such as vitals, X-rays, MRIs, etc.). That is, the EHR becomes another player, and often the most important player, in the diagnosis and treatment of patients, in how clinical work is evaluated, how costs are billed, how the illness is labeled, and how the medical profession understands its actions and outcome. Here, we focus on distortions that often occur when we seek to integrate the technology with the other data. More, we seek to catalog and organize these distortions, and perhaps illuminate the structures underlying them.

Ostensibly, Healthcare Information Technology (HIT) directly embodies all the relevant features of a given medical reality and directly corresponds to clinicians' mental models (since the clinicians must work with it). But no one, not even HIT vendors, believes the HIT's design and populated data could correspond to the many differing clinicians' mental models, or even to any one clinician's mental model.

We first offer a typology of misunderstandings between patients' realities, clinicians' mental models of those realities, and representations of those realities within HIT—usually EHRs (also called Electronic Medical Records [EMRs]). Inspired by Norman (2002), we use the term "mental model"

in the general sense, as the way clinicians internally represent and then reason about actions in their clinical world. We then use this framework to examine different sets of troublesome but generic use cases. Last, we consider limitations and the next steps.

## Methods

Our scenarios, or use cases, were based on: the research literature, 27 years of our direct observations, work with our research partners, logs from hospital and clinic IT departments, implementation teams' reports, the U.S. Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ)'s *Guide to Reducing Unintended Consequences* (Jones et al. 2011), personal communications by users, attendance at several HIT vendor forums, hospital computer user help desk logs and discussions with help desk staff, the U.S. FDA's Center for Devices and Radiological Health reports and logs (which has reports of problems with health-care IT),<sup>1</sup> participation in Institute of Medicine—and the American Medical Informatics Association (AMIA)—task forces on usability (Sinsky et al. 2012; Middleton et al. 2013), AMIA's implementation forum (where medical informatics experts and clinicians discuss these issues), and additional reports from the field. Rather unexpectedly, the vendors of this equipment, which is advertised as over 99% foolproof, had many insights about the workaround used by clinicians to make the system function in the real world.

<sup>1</sup> See: U.S. Food and Drug Administration. CDRH Reports (<http://www.fda.gov/AboutFDA/CentersOffices/OfficeofMedicalProductsandTobacco/CDRH/CDRHReports/default.htm>; retrieved August 31, 2022) and U.S. Food and Drug Administration. Manufacturer and User Facility Device Experience Database (MAUDE) (<http://www.fda.gov/MedicalDevices/Device-RegulationandGuidance/PostmarketRequirements/ReportingAdverseEvents/ucm127891.htm>; retrieved August 31, 2022).

We also participated in scores of hospital sessions called “Failure Mode and Effects Analysis” (FMEA) meetings, where errors are discussed, their causes explored, and improvements offered. These are standard events in hospitals that are seeking to understand why a piece of equipment or a process has not worked as expected. Often these occur after a consequential error is unearthed.

In addition, as in most U.S. hospitals, there are Mortality and Morbidity (M&M) conferences. These are a required gathering of the clinical and technical staff whenever a patient is significantly harmed or killed. Recent trends seek to make these meetings learning experiences without blaming staff. The theory is to encourage open discussion in a non-punitive form. This perspective fits with the human-computer interaction perspective, which prefers the term “use error” rather than “user error.” The term is valuable in that it acknowledges that most errors are, in fact, due to poor device design rather than lazy or careless users. Of course, the non-blaming ethic is sometimes violated.

Note also that the literature on the transition from paper to computers is no longer relevant to this research. That shift occurred more than a decade ago in all of our observation sites. There were no paper documents involved in this research. Even the MAR (previously the nurses’ paper guide to medication administration) was replaced by the eMAR, the computerized task list for nurses. The only paper involved were labels—the paper inserted into patients’ wrist bands or occasional paper labels attached to IV bags or the envelopes housing the medication.

*Triangulation beyond the semiotic triangle:* The work reflects a very intentional triangulation of 1. observations, 2. interviews (with vendors, clinicians, IT

personnel, and trainers), 3. shadowing, and 4. systematic data analysis of over half-a-million scans of patients’ wrist bands and medication labels in addition to the tens of thousands of documented reasons for overrides of / workarounds to the system (typed by nurses and others to explain why the system did not work as designed). These are the critical workarounds that allow patient care to continue in the face of inadequate software design or rigid procedure manuals that fail to reflect the reality of care. We also participated in the many meetings noted above, which we augmented with later interviews with the clinicians and technology staff.

Central to all of our analyses were the underlying theories of how technology is used in any organization, often called Socio-Technical Analysis (Harrison, Koppel, and Bar-Lev 2007; Jones et al. 2011; Sinsky et al. 2012), which recognized that “technology-in-use” is never static and that there are recursive interactions between the organization, its rules, its devices, and the personnel who are the actors in this setting. Technology changes the organization, its processes, and its rules, while it is being changed by all of those factors. Moreover, because most of the study team were sociologists (2) or industrial engineers (1), the nurses, who are the primary users of the technology, felt it was safer to talk to us than to the usual hospital hierarchy of physicians and administrators. Also, these interactions—among the clinicians, between the clinicians and patients, and between the objects (e.g., barcoded medications and the computer system)—are classic examples of symbolic interaction’s underlying premises on the role of individual interpretations of any action and the role of context in interpreting behavior. The workarounds make sense in the landscape of the mission of the hospital, healthcare, and clinicians, even if they violate the designated part of the task the nurs-

es are fulfilling. Meaning, as always, is negotiated in contexts.

*Constructing the typology:* To construct our typology, we employed a *grounded theory* approach, amassing many scenarios/problem cases, and then categorizing them according to an emergent typology derived from the cases themselves. This was followed by iterative re-examinations incorporating insights from: Interactive Sociotechnical Systems Analysis (ISTA) (Harrison et al. 2007), with its emphasis on the recursive nature of HIT and workflow; from Decision Support Science's rigorous examination of parameters, constraints, and optimizations (Culnan 1987; Mingers and Stowell 1997; Kagolovsky et al. 1998); and from the Human-Computer Interaction literature (HCI) (Jansen, Spink, and Saracevic 2000; Norman 2002; Wickens et al. 2004; Solskinnsbakk and Gulla 2010; Kaptelinin n.d.), a natural fit with our focus on usability, flexibility, and adaptability. Typical of grounded theory methods, the categories underwent repeated modifications.

## A Typology

We offer five types (categories) of miscommunication among: 1. the patient's physical reality, 2. clinician's mental models, and 3. HIT. Undoubtedly, there are areas of possible overlap, but we have made every effort to disambiguate and clarify.

Note: Almost all of our examples are directly from EHRs/EMRs, but a few are from their digital partners, collectively called HIT. These are: *Computerized Provider (Physician) Order Entry (CPOE)* systems, the *Barcoded Medication Administration (BCMA)* technology, and the *electronic Medication Administration Record (e-MAR)*. Where appropriate, we name the specific sub-system, but for the sake of consistency, we generally use the terms "EHR," "EMR," or "HIT."

We generally understand physical reality through our mental models of that reality. As noted, modern healthcare settings have another player: the HIT, which implicitly and explicitly reflects many mental models, facets of reality, and measures thereof that vary in reliability and validity. The HIT, thus, is both a medium of communication and a representation of much information—some of which is conflicting, some of which is missing, and all of which interacts with the mental models of designers and users. It is both a microcosm of medical care and it shapes medical care.

Looking at our initial set of trouble scenarios, we illustrated the types of mis-correspondence and provided a structured way of organizing them.

- Let RW denote the space of underlying patient realities in the real world—usually the patient's condition, vitals, and test results.
- Let MM denote the space of clinician mental models. [Where relevant, we will add a subscript to indicate the clinician involved.]
- Let IT denote the data and language of the EHR.

Strictly speaking, our representation of the "real world" contrasts with clinician mental models and the EHR since we focus on how these two (MM and IT) correspond or mis-correspond to the underlying medical reality, the "real world" here. Of course, all three are parts of reality.

Moreover, we note that the three-part model outlined above is a simplified version of many differing perspectives and hierarchies. That is, in almost all cases, more than one physician is involved in the patient's care, each with a differing perspective, specialist focus with accompanying different sets of medical images and lab results. Often,

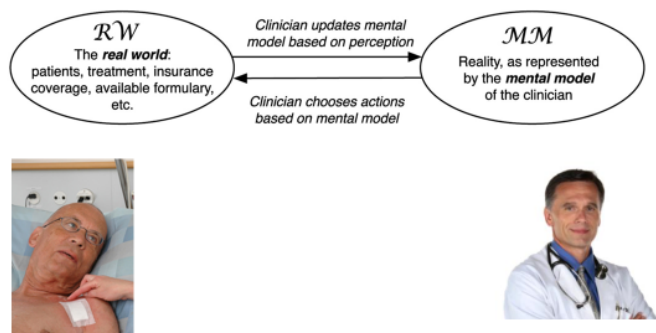
also, there is more than one institution (e.g., previous hospitalizations, other clinicians, history of other treatments, etc.). In the U.S., also, hospitals have extensive administrative leadership that sets policy and budgets. Last, and often most powerful, the final decider about treatment is frequently the patient’s insurance company. Each insurance company has different cost arrangements with the hospitals for what and how much is funded; and

for what treatments and pharmaceutical choices are allowed. The insurance rules often determine the care.

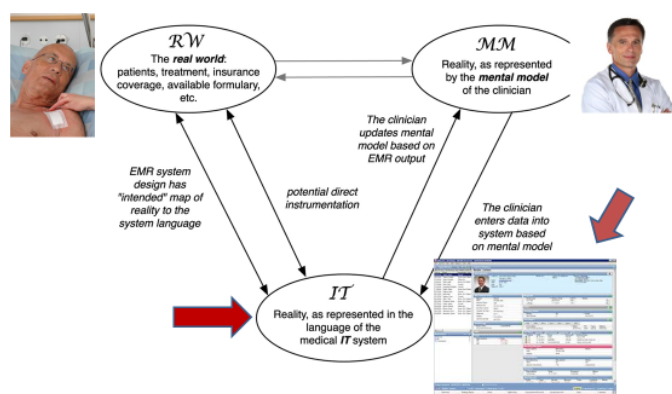
**To the underlying models:** Figure 1 shows the initial situation where the clinician works with the underlying medical reality via their mental model. Figure 2 shows the more complicated picture when we add HIT.

Figures 1 and 2. Clinician mental models of patient conditions and their interaction with EHRs

### Patient Reality *and* Doctor’s Mental Model



### Adding in the Chart (Electronic Health Record – EHR)



Source: Self-elaboration (diagrams credit: Sean W. Smith; images: found and adapted by Ross Koppel).

What is relevant here are the nuances of the various mappings between the spaces. When a clinician sees some particular EHR screen or menu from the IT, what model (MM) do they construct? Does this model correspond usefully to the reality (RW) that generated this mental model? Furthermore, if two different clinicians see the same EHR screen, will they draw

the same conclusions about the correspondence to reality? Within a typical hospital, there will be thousands of clinicians in many different groupings. There may also be 150 to 400 different IT systems communicating with the HIT. Table 1 presents the problems with these mappings and provides a way to organize the trouble scenarios we discuss below.



**Table 1. Mapping distortions and trouble scenarios**

Distortion Categories		
<i>Incompatibility Type</i>	<i>Incompatibility Description</i>	<i>Sketch</i>
Type I: <i>IT too coarse</i>	Significantly different scenarios in RW and/or MM are represented in the same way in IT. [Examples: 1. Problem lists that do not permit sufficient qualification or classifications, for example, left side CVA (cerebrovascular accident) vs. just stroke, or inactive asthma. Or, 2. only indicating the patient has cancer is woefully insufficient to be useful to oncologists.]	
Type II: <i>IT too fine</i>	Scenarios identical to the clinician are represented significantly differently in IT [Examples: 1. Very granular categories within ICD-10 may reflect a level of certainty or understanding that does not exist for a specific patient. The (false) specificity may misguide other clinicians. 2. Unconfirmed suggestions of one very specific subcategory of several possible cancers may lead to premature closure of analysis.]	
Type III: <i>missing reality</i>	Scenarios or scenario details significant to the clinician are not represented at all in IT. [Examples: 1. Only lab reports and medications are listed; not symptoms or history. 2. The EMR implicitly assumes COWs (computers on wheels) are always network-connected, but the clinician encounters a reality where they are not.]	
Type IV: <i>multiplicity</i>	Different communities of clinicians may construct different mental models (and hence infer different realities) from the same representation in the IT. [Example: the EMR reflects misleading/distracting judgments by staff or family members in addition to many lab reports with alternative interpretations.]	
Type V: <i>looking glass</i>	When a clinician scenario is reflected into the IT and back, it becomes something rather different and surprising. [Example: clearly incorrect sensor data, which a clinician would reject, becomes enshrined in the EMR, which now describes a reality that never existed.]	

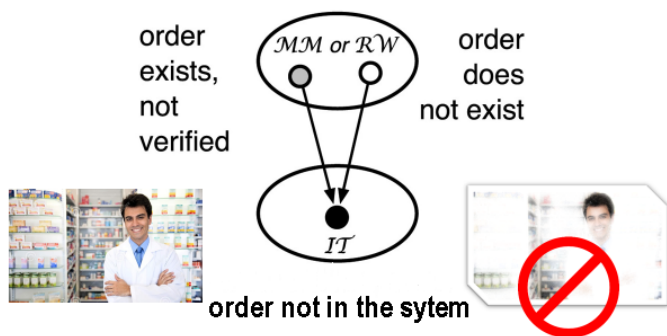
Note: the scenarios shown below are selected from among 45 developed by Smith and Koppel (2014). Readers may wish to refer to that paper to view the full set of scenarios.

Source: Self-elaboration (diagrams credit: Sean W. Smith).

The scenarios presented below mirror the many sorts of errors reflected in the typology—illustrating actual examples of patient harm or potential harm caused by the distortions. Later, we expand the scenarios to consider additional participants, that is, additional clinicians, EHRs from other hospitals or institutions, family members of the patients, and, of course, the patients themselves, as they are not allowed to view and comment on their electronic health records.

**Schrodinger’s Pharmacy:** Doctor ordered a medicine, but it has not yet been “verified” (approved) by the pharmacy. The order exists, but some EHR screens do not show that (because the pharmacist did not yet say OK). The order exists, and the order does not exist. Alas, another doctor, not seeing the first order, can order twice the amount (“double-dosed”).

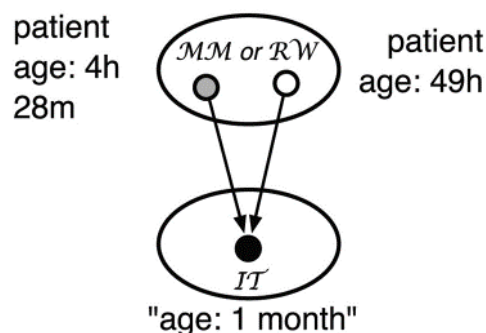
**Figure 3. Schrodinger’s pharmacy: ordered medication not yet visible to the doctor**



Source: Self-elaboration (diagram credit: Sean W. Smith; images: found and adapted by Ross Koppel).

**Baby Age/Ages:** For newborn babies, precise age (in hours or minutes) is often needed to determine treatment, such as medication dosage. However, EHRs often do not allow fine-grained age information, just the number of months or years.

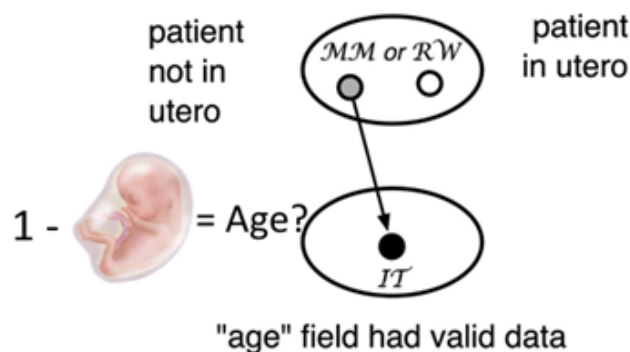
**Figure 4. Baby ages: lack of fine-needed metrics for baby ages**



Source: Self-elaboration (diagram credit: Sean W. Smith).

**Negative Age:** When treated in utero, a fetus may need to be represented in EHR as a patient. But, the EHR age category does not have negative ages, that is, “three months before birth” (age = - 3). Some systems use gestational age, but there is no consistent metric for that.

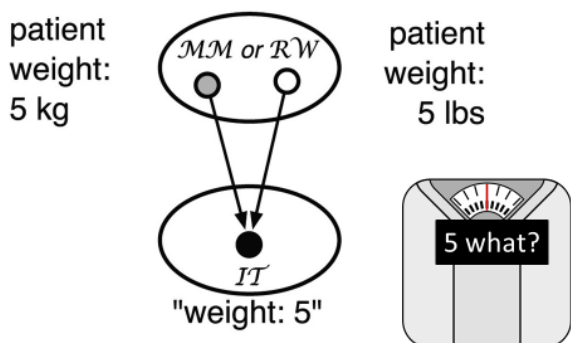
**Figure 5. Inability to insert age of patient for in utero treatment, that is, negative age**



Source: Self-elaboration (diagram credit: Sean W. Smith; image: found and adapted by Ross Koppel).

**Patient Weight(s)?** In the U.S., patients typically give weights in pounds; but for kids, all medications use the metric system. Failure to specify can lead to 2.2-fold overdosing. For babies, this equals death.

**Figure 6. Errors from the use of both metric and imperial measures**

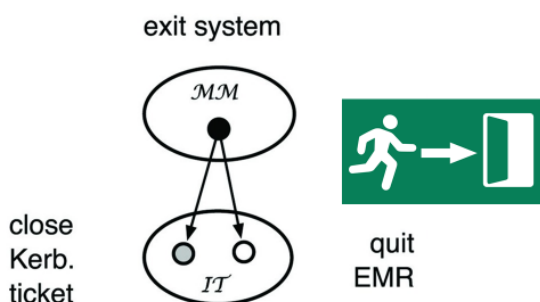


Source: Self-elaboration (diagram credit: Sean W. Smith; image: found and adapted by Ross Koppel).

**How to End?** Doctors see several ways to exit the EMR system: CLOSE; EXIT, QUIT, et cetera, but each has a very different meaning to the EHR. Are data saved or not? Is the new information now part of the record, or not?

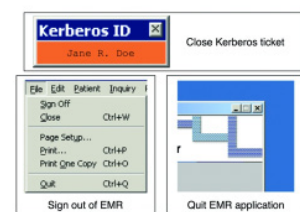
**Who Is the "Patient"?** Is it the IVF zygote (in vitro fertilization), later fetus in utero, and later, the baby born; all the same person, but may have three different records in the EHR.

**Figure 7. Confusing terms to end EHR sessions**



**ALSO: "END, FINISH, SUBMIT, NEXT, DONE, CLOSE"**

**Example....**



Computer-savvy clinicians saw three ways to exit the system as equivalent.

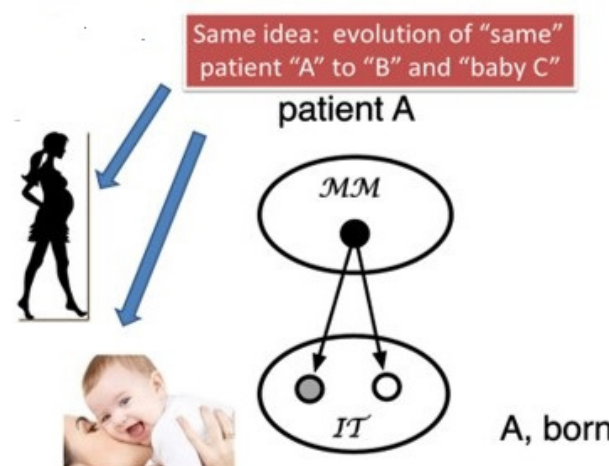


The system treated the one approach so differently that users were compelled to tape up warnings.

Source: Self-elaboration (diagram credit: Sean W. Smith; images: found and adapted by Ross Koppel).

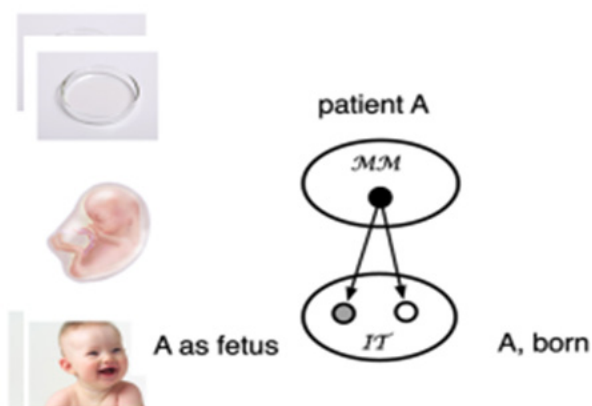
**Same or New or Two Patients?** Similarly, in many medical facilities, a woman may be seen as general patient A, a maternity patient B, and then a mother with a new baby C, who becomes a patient at the facility—and the EHR has three separate records.

**Figure 8. Different terms for the same patient: zygote, fetus, baby**



Source: Self-elaboration (diagram credit: Sean W. Smith; images: found and adapted by Ross Koppel).

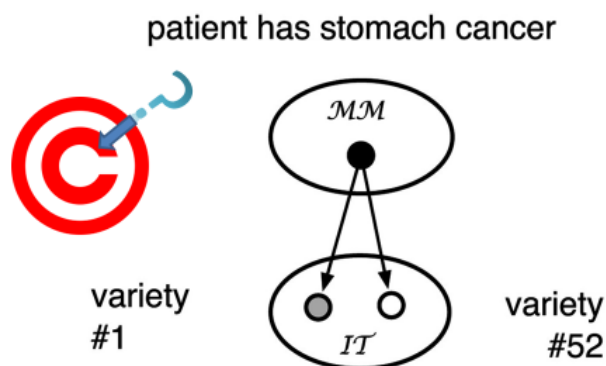
**Figure 9. Emerging terms for emerging patients: “patient,” “maternity patient,” “baby”**



Source: Self-elaboration (diagram credit: Sean W. Smith; images: found and adapted by Ross Koppel).

**What Cancer? Which Cancer?** This is a real case of false specificity: The doctor says his patient has stomach cancer and sends the patient to a specialist. But, EHR requires the doctor to pick a stomach cancer from a drop-down menu of scores of different varieties of stomach cancer. No option for “I don’t know—that’s why I am referring the patient to a specialist” will probably misdirect the oncologist.

**Figure 10. False specificity of diagnoses**



Source: Self-elaboration (diagram credit: Sean W. Smith; image: found and adapted by Ross Koppel).

**The smell of Breath:** Doctors have been using the smell of breath for thousands of years to diagnose illness. But, EHR categories do not include that option. Note: with a paper system, doctors could write it on their notes.

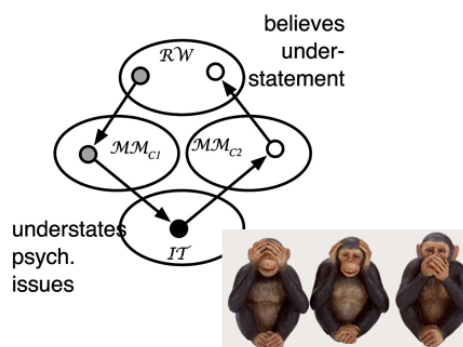
**Figure 11. Missing categories in EHRs**



Source: Self-elaboration (images: found and adapted by Ross Koppel).

**Intentional Understatement:** Sometimes doctors lie or distort to protect patients, for example, to help get the patient’s insurance to cover their convalescence for another week or two, to avoid jail (e.g., drug use), to hide pregnancy, to help a worker get a job, or to avoid a kind of work the patient cannot perform.

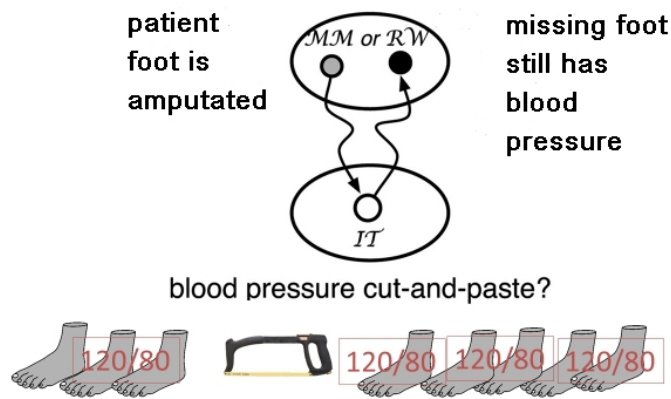
**Figure 12. Intentional understatement or deception of diagnoses or treatment time**



Source: Self-elaboration (diagram credit: Sean W. Smith; image: found and adapted by Ross Koppel).

**Duplication and Paste/Cut and Paste/Amputate and Paste:** The ease of “copy-and-paste” with digital data creates errors. One patient’s EHR data showed three weeks of the exact same foot blood pressure readings. But, the nurse had just re-entered the same earlier blood pressure 21 times over. Alas, that foot had been amputated. It was the same blood pressure, but it should have been zero, not the blood pressure from before the operation.

Figure 13. Copy and paste errors or deception

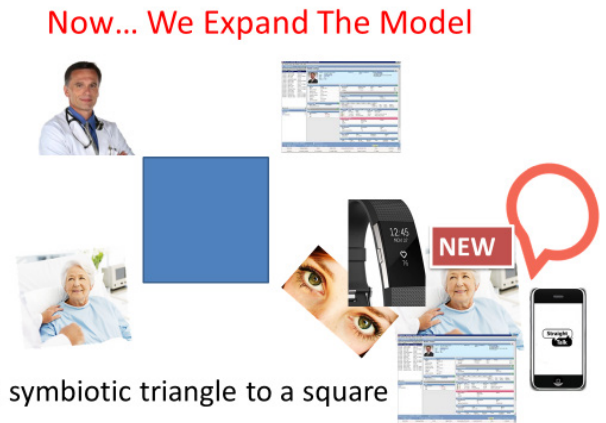


Source: Self-elaboration (diagram credit: Sean W. Smith; images: found and adapted by Ross Koppel).

## Expanding the Model from Three to Four Elements

Here, we expand the model to include a new, but essential, player in the process: The patient! It is no longer a triangle, but a square, where the patient has a role in addition to the physician, the lab reports, and the EHR.

Figure 14. From symbiotic triangle to four elements, that is, adding the patient’s perspective



Source: Self-elaboration (images: found and adapted by Ross Koppel).

In our first scenario of this expanded model, the new element—the patient—presents a conflict because the patient’s involvement may compromise the treatment process. That is, new laws in the U.S. dictate that the patient has the right to see the doctor’s notes. This has many advantages, and some dangers. On the plus side, it gives the patient the opportunity to better understand what the doctor is thinking and conveying to their colleagues. It also gives the patient an opportunity to review their data and correct errors. Patients may also use the information to search the web for more information or to consult with other clinicians. On the negative side, doctors may not feel free to fully explain what they want to convey to their colleagues and insert it into the medical record, the failure of which may seriously compromise the patient’s care and, indeed, well-being. Also, there is a danger that a family member may see information that should be confidential between doctor and patient. Perhaps worse, patients may be horrified to learn via a web link that they have cancer or that they

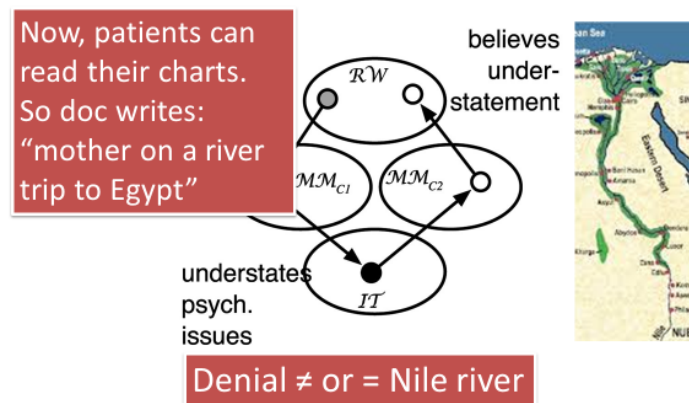
have been classified as “morbidly obese.” Last, a lot of medical terminology and acronyms are unknown to patients. The term SOB commonly refers to someone who is difficult or nasty, that is, a son of a bitch. But, in medical terms, it means shortness of breath. Similarly, some medical phrasing appears hostile, for example, it is common to see a text such as “patient denies smoking” or “patient denies drug abuse.” This is frequently misunderstood as the doctor doubting the patient’s statements. In reality, it is an attempt to convey the uncertainty of any patient’s claims about their lives. There is also a danger of patients’ not understanding the complexity of a diagnosis. Some seemingly dire laboratory reports may be benign, for example, some cancers are easily removed and do not affect the patient’s well-being. Other reports from radiologists or pathologists may require more information to understand, for example, additional data from linked laboratory reports.

**Intentional Understatement (Another Scenario):**

The first case is from a psychiatrist who was seeking to explain to her colleagues that the mother was in denial about the daughter’s (the patient’s) condition. The psychiatrist was cryptic and wrote: “the mother was on a river trip in Egypt,” to convey—via the pun between the word for the river “Nile” and the English word “denial” that the patient’s mother did not recognize her daughter’s condition. Alas, the patient read the chart and insisted her mother had never been to Africa and that the doctor was wrong.

Another big problem is the disclosure of medical information about teenagers, where the parents may have the right to see the record that may contain private information.

**Figure 15. Intentional deception in the EHR to alert colleagues, but not alert the patient or her family**



Source: Self-elaboration (diagram credit: Sean W. Smith; image: found and adapted by Ross Koppel).

**Figure 16. Possible conflicts of information access: Keeping teenager’s medical data from parents**

**Teenagers**

- Who can see data?
- Who prohibited from seeing data?
- How private?
- What’s private?
- What of parents’ genetic data?
- What of schools and the government?



Source: Self-elaboration (image: found and adapted by Ross Koppel).

Yet another aspect of patient involvement that is both a blessing and a curse is the digital self—where patients’ watches and other devices report medical information to the EHR constantly. The data load may be overwhelming, and it would be understandable for clinicians to miss critical information in the

avalanche of constant information, most of which is of little interest.

On the other hand, no medical information is necessarily benign. A woman may have had a pregnancy test in the hope that she was not pregnant; seemingly good news. But, if the woman is not having sex with her current partner, the fact that she has ordered a test—even if negative—is hardly neutral information.

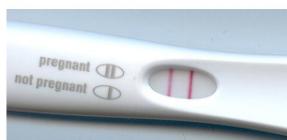
**Figure 17. The digital self: problems of incorporating and analyzing self-reported data**



Source: Self-elaboration (image: found and adapted by Ross Koppel).

**Figure 18. Dangers of displaying any medical data to families or caregivers**

No Medical Data Are Benign



Source: Self-elaboration (image: found and adapted by Ross Koppel).

Now, we explore the consequences of expanding the model even more. Beyond considering the com-

plications and advantages when we include the patient, we include other clinicians and other EHRs (patient records and charts) from other medical institutions. This also highlights the fact that the chart is always changing, with new data added and corrections to the existing data. It is hard enough with one chart. But, with more charts, some reflecting other days and times, the possibility of confusion and error is magnified.

**Figure 19. Added complexity when including several clinicians and data updates in the EHR**

WE CAN EXPAND THIS MODEL EVEN MORE...



- There are several clinicians

More than just one chart, e.g., patient and charts from other medical facilities



- Chart is often changing; updated; new data; new insights



Source: Self-elaboration (images: found and adapted by Ross Koppel).

Thus, we must also incorporate the mental models and the data from other clinicians and other laboratories. We, now, often have conflicting perspectives and differing datasets. Last, the patient may have family and other people who have additional perspectives and desired outcomes. For example, the family may wish to stop treatment and have their relative return home or be placed in a different institution.

## Discussion

There is a growing literature on HIT dissatisfaction (Harrison et al. 2007; Cimino 2013), and industry practitioners worry that 70% of such installations fail (“IT Projects Have a 70% Failure Rate: Don’t Let Your Hospital IT Projects Fail” 2012). Analyzing these scenarios suggests at least one common thread is woven by IT systems that fail to correspond to the medical workflow: implementing EHRs introduces an additional representation of reality—one that comes between the clinician and the patient and exists in manifold forms among the many clinicians treating patients. When these representations fail to match the patients’ conditions and clinicians’ mental models, EHRs can distort reality, which it nevertheless continues to neatly array in specified columns and rows.

We do not fault the EHRs for any of these difficulties. Any representation distorts, be it paper, logs, reports, or even ontologies designed to reduce confusion. But, what may be different about computerized HIT as compared to earlier paper-based systems (built with and on the natural affordances of paper) is the rapid permeation of interconnected IT into the medical workflow, coupled with the relative inflexibility of computerized systems, which do not know “when to look the other way” (Felten 2002). In addition, HIT is freighted with additional and extraordinary requirements of documentation, categorization, ordering, responding to (and generating) alerts of varying utility, accommodating legacy limitations, and billing. Moreover, HIT must also operate in a diverse interdisciplinary environment dictated by professional societies, state and federal boards, payers, unpredictability, no control over inputs (patients and their severity), limited control over patients’ actions, and innu-

merable unknowns and unreliable data. We add, lastly, that many of the key players are untrained in the HIT’s use and may be mastering a complex subject while learning to operate the HIT, which is itself undergoing frequent modifications. All of these factors limit user interface flexibilities and thus may influence responsiveness to clinicians’ mental models and patients’ always-emergent realities.

Moreover, many times the EHRs do a dramatically better job of reflecting reality than paper ever could. The instant availability of graphic representations that would be nearly impossible to construct with paper records offers alternative views of laboratory reports (e.g., shifting timelines or overlays of results); omnipresent data means consultants and others can view records anywhere and anytime; and laboratory results and medical images can be sent to several clinicians simultaneously. Supervision by experienced clinicians no longer needs to be constrained by physical space.

Another approach might be to look at how the heterogeneity of medical workflows may require each HIT system to be custom-engineered, hindering the economies of engineering investment that benefit IT by supporting more homogeneous and universal tasks, such as word processing. As the line goes, “if you’ve seen one EHR installation, you’ve seen one EHR installation.” In addition, even if workflows were similar from institution to institution, the number and types of other IT systems that link with any given EHR installation are vast, numbering in the hundreds, with each requiring special codes and connecting algorithms. Every EHR, no matter how similar to its sister, will be different when running in a different institution.



In response to these challenges, our work centered on cataloging these “hard-to-use cases” (instead of the more typical focus on “use cases”). Prior work on computer decision support for clinicians (DSS) (e.g., Culnan 1987; Mingers and Stowell 1997; Kagolovsky et al. 1998; Harrison et al. 2007) was beneficial by emphasizing the interaction of workflow and HIT, which is a major theme of the clusters. Prior work on HIT (e.g., Jansen et al. 2000; Norman 2002; Wickens et al. 2004; Solskinnsbakk and Gulla 2010; Kaptelinin n.d.) led us to consider the role of the EHR user's mental model concerning the EHR system itself and the medical reality in which the user must act. The work by Harrison, Koppel, and Bar-Lev (2007), Heath and Mondada (2019), and Luff, Heath, and Sanchez Svensson (2008) stressed the need for, and absence of, the malleability of the software. In this sense, the previous theories helped us in generating the clusters of hard-to-use cases, and of our resulting typology, which builds on and extends the prior work.

To help solve these problems, we need to better identify and reduce incorrect mappings between HIT and patients' bodies and between HIT and clinicians' mental models. For example, suppose the clinician could press a button, take a screenshot (e.g., Cooley and Smith 2012), and scribble on it with a magic stylus. Clinicians could then correct or annotate the EHR to reflect distortions, for example:

- Type I: When the IT language is too coarse: clinicians could circle the checkbox and say, “there are more things in heaven and earth than your model allows.”
- Type II: When the IT language is too fine: clinicians could circle several items on the EHR's screen and annotate, “it's one of these, but not just ‘this one.’”

- Type III: When the IT language is missing or “too small”: clinicians could say, “you're missing this thing I care about.”
- Type IV: When the IT language lends itself to a multiplicity of interpretations: things are trickier; maybe the second clinician could note, “this is what I thought this meant,” and the system could forward this back to a representative of the first clinician.
- Type V: When the IT offers a distorted-looking glass reflection: clinicians could note, “this is very, very wrong.”

Such an approach could also help with ambiguities and provide the affordances of paper, so lacking in most digital interfaces. When clinicians are uncertain and/or the data are ambiguous (as is often the case), clinicians could reflect on the ambiguity and suggest a range of possible options. When clinicians were uncertain about the most appropriate consultant, they could indicate the ambiguity and request clarification by specialists.

HIT will also benefit by improving how we discover and remediate these problems (Koppel 2013). This requires work by local IT teams, requests to vendors, analyses of linkages with other IT systems, ongoing observations of clinicians' work, focus groups, interviews, et cetera—or, most probably, a combination of these methods. Remediation will require working with all parties and, perhaps more importantly, empowering clinicians and others to observe problems and request changes and improvements. Most important, problems that have been reported and requests for improvements or modifications must be addressed. Adding enhanced awareness of difficulties to the existing frustration will only increase alienation and learned helplessness. Encouraging clinicians to act

without subsequent action on the IT side is perhaps worse than doing nothing.

As discussed above, we also need to recognize and address the role of the myriad other IT systems that interact with each HIT system. Problem-solving often requires understanding how several IT systems work together or do not.

We need to recognize the role of workarounds as both needed solutions and as symptoms not of user laziness, but system design failure, or at least system non-responsiveness—and we need to figure out how to fix these designs.

## Limitations

There is no listing of distortions generated by the interactions of patients' physical reality, clinicians' mental models, and HIT. We used many information sources, but there are inevitably hundreds of additional examples and scores of more use case scenarios that will emerge. We, therefore, make no claims of completeness. Also, given the delicacy of some of the situations and the contractual restrictions preventing users of commercial HIT systems from publicly discussing "flaws" (Koppel and Kreda 2009), a systematic collection of these examples is probably impossible. In that, this paper is a conceptual typology of problem scenarios, data source limitations are obvious, but only temporarily problematic. A new scenario will be offered and evaluated. If they do not apply, they will be quickly removed from consideration. If they are helpful in improving HIT, they will be included.

Another limitation is that we did not extend this analysis to include the perspectives of patients, their families, and the many other clinicians who

may have competing, supportive, or very divergent views and desired outcomes. Including these additional—and often critically important perspectives and data—would expand the model from the triangle we present here to a very different shape, perhaps extending to hyperspace. But, the reality of healthcare indeed extends to these additional dimensions, and we encourage others to pursue such new models.

To our knowledge, this is a new typology, incorporating the commonalities of HIT functions and medical workflow. There are, therefore, undoubtedly overlaps or missing elements in our typology. We assume further refinements are probable. Also, we did not include a separate node for patients' mental models—a most worthy addition, which we hope will be addressed in future research.

## Conclusion

We have tried to present our methodology for the discovery and documentation of a process that claimed almost perfect accuracy when followed according to the listed procedures using the technology as presented. In contrast, our several methods of observation, interviews, and data analysis revealed that relying on the technology and the rules would prevent hundreds of patients every day from receiving their needed medications. Our effort was an attempt to attenuate the gaps among patients' realities, clinicians' mental models, and representations of those realities in EHRs—and perhaps to offer some insights into how clinicians gather information about patients' conditions via EHRs. We also hope our typology and scenarios enable HIT designers and implementers to reduce their systems' ambiguities, missing elements, over-generalized or too granular categories, obfuscated data, and un-

certain navigation. The scenarios we present, then, are intended to guide both our understanding of misrepresentations (the typologies) and as tools for addressing each distortion or inadequate presentation of reality. The typology is, thus, a first step to making HIT work better with patients, clinicians' cognitive models, data (structured, unstructured, misclassified), and our representations of all three.

## Acknowledgments

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Problems: A Typology of How Patients' Physical Reality, Clinicians' Mental Models, and Healthcare Information Technology Differ" (*Journal of the American Medical Informatics Association*, 2014). The author is grateful for the use cases provided by the members of the AMIA implementation forum; thousands of clinicians who routinely contribute to vendor forums, the FDA MAUDE database, and to concerned scholars of HIT (to whom they send screenshots and use cases); and CMIOs and healthcare IT staff who daily work to keep the peace and HIT operational. I also thank Sara Sinclair, Avery Yen, Chen Qin, and Vijay Kothari for their contributions to the catalog.

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# Is Homicide a Turning Point in the Life of Perpetrators? A Narrative Analysis of the Life Stories of Marginalized and Middle-Class Male Homicide Offenders in Metropolitan Buenos Aires, Argentina

**Martín Hernán Di Marco**   
University of Oslo, Norway

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## Keywords:

Homicide; Violence; Perpetrators; Narratives; Life Story; Turning-Points; Masculinity; Argentina

**Abstract:** This paper aims to analyze the relevance given to violent deaths and imprisonment by male homicide perpetrators in their biographical reconstructions. Drawing on narrative criminology, this study examines the offenders' emic terms, rationalities, and stories. The analysis is based on seventy-three purposefully selected narrative-biographical interviews and field observations in prisons and homes of former convicts (2016-2020) in Metropolitan Buenos Aires, Argentina. The corpus was analyzed following an inductive thematic coding strategy using ATLAS.ti. Three central narratives about homicide and incarceration emerged: "opportunity," "rock bottom," and "disruptive." For most, homicide was described as a biographical opportunity to rethink their lives, pursue new pathways, and "stabilize" a previously uncontrolled lifestyle. However, homicides perpetrated by respondents with higher socioeconomic status were disruptive events. Participants used stoic rationality—the positive appraisal of painful experiences—to structure their sense-making and stories of violence. This rationality permeated perpetrators' presentations of themselves, their turning points and lived experiences, and the violence performed and suffered. This paper grapples with the widespread assumption that homicide is a radical change in the lives of offenders and questions the universal meaning of violent death. Performing violence is not only neutralized but is also seen as an expected and inaugural event in life stories, dependent on the worldviews of the social actors.

**Martín Hernán Di Marco** is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Department of Criminology and Sociology of Law at the University of Oslo. He holds a Ph.D. in Social Sciences from Buenos Aires University. His research focuses on narrative criminology, masculinity, and lethal violence. Among

his current research projects is Crime in Latin America (CRIMLA), which focuses on developing culturally sensitive life-course criminology.

**email address:** [mh.dimarco@gmail.com](mailto:mh.dimarco@gmail.com)

**H**ow do homicide perpetrators make sense of their crime? How significant is such an event in their life stories? Is homicide perpetration a turning point in their lives? This paper aims to analyze the relevance given to violent death and imprisonment by male homicide perpetrators in Metropolitan Buenos Aires, Argentina (2016-2020) by examining their biographical reconstructions and the turning point descriptions in their narratives of the crime. By doing so, this study grapples with the widespread assumption that homicide is a radical change in the lives of offenders and questions the universal meaning of violent death.

Homicide has been a longstanding research topic in criminology and social sciences (Brookman, Maguire, and Maguire 2017). However, this phenomenon has largely been examined via quantitative methods, especially for patterns, victims' and victimizers' profiles, and criminogenic characteristics (Innes, Tucker, and Innes 2017; Dobash and Emerson Dobash 2020). The pre-eminence of statistical secondary data analyses in the study of lethal violence has been related to methodological issues (i.e., barriers to accessing the primary population, difficulties of conducting fieldwork in prison, or with former convicts, etc.), but also to institutional barriers, from the IRBs and prisons' authorities, and the frustrations and blocks experienced by researchers involved in dealing with prison systems' staff and inmates (Liebling 1999; Patenaude 2004). Consequently, few studies have endeavored to examine the rationalities and stories of violent criminals (Presser 2008; Imbusch and Veit 2011; Hartmann 2017), especially in Latin America (Birkbeck 2020:121; Di Marco and Sy 2020).<sup>1</sup>

A small number of studies have used perpetrators' life stories to understand the significance of homicide. In the extant literature on perpetrator homicide, linking the crime to a lack of adjustment to stress and trauma (Ferrito, Needs, and Adshead 2016), the use of neutralization techniques to circumvent shame from the crime (Ferrito et al. 2016), and the struggle of perpetrators to convey their suffering and articulate painful experiences (McKendy 2006) have been highlighted. Envisioning a homicide as a turning point in the perpetrator's life trajectory remains mixed. Life-course studies have concluded that imprisonment may constitute a turning point in the perpetrator's criminal trajectory (Sampson and Laub 1993; Cid and Martí 2012). Alternatively, other studies have shown that violent deaths are normalized and not seen as a major life event, depending on their life courses and socialization contexts (Liles 2018), that the relevance given to the crime varies according to the perpetrators' worldviews (Birkbeck 2020; Gabaldón 2020), and that homicide can be presented—in the context of a research interview—as an irrelevant event (Birkbeck 2020). The justifications and neutralization strategies used by offenders (Rodríguez 2020) and the use of prevailing narratives to account for the crime (Presser 2008; Di Marco and Evans 2020) have been recent strategies to analyze the sense-making of homicide.

Micro-sociological studies have looked into the experiences and rituals that take place during physical confrontations, allowing "high resolution" analytical descriptions of violent deaths (Innes, Tucker, and Innes 2017:12). Stemming from the concept of situational transactions, as contextualized interactions in ritualized stages (Luckenbill 1972),

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<sup>1</sup> Katz (2002), Presser and Sandberg (2015), and Sandberg, Copes, and Pedersen (2019) have extensively reviewed criminological

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and sociological literature about this topic and discussed the tendency to undermine the stories and experiences of offenders.

radical interactionism has shown that male-male confrontations imply an honor contest (Athens 1977), a mutual agreement of aggression, and a defense of status (Polk 1999). Humiliation and shame are key emotions in the performance of violence (Athens 1977), and violence can be understood as “an attempt to replace shame with self-esteem” (Gilligan 1999:111).

Moreover, Katz (1988) suggested that “righteous manslaughter” is shaped by morality and emotions. In the actor’s experience, violence is based on the belief in the action’s justice. This approach to homicidal action is grounded in the premise that background biographical factors (such as socioeconomic status) are not enough to explain the action itself (Katz 2002). Collins (2008) has argued that, since violence is usually an unsuccessful project, key aspects to understanding its performance are the resources that actors use to overcome confrontational fear and tension. More recently, Ceretti and Natali (2020) proposed the concept of violent cosmology to complement this micro-sociological approach to a narrative understanding of violence.

These interactionist studies coincide in inquiring about meaning by looking into the self as a situated process (Athens 1977): meaning and *in situ* rituals are a necessary dyad. Nonetheless, empirical micro-sociological studies of homicide have been marginal in the field of homicide (Hartman 2017), mainly due to the methodological challenges of observing violent deaths. Access to data or the epistemological limitations of analyzing interviews to inquire about interactions are still a matter of discussion (Collins 2008; Hartman 2017).

From a broader perspective, the voices of incarcerated people have been a focal point of critical crim-

inology to understand inmates’ perspectives, their conflicts, and the effects of the penal device. Gaucher (2002:7) suggests that storytelling can be a means of survival, a strategy to “withstand the dislocation that prison life creates.” This approach, as it has been noted (Briggs 2011), allows for exploring the nuances of sense-making and highlights storytelling as a form of identity building.

Particularly, narrative criminology has contributed to the understanding of crime by looking into the stories told by offenders and analyzing their sense-making (Presser 2008; Sandberg and Ugelvik 2016; Sandberg et al. 2019). The sense-making is relevant to comprehend how perpetrators convey meaning to violence and to show that meanings shape past and future actions (Presser and Sandberg 2015:1). Drawing on neutralization theory (Sykes and Matza 1957), ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967), and sociology of accounts (Scott and Lyman 1968; Orbach 1997), the narrative approach has shown the array of resources at hand that actors situationally use to account for their actions. Similarly, desistance theory has highlighted how stories affect the persistence or desistance of violence performance, and the offenders’ subjectivity (Maruna and Copes 2005). Therefore, this broad framework focused on storytelling articulates narration, identity, and rationalization as connected social processes.

Whether focused on storytelling or emotional experience, the above-mentioned literature highlights how the offenders’ worldview and subjectivity are key to understanding their actions, their explanations of a past action, and, most importantly, the possibility to desist or resist in the performance of violence. Therefore, how homicide is placed in the perpetrators’ biographical reconstruction (the stories about it, its tropes, and the relevance it acquires)



is key to identifying what instigates and sustains harm-doing and what makes it change (Presser and Sandberg 2015). Furthermore, whether the narratives around violent deaths resemble or divert from common institutional discourses (i.e., individualizing, medicalizing, etc.) is central to understanding the subjective effects of prisons and the competing meanings around homicide and incarceration.

Drawing on narrative criminology, this paper focuses on how male offenders give meaning to homicide and present it in their life stories.<sup>2</sup> This study, thus, highlights the strength of this theoretical framework to understand the shifting ways in which violence is signified, how it is presented in life stories, and how moments of engagement with masculine norms provide an alternative logic frame to institutional rationalities to think about their lives.

## Methodology

This paper is based on seventy-three narrative interviews with 25 cis-gender men who were charged with intentional homicide (*homicidio doloso*) of other men in the context of a quarrel or interpersonal dispute in Metropolitan Buenos Aires, Argentina (2016-2020). Data collection took place in four sites belonging to either the Argentine Federal or Municipal Penitentiary System, as well as the residences of men who had finished serving their prison sentence.

A purposive sampling technique was employed because of the challenges of conducting fieldwork in prison (i.e., accessing institutions, and contacting interviewees) (Briggs 2011). This strategy in-

tionally created a heterogeneous sample for the level of education, age, and incarceration time. Access to the prisons was granted via three channels. First, educational facilities within the penitentiaries (primary and secondary schools, universities, and workshop centers) were contacted. Second, permission to enter prisons and contact inmates was formally requested to authorities. Third, interviews were conducted as 'visits' (in visit areas), which are formally solicited simultaneously by the inmates and the researcher. These different access strategies ensured that the population was varied, especially regarding their education and social context in prison. Fraternizing with prison guards was avoided as far as possible to avert being seen as an institutional actor and, therefore, to prevent violating inmate codes and intensifying existing rivalries between participants and guards (Rosenfeld, Jacobs, and Wright 2003). Contact with men who had finished their prison sentences was made via references from other imprisoned men encountered during the fieldwork.

In the resulting sample, 36% (n=9) of the men completed primary school, 44% (n=11) had completed high school, and 20% (n=5) had university degrees at the time of the crime. All men were 18 years or older, with 48% (n=12) between 18 and 25, 36% (n=9) between 26-35, and 16% (n=4) 36 years or more when the crime was committed. While the mean age of the sample (27) coincides with the average of male homicide perpetrators in Argentina, the proportion of men with higher educational credentials in this group of interviewees was purposefully higher to encourage comparison. At the time of the interviews, 40% (n=10) of men were between 18 and 25, 32% (n=8) were between 26-35, and 28% (n=7) were between 36 and more. The average time in prison for the sample was of 4.5 years.

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<sup>2</sup> I would like to acknowledge the substantial contribution of Dr. Subasri Narasimhan for her encouraging comments and the review of the manuscript before submission.

An unstructured narrative interview method was utilized to encourage the participants to guide the conversation, tackle emergent topics, and elaborate on meaningful themes (Corbally 2014). All interviews began by asking the participants to tell their life stories. Probing included follow-up questions, paraphrasing statements, and interjections. The conversation followed the sequences that the men brought up, and intrinsic questions (Chaitin 2004) were usually asked in the third encounter. Participants were asked to draw lifelines to make their stories visually assessable for the interviewer (Adriansen 2012). Special attention was paid to how the men sequenced their stories and which events or transitions created different stages (Rosenthal 2018). All interviews were conducted by the author of this paper. The interviews were digitally recorded and lasted between 60 and 120 minutes. A total of 73 interviews were conducted with participants.

In contrast with an initial hypothesis and some of the specialized literature about interviewing offenders (Umaña 2018), conversations developed smoothly and amicably. Humor and the thrill of telling their stories were common emotional predispositions. This general mood might not only be related to the gratification of relating anecdotes (Jackson-Jacobs 2004) and the interactional uses of laughter (criticizing authority, boasting their achievements, and alleviating suffering) (Sandberg, Tutenges, and Copes 2015) but to the fact that storytelling is a central identity-building practice and a ritual to establish a reputation in prison.

To ensure rapport, the fieldwork included other activities other than the interview itself. Participating in lectures and workshops, cooking and having lunch, playing board games, and simply talking about daily topics were ways to get to know each

other and, at the same time, to get to know the institutional spaces. Typically, the first interview with each case started after several other activities were shared with him.

The fact that I was dubbed *profe* (teacher) by the participants from the different prisons and settings is an indicator of how my presence in the field was seen. Being associated with a figure of educational authority is a way of making sense of an academic project by linking it with well-known hierarchies. This aspect of the fieldwork sheds some light on the expressed reasons why the participants accepted to talk about their lives. The main motivations expressed by interviewees included: a. seeking understanding and telling their stories to an outsider, b. the desire for change and reform, c. expecting that the interview would have an impact on other people's lives, and d. experiencing satisfaction by telling anecdotes.

The prisons in which the fieldwork was conducted did not have specific rehabilitation devices, treatment programs, or *programas de externación* (resocialization plans). Counseling (as specific guidance) was not present in these prisons, which is a structural feature of the Argentinean penal system (CELS 2005). Nonetheless, individual psychological treatment and religious groups (particularly, evangelists) were present. Furthermore, educational institutions (and more specifically, university courses within the prison) have a prominent role in everyday life by organizing courses, seminars, workshops, and, more generally, an influx of topics and discourses. The programs and activities organized by universities are, however, not discussed with or influenced by prison staff.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Under Argentine law, universities are autarchic and autonomous institutions. Consequently, guards are not allowed to enter these facilities, and penal staff does not have the authority to intervene with educational material and plans.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim, assigned pseudonyms to anonymize the participants, and analyzed using ATLAS.ti software. Open codes were created following a thematic approach (Braun and Clarke 2006). Two independent researchers coded the entire corpus to assess the reliability of the analysis. This paper focuses on the biographical indexes, turning points, and life periods (Fischer 1978; Rosenthal and Bogner 2017:162-163) to reconstruct the private calendars (Leclerc-Olive 2009) of the participants. Biographical cases are used to illustrate the analysis. The analysis was based on the premise that the image of the self is not a direct reflection of experience, but a creative process situated in the context of an interview and related to the interviewees' construction of identity (Presser 2004; Butler 2005).

The narratives described in this paper are ideal types and are presented as sensitizing concepts (Blumer 1969) that encourage the identification and interpretation of the trends in storytelling and, ultimately, understanding the role that homicide/imprisonment has in the lives of perpetrators. Moreover, the narratives should be considered as products of the parameters of the interviews (Butler 2005)—they are the product of a situated social interaction.

Ethical approval was provided by the Bioethical Committee "Dr. Vicente Federico del Giúdice." Informed consent was utilized, in written and verbal forms, and data were kept confidential.

## Results

How do perpetrators talk about homicides? Where was the homicide 'placed' in their biographical reconstructions? And how is imprisonment positioned and depicted in their life stories? Within the

interviews (n=73), the word homicide was rarely used by the participants to talk about their crimes (n=2). Instead, participants used a range of direct and indirect expressions to describe the crime, including "what happened," "the reason why I'm here," "the death," "the mistake," and "the incident," among others. The reluctance to directly name the killing as homicide has been previously documented (Kessler 2010:122; Presser 2008; Ferrito 2020), and serves as an indicator of how offenders manage their self-presentation and frame their stories in interviews.

Participants from this study had heterogeneous social backgrounds. The life histories of Walter and Serge synthesize the main features of middle-class and marginalized trajectories, as exemplary cases (Rosenthal 2018). Walter was born in a wealthy neighborhood of Buenos Aires. After attending primary and secondary school in a bilingual institution, he continued his education by going to a private university and working in his family's business. Contact with public and private institutions is presented throughout his narrative, whereas physical violence is mentioned exclusively during his adolescence in the context of sports. He was 39 when he committed the homicide of his brother-in-law as a result of ongoing arguments over money. Contrastingly, Serge was born on the outskirts of the city and moved several times before his adolescence. His father left his home when he was one year old and had a turbulent criminal career. By the age of 15, Serge had started committing small robberies and using drugs with his group of neighborhood friends. Having dropped out of high school, he pursued a career as a professional bank robber. Aside from school, institutions are notably absent in this life story. Fights, vendettas, and guns are mentioned throughout his life story.

Despite the diverse stories of the men, there were prevalent discourses to make sense of the crime and to give an account of oneself. Three main narratives—presented as ideal types—were used to talk about homicide: “opportunity,” “hitting rock

bottom,” and “disruptive” (see: Table 1). These categories were created based on two domains: first, how men talked about the effect of the homicide on their lives and, second, the continuation-alteration of a social trajectory.

**Table 1. Narratives based on perspectives on homicide-imprisonment’s effect, and continuation-alteration of social trajectory**

Narratives	Effect on life	Continuation-alteration	Exemplary quote
Opportunity	Departure from a problematic pathway and potential moment for self-improvement (focus on the future)	Alteration	“I had the chance to be locked up. That was the best thing that could have happened to me.”
Rock bottom	Negative expected turn (focus on the past)	The momentary alteration, the continuation of the self	“I guess I had it coming. I was like a car out of control, spinning out of control...”
Disruptive	Radical negative unexpected turn (focus on the future)	Alteration	“It was a sudden change in everything. Never thought I would end up here, so... I’m a different man after walking through those doors.”

Source: Self-elaboration.

**An Opportunity: “It’s the Best Thing That Could Have Happened to Me”**

11 of the 25 narrators predominantly used opportunity narratives. These stories revolved around seeing incarceration as a departure from their previous problematic pathways, a transition to a new stage of life, and a potential or effective opportunity for redemption or self-improvement. In these cases, homicide was presented as less meaningful than the event of being imprisoned or an inseparable event from imprisonment.

For Ruben, being incarcerated after killing another man with whom he lived in an abandoned house implied the prospect of a change in his self. He discussed that being arrested meant a key moment in his life—it allowed him to embark on a new life pathway and distance himself from the pre-determined future that his family expected he would have.

My family thought I had no future, “You’ll end up in jail, you’ll end up in a ditch.” And that was where I was heading...And I grew up thinking that, and I even wanted to become the worst badass [*poronga*] in

the neighborhood. Until I had the chance to be locked up [*caer preso*]. That was the best thing that could have happened to me. Otherwise, I would have ended up dead...This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Although I think my family sees that just as a pause in my pathway, behind bars. But, it is not; it put me back on track. [Ruben, 23 years old]

References to being “locked up” [*caer preso*] as a turning point and, simultaneously, a biographical opportunity were frequent in the life stories of young men from marginalized areas. These narratives were more frequent amongst those men who used redemption narratives (Ferrito et al. 2012; Liem and Richardson 2014; Di Marco and Evans 2020). Expressions like, “I had the chance to be locked up,” “it was the best thing that could have happened to me,” and “it was the only thing that put me back on track” not only refer to changes in their social contexts, resources, and potential pathways but also their worldviews. Redemption, possibilities, and self-improvement are discursive elements that the interviewees learn from the penal enunciation contexts (Mcadams et al. 2001).

In stories such as Ruben’s, homicide is presented as a life index—a mark in his trajectory (Atkinson 1998). However, going to prison represents a major event that supersedes death itself. In this participant’s story, the interchange between homicide and prison became clear as he omitted the killing altogether when drawing his lifeline and, in place, highlighted being arrested. When reading the line, he stated:

So, then I moved to this house, with these guys I knew from the streets and... not much else. The next important thing was when I was arrested [*encanar*] and came here. And then things started going better, smoother. [Ruben, 23 years old]

Serge’s story shares the view of imprisonment as an opportunity—it inaugurates a moment in his life when he felt safe from a potentially violent death himself, and he describes a halt to his criminal career.

I had a lot of negative moments in my life, many shitty decisions, you know. Getting high, hanging out with the wrong people, beating up my classmates. That was all negative, a burden. But, on the positive side, other things happened that kept me afloat. Having my nephews and seeing them grow up healthy and out of trouble. And being imprisoned, too, transforming myself and putting me back on track...Some of the good, positive things in life just hit you, but ultimately help you... This helped me grow up and realize that I was going down the wrong path. [Serge, 26 years old]

Ruben and Serge’s stories illustrate the discursive effect of penal knowledge devices, such as psychology and educational courses in prison (Jarman 2019). Seeing prison as a moment of atonement, redemption, and even learning is rooted in the discourses encouraged in correctional devices (Maruna and Copes 2005). The use of labels (“back on track,” “transformation,” etc.), which are more commonly used by prison staff and healthcare professionals, is connected to this discursive outcome. Furthermore, this presentation of the self as a redeemed character, indicates the parameters with which offenders can give an account of themselves (Butler 2005).

As Briggs (2011) and Gaucher (2002) noted, inmates’ storytelling is not only a key identity-building practice but a survival strategy. Ascribing to institutional stories about life, transformation, and opportunities allows them to shape their presentation of self in the penal context and grapple with the sense of agency (McKendy 2006). Identifying a prison sentence as a time to “transform” oneself can be a way

to deal with the emotions following the institutional speech.

Similarly, Nicholas presented his detention as a turning point more relevant than homicide itself. This crime was seen as an inevitable outcome of his lifestyle.

Sooner or later, it was going to happen. And it did happen [laughs and shrugs his shoulders]. You can get a bullet, crash when you're being chased by the cops, or get caught. I was caught...As a kid I didn't expect to end up playing for the national football team. I've always had my feet on the ground. But, I didn't expect to go through these changes inside here...I'm taking advantage of the situation now because I'll be all by myself when I get out. So, I'm learning from people who know more, you know? [Nicholas, 20 years old]

Detention is not only depicted as more meaningful than the crime itself, but it is described as a learning platform. Violent death is not an unexpected or distant event, nor does it disrupt the respondent's storyline. Prison is presented as a usual transition and, for some men, an aspirational event. The optimistic logic about detention and death takes the form of a compensatory biographical arc (Hankiss 1981).

Presenting a hopeful view of prison and highlighting detention over the crime was prevalent in these narratives. These stories allowed interviewees to distance themselves and their past actions from negative meanings (Tomsen and Gadd 2019). Furthermore, describing hypothetical scenarios ("I would have ended [up] dead"), by contrasting what happened and what could have occurred, allowed them to evaluate their stories within an optimistic frame (Labov 1982:226).

While most of the interviewees who used "opportunity" narratives stressed that prison could be a positive life-altering event, others used them to emphasize other aspects. For instance, Charly pointed out that being in prison is not only a place to "get back on track" but also to protect himself from his family and family legacy.

Coming here, after what happened, was sort of for the best. I thought, "I'll be sentenced for a long time, and I'll have the chance to study, and not worry about other stuff," you know? Especially about my family, my father, and my brothers...This was very, very important for me [raises his voice]. I didn't have many happy memories with my family. My father went in and out of prison during my whole life. A dead brother, two in prison for armed robbery...I still have a chance to... be different from them here. This keeps me away from them. Otherwise, I'll be in the same shithole. [Charly, 19 years old]

Charly's narrative exemplifies two tendencies in the stories. First, he indirectly references homicide ("what happened"). Second, he stresses the positive aspect of being imprisoned after violent death. However, unlike Ruben, Serge, and Nicholas, he emphasized this turning point to solve a family-related conflict and highlight the distance from family to combat inevitable generational legacies. This adaptation of the "opportunity" narrative into a different story shows the range of ways in which it can be adapted and presented depending on biographical trajectories and symbolic resources. It also shows that interpreting this stage as an opportunity is not necessarily related to individual 'personal change' narratives rooted in broader neoliberal discourses since it is also linked with local folk theories about crime, violence, and safety (Jarman 2019).

In contrast with these cases, other stories are more ambiguous as to the meaning of homicide and detention within the life course. Understandably, this is not a result of the ubiquitous sense of these events but of how men reconstruct their life stories and negotiate meaning in the context of the interviews (Presser 2005) and the ambiguity and opacity managed when giving accounts of themselves (Tewksbury and Gagné 2001; Butler 2005). Dan illustrated this ambiguity when he stated that being detained was one more “medal of honor”:

What really fucked me up was when I got the boot from the petrol station. That fucked me up [emphasizes]. You are a teacher, you'll understand. I had a chance in life then not to steal or end up selling shit in the streets...I'm here because that is what happens with the underdog...For a lot of people, that's a medal of honor: you have one for every cop you drop, every time you survive prison. For me, it's just one more small medal, an extra point...But, I'll use the time here to prove to everyone I can do my best and that I can have a proper job and life. [Dan, 37 years old]

Dan presents a variation of the stories of detention and death—these events do not highlight a set of before and after expectations but mark a less important biographical index. In his trope, losing a job meant the beginning of a personal decline. In this antithetical presentation of the self (Hankiss 1981), detention is one more moment in life—he is still the same person from before the homicide, and the crime underscores his prior, inescapable trajectory. Nonetheless, prison is still a stage to “prove to everyone” that he can change.

While Dan's story reinforces the tendency of the perpetrators to present imprisonment as a more important event than the crime, this case has some

key differences. First, he committed homicide at an older age (36) compared to the other offenders. Second, his life story is structured with a fatalist arc (Di Marco and Evans 2020)—his explanation and neutralization around the violence are related to his position in society, by his depiction, as an “underdog.” By directly interpreting the interviewer as a teacher, he stresses the ‘obviousness’ of this argument and seeks an accomplice to the narrative (Presser 2004).

The opportunity stories presented so far have a cross-cutting theme—the pivotal moments in respondents' lives not only “make them who they are now” but make them stronger, more resilient, and more prepared for the world. As masculinities studies have suggested (Messerschmidt 2000; Jewkes and Morrell 2018), the selection and interpretation of life events illustrated a way of presenting the self and making sense of adverse experiences as moral and subjective tests. For these men, violence is not alien—it is a force negotiated and contested. The possibility of using violence is presented stoically, by the resources at hand (Ellis, Winlow, and Hall 2017). Moreover, in most of these cases, homicide is presented as a righteous act (Katz 1988). Violence is committed because, from the men's perspective, the victim violated fundamental and unassailable values.

There are several main analytical features of “opportunity” narratives. In Ruben, Charly, and Dan's stories, for instance, being imprisoned [*encanar*] is seen as a marked turning point—it indicates the stop of a trajectory and a change towards a better life course. Changing the social environment, desisting from crime, or avoiding peers are the practical product of incarceration. This is presented as an “opportunity,” “chance,” and “a rest from a turbulent life.” Their stories are filled with expres-

sions and tropes (“the best thing that could have happened to me,” “I would have ended up dead”), which illustrate how imprisonment can be seen as a more relevant event than the actual homicide. Moments that are associated with trauma, tragedy, or despair are, therefore, interpreted, negotiated, and valued in their presentation of the self as having the potential to change them for good.

### **Hitting Rock Bottom: “Life Comes to a Halt”**

Eight of the 25 interviewees primarily told rock bottom narratives. In contrast with opportunity narratives—in which an optimistic view on the dyad homicide-imprisonment is stressed—in this narrative, the optimistic interpretation of homicide/imprisonment is overshadowed by a sense of momentary negative alternation of life. Moreover, stories using the “rock bottom” plots focus on how detention implies the logical consequence of a previous life trajectory. This change in the protagonist’s story can be presented as necessary (“there was no other way”) or contingent (“I could have gone down the same path for many years”) at the time.

David illustrates this narrative in its necessary variation. He committed the homicide of a neighbor after a long-standing fight over a fence. He was 24 at the time of the crime.

Just before this happened, I lost my job. Because of a misunderstanding, I was fired...This changed me from that point onwards: I was really irritated and started fights over any little thing. My quarrel with Jacob [the neighbor] was just one more fight I picked up...But, because of that fight, I ended up here...I guess I had it coming. I was like a car out of control, spinning out of control... [David, 26 years old]

“Being here” is presented as a crucial moment, whereas “the quarrel” that ended up in homicide is downgraded to “just one more” incident in his decline arc. David’s story has a self-absolutive plot (Hankiss 1981)—the protagonist’s previous trajectory explains the crime. In this account, the background (being fired, his volatile temperament, the tendency to start fights) is stressed to give meaning to the homicide—the violent death is presented as a logical or comprehensible outcome of a prior personal tendency. For this, he uses an “out of control” script, which is common in rationalizing and neutralizing violent crimes committed by men (Hearn 1998; Presser 2004; Dobash, Dobash, and Cavanagh 2009).

**David:** Being irritated all day long, feeling boiling with rage, I could have gone down the same path for many years. But, this happened, and, well, I’m here.

**Martín:** Yes. Feeling boiling with rage. Before, you mentioned that some other men here see this as an opportunity.

**David:** Yes, some do. They think they’ll end up changed, reformed, purified [mocking accentuation]. I believe most of us are here, including me, because we hit rock bottom because we were far too taken by criminality, anger, greed, or something else. Sooner or later, they come here. [David, 26 years old]

Differentiating oneself from “others” serves as a chance to present a certain moral self and, at the same time, to depict the morality of “others” (Linde 1993). David’s distancing from men who see prison as an opportunity helps to understand the competing worldviews in this institution (who am I, who are the rest, what subjective processes take place in prison, what is change) and, at the same time, to evaluate how hegemonic are these narratives. His reference to other inmates’ perspectives (verdict or



not) illustrates how the narratives around homicide and imprisonment are being exchanged and disputed and, consequently, have micropolitical consequences for them. Opportunity and rock bottom narratives are competing in the penal context.

A common theme in rock bottom and opportunity narratives is the anticipated nature of negative events, including imprisonment, direct conflict with the police, and another major declining incident. Fights, violent accidents, or a “mishap” are presented as foreshadowed and routine events in their stories: “that’s what usually happens,” “it was meant to be,” “I had it coming,” “it’s not destiny, but it is what usually happens.” The fact that men who told these stories “took for granted” homicide or arrest was rooted in their inextricable relationship with violent dynamics (Auyero, Bourgois, and Scheper-Hughes 2015) and their normalizing of certain forms of physical violence (Karandinos et al. 2014).

While rock bottom and opportunity narratives are used to make sense of their lives and of the crime itself, the meanings conveyed differ. Rock bottom stories emphasize the momentary end of a stage in life, focusing on the events that led to this moment. In contrast with opportunity narratives (where the future is emphasized), the past is more relevant. This type of story not only is a neutralization strategy similar to the ones found in other studies (Presser 2004; Di Marco and Evans 2020; Rodríguez 2020) but it is also an indicator of how the violent act itself is defended and legitimized.

Patrick provides a variation of this narrative. He was sentenced to 10 years in prison after stabbing his former boss, who owed him money. His story accentuates that, while reaching the “rock bottom

moment” in his life, being imprisoned does not necessarily imply an end to his criminal activities.

I handled things wrong with him [boss], with him and my wife, and other people. But, I had a rope around my neck...This was a rock bottom moment in my life [*estaba en las últimas*], and somebody ended up dead, but I know I’ll end up again doing other shit when I get out...Of course, being here, imprisoned, is fucked up, and it’s, how can I put it? Something that I’ll remember for the rest of my life. That my family will remember for the rest of their life. But, there are a lot of things at the end of the tunnel, and, from what I’ve heard, not all of them are good. I might end up robbing again, who knows? [Patrick, 29 years old]

Although rock bottom narratives can depict the halt in the type of delinquency life course, they can also take the form of a temporary or momentary story (“I might end up robbing again”). For instance, Marc stressed that being imprisoned was a result of his lack of skills and inexperience as a criminal, and incarceration is a means of improving and perfecting his criminal activities.

I came here because I was stupid [*gil*], I didn’t know how to handle things, how to stop...I was high every time I went to rob. That’s for beginners. This was meant to be, but I’ll come out smarter [*más pillo*] at least...A guy died, unfortunately...Meanwhile, I’m sitting here in this shithole. [Marc, 23 years old]

Marc illustrates that hitting rock bottom might not imply a process for the “entire self” but a transition and change of a particular aspect of the protagonist. In this account, his “beginner self” changed and, thus, it is allowed a transformation to “come out smarter.” In contrast with the positive view of imprisonment in the opportunity narrative—in which redemption

and subjective transformation are brought up in the interviews as key components of their processes—in rock bottom stories, being imprisoned can imply “using this instance to perfect my skills.” As Kessler (2010) argues, the professionalization of delinquents usually implies reaching certain stages in their career, which can be experienced as landmarks—their life course and goals remain unaltered, yet halts are lived as learning stages.

What are the main analytical features of “rock bottom” stories? This narrative is used to present homicide and imprisonment as a momentary halt in the life course, whether it is seen as necessary or contingent. These variations all contain the same distinctive discursive elements—an expected alteration from a previous path is experienced. However, this change is not interpreted as a moment of complete subjective transformation or “self-improvement” (as “opportunity” stories highlight) but rather a smaller change in some aspect of the trajectory (criminal skills, temperament, “street smarts”).

The fact that the dyad homicide-imprisonment is presented with this narrative underscores the normalization of violent deaths in certain social contexts (Karandinos et al. 2014) and how this is related to prevalent worldviews (Santos 2012). Homicides were presented as righteous actions and, hence, neutralized. As other research in Latin America has suggested (Birkbeck 2020; Gabaldón 2020), these types of stories are indicators of the likelihood of violence occurring and, in general terms, of how it is signified in certain contexts.

### **Disruptive: “This Is Not My Life”**

Six of the 25 participants predominantly used disruptive narratives in their life stories. In contrast to

the previous stories, these narratives stress that the protagonists suffer a radical unexpected change in their lives. “I never ever thought something like this might happen to me,” “everything turned upside down in the blink of an eye,” and “I was stunned, in shock; I’ve never even been to a police station before” were expressions that illustrate the pivotal meaning of homicide and imprisonment for these men.

Most of the participants (n=19) that employed opportunity or rock bottom narratives were young men who were raised in marginalized neighborhoods. Nonetheless, older offenders and especially those with higher socioeconomic statuses described the homicide as a disruptive story. The crime was viewed as a painful transition to an unknown and uncertain stage of life.

Denise killed his partner’s ex-husband after an argument over custody rights. At that time, he was working in his family’s company and living in a wealthy area of Buenos Aires. The killing marked a clear “before and after” event, and it is still a contemplative matter [*procesar*] in his current life.

I was about to buy a house on the beach. Just had even talked to the realtor...And then this happened and changed everything [puts his hand on his forehead]. I’m still figuring it out [*procesando*]. It was a sudden change in everything. Never thought I would end up here, so... I’m a different man after walking through those doors...I’ve been talking to the psychologist, and even knowing that I have a violent personality doesn’t make it easier for me to understand what happened...That pushed me here. [Denise, 39 years old]

In contrast with opportunity and rock bottom stories, Denise’s disruptive narrative emphasized an

abrupt change in his life trajectory. Both the death and the incarceration marked a negative change in his expected life course. His story illustrates the prevailing arc in disruptive stories—personal decline (Adshead and Ferrito 2015). The fact that he uses a biomedical label (“violent personality”) illustrates how certain medicalizing discourses shape the stories and accounts of these men. While not all of the participants used expert theories and terms to make sense of their actions, the presence of psychological categories shows the presence of dominant theories in penal devices, as has been found by other studies (Di Marco and Evans 2020; Di Marco 2022).

In Walter’s case, the death of his brother-in-law and his conviction for first-degree homicide was not only seen as a watershed in his life, but a change in his family’s dynamic.

Go figure that...I never, ever thought something like this could happen to me. Never. One day, out of the blue, everything went south. I lost my job; I lost my little sister. She didn’t want to talk to me ever again. My parents are still by my side. But, you can tell this situation hurts them...What makes it worse is that when I’m out, they’ll [his parents] be probably gone... If you asked the 35-year-old me if I would ever have fought with someone like that, or if I would be anywhere near such an atrocious incident, I would have laughed and said no...When I woke up at the police station, the day after, I remember thinking, so vividly, this is not my life. This is not my life...It’s been 2 years now, and I know that, even though that man, from that day [of the incident] was not really me, I have to man up [*bancársela*] and use this experience to learn something. [Walter, 42 years old]

The previous verbatim illustrates Walter’s symbolic distance from the violent deaths. The crime marks

his life story—it is the breakdown of relationships and a sudden, unexpected, and unfamiliar shift in his life course. Moreover, his distancing from the protagonist of the story (“this is not my life”) marks a stable narrative—the act of violence is explained by a temporary lapse in character and does not reference the narrator’s ‘true’ identity (Presser 2008). Unlike opportunity narratives, in which the past and present selves are presented as different, in stories about disruption, the protagonist does not change.

Despite the distance from violent deaths in Walter’s life before the crime, his interpretation of the situation is like his approach to prison—he must “man up” (*bancársela*) and learn from this experience. Sticism is a key element in the traditional construction of masculinities (Connell 1995), and it is a common topic in these interviews—either learning from the experience or being strong for a certain reason (a future, a relationship, faith, etc.) remain cross-cutting themes. Despite the grief, sorrow, and sadness expressed in the interviews, “surrendering,” as an interviewee said, was not an option. This could be interpreted as emotional illiteracy (Hearn 1988:27) or, conversely, as a specific type of rationality.

For Juan, who killed his cousin in an argument over inheritance, the crime altered the expected course of his life.

It’s hard to...It was a fight, yes. We were arguing about money, yes. But, it’s not something I premeditated, or that he provoked, or anything like that. It was truly an accident...The thing got out of control, and he fell [from a terrace]...I’ve heard all the stories from other men here, and they’ve all had these types of experiences before. They fought, stabbed, and hammered. I didn’t...That doesn’t mean I’m not guilty, legally

speaking. But, it's something that the judge didn't consider. And now my life is ruined. I lost everything I had. Family, house, wife. I'm alone now and I must start from scratch...At least I can prove everyone that that's not who I am, that it was an isolated event. [Juan, 29 years old]

Stories about accidents, mishaps, and being under the influence are common tropes to distance the narrator from the event and neutralize a crime (Dobash et al. 2009; Presser 2009). In Juan's story, his distancing from "other men here" is a key aspect of his narrative to present himself as less condemnable than other prisoners. Furthermore, the possibility of envisioning a future—in contrast with previous optimistic narratives revolving around redemption and self-transformation—is referred to as "ruined." Despite this presentation, "start from scratch" and "proving" himself illustrate the same stoicism from other stories.

In disruption narratives, the presentation of homicide-detention as a turning point oriented the biographical reconstruction towards the identification of key life indexes—stressors, decisive moments in their lives that marked them or events that could explain the death were common topics in these stories. Presenting the homicide as an unexpected dreadful event implied, in this narrative, accounting for its extraordinary nature.

Was it my character? Was it the greed for money? Was it debt? Was it how we were raised? I don't know. I don't know if there is an answer. But, I've been thinking about it ever since. Thinking about what could explain what happened. [Juan, 29 years old]

What are the main analytical features of "disruptive" narratives? In contrast with opportunity and

rock bottom narratives, stories that take this form highlight homicide as a turning point and its negative effect on their lives—death distorted an otherwise planned life course. The impact on subjective well-being, relationships, or their future life and self are the focal point of these stories. Men who had narrated their lives with this structure emphasized the unexpected nature of the crime. These men did not have prior experience with violent deaths, the police, and the judicial system. As Santos (2012) points out, the life-world that social actors take for granted explains the disruptive effect in their lives and the reason why these deaths are not justified as righteous acts. This offers a nuance to Katz's (1988) findings.

## Discussion and Conclusion: A Necessity Made into Virtue?

How were homicide and imprisonment portrayed in these life stories? What is the analytical relevance of these narratives? The biographical analysis provides detailed and comprehensive data about turning points and how the actors perceived them. Previous research has scarcely asked why, how, or if homicide became a pivotal moment in the eyes of the perpetrators (Brookman 2015; Liles 2018). By adding the analysis of the offenders' rationalities, this analysis suggests four empirically-grounded points related to the sense-making process of violent deaths and the presentation of the self, which were "put on stage" (Goffman 1967) during the interviews.

Firstly, perpetrators made sense of the killings in heterogeneous ways, illustrating that homicide is not necessarily experienced as a negative or a "traumatic" event—in most cases, homicides were seen as a positive inaugural moment. This finding is further nuanced when comparing the structure of

the life stories of men from different socioeconomic backgrounds and age groups. The structuring (which events organize their stories/calendars) and sequencing (how they concatenate vital events) of the stories vary, as well as the expectations in their life—for younger men from marginalized areas, violent death is part of their expected future (Santos 2012). This finding reinforces the hypothesis that homicide is not inherently a turning point in the life of perpetrators since violent deaths were predominantly normalized (Liles 2018; Birkbeck 2020; Gabaldón 2020). Furthermore, stating that the act of killing is not necessarily ‘traumatic’ allows reinterpreting of dominant theories about painful experiences (McKendy 2006) and adjustment to stress (Ferrito, Needs, and Adshead 2016)—discursive contexts shape experiences of harm and pain.

As Presser (2004) noted, the elements of life stories are what the actors select to present in the interview. Therefore, the question about the conditions of selection and the variation amongst the different participants is key. The shifting ways in which homicide is signified are not only related to its centrality in the life stories but also to how it is symbolically managed. Young men from marginalized neighborhoods did not present the killing as a crossroad. Instead, being “locked up” [*encanar*] was an event that changed their life-courses. Narratively, the offenders used a metonymy between homicide and imprisonment—prison can replace death as a vital index. In line with a contextualized understanding of these narratives, the greater importance of imprisonment can be interpreted as a survival resource in prison and a strategy to reshape institutional discourses (Gaucher 2002). Talking about their life and the crime is necessarily related to the available and valid stories in prison and, therefore, a way to avoid stigma.

Distancing the self from the negative and stigmatizing meanings of violence has been a well-studied phenomenon (Presser 2004; Tomsen and Gadd 2019; Rodríguez 2020). As Presser (2008:78) has stated, placing the crime on the margins of their life story is a usual strategy by offenders to differentiate themselves from the criminal action, emphasize that the crime does not define them, and, ultimately, illustrates the creative process of self-presentation. This paper not only confirms this statement but contextualizes this phenomenon in the hegemonic discourses of Argentinean penal institutions.

Secondly, the sense-making process varied amongst men from different social backgrounds and classes. Identifying the violent act and incorporating it in the stories varied concerning how distant violent death was to a respondent’s everyday life. Namely, men from marginalized neighborhoods “tolerated” more violent crimes (Cozzi 2014) and legitimized their transit through prison. As Hearn has pointed out, engaging in violence has a subjective effect, since the more frequent the violence is in everyday life, “the more it is taken-for-granted” (Hearn 1998:202).

Additionally, being in prison is neutralized and narratively treated as a positive event—being “locked up” [*encanar*] can be an expected event in life-courses and can also be interpreted as a transition to “rest,” “train,” or “be safeguarded” from daily hazards of their neighborhoods. Thus, homicide can be a positive index in life (Mcadams et al. 2001; Baird 2018).

This finding provides an opportunity to revisit the statement that homicide is intrinsically related to trauma and an abrupt change in a life trajectory, suggested in previous research (Liem and Richardson 2014; Adshead and Ferrito 2015), as well as com-

mon sense. Lethal violence—as well as other forms of harm and suffering—can be normalized in their perspective and, consequently, it might not represent a turning point (Liles 2018). Furthermore, these life stories allow understanding of violence perpetration in a different light from the hegemonic medicalized frameworks (Scheper-Hughes 1992; Epele 2019), which tend to apply biomedical labels to the actors' experiences, unacknowledging how human experience and meaning are shaped by discursive environments.

Based on this result, the following hypothesis could be formulated—the greater the symbolic distance with homicide, the more the tendency to experience and present this event with a disruptive narrative. Further exploration of this hypothesis might encourage the merging of narrative and interactionist theories of violence—namely, the perspectives of Collins (2008), as a continuation of Athens and Katz's work. As it has been suggested by Ceretti and Natali (2020), the sensible experiences of actors could indicate the sources of perpetrators' narratives. Considering Katz (1988) and Athens' (1977) phenomenological understanding of the self, the above findings suggest that social background influences how violence is experienced and narrated.

Thirdly, despite the heterogeneous tropes of the stories, a similar stoic logic was applied to present their lives—harmful, painful, or disruptive events were interpreted as “growing up” events that made them stronger. This prevailing rationality to interpret lived experiences—the positive appraisal of harmful events—can be linked to how hegemonic masculinities experience and interpret their lives (Hearn 1998; Messerschmidt 2000; Ellis, Winlow, and Hall 2017; Baird 2018) and to a restorative strategy of the self (Kimmel 2019).

Stoic rationality is illustrated with two main points. First, most biographical indexes were related to honor and ‘character-building’ stories. This was prevalent in either younger or older men: “becoming independent,” “becoming a man,” “learning about life,” or even being imprisoned. Second, presenting these events, and specifically the homicide, in a positive manner coincided with moments of engagement with masculine social norms (Connell 1995:122)—the moments of passage illustrate the proactive search for certain attributes.

Finally, the positive appraisal of harmful experiences, imprisonment, and homicide are linked to the institutional discourses themselves. Thinking in terms of personal growth, strengthening and safeguarding are deeply connected to the devices present in prison (i.e., psychology and religion). Hence, this dominant interpretation of their lives has institutional marks (Presser 2008) or text-atoms (Martin 2019) that shape it. This raises the question of whether replacing homicide with imprisonment as a turning point could be an unintended consequence of these discourses. This presents a paradox related to the fact that the more institutionalized discourses overshadow the homicide itself by incorporating expert labels and theories about self-improvement.

As previous research in Argentina has shown (Di Marco 2022), several narratives can be identified in the accounts of homicide offenders, including redemption, complicity, and fatalistic stories. While not all of these resemble dominant neoliberal psychological narratives (i.e., individualizing and medicalizing social actions) (Illouz 2008), the prevalence of self-improvement and self-help narratives in the findings above is noteworthy. Violent death and imprisonment can be seen as a life index that triggers a positive individual change. Nonetheless, rock bot-

tom stories, when considering homicide/imprisonment a momentary stage, show a clash between institutionalized penal discourses and folk theories of crime (Jarman 2019). In these cases, homicide can be justified and legitimized as a valid action and a foreseen moment in life.

The previous analysis can be related to two broad frameworks of biographical narratives. First, the selection and presentation of turning points can be a way to identify rationalizations and neutralization strategies of a past action (Sykes and Matza 1957; Orbuch 1997) and, second, it can be interpreted as sensible aspects that “enable” the crime itself (Katz 2002) since stories shape, instigate, and sustain future actions (Presser and Sandberg 2015). Either way, homicide “appears” and “disappears” from the life stories and is displaced by imprisonment as a turning point, depending on how normalized is violence and violent deaths in the horizon of expectations (Schütz 1967).

Identifying the narratives that perpetrators use to rationalize the crime offers a rare opportunity to analyze the first-hand stories told to manage the emotions about this event, and ultimately analyze the values and meanings that enable or prevent desistance (Presser and Sandberg 2015). This approach also illustrates that subjective transformation linked to correctional devices is not linear (Ferrito et al. 2016). As suggested above, men use new discourses (redemption, “opportunity,” etc.) to explain homicide. Analyzing how narratives are negotiated would allow engaging with offenders without simplifying their agency or the institutional setting in the shaping of stories. This is a key approach when designing and evaluating penal institutions and, more generally, identifying the conditions of the possibility of violence.

Drawing on narrative criminology, this paper addresses two gaps in the sociological literature on homicide. First, it reconstructs the life stories of perpetrators of male-male homicide focusing on the identification of biographical turning points presented by the actors themselves. Second, it analyses the sense-making of homicide and imprisonment by perpetrators and it shows how meanings about death can be managed differently according to socioeconomic background and horizon of expectations of inevitable life course events.

By exploring the life stories with an emic perspective, this paper grapples with the widespread assumption that homicide is a radical change in the lives of offenders and questions the universal meaning of violent death. Performing violence is not only neutralized but is also seen as an expected and inaugural event in life stories, dependent on the worldviews of the social actors. Furthermore, homicide tended to be made invisible in the accounts, superseded by detention that had a more significant role in their stories

The findings and nuances of this paper intend to expand the ongoing discussions about violence from an academic and public-policy perspective. The stoic rationality, the positive appraisal of painful experiences, and the metonym between homicide and imprisonment are key results that encourage reviewing how penal devices tackle offender treatment, especially in the Latin American context. Moreover, despite the institutional difficulties and reluctance of researchers to produce first-hand data with perpetrators—as it has been discussed by Brookman (2015) and Brookman, Maguire, and Maguire (2017)—this methodological strategy has proven to be an unavoidable step in comprehending the current regional and global scenario about homicide. In this research, the use of open-ended interviews has been central to

avoid guiding the participants with external terms and logic.

While there is a plethora of scholarly theories about homicide, only empirical explorations of sense-making can contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. In academia and common sense,

killing is associated with an existential moment and an irrational, deranged, or immoral act. This research shows otherwise. Revisiting existing data, theories, frameworks, and institutional devices that state certain meanings conveyed to violence—without having empirical grounds for it—constitutes a worthy path of inquiry, still vastly unexplored.

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# A Socially Constructed Individualist: An Interactionist Study of Role-Making among Orchestral Conductors

**Dominika Byczkowska-Owczarek**   
University of Lodz, Poland

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**Abstract:** The paper analyzes the role-making of an orchestral conductor. It is framed by the symbolic interactionist perspective and focuses on Ralph Turner's role-making theory and the works of Alfred Schütz and Howard S. Becker and associates. The research project is based on grounded theory methodology. The applied techniques include semi-structured interviews, video-elicited interviews, observations of teaching conducting and opera rehearsals, video analysis, and secondary data analysis. The results reveal how the process of role-making is shaped during secondary socialization and indicate the social features of the role, such as high social prestige, awareness of the body, an exclusive social group, and teamwork. The role-making process is based on permanent interactions and negotiations with social actors: the composer and the musical score, the orchestra, soloists, ballet, and the audience. Additionally, it is influenced by cultural factors, such as the conductor's gender, age, nationality and international experience, competencies, as well as the type of professional contract. At the same time, conductors need to actively maintain the image of determined and resolute individualists, as expected by the social actors they interact with.

**Dominika Byczkowska-Owczarek**, a sociologist, is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology of Culture, Faculty of Economics and Sociology at the University of Lodz, Poland. Her book, *Ciało w tańcu. Analiza socjologiczna* [*Body in Dance. Sociological Analysis*], presents the outcomes of a study on ballroom dancing as a social activity. She has participated in research projects concerning communication on hospital wards, lobbying, revital-

ization of cities, and HR procedures. She is a book review editor in the *Qualitative Sociology Review*. Her main scientific interests are: symbolic interactionism, grounded theory methodology, qualitative methods, autoethnography, sociology of the body, sociology of medicine, and ethnographic research.

**email address:** [byczkowska.owczarek@uni.lodz.pl](mailto:byczkowska.owczarek@uni.lodz.pl)

**The** article focuses on the role-making of orchestral conductors as a socially constructed process. In particular, I will undertake how the individual professional role of an orchestral conductor is negotiated with other social actors, both groups and individuals, and how it is influenced by various cultural, organizational, and group-related factors.

The job of an orchestral conductor is to make a group of musicians play one consistent piece of music. As some interviewees stated, such a task may be compared to working with a group of people who simultaneously read a poem. They have the exact text in front of them. However, each person may deliver the tempo and loudness differently and give a divergent emotional interpretation of the text. The conductor's role is to make the orchestra, and other participants of the performance (e.g., ballet, soloists), perform musical notes as one, introducing particular instruments at the right moment of the musical score while delivering their interpretation of the music.

The text is based on a broader grounded theory methodology research project entitled *With Baton and Scalpel. Work Intermediated by the Body. Specialist Knowledge and Bodily Skills in the Work of Neurosurgeons and Orchestral Conductors*. The study aims to understand and describe the regularities of specialist work carried out through the body in two professions—orchestral conductors and neurosurgeons. Therefore, the main part of the research has been done among two groups whose members work together or have a close professional acquaintance with one another. The ongoing study has been conducted in Poland since 2018. In the text, I will

present the outcomes of the study on orchestral conductors concerning the social construction of their professional role and answer research questions referring to this professional group. The research questions the article answers focus on the role-making of an orchestral conductor, especially on negotiating with others, performing the leadership role, and engaging in verbal and non-verbal communication. The article's main argument is that despite its individualistic image, the social role of the conductor is shaped, negotiated, and created through social interactions with groups and individuals and with an object—the musical score, under the influence of cultural, organizational, and group-related factors. At the same time, the conductors put great effort into maintaining the image of a determined and independent leader. Although the text describes the social role of orchestral conductors, it indicates the regularities of any social role that has a more individualistic image, where charisma and leadership play an important role, and where regular tasks are both developed through the cooperation of various groups and individuals and dependent on the image of a resolute leader.

## Theoretical Background

### Symbolic Interactionism and Role Theory

I have chosen symbolic interactionism as the theoretical perspective of the research. The symbolic interactionism premise concerning human nature is that individuals act consciously, not as objects determined by impulses, social norms, roles, or biological factors. As Norman Denzin writes (1972:77), human behavior never has “real meaning,” only the one ascribed by an individual. The meanings of objects derive from social interactions—how others act towards a given subject is crucial as it defines the

object (Blumer 1969; Konecki 2005). To understand an acting subject, it is necessary to identify one's activity within the cultural context and capture its culturally defined meaning—recognize such an action through the prism of culture or the specific context in which it occurs (Blumer 1969).

The social role concept applied when analyzing the collected data refers to Ralph Turner's (2002) symbolic interactionist theory. He claims that roles exist in various levels of concreteness and consistency. However, individuals frame their behavior as if they were clearly defined and see-through. As a result, they make some aspects of the role more or less explicit, depending on the social context (Turner 2002:22).

In Turner's works, one may find negotiated, interactionally constructed processual descriptions of the social role. A social role may be constructed by different social actors in various ways, even though the tasks of the role are the same. In the case of conductors, how they play their social role is taught during secondary socialization, mainly by their professors. However, as Turner states (2002:23), in the role-making process, each role relates to other roles in a particular social situation. It cannot exist alone, without roles towards which it is oriented. Individuals are, therefore, not passive occupants of their social position with clear rules and norms ascribed. Instead, they are actors who actively navigate in the context at least partly furnished by their relationship with other social actors. The roles that have the most impact on role-making among conductors are orchestral musicians, soloists, composers, ballet dancers, and the audience.

I frequently refer to the notion of 'profession,' which I understand after Eliot Freidson (1988:71), as

a group of people performing a set of activities that provide them with the primary source of their subsistence. William Goode (1977:442) states that professions have two fundamental attributes—specialized training in a body of abstract knowledge and a collectivity or service orientation to their work (as cited in Rodgers and Thorson 2019:n.p.).

### Schütz and Becker—Two Theorists of Music

Two theorists of the sociology of music<sup>1</sup> whose works are helpful in the analysis presented in the article are Alfred Schütz, with his classical "Making Music Together" (1976), and Howard Becker, with a series of works on music as a socially negotiated phenomenon (Faulkner and Becker 2009; Becker and Pessin 2017). The authors represent two different theoretical approaches—phenomenology in the case of Schütz and symbolic interactionism in the case of Becker.

The first sociologist mentioned, Alfred Schütz, represents a phenomenological perspective on *making music*. In the article, I adopt his position to explain one aspect of the conductor's role—mediating between the composer and the orchestra to recreate a piece of music. As Schütz (1976:159) writes, the musician's role is to mediate between the composer and the listener. When one looks at it from such a perspective, the conductor's role is to mediate between the composer and the musicians. They follow the instructions given by the composer. A musical score is no more than a set of commands a musician obeys to perform the piece of music properly (Schütz 1976:163, 166). As such, it lacks interpretation. Wil-

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<sup>1</sup> The text at hand should rather be included in the domain of the sociology of interaction or the sociology of work (or, more precisely: working), as it investigates the social, group, and interactional aspects of the role of a conductor.

helm Furtwängler (as cited in Schütz 1976:166) states that musical notation does not indicate the precise volume of a *forte* or the speed of a *tempo*. Conducting is an idiosyncratic art, and composers may hold their understanding of the slowness of *adagio* (Malhotra 1981 as cited in Khodyakov 2014:67). Each is performed in accordance with the particular place and orchestra. The expression markings intentionally have only symbolic value and should be interpreted specifically by each instrument. As Schütz (1976:166) states: “an ‘ff’ for the bassoon has quite another meaning than for a trombone.”

Let us suppose that only one musician is playing a musical score. In that case, he/she ‘deciphers the hints’ of the composer and may perform their interpretation of a *forte*. When there are fifty or eighty instrumentalists, one person translates the score into sounds and communicates it to the others. That person is the conductor. Moreover, each instrumentalist has only a part of the musical score in front of him/her—the one that refers to the music played on their instrument. The conductor’s role is to make all those parts fit into place at the right moment and create one piece of musical art that is technically correct and corresponds with his/her interpretation. As Schütz writes, the musicians “tune into” each other (Segre 2020:68, 72-73). In smaller groups, this is accomplished by nonverbal communication, for example, eye contact and observation of gestures.

On the other hand, in bigger orchestras, musicians do not see all of their co-performers at all times. The conductor should enable the contact they cannot establish with each other. “The beat of the conductor’s baton” (Schütz 1976:176) also counts and measures the time passing during the performance, making it their inner time, introducing “the sharing of the on-

going flux of the musical content” (Schütz 1976:174). The sense of making music together lies in sharing a meaningful mental experience and involves permanent communication between the musicians (whether direct or mediated by the conductor) (Segre 2020:72-73).

When it comes to the works of Howard Becker and his associates, they provide a broader perspective of the symbolic interactionist viewpoint on interacting, communicating, negotiating, and role-making. Becker sees the world of music as an organized entity, a form of collective activity whose participants share experiences and interpretations (Becker 2008:160-161 as cited in Segre 2020:66). The role of any musician is negotiated, and each individual stays alert to the actions of others and adjusts their decisions and actions to what they hear and see (Faulkner and Becker 2009:185). The conductor’s role is mainly organizing the common performance by “indicating—by the length of time occupied by an upward gesture of the hand, arm, or head followed by a downward movement—the length of the beat” (Faulkner and Becker 2009:119).

Despite the differences between the phenomenological perspective represented by Alfred Schütz and Howard Becker’s symbolic interactionism, several similarities are salient for the sociological analysis of conductors’ work (Segre 2020:68). In both approaches, a critical role is played by the notions of meaning, interpretation, communication, understanding, and the definition of the situation. Their interest in music studied as a social activity focuses on performances and relationships between the musicians, performers, and the audience (Segre 2020:65). Playing, performing, and improvising music is a cooperative and negotiated activity that relies on “deeply conventionalized agreements regarding musical

roles and actions” (Faulkner and Becker 2009:122 as cited in Segre 2020:74).

It is worth noting that the conductor is a member of the world of educated musicians. Therefore, he/she owns socially derived and approved knowledge. At the same time, teachers at music schools transmit the prestige of authenticity and authority to conductors (and other musicians). That legitimizes his/her interpretation of a piece of music from the perspective of history and the biography of its author, as the conductor (or a single musician) recreates the composer’s experiences, not only the expression of his/her musical thoughts (Schütz 1976:168-170). According to the study participants, the definition of the role of the conductor has changed in the last half-century in that respect. The older definition states that the conductor should recreate what the composer wished to express with his/her ‘stream of consciousness.’ However, according to the more recent definition, the composer’s role is to interpret the musical notation and recreate what the composer wanted to say, but in a way that a contemporary audience may understand. Some of the interviewees, rather older or under the influence of an elderly professor, accomplished their work as identified by the earlier definition. Others, usually younger and in stages of a career that made them more independent from elderly professors, would align with the modern approach to the conductor’s role.

### **The Literature on Music and Conductors**

A researcher who undoubtedly made an outstanding contribution to the state of knowledge on music in the field of symbolic interactionism is Joseph Kotarba. His and his associates’ numerous works on music, such as “Rock ‘n’ Roll Music as a Timepiece” (2002), “Pop Music as a Resource for Assembling

an Authentic Self: A Phenomenological-Existential Perspective” (2009), *Understanding Society through Popular Music* (2013), and a special issue of *Studies in Symbolic Interaction: Symbolic Interactionist Takes on Music* (2016), offer a precise analysis of the links between contemporary music and social identity, the construction of self, the sense of place and time, the emergence of new musical styles, and many others. However, Kotarba focuses mainly on popular genres such as Latin, rock’n’roll, and pop; he rarely analyzes or describes more classical genres, where conductors usually work.

Other scholars whose works shed light on a symbolic interactionist analysis of music communities are Paul Berliner and Robert Owen Gardner. In his book, *Thinking in Jazz* (2004), Berliner describes individual and group learning to improvise. After a long study, also as a participant in the social world of jazz musicians, he offers not only an insider’s perspective but also the point of view of professional jazz musicians. In the book, he conceptualizes various ways in which the performers gestate their music, learn to communicate it to others, and interplay to produce one consistent piece of music.

Meanwhile, Gardner analyzes in his book *The Portable Community. Place and Displacement in Bluegrass Festival Life* (2020) and other works, data from ethnographic field research into bluegrass music culture in the American West. He describes various forms of social relations, the mobile *Gemeinschaft* community, intimacy, inclusion, and simplicity among the participants, their social relationships, and mutual support.

Much is said on various social aspects of popular music in two volumes of *Studies in Symbolic Interaction—35* (2010), edited by Norman K. Denzin, Christopher J. Schneider, Robert Owen Gardner, and



John Bryce Merrill, and 42 (2014) edited by Norman K. Denzin. Volume 35 focuses on meanings, the creative process of music-making, interactions, producing emergence, belonging, identity, and the aspects of interactions in the musical context. Volume 42, entitled *Revisiting Symbolic Interaction in Music Studies and New Interpretive Works*, offers an insight into facets such as experiencing music, cooperative activity, and the semiotics of popular music genres.

A review of the sociological literature concerning conductors reveals that sociologists are most interested in the status of women in this profession and how gender and class-related issues influence their work (Bull 2016), as well as their place in the highly hierarchical and male-dominated genre of art (Ravet 2016). Dmitry Khodyakov (2014) analyzed the relationships between guest conductors and the orchestra concerning leadership, power, and legitimization. Meanwhile, Cayenna Ponchione (2013) studied the construction of professional identity during secondary socialization, and Valerie Malhotra (1981) offered a phenomenological analysis of orchestras creating music.

Hyacinthe Ravet's *L'orchestre au travail: interactions, négociations, coopérations* is a book based on an ethnographic study conducted in France and Germany. Ravet (2015:51) proposes a concept of the "sociology of music in action" (*sociologie de la musique en action*) by which she focuses on negotiations between the conductor and other musicians in the process of preparing the interpretation. It consists of cooperation, conflict, and resistance between the social actors, as well as distancing from their interpretation, and leads to non-obvious harmony during the concert. Additionally, the author highlights the importance of non-verbal communication and the meaning of gestures in communication between the conductor and musicians.

Roy Cain (2005) contributes to the knowledge in the field with his "Singing Out and Making Community: Gay Men and Choral Singing," a chapter in a book entitled *Doing Ethnography. Studying Everyday Life* (Pawluch, Shaffir, and Miall 2005). The text is based on the author's personal experience as a chorister and focuses on the social role of choirs in constituting communities. It also analyzes the relationship between choir singing and gay identity and refers to the role of choral conductors.

Carolyn Ellis and Brydie-Leigh Bartleet (2010) offer an autoethnographic point of view on conducting in *Music Autoethnographies: Making Autoethnography Sing/ Making Music Personal*. However, it has a more personal, individual, and therapeutic dimension. Similarly, Brydie-Leigh Bartleet's "Behind the Baton: Exploring Autoethnographic Writing in a Musical Context" (2009) describes the relations between music-making, creativity, and the autoethnographic process. The text is based on her experience as a conductor.

The literature does not cover how the role of an orchestral conductor is socially constructed by negotiating with various groups and individuals and, at the same time, preserving the image of a determined and resolute individualist. And while some texts analyze the leadership aspect of the conductor's role, also concerning other social roles, mainly orchestral musicians, they rarely study other social actors—the soloists, the ballet, or the audience—as I aim to do in this article.

## Methods

A part of the research project presented in this paper is based on the study conducted among academics and conducting students and conductors associated with the Academy of Music, the Phil-

harmonic, and the Opera in a large Polish city. The research sample was chosen following the grounded theory methodology (GTM) procedure—theoretical sampling. GTM assumes that while constructing a theory, the researcher does not focus on verifying hypotheses but on comparing different cases (constant comparative method), which can, for example, be typical and atypical (Miles and Huberman 2000), to develop the properties of categories.

GTM is rooted in symbolic interactionism and indicates the processual character of social phenomena. It is an appropriate methodological perspective for research on social influences on the human body since its procedures are flexible while requiring methodological discipline. The procedures of GTM eschew the stating of preliminary hypotheses. The researcher returns to the field (where one may find the data) and analyzes the data in successive stages, formulating theses to be verified. This process is iterative, thus repeated in the course of the research. During the analysis, the data are coded, and the categories grounded therein are developed. The researcher returns to the field where they may find data, looking for new information based on the initial analysis and theoretical questions that arise until the saturation of categories is reached (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Glaser 1978; Strauss 1987; Strauss and Corbin 1990; Charmaz 2006; Corbin and Strauss 2007). I have chosen the constructivist version of GTM to conduct my research (Charmaz 2006; Bryant and Charmaz 2007; Bryant 2009).

In the research project, the data referring to the profession of orchestral conductors were gathered using the following techniques (as described in detail in Byczkowska 2009):

- Observation of conducting students during one semester of classes with professional orchestral conductors in the Music Academy; observation of professional conductors during rehearsals in the Opera. In total, I conducted 30 hours of observations during the part of the research concerning the work of conductors. During each observation, I held conversational interviews (Konecki 2000).
- Video-elicited (3) and semi-structured interviews (10) with orchestral conductors (4), a choir conductor (1), an assistant conductor (1), an accompanist (1),<sup>2</sup> and students (2). Some of the study participants consented to be interviewed more than once. The interviewees varied in age (between 20 and 60), length of professional practice, professional experience, and career range (local, national, and international). I conducted interviews of both kinds with nine musicians (six conductors, two conducting students, and one accompanist).
- Analysis of video materials from rehearsals and orchestral concerts.
- Secondary data analysis of a biographical interview (1), a historical book on the careers of famous conductors (1), a conducting manual (1), and TED talks on conducting (2).

The said data gathering techniques enabled me to approach the topic from various points of view, mitigating some of the disadvantages of each data collection tool. The use of numerous techniques, including those that grasp data other than narratives,

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<sup>2</sup> An accompanist is a person who plays the piano during conducting lessons and is supposed to react to the student's gestures as an orchestra would.

helped bring the embodied yet unintelligible practices and experiences to light.

The data analysis included several GTM procedures, such as coding (substantial [open and selective] and theoretical) of the gathered data (narrative, visual, audio, fieldnotes) and writing theoretical memos. I applied theoretical sampling, triangulation, constant comparative method, adopted *in vivo* codes, diagrams, axial coding, and conditional matrix (Konecki 2000; Byczkowska-Owczarek 2019).

### The Social Role of a Conductor

Becoming a conductor is a process that requires an extended period of theoretical and practical education, with the final stages taking place under the supervision of a master (see also: Goode 1977:442 as cited in Rodgers and Thorson 2019:n.p.). Musical education in Poland usually starts as early as the age of 7 or 8 in a primary music school and continues in a secondary music school. Children and teens who attend such schools learn to play musical instruments and have lessons about music theory and history. Some decide to continue their education at music academies, where they may choose various majors, such as instrumentalist, vocal, musical theory, musical composition, or music education.

Major programs in conducting are offered by some music academies in Poland. However, it is socially expected that a conductor should be a mature musician, so a conducting major is usually a second major (undertaken after completing a degree in instrumental music or music education). Usually, there are one or two, rarely three, students per year in conducting major programs. Each year has one leading professor—being the primary mentor and teacher. Conducting classes take place in a room with two

grand pianos, and one or two accompanists play music conducted by the student. The professor usually helps, comments, performs, and interrupts students during the classes. The students are allowed to lead the music academy's orchestras to learn how to work with a bigger group of musicians. To finish each semester, every student must pass an exam in front of professors, performing a few musical works prepared with the professor and one arranged individually. The final exam is based on conducting a concert.

There is a crucial division between conductors—whether they lead a choir or an orchestra. Choral conductors usually work with smaller groups (up to 50, rarely up to 80) divided into four or six voices. The voice as a musical instrument is unique and significantly different from other instruments, and the interviewees claimed that it is similar to working with four or six instruments. In turn, an orchestral conductor works with larger groups of people, broken down into the musical instruments they play. Modern symphonic orchestras may have more than one hundred instruments.<sup>3</sup> An orchestral conductor's role is to make them all perform one consistent piece of musical art. However, it is not an exclusive specialization. Members of both specializations can lead choirs, orchestras, and mixed ensembles (when both a choir and an orchestra perform a piece), although choral conductors rarely use a baton.

A conductor needs several kinds of knowledge to lead an orchestra, including theoretical and non-practical (e.g., general knowledge of music his-

<sup>3</sup> These include: 16-18 1st violins, 16 2nd violins, 12 violas, 12 cellos, 8 double basses, 4 flutes, 4 oboes, 4 clarinets, 4 bassoons, 5-8 horns, 4 trumpets, 4 trombones, 1 tuba, 1 kettledrum player, 3-4 percussionists, 1-2 harps, and a keyboard player (piano, celesta, harpsichord). Retrieved September 24, 2022 (<https://theidiomaticorchestra.net/>).

tory) (Harris 2007) and theoretical-practical knowledge (e.g., the knowledge of music theory) (Stanley and Williamson 2001). These types of knowledge can be classified as *knowing that*. Another element of knowledge is *knowing how* that refers to the knowledge of how to lead an orchestra during a rehearsal and a concert. Some elements of the *knowing how* may be referred to as *tacit knowing* (Polanyi 1966)—information that the origin is unknown to us, that we are not able to verbalize, but use freely. Such knowledge is difficult to transfer as verbal communication and is insufficient to share. For instance, one can talk about “leading strongly,” but such a style of leading is undoubtedly easier to implement than to describe. Conductor training is also about teaching and acquiring skills such as “feeling the music,” that is, the ability to control the orchestra using the body (Ravet 2015). These types of knowledge are not separated and impact one another in professional practice. An individual may lose the ability to implement the practical type of knowledge, for example, when physical abilities are lost in the course of an illness, but still *know how* to use it (see also: Jakubowska 2017).

Professional conductors rely on theoretical expertise in their work. At the same time, success in the profession depends on their manual dexterity or, more generally—bodily skills and proficiency in the use of theoretical knowledge as intermediated through the body. One may be proficient in theoretical knowledge (e.g., the theory and history of music), but unable to put such knowledge into practice, thus allowing it to become part of their oeuvre, without utilizing bodily skills. The use of a baton requires high bodily awareness and many years of practice under the supervision of practicing conductors. Secondary socialization (i.e., acquiring a professional identity and acculturation of norms and

values defined by and/or for a specific social group) and education are intertwined with physical practices aimed at acquiring physical skills. Gaining bodily experience, including specific skills in bodily knowledge or somatic knowledge (“muscle memory”), is vital for this social role. Conductors use gestures and facial expressions not only to convey information regarding how the musicians are to play but also to inspire the orchestra and communicate meanings (both cultural and emotional) associated with a particular music piece.

The social role of an orchestral conductor may be characterized by the following features serving as the context they act within. First of all, conductors possess *highly specialized theoretical knowledge*. Also, they are socially connoted with expertise and treated as an elite within their professional environment. Thus, members of this professional group feel the uniqueness of their work and the exclusiveness of their profession (Freidson 1989).

Secondly, they acquire a very high *awareness of the body*, controlling even the slightest movement of the face and bodily gestures (Ravet 2015). Multiple skills need to be embodied, remembered, and pursued. During a concert, they do much intellectual work and adapt to unpredictable situations. When conducting live music, conductors work in real-time, and there is almost no possibility of correcting an error.

Thirdly, secondary socialization occurs in a rather *exclusive group*, significantly reducing any influence from outside of their professional environment. To be an excellent professional conductor, it is necessary to spend much time learning and practicing. This socialization also includes bodily habitus (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990), in line with gestures, posture, facial expressions, and clothing.

Fourthly, the conductor leads a team that is largely responsible for the *success of their common task*. Despite the high individual prestige that results from the conducting profession, success depends on teamwork. Therefore, the importance of individual work and cooperation with the team is appreciated and maintained (Schütz 1976). Charisma, allowing the conductor to manage the team during the performance, also plays an important role (Khodyakov 2014:67). Competition, negotiations, or conflicts between the orchestra (as a whole or its members) and the conductor may occur. As the interviewees state, the effects are much better if the orchestra members feel comfortable working under a conductor, believe him/her and follow his/her instructions (see also: Ravet 2015).

Fifthly, the profession is *dominated by men*.<sup>4</sup> Women have only widely entered the profession in the last two decades, and most conductors are still male. Some professors, usually elder ones, indirectly refuse to teach female students, and there is an informal rule that female professors should mainly teach women. As the interviewees stated, this is mostly due to the stereotype that women are unable to deliver a strong, powerful expression that is sometimes necessary during a concert. However, female conductors disagree with such a viewpoint as many world-famous female conductors, like Agnieszka Duczmal, Simone Young, Odaline de la Martinez, or Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla, to name a few, offer excellent and strong musical interpretations.

Another interpretation is delivered by Anna Bull (2016:857), who states that this genre of music has always been produced and consumed by the middle

classes. Therefore, it reproduces middle-class values concerning the relations between musicians, including more traditional gender relations.

Negotiating the role-making of a conductor involves *various social actors*. This process includes orchestral musicians, soloists (vocal and instrumental ones), composers, the ballet, and the audience, all of whom strongly influence the actions undertaken by a conductor. In the following part, I will describe and analyze how interactions with each of the mentioned social actors have an impact on the performance of the social role of a conductor. Other social actors, such as the musical institution's administration, authorities, technical staff, choir, and director (in the case of theaters and operas), also play important roles, but I will not analyze their influence in depth due to space constraints.

### The Composer and the Musical Score

The relationship between a conductor and the work written by a composer in the score (see also: non-human actor/actant in Latour 1996:369) is dependent on whether the conductor prepares the score alone. That may be the case because the composer is no longer alive, or it is unlikely that he/she will listen to that specific performance or participate in concert preparations. Even if the conductor works with the score him/herself, the interpretation is not fully individualized (Ravet 2015). In this aspect of the role, the conductor is limited not only by the notation but also by imaginary interactions with the composer. He/she tries to deduce the composer's intentions, for example, by learning about the period when the piece was written. In addition, the conductor adds his/her meanings and features, emphasizing specific values in the work. The knowledge of the composer's biography also influences the interaction with the score:

<sup>4</sup> In Great Britain, women comprise 1.4% of all orchestral conductors (Scharff 2015 as cited in Bull 2016:857).

The musical notes come at the end. First, who wrote it, when, what he experienced. Why do I love Brahms? Because he had a very sad life! Really dramatic. Once you read about Brahms and then start listening to his piece, it seems completely different, right?... Tchaikovsky, his “vomit” of expression. Because he was gay, right? He had no other way of saying that at the time. He spoke through music, but it was so exaggerated that it is sometimes strange to us today... So you always have to take into consideration who it was, what he was doing, what was happening in his life at that moment because it was at that moment that he wrote this piece. [female conducting professor]

As Jerzy Waldorff (1994:35) put it in his book, the composer creates a sculpture. It is up to the conductor to present it, illuminate it, and show it in a specific context. Thanks to this, depending on the conductor’s interpretation, a work by one composer may be performed better or worse and show its various aspects.

## Orchestra

A crucial aspect of the conductor’s role-making is cooperation with the orchestra—a complex organization of highly trained musicians (Khodyakov 2014:65)—transforming his/her bodily expressions into actual sounds. In the conversational interviews I conducted during the observations, the musicians repeatedly recalled shocking stories when the orchestra, mistreated by the conductor during rehearsals, remained silent during the concert despite the conductor’s sign to start. In such a situation, the conductor is unable to influence the orchestra. In most cases, however, orchestral musicians collaborate with the conductor, and even if he/she makes a mistake, the orchestra will play as agreed during the rehearsal. One of the interviewees, an opera

conductor, told me that he once forgot to bring his musical score prepared for the concert. He stood there in front of the orchestra and was paralyzed by the lack of notes and comments. One musician, who played in a later part of the concert, ran to the conductor’s room and brought it. During this time, the conductor conducted without notes, using only his memory, but the orchestra supported him and played as established during rehearsals.

Charisma and the ability to influence musicians who perform in the orchestra play a unique role in this relationship. During the conducting classes I observed, teachers made multiple comments on how to work with an orchestra represented by one or two pianists during the classes. During one of the lessons I witnessed, a student showed a grimace of dissatisfaction when the accompanists played differently than he would have liked. He was immediately reprimanded by the professor.

Professors would often react if a student made an unclear gesture, and they frequently explained the pianists’ mistakes by the student’s lack of precision and decisiveness. This element of the conductor’s role is, therefore, an essential part of the didactic process. Each conductor, however, uses his/her unique ways of managing the orchestra, which is also dependent on the particular characteristics of its members.

A conductor, as a mediator between the composer’s notation and the orchestra, solves the problems that result from the practical performance of the piece by the orchestral ‘apparatus.’ As Jerzy Maksymiuk, a world-famous Polish conductor, put it, a conductor should know the possibilities of each instrument. Composers are creators of somewhat abstract musical scores unless they are also conductors. It is the

conductor who puts their concept of a sound into actual music action. Working with instrumentalists shows that, for example, the flute is inaudible because the composer did not take into account that another group of instruments is louder (Maksymiuk and Piasecka 2002:96).

A vital element of the conductor's social role is the ability to react quickly to errors, uncertainty, or hesitation in the orchestra (Faulkner and Becker 2009). As a leader, the conductor is responsible for the performance of the work, including various slips of the orchestra. As all the interviewees stated, no hesitation or uncertainty should be seen in his/her movements. The conductor energizes and inspires the orchestra, and the main instrument of the conductor's work is the body.

In the profession of the conductor (not only an orchestral one), indecision is interpreted as evidence of a lack of professionalism, a lack of charisma, and an inability to control one's body. Conductors manipulate impressions through their bodies, and, as leaders, they constantly control their facial expressions, that is, reactions to any errors that may appear. Any, even small and short, facial expression that shows dissatisfaction or disappointment is a sign for the orchestra that the conductor is not happy with their work. In such a moment, the orchestra may be put off its stride and can cast a shadow on subsequent stages of the concert. As one of the interviewees, a female conducting professor, stated, decisions about the means of interpretation are:

Seemingly democratic. Because these appearances give me more opportunities, right? I have more of these ideas to solve the problem and give the team a sense of freedom. Freedom. The right to decide, right? This is what I think is very important. I am not

a supporter of dictatorial rule over the team. I just don't know if it can give anyone satisfaction. It means the burden of responsibility for the decision made, and so it always falls on me. [female conducting professor]

The conductor-orchestra relationship has changed considerably since World War II, along with cultural changes.<sup>5</sup> Before WWII, the role of a conductor had much more to do with dictatorship or even tyranny (see also: Khodyakov 2014:77). It was caused by the socio-economic conditions that prevailed before WWII and the death of many professional musicians during the war. In the 1950s and 1960s, a large number of musicians were amateurs who had received little or no professional education. Things changed slowly up to the 1990s when a new interpretation of leadership became dominant. As the number of professional, highly educated musicians increased, new, more partner-like relationships between a conductor and an orchestra developed. The musicians knew the 'obvious things' and could interact with the conductor like partners. A male conducting professor describes the process very well:

You have to be very resolute. Firm. Today, mainly professional. With knowledge and skills, you must immediately impress the orchestra to get them to back you. Until recently, where it was only a male profession, until the 1990s...this model of conducting an orchestra has completely changed. It was, all over the world... they were gods. Ruthless, tough. A bossy sergeant, humiliating people, and so on. That was it. Until the nineties...I was already a bit differently shaped. I had a different idea, which worked well for me...that I would achieve more, of course, always very consis-

<sup>5</sup> More about the historical context of the social role of a conductor may be found in a chapter by Denis Stevens, "Why Conductors? Their Role and the Idea of Fidelity" (1986).

tently. Polite, but very consistently...Same methods, but in a different way [laughs]. Dressed in a different form.

Generally, obeying the conductor is an institutionalized rule that dates back to the Baroque period. Highly educated musicians learn for years how to observe the conductor's baton and interpret his or her gestures and facial expression (Khodyakov 2014:66). Their secondary socialization of the musician's role includes obeying the conductor's orders, which enables him or her to perform their role. As Dmitry Khodyakov (2014:67) puts it, the conductor's authority is based on tradition, charisma, and the legal rules of the orchestra.

### Soloists

Conductors may work with two types of **soloists**—instrumentalists and vocalists. Both may appear in a philharmonic and an opera. In a philharmonic, the soloists usually stand on the stage with the orchestra and are visible to the conductor. In operas, instrumental soloists may either be present on the stage or sit in the pit with the orchestra while singers play their parts on the stage. In such an arrangement, communication with the conductor may be more challenging. In all of these situations, the conductor's regular role, that is, that of a leader, is passed on to the soloist. The conductor's main task is to make the soloist feel safe and to conduct the orchestra in a way that their music makes a comfortable background. During one of the conducting lessons, I observed a female conducting student working with a female violin soloist. The student's job was to conduct two piano players in accordance with the performance of the soloist. Assessing their first presentation, the professor said to the conducting student: "You cannot conduct a soloist. Look at

the bow and breathe to have equal impulses with her." When a conductor works with a real orchestra, impulses are transmitted by the conductor to the orchestra. That is how a common musical reality is created through the conductor's body, namely, his/her breath.

The way the music is played may be negotiated during the rehearsals—an example of how social interactions shape the role-making depending on the needs and requirements of the interactional partner (Turner 2002:23). The negotiations may take the form of verbalizing the perspective of the soloist, who has their vision of the piece. However, the conductor's job is to make the whole piece of music sound coherent; therefore, if the soloist's concept is not good enough or does not suit the musicality of the particular orchestra, the conductor should attempt to find a common notion so that the final effect is satisfactory for all parties. Sometimes, especially when the conductor and the soloist know each other very well and have somewhat of a partner-like relationship, these negotiations may be very straightforward. During one of my observations of opera rehearsals for a New Year concert, one of the male vocal soloists kept singing a romantic piece at a very slow pace. The issue had already been discussed with the conductor. When the orchestra performed the piece on the third day of rehearsals, and the soloist sang it slowly again, the conductor shouted to him from the orchestral channel: "Oh John [name changed—DBO], come on! You don't want to sound like some old lout!"

However, negotiations may also take place during a concert. The soloist may perform differently than agreed during the rehearsals, in which case the conductor usually has no other choice but to conform to the soloist's expectations, bearing in mind the suc-



cess of the concert (Faulkner and Becker 2009:185). Despite the distance and ongoing performance, the interactions between the conductor and the soloist take place even in such challenging contexts. As the following example indicates, role-making occurs at all times and is sometimes limited to nonverbal communication between the actors. As conductors explain, eye contact is essential. The soloist learns to see it and look at the conductor in a way imperceptible to the audience.

This situation may be challenging for the conductor's leadership, as it undermines his/her decisions and forces him/her to perform under the soloist's dominance during the concert. Therefore, actions are taken to fix the conductor's status. The following example indicates that a conductor should constantly interpret the actions of others and decide whether they interfere with his/her interpretation of the social role:

Well, you can give up your vision, but it's never convenient because it is also like...It is just such a thin line between what you can impose and what you can give away without losing face, right? Well, because if every singer did what he wants with you, then, at some point, the orchestra will also say, "Okay, [we don't care]." Or you have some authority, and you can force it...Then you have to intervene somehow; you just have to. [female opera orchestra conductor]

## Ballet

When it comes to cooperating with the ballet, which is often a task of opera conductors, an additional issue needs to be considered, namely, the human body as an entity that works within certain limitations. Of course, the limits of the human body are visible in the case of instrumentalists (e.g., an over-

ly fast pace makes it impossible for them to play) and in the case of vocal soloists (e.g., the issue of breathing, the ability to hold a note), and they may also interfere with the conductor's vision. However, in the case of ballet dancers, the conductors who work with them state they should be familiar with how dancers work, perhaps by participating in ballet rehearsals, and adjust the pace of the music to the bodily abilities of the group or the ballet soloists. With instrumental and vocal soloists, two-way communication with the conductor is possible. They may show the conductor that something is wrong or that they need to go slower or faster. In contrast, ballet dancers constantly move on the stage and have infrequent eye contact with the conductor. During a performance, dancers adjust their bodywork to the music played by the orchestra. As a male opera orchestra conductor puts it: "Here a smile [on the dancer's face], a heavenly atmosphere, but then they leave the stage and say, 'What was that?!'"

When preparing a concert, the ballet director works alongside the conductor and indicates the parts in which the dancers may have problems with the pace, jumping, or other elements of the performance. Sometimes, the changes are included in the final version of the concert, regardless of the conductor's vision of the piece.

The conductor's interpretation of the musical score, expressed, among others, by adopting a particular pace, needs to be negotiated with the performers. Otherwise, the concert may not be well-played, or a conflict between the conductor and the ballet dancers will arise. The negotiation takes place not only during the rehearsals. When leading the orchestra during the concert, the conductor constantly observes and harmonizes the pace of the music between the ballet and the orchestra (see also: Faulk-

ner and Becker 2009:185). That is a challenging task. A female opera conductor describes some of the problems that may arise:

If you're at too slow a pace, he [a ballet dancer] won't jump out because there is no run-up, right? The uphill run is too slow for him to do a pirouette, well...I was conducting, this year I had my first ballet debut, so let me tell you, I was so sweaty. Jesus! I thought I would die [laughs]. To harmonize the music and the body, the possibilities of the body. There are also soloists there; there are group performers. Each of the soloists is different, right?

## **Audience**

The relationship with the audience is mainly based on whether they will or will not approve of the conductor. It depends on many factors and is more relevant to philharmonic halls or operas with a long tradition. The audience is more used to a particular repertoire, performance style, or conductors' behavior. For example, conservative audiences, used to hearing the classics, are reluctant to accept conductors who prefer more contemporary pieces. In such situations, some conductors, even eminent ones, decide to include music known to their audience in their repertoire, even if it is not entirely in line with their taste (Waldorff 1994:50).

The conductor's relationship with the audience, mainly with regular patrons of a particular musical institution or with the audience present in the concert hall at a certain moment, may vary from welcoming to terrorist. Herbert von Karajan, the world-famous Austrian conductor, would stop conducting after a few beats if he thought that the audience did not treat the stage with due respect, for example, if someone coughed or shuffled their legs. He

would turn around and frown with an intent stare. The audience was afraid of him (Waldorff 1994:292).

As the conductor plays no musical instrument, some less informed members of the audience may doubt his/her role on the stage. Thus, some conductors feel the need to legitimize their presence through more expressive conducting gestures (Khodyakov 2014:66, 68). The impression management applied in such situations is a way of communicating with the orchestra. Some conductors, knowing that a passage in a certain part of a piece is difficult and that the orchestra may make an error, might turn and look at the audience, sometimes blink, but generally show how they should understand the piece. As one of my interviewees said, "half of the audience is deaf, but they all have eyes."

An essential condition of the relationship between the conductor and the audience is that he/she usually stands in front of the orchestra with his/her back turned to the audience. That constitutes a context in which the audience cannot see the conductor's face (Khodyakov 2014:80). Therefore, the conductor does not feel observed by the audience and can focus on making music. Many of the conductors I interviewed declared that was one of the pros of their profession. Standing with their back to the audience and facing the orchestra creates a context of focusing on the common creation of the sound, not the perception of the audience (although some conductors also try to manage meanings transmitted directly to the orchestra). Not being observed by musical amateurs, only by professionals, creates a more comfortable atmosphere for work and expression.

The interaction between the conductor and the audience rarely is direct. It takes place only when the conductor enters or leaves the stage or makes

an announcement. Therefore, the rapport between the conductor and the audience is built by experiencing the concert's shared and common reality. The feeling of a shared music reality is something conductors crave. However, the listeners' ability to follow the flux of music involves their awareness and knowledge that all musical elements constitute "a meaningful unity" (Schütz 1996:275; see also: Skanda 1982). That is how a male opera orchestra conductor describes the feeling:

I think that the coolest and most uplifting moment, when you can forget about all those different problems, is the moment when you feel it, and feel it very clearly, when the audience behind, behind the conductor's back, begins to breathe in a specific way and feel this unique energy. You can really feel that people like it. And it gives you huge wings.

### **Personal Characteristics Influencing Conductor's Role-Making**

The conductor's role is negotiated during various rehearsals, including those with an orchestra, but also with soloists or, in the case of opera conductors, with the choir and ballet. While interacting with musicians, dancers, and soloists, the conductor shapes his/her actions towards them and how he/she performs this social role. The most important factors that influence the role-making of an individual as a conductor are:

- **Gender:** The dominance of men in the profession originates from tradition. The definition of this social role was shaped when women were socialized to perform social roles characterized by submissiveness and a lack of decision-making skills, assertiveness, or leadership. Although the times and gender roles

have changed since the 18th century when the conducting profession appeared, women as conductors are assessed by the audience, musicians, and colleagues according to slightly different criteria. It is assumed that a male conductor is better suited to more 'serious' projects and strenuous undertakings. When it comes to the role-making of female conductors, the debate over the dress code is an interesting issue. According to some female conductors, their clothing should resemble men's outfits as much as possible. According to others, quite the opposite is true—the dress or gown should be feminine, elegant, and sexy. That is an intriguing example of the processual role-making aspects of female conducting as either imitating the social role of a male conductor or looking for ways to distinguish female conductors from men.

- **Age:** In the process of role-making, age has an impact on the chosen kind of relations with others—more dominating or more partner-like. Conductors who started their careers in the 1990s still had the chance to be educated and professionally shaped by professors who had been socialized in a hierarchic culture of orchestral and opera music and passed this image of the conductor's role to their disciples. However, through various other interactions, such as participating in international projects or working with younger orchestral musicians, students get acquainted with and have a chance to develop a less hierarchical pattern of relationships between the conductor and the orchestra.
- **Nationality and international experience:** If a conductor develops an international career,

he/she usually internalizes different, culturally shaped ways of communicating with the orchestra: he/she is more or less direct, offers more or less explanation, and decides to show emotions or communicate calmly. The more international professional experiences a conductor acquires, the more strategies he/she develops when interacting with other social actors. During international cooperation, a conductor also learns the universal language of gestures that musicians with different cultural backgrounds can interpret.

- Competencies: The conductor's experience, including international settings, greatly influences how orchestral musicians, soloists, audiences, and other social actors treat him/her. As already mentioned, it is challenging to maintain a balance between the conductor's vision and the influence of the people he/she cooperates with. An effective strategy to achieve such a balance is to build a rapport with others based on competencies such as theoretical knowledge, bodily skills, past projects, and charisma. That may be done by, for example, negotiating, sincerely or just pretending, the interpretation of the musical score (Khodyakov 2014:77). The ability to create trust between the conductor and his/her collaborators is vital for making music together. As Charles Hazlewood (2020<sup>6</sup>), a British conductor, declared, "My job depends upon it. There has to be between me and the orchestra an unshakable bond of trust, born out of mutual respect, through which we can spin a musical narrative that we all believe in." If the trust and rap-

port are lacking, the conductor cannot put his/her other competencies, however outstanding, into (orchestral) action. The competencies are also a kind of proof that a conductor knows what he/she is doing. A conductor may break even the most basic rules of the profession (e.g., remaining silent during the concert) if he/she is an established individual and if the behavior is consistent with the conventions and character of the musical piece (see also: Faulkner and Becker 2009:122). A great example is Leif Segerstam singing and shouting during a concert of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade* op. 35 played by the Sinfónica de Galicia.<sup>7</sup>

- Type of professional contract: The form of employment influences the attributes of power the conductor has. If the conductor is also a director of music of the institution, his/her power over the musicians is greater, and she/he may, for example, refuse to prolong a musician's contact or not include them in future projects. Her/his power is based on charisma, but also the ability to influence the musician's career. Assistant conductors do not have that attribute of power, but they may have a long relationship with the orchestra; therefore, they may use charisma to build trust with the musicians. Guest conductors who play with the orchestra have the fewest attributes, as they work with the musicians for a short period and have no formal power over them. It is mainly through their ability to establish a trustful relationship with the orchestra and their charisma that they exercise their power (Khodyakov 2014:65).

<sup>6</sup> See: *Trusting the Ensemble*. Online lecture. Retrieved September 20, 2020 ([www.ted.com/talks/charles\\_hazlewood\\_trusting\\_the\\_ensemble](http://www.ted.com/talks/charles_hazlewood_trusting_the_ensemble)).

<sup>7</sup> See: Segerstam Leif conducting Sinfónica de Galicia in Rimsky-Korsakov: *Scheherazade* op.35. Retrieved June 10, 2021 ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zY4w4\\_W30aQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zY4w4_W30aQ)).

## Concluding Remarks

The article debunks the myth about the individual, undisturbed, and autonomous work of an orchestral conductor. The making of this social role is shaped, negotiated, and created through social interactions with individuals and groups and with an object—the musical score. At the same time, the image of a resolute and determined conductor is sustained due to the expectations of other social actors engaged in the process of performing music. Additionally, the research reveals that the conductor's social role-making is influenced by cultural, group-related, and interactional factors. These factors shape individual careers and hence, the development of orchestral music. This role-making process relies on an ongoing balancing between the individual (the artistic) and the social (the persuasive, the organizational). Additionally, it depends on the negotiation of meanings with other social actors constantly taking on the view of the other and reconstructing the self in such social situations as interpreting a piece of music, presenting the interpretation to the orchestra, reacting to errors during rehearsals, and constructing leadership (Turner 2002:23).

Adopting Schütz's phenomenological concept enabled me to analyze the mediating process between the late composer and the orchestra to recreate a piece of music. The conductor's interactions with the late composer, his/her biography, the history of their times, and the possible intentions and emotions behind creating a musical score are based on socially derived and approved knowledge acquired during the educational process. Since the musical score is a set of guidelines that need to be followed to recreate a piece of music, they lack interpretation. The ways of interpreting each musical piece are part of the socialization in the musical professions and are based

on a common understanding of a piece, along with contemporary trends of interpretation. Additionally, the conductor's task is to recreate the piece of music taking into account the skills of particular musicians, the place of a concert, knowledge and ability to understand the meanings of the music by the audience. The audience's role is important as well since the conductor's task is to recreate the musical piece in a way that would be understood by contemporary listeners. What all of the described interactions have in common is that they are all created with a partner with imagined features—the late composer, the musical score and its meaning, and the audience. The conductor is taught and socialized to interact with them in a way that is expected from his/her social role.

Howard Becker's interactionist perspective was practical in analyzing the processes of communicating, negotiating, managing conflicts, and establishing a shared definition of the situation among all social actors engaged in the situation of a rehearsal or concert. Constant communication, verbal during rehearsals and non-verbal at the show, requires a shared set of meanings and gestures a conductor uses to transmit his/her idea of sound to other musicians. What is more, he/she considers the abilities of other performers, mainly the ballet and soloists, to produce a thriving musical entity. These rather democratic traits of relationships between the conductor and other participants of the situation are accompanied by more—in the case of conductors with a more traditional and patriarchal definition of their role—or less—in the case of conductors with a more modern definition—direct statements of their superior position and leadership. The role-making also depends on the wider, for example, economic or historical<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The mentioned change in the definition of the conductor's role after WWII.

context of the conductor's work or the personal characteristics. Numerous mentioned features, such as age, gender, nationality, or international experience, influence the perception of a conductor. However, if an individual chooses charismatic and leadership strategies of interactions, the personal features fall into the background of a particular situation.

Relationships with a variety of actors, and their related worlds of shared experiences, are necessary to obtain the symbolic and material resources required to establish communication networks both

between the performers and with others (Becker 1951; Segre 2020). Negotiating the role and the task of conducting indicates that "meaning arises contextually" through the performance and interpreting the reactions to the significant gestures used when playing a common piece of music (Faulkner and Becker 2009:154-155). The interactional aspect of the conductor's social role is crucial. It is the only musical profession that does not make any sound. It is others who make sounds for the conductor. Yet, it is the conductor him/herself who takes responsibility for every sound played during the performance.

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# Popular Stoicism in the Face of Social Uncertainty

**Renata Dopierała**   
University of Lodz, Poland

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**Abstract:** The article discusses popular Stoicism (a modern, simplified, and often commercialized version of ancient Stoicism), which is offered as an answer to the uncertainty of modernity. The financial, political, climate, and health crises have been detrimental to the sense of agency and control over one's life, leading individuals to seek ways of (subjectively) regaining it. Popular Stoicism can be viewed as an expert system providing individuals with a specific vision of happiness and the good life, in addition to offering practical knowledge on how to define an area of individual agency by negotiating the boundaries between that which is within one's power and that which is not. Reflections begin with a juxtaposition of ancient and contemporary Stoicism, focusing on their different socio-cultural origins, followed by a synthesis of the principles of ancient Stoicism on happiness and the good life and a detailed interpretation of the 'offering' of popular Stoicism in the relevant areas. In the latter context, two chosen Stoic exercises (necessary to achieve happiness and the good life) are discussed—the ability to recognize what things depend/do not depend on us and Stoic emotion work. The practices and techniques recommended as a part of constant work on oneself are also supposed to teach individuals to adapt to their unstable reality. As a result, the popular version of Stoicism perpetuates the mechanisms of the culture of individualism, which holds the individual fully responsible for their life, and the therapeutic and counseling culture (based on one's readiness to constantly self-improve), which is a new form of disciplining in a neoliberal society. Both are important elements of the everyday life and lifestyle of the middle class. This class is interested in self-fulfillment and is the primary target audience of contemporary Stoic handbooks. The consideration is based on fragments of books on popular Stoicism, mainly written by Polish philosophers, subjected to qualitative content analysis.

**Renata Dopierała, Ph.D.**, works at the Department of Sociology of Culture, Institute of Sociology, Faculty of Economics and Sociology, University of Lodz, Poland. Her research interest lies in the sociology of everyday life (with

the main focus on the issue of privacy) and the sociology of things. Her interests also include the phenomenon of consumerism and anti-consumption lifestyles.

**email address:** [renata.dopierala@uni.lodz.pl](mailto:renata.dopierala@uni.lodz.pl)

According to numerous theorists and researchers, late modernity is characterized, among others, by processes of social acceleration, which evoke the feeling of alienation (see: Rosa 2013; 2020), recurring economic crises affecting local economies and global networks, exacerbating climate changes, and transformations of capitalism that no longer is 'only' increasingly more expansive and competition-oriented but is also becoming a surveillance capitalism (see: Zuboff 2020). My intention here is not to assess the degree to which these diagnoses aptly describe our reality, and I will also refrain from reconstructing arguments in favor of such beliefs or their counter-discourses.

Among many consequences of the aforementioned phenomena, one merits special attention—uncertainty that should be viewed as the instability and unpredictability of the social order,<sup>1</sup> which, in turn, leads to the collapse of ontological security<sup>2</sup> (Giddens 1990; 1991). The loss of faith in the immutability of the rules of social life has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the currently ongoing war in Ukraine, so much so that it has become a structural element of individual experience (see: Blokker and Vieten 2022:1). As demonstrated by research conducted during the pandemic, the more an individual realizes how everyday life has become unstable, the stronger their need to regain

<sup>1</sup> Uncertainty manifests itself in many aspects of individual life influencing each other, the most noticeable of which include: material (decreased or lost income, and thus the inability to maintain a constant budget), professional (loss of employment or the possibility of workplace closure, reduction of hours worked, precarity), as well as emotional and health-related (mental health disorders in various age groups, increased rates of somatic disorders).

<sup>2</sup> Ontological security is “the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of their surrounding social and material environments of action” (Giddens 1990:66); it relies on people’s ability to give meaning to their lives.

cognitive control (Drozdowski et al. 2020). A consequence of the pandemic—one that is relevant to this analysis—is an opportunity for the entrenchment of dominant therapeutic and counseling discourses. According to Marek Krajewski and Małgorzata Kubacka (2020:72 [trans. RD]), “the pandemic could enforce and legitimize the symbolic power of certain groups (coaches, psychologists, personal trainers, etc.), rendering their knowledge even more vital to attaining the good life.” The idea of the good life mentioned by the authors, together with the related discourses of happiness and high quality of life, determine an individual’s goals and lend direction to their actions. Considering the deepening sense of uncertainty, those ideas also become problematic. When faced with the phenomena described above, living a satisfying and fulfilled life is rendered difficult. As a result, individuals seek solutions that enable them to develop a sense of being able to influence reality and regain control of their lives (which is vital to one’s subjective sense of well-being). One such solution involves ‘testing’ the models of the good life offered by the consumerist culture of capitalism. That is because such situations generate demand for knowledge, the sources of which include the various expert systems (see: Giddens 1990; 1991). Philip Rieff (1966) stated that when normative control weakens, an increase can be observed in the demand for expert advice, and the chief problem for individuals is improving themselves. From this point of view, an example of an expert system appears to be Stoicism, which is becoming increasingly popular<sup>3</sup> and has been described by a certain

<sup>3</sup> During the pandemic, the popularity of Stoicism has grown in the UK. According to Penguin Random House, print sales of *Meditations* are up 28% for the first quarter of 2020 vs. 2019, while print sales of *Letters from a Stoic* are up 42% for the same period. The sales of *Meditations* have been quietly on the up for the last eight years, around 16,000 copies were sold in 2012, but this increased to more than 100,000 copies in 2019 (Flood 2020).

commentator as a philosophy “built for hard times” (Anderson 2012). The philosopher Jules Evans (2019) said: “Stoicism is popular now because people feel out of control. . .Stoicism says, accept that you cannot control the external world, but that you can find a measure of serenity and happiness and moral meaning by focusing on what *is* in your control, your own beliefs and your own actions.” The recommendations offered by the contemporary version of Stoicism seem to resonate with the uncertainty of modernity, as not only do they offer strategies of regaining a sense of influence and control (it is debatable how illusory these may be) but also present methods of achieving happiness and the good life,<sup>4</sup> which many individuals—particularly those from the middle class—perceive as directives and manuals. The nominally different frameworks of interpreting individual experiences offered by modern Stoicism are, in my opinion, a socially-relevant topic.

The article analyzes three publications on modern Stoicism written by Polish authors<sup>5</sup> (constituting the primary data corpus), as well as two translated publications (as additional materials)<sup>6</sup>; the authors

<sup>4</sup> William B. Irvine, a modern American philosopher and proponent of Stoicism, said this when interviewed in 2020: “I think that the first half of the year has already given us plenty of reasons to believe that this is the philosophy that really makes life more bearable. Since we have no power over how the virus appears and spreads, even if we make sure to follow the rules and regulations, we can only accept everything that is happening around us with a Stoic demeanor and be grateful that we are still alive because we could be gone, that every day spent with our loved ones is an additional reason to be happy” (Irvine 2020a [trans. RD]).

<sup>5</sup> Mazur, Tomasz. 2014. *O stawianiu się stoikiem. Czy jesteście gotowi na sukces?* [*Becoming a Stoic. Are You Ready for Success?*]. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN; Seidler, Paulina F. 2022. *Po prostu spokój. Jak dobrze żyć po stoicku* [*Plain Peace. How to Live in a Stoic Way*]. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Zwierciadło; Stankiewicz, Piotr. 2014. *Sztuka życia według stoików* [*The Art of Living according to the Stoics*]. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo WAB.

<sup>6</sup> Sellars, John. 2021. *Lekcje stoicyzmu* [*Lessons in Stoicism*]. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Czarna Owca; Irvine, William B. 2020b. *Wyzwanie stoika. Jak dzięki filozofii odnaleźć w sobie siłę, spokój*

of all these publications are philosophers. They reconstruct the premises of Stoicism based on source materials (cited more or less extensively). However, it is not my role to verify the validity of their exegeses and doctrine compliance. Considering the subject matter of the paper, out of the extensive research material, I chose and analyzed only elements of happiness and the good life. The methodology used was qualitative content analysis, the purpose of which was to systematically and reliably determine how these topics are presented in the analyzed publications. The analysis led to the discovery of new categories and aspects of the main subjects: the modern understanding of happiness and the good life, ways of achieving them (self-development practices and exercises), and their implications for individuals in the current socio-cultural context. My analysis begins with a juxtaposition of ancient and contemporary Stoicism, focusing on their different social, political, and cultural origins, followed by a synthesis of the principles of ancient Stoicism on happiness and the good life. In subsequent sections, I provide a detailed interpretation of the ‘offering’ of popular Stoicism in the relevant areas, focusing on its individual (identity-related) and socio-cultural consequences.

## Ancient Stoicism and Popular Stoicism—Recognition

Stoicism is a Greek school of philosophy founded by Zeno of Citium in the 3rd century BCE, developed by Chrysippus of Soli into a comprehensive system that, over the course of five centuries from

*i odporność psychiczną* [*The Stoic Challenge: A Philosopher’s Guide to Becoming Tougher, Calmer, and More Resilient*]. Cracow: Insignis Media. That is because the books by Polish philosophers are comparable in size and provide an extensive account of Stoic beliefs, whereas translations, due to their smaller size, generally only provide cursory overviews.

its inception, underwent transformations, which reflected the changing socio-cultural environment at the time. “Stoicism arose and became popular in difficult, trying times—the Greek city-state was breaking down, the world no longer felt stable, and change (and chaos) was everywhere. Similarly, for many people today, our world feels out of control in many ways: socially, politically, and environmentally” (Evans 2019). Greek Stoicism was referenced by such Roman thinkers as Seneca and Marcus Aurelius (who represent the late school of Stoicism), who were responsible for propagating its ideas. Stoicism was developed in Hellenic Athens, which means that its tenets were intended for citizens, that is, free, educated people who did not work for a living, but were eligible to decide on public/political matters—these criteria were only met by high-status and wealthy males<sup>7</sup> (an exception to this was Epictetus, who was a purchased slave). Ancient Stoicism—despite its professed egalitarianism—was thus intended for a narrow group of practitioners who could afford to devote themselves to a *vita contemplativa*, using Stoic exercises and practices to become the ideal sages—men of wisdom and virtue.<sup>8</sup> The ethical aspect of Stoicism (relevant from the perspective of this consideration and analyzed in detail in the following sections of the article) focused on the highest human good and the main goal of human activity, which was believed to be the pursuit of happiness and virtue, and entailed recommendations on how to live well. The return to Stoicism, which began in the second half of the 20th century, has assumed

<sup>7</sup> The political community excluded women, slaves, and foreigners; the former were primarily occupied with the private sphere (the home), which, at the time, was separated from the public sphere and matters related to various necessities of life.

<sup>8</sup> Virtue used to mean something different than it does today. In this case, classical Stoicism can be viewed as more aligned with modern guides, as it approaches virtue as a relatively stable character trait that can be cultivated within ourselves.

various forms (to account for various needs and expectations of individuals, as well as their different development stages), although it does not simply draw upon or reference the original school of thought, as was the case in the Renaissance, for example, but constitutes its ‘reactivation’ as a still-relevant philosophy (see: Mazur 2010; Stefaniuk 2017).

Currently, Stoicism is particularly popular in the West, as evidenced not only by various new research papers circulating in the hermetic world of academia but also by popular culture texts that promote Stoic ideas as offering utility for modern individuals. This version is referred to as Pop Stoicism or popular Stoicism and is defined as “contemporary commercialized Stoicism or, to be more precise, commercialized elements of Stoicism” (Stefaniuk 2017:49).<sup>9</sup> From this perspective, Stoicism serves as the base for self-help books, self-fulfillment, and self-development guides and coaching publications. The Internet is also rife with dedicated podcasts, blogs, newsletters, and Instagram and Facebook accounts created by both professional and amateur philosophers. “Modern Stoicism has become an industry. And a mega-industry at that. For the consumers seeking wisdom on how to live the good life—and there are a lot of them—there are daily digests of Stoic quotations, books, and websites packed with Stoic wisdom to kick-start your day, podcasts, broadcasts, online crash courses, and more” (Sherman 2021).

In Poland, translations are available of books by such philosophers as William B. Irvine and John Sellars, as well as the non-philosophers Ward Farnsworth

<sup>9</sup> The author states: “when we mention ‘pop-Stoicism’ or the simplistic modern form of ‘commercialized Stoicism,’ it is necessary to distinguish it from the Stoicism of ancient philosophers, that is, from the ‘proper’ or ‘original’ Stoicism, which has long been the subject of serious academic research and discussion” (Stefaniuk 2017:50).

(a lawyer), Ryan Holiday and Stephen Hanselman (a writer and a publisher). Also published are papers and books by Polish academic philosophers claiming to apply the principles of Stoicism in their everyday lives. The most recognizable being Tomasz Mazur and Piotr Stankiewicz. These authors share their experiences not only with readers of traditional book publications and course participants but also with users of new media, in which they are active in a multitude of ways—they operate websites, record podcasts, write blog posts, and appear on various shows. Piotr Stankiewicz describes himself as a teacher of reformed Stoicism, while Tomasz Mazur refers to himself as a philosophical development trainer who promotes “philosophical self-development,” which, among other activities, involves seminars and workshops. Another philosopher is Marcin Fabjański, the founder of the Apennine School of Living Philosophy, established in Italy and drawing upon the “teachings of the Stoics, Epicureans, Buddhists, and Taoists, as well as modern and contemporary philosophers.” The above initiatives, apart from those aimed at popularization, are purely commercial in nature and constitute—more or less intentionally—a part of the counseling culture (this is exemplified by the terminology used, e.g., “philosophical development trainer”).

In addition, blogs and podcasts are established by individuals who are not trained philosophers, but who—in their perception—practice Stoicism, forming a community of people who share a similar system of beliefs and attitudes towards reality. Such blogs either focus fully on various elements of Stoicism (its history, principles, or practices) or combine Stoic themes with other ideas that are considered useful in attaining the good life, for example, mindfulness, minimalism, et cetera. Other blogs and podcasts illustrate its pragmatic, selective

applications to particular aspects of reality, for example, business ventures, improving interpersonal relationships, achieving fulfillment in romantic relationships, and seeking tranquility via Stoic meditation (such cases are akin to applying mindfulness to achieve a particular goal, e.g., to reduce stress [see the works of Jon Kabat-Zinn]).

## Classical Stoic Happiness and the Good Life

Happiness is a recurring goal of individuals, which is why it is necessary to begin by recapitulating the views held by classical Stoics regarding happiness and the related understanding of nature, before referring to the broader conceptual constructs of the ‘good life’ and ‘quality of life,’ as well as the popularized versions of these two phenomena.

The belief that happiness is an important goal of human life and that the purpose of philosophy is to enable its attainment, was not only espoused by the Stoics. This aspect is present in nearly all ancient schools of philosophy (Epicureanism, the Cyrenaics), although the Stoics differed greatly in their approach to the issue. That is because the Stoics believed that happiness, if contingent upon external factors, was uncertain and that to ensure a constant level of happiness, it was necessary to either gain independence from these factors or overcome them. The other solution (control over the world) was seen as impossible, which is why the only way of becoming independent was to ‘develop’ self-control. The pursuit of happiness entails a degree of self-denial—“to achieve everything, one must deny oneself everything” (Tatarkiewicz 2002:132 [trans. RD]). A person who subscribes to this view thus pursues only internal goods, which are only within their power, making them certain. Internal goods

are a virtue, viewed as the sum of wisdom, independence, and happiness. “In viewing virtue as the sole condition for happiness, [the Stoics] practically equated it with happiness, considering it to be the highest good or even the only true good” (Tatarkiewicz 2002:132 [trans. RD]).

Thus, the road to happiness does not involve changes to the external world, but changes to one’s views—erroneous individual beliefs and judgments—on reality. “Everything depends on opinion; ambition, luxury, greed, hark back to opinion. It is according to opinion that we suffer” (Seneca 2017:78.13 [trans. RD]). The belief that views can be modified stems from the division into that which is and is not within the power of the individual. Happiness is within the power of the individual—a positive or a negative mood originates from our will, and thus the source of suffering is not external but a result of our internal attitudes. As stated by Epictetus (1961:455 [trans. RD]), “Of things that exist, some are in our power and some are not in our power. Those that are in our power are conception, choice, desire, aversion, and in a word, those things that are our own doing. Those that are not under our control are the body, property or possessions,<sup>10</sup> reputation, positions of authority, and in a word, such things that are not our own doing.” Things in our power are all spiritual states, including happiness and unhappiness, while things beyond our control are prestige, money, and health—“as only that is within our power

which is fully and unconditionally in our power” (Epictetus 1961:457 [trans. RD]). A consequence of these beliefs is the view that an individual is capable of making oneself happy (Stankiewicz 2014:67–68), which necessitates self-development by various techniques and practices.

Regarding the other aspect, adapting to nature, which is reasonable and harmonious, is part of achieving individual perfection. Living in accordance with human nature was synonymous with living in accordance with nature in general—it was an expression of virtue. The Stoics equated a virtuous life with living in alignment with nature. A virtuous existence was free and aligned with reason, as that was the nature of man, not passions. Virtue was thus wisdom, knowledge, and reason (Tatarkiewicz 2002). To summarize, according to the classical version of Stoicism, a happy person understands reality (the order of things) and accepts everything that happens to them. The suffering they experience should not cause them to lose balance or cloud their understanding of the order of things—that which is within the laws of nature cannot be viewed as misfortune. To live the good (i.e., happy) life, one must also be able to distinguish between good and evil—human ignorance in that regard causes individuals to perform evil acts, whose consequences are not only an unhappy life but also the ruination of their character.

### Popular Stoic Happiness and the Good Life

The authors of popular Stoicism publications recommend it to those who are looking for balance, happiness, and quality of life (Irvine 2020b) or want to remain calm, make wise decisions, find the meaning of life and a sense of happiness (Se-

<sup>10</sup> “Both ownership and wealth are independent of the individual as they can easily be lost. Control over material items is thus illusory and cannot be maintained. External things are independent, but one’s relationship with them is under one’s control. All these impermanent, inconsequential things are not indispensable to happiness, and lack thereof cannot be a source of unhappiness; in this sense, they are neutral. The Stoics strove to convince people to make them neutral in another sense as well—so that they caused neither desire nor disgust. A wise man ignores them, which is why he is truly independent” (Tatarkiewicz 2002:133 [trans. RD]).

idler 2022), thus searching a guide to the art of the good life (Stankiewicz 2014). Such texts do not address Stoicism as a philosophy applying to the entire human life (unlike ancient Stoicism), but as a set of techniques and exercises that define what one should strive for and how to achieve it concerning a given area or fragment of social reality; hence, the term “fragmentary stoicism”<sup>11</sup> (Mazur 2010:239). References to Greek Stoicism are few and are outnumbered by Roman writers—Epictetus, Seneca the Younger, and Marcus Aurelius.

According to Piotr Stankiewicz’s interpretation, happiness and the good life are “the goals of the Stoic philosophy and its *raison d’être*. To live a Stoic life is to be merry, to live well and happily. Stoic happiness is the fullest, most perfect, and lasting; it is characterized by independence, self-determination, and agency” (Stankiewicz 2014:490 [trans. RD]). Another aspect is pointed out by John Sellars (2021:26), who states that “when we begin to rule over our judgments, we will gain full control over our lives. We will decide what is important to us, what we want, and how to proceed. Our happiness will be under our control. We have control over everything really important to our well-being.” From this point of view, popular Stoicism serves many functions relevant to the contemporary socio-cultural landscape.

First, popular Stoicism—provided that certain conditions are met—is supposed to provide the individual with not only happiness (narrow sense, see: Czapiński 2004a) but also a high quality of life (broad sense). These discourses currently play

<sup>11</sup> According to Tomasz Mazur, the main contemporary forms of Stoicism include historical, academic, professional, religious, political, and supportive (in the psychological sense) Stoicism (see: Mazur 2010).

a dominant role in shaping how individuals pursue the meaning of life and are also a restrictive criterion for assessing if these pursuits are properly designed. In the aforementioned publications, happiness<sup>12</sup> and the good life appear together as a construct presented as if it were self-evident, for example, according to Stankiewicz (2014), the happiness the Stoic seeks is *eudaimonia*—the good life or well-being. This approach is akin to that of ancient philosophy in which *eudaimonia* was a combination of well-being, happiness, and flourishing. In books on popular Stoicism, the term “well-being”<sup>13</sup> is accompanied (though more rarely) by the term “quality of life,” which is also not explained. The authors of the analyzed publications use the terms “happiness,” “quality of life,”<sup>14</sup> “well-being,” and “the good

<sup>12</sup> The most popular concept of happiness defines it as a “[lasting and complete] satisfaction with one’s life as a whole” (Tarkiewicz 1966:1; 1962). From this point of view, happiness is understood as “a typically long-term psychological condition—not the acute emotion of feeling happy, but rather whatever it concerns us when we talk of someone’s being happy these days” (Hayborn 2003:306). Hayborn distinguishes psychological happiness from a philosophical one. In the latter case, it is conceived differently as “a kind of well-being or flourishing that in the ancient Greek of Aristotle and Plato went by the name of *eudaimonia*” (Hayborn 2003:306). Happiness may also be considered in a broader sense—close to the notion of well-being.

<sup>13</sup> There are multiple conceptions of well-being, for example, Ed Diener (1984) defines subjective well-being as a combination of positive emotions and the degree to which one appreciates and is satisfied with one’s life. Carol Ryff (1989) proposes an alternative idea of psychological well-being that is measured with six constructs related to self-actualization: autonomy, personal growth, purpose in life, self-acceptance, environmental mastery, and positive relations with others. Psychological well-being is a core feature of mental health, including two dimensions (see: Czapiński 2004b): hedonistic or affective (mood, the balance of emotional experience, feeling of satisfaction) and eudaimonic or spiritual (fulfillment, value of life, cardinal virtues, long-term goals, and one’s needs).

Philosophers differentiate between well-being and the good life; well-being refers to what an individual experiences physically and mentally together with the interpretation of these experiences, while the good life is understood more broadly as the fulfillment of external conditions independent of states of consciousness (Lazari-Radek 2021:114-115).

<sup>14</sup> The quality of life, in turn, is perceived as multidimensional, encompassing emotional, physical, material, and social



life” interchangeably, even though modern philosophical, psychological, and sociological literature draws distinctions between them. These terms are not synonymous, even though their semantic scopes overlap to a large degree. However, due to the limited scope of this paper, the differences between them cannot be discussed in detail here.

Second, its goal is to attain happiness, which is specifically defined as autonomy, self-determination, decision-making, and a sense of control. These traits merit attention as they can be understood to mean something different than the aforementioned sense of perspective and acceptance of reality, which are typical for the classical version of Stoicism. These attributes can be viewed as the expected and preferred attitudes within the consumerist culture of capitalism, valued positively by those who have internalized these functional patterns. In actuality, these are socially-constructed mechanisms of adapting to the requirements of that culture. Self-determination, commonly associated with viewing oneself as a project or enterprise that must be managed, is key in that respect (Pop Stoics view classical philosophers as the masters of self-management—more on that in a later section). Autonomy, the subjective sense of self-direction and agency, is related to control that is located in the individual. Agency refers to the need to be flexible, able to adapt (constantly improve) to shifting conditions and the ‘necessity’ of making choices and actively steering one’s life. Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello identify a new formula of capitalist culture (from the 1980s onward) that manifests itself in discourse via communication patterns containing expert recommendations on how to harmonize modern entrepreneurship

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well-being. It can refer both to the individual experience of life and to the living conditions in which people find themselves. Hence, quality of life is highly subjective (Rokicka 2013).

with the actions of individuals with particular character traits (example terms include “activity,” “project,” “adaptation,” “flexibility,” and “creativity”). Outside of discourse, methods of forming desirable individual behaviors exist, which are specific to contemporary capitalism (the demand for displaying initiative, forcing project-oriented thinking, expecting risk-taking behaviors, and assuming responsibility). That means promoting managerial behaviors not only in one’s professional life but in one’s private life as well (see: Stachowiak 2014).

Third, it is possible to interpret popular Stoicism in a way that emphasizes its negative effects on individuals. Similar to other visions of the good life, they rely on a paradoxical intertwining of happiness with the expectation structure. As noted by Eva Illouz (2012:16 [trans. RD]), the reason we are unhappy is that “we are offered lifestyles that appear within our reach, as well as the belief that, if we strive hard enough, we can achieve our dream life.” By placing these expectations within the “I,” an individual is not only able to but is also obligated to work harder on themselves, which contributes to blaming oneself for any shortcomings, imperfections, and weakness. According to Illouz (2012:16), failure to attain the good life is a problem that affects everyone, regardless of class. Its cause lies in a manufactured cultural fantasy according to which anything can be achieved on one’s own.

### **Work on Oneself—Stoic Training and Exercises**

In addition to believing that the goal of individual pursuits is happiness, the Stoics also identified ways of attaining it. Their method comprises deliberate (conscious) hard work on oneself, which involves certain techniques and exercises and requires inter-

nal discipline, mobilization, and self-reflection (Mazur 2014:111; Seidler 2022). These techniques arise from the fundamental Stoic belief that well-being, mood, and feelings are contingent on one's cognitive attitude, on which individuals have influence and are thus able to change it. "The Stoics believe in the tremendous power of man. That we can motivate ourselves, control our emotions, and guide our inner life, that we have enormous influence on ourselves. This philosophy cultivates in us a belief that we can change ourselves and our thinking so that we can live a good, happy life, find our way out of any situation, and face even the greatest challenges. [Stoicism] is an art of life that requires changing how we view the world, think about ourselves and the world, changing our habits. It is a kind of internal transformation or conversion" (Seidler 2022:16-17 [trans. RD]). The transformation of the individual's dispositions is usually a two-stage process, each with a different way of perceiving the self (building an identity) and attitude towards reality. The first stage is the "time before," and the second is the "time after" discovering and practicing Pop Stoicism. A transition between these two modalities is possible thanks to popular Stoicism assuming the role of an expert system. This expert opinion delineates the areas where work must be performed on oneself—one's desires, actions, and thoughts (base elements), as well as how that work is organized—internal mobilization; ceaseless, strenuous effort; hard work; discipline and self-reflection that are supposed to bring the individual closer to happiness. This statement serves to illustrate the therapy discourse characterized by exposing the "internal life" of the individual and the increasing role of institutional and informal counseling. As observed by Małgorzata Jacyno (2007:148 [trans. RD]), "the modern man has an inside that he can choose, shape, model, mold, change, educate, and manage," and

this process follows a plan of action and design for what is being managed. According to Michel Foucault (2018), the discourse developed by the therapy culture is a new form of disciplining and managing a neoliberal society. In the processes leading to the emergence of the modern form of the "I," he identified the importance of the discourse originating particularly from psychology (psy-disciplines). The language of psychology that penetrates various areas of life is a new form of exercising ideological power as it creates conditions in which individuals feel responsible for themselves in the name of freedom. This way, modern knowledge imposes the cost of management on individuals, and diminished political control is replaced by self-control.

The situation presented here matches how the counseling and therapeutic culture operates,<sup>15</sup> which can be conventionally divided into three stages: illness/dysfunction, diagnosis (via the application of measures indicated in an expert opinion), and healing (see: Jacyno 2007; Illouz 2010). In this context, normalization occurs via self-knowledge (auto-therapy) produced by referring to an expert knowledge system—popular Stoicism and popular psychology (a trivialized version of academic psychology) that function as the institutional support of neoliberal-

<sup>15</sup> In the opinion of Eva Illouz (2010), the therapeutic discourse is well-adapted to how modern humans experience socio-cultural reality. It provides instructions on how to conduct oneself when faced with uncertainty or in situations where individuals may struggle for control, is characterized by a great degree of institutionalization, enjoys the praise and support of the social elite, and its messaging is popularized via various social networks. That causes individuals to believe in its effectiveness, leading them to combine the offering of the culture of counseling and therapy with their lives and experiences with the help of a special 'emotional language,' which is a tool of introspection and understanding oneself, determining avenues for personal development, and presenting oneself to others. In return, the discourse generates certain emotional practices and specifies how internal and macrostructural problems should be perceived, defining their hierarchy and shaping attitudes towards them.

ism. Its purpose is to transform those who are “ill” into healthy individuals or restore them to a social-functional state. These ideologies influence what is perceived as a “normal” subject and treat society as a set of individuals responsible for themselves, including their health.

The exercises are related to the term “technologies of the self,” coined by Michel Foucault, who analyzed how knowledge is organized concerning the self (examples include “caring for oneself,” “taking care of oneself,” and “looking after oneself”) by describing it within the context of selected ancient and early Christian philosophical schools. Currently, technologies of the self are not so regulated philosophically or religiously as they are capitalistically (see: Rydlewski 2020).<sup>16</sup> According to Foucault (2000:249 [trans. RD]), they “permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.” The components listed by Foucault—means (dispositions), operations (training), and transformation (goal)—can be found in the analyzed texts. In this context, Pop Stoicism is an

<sup>16</sup> An example of this is coaching, which is a quasi-therapeutic practice aimed at adapting an individual to the neoliberal, flexible model of labor, about which the individual feels alienated and thus unhappy. Happiness and success, whether in one’s private life or career, are always within reach, it can be achieved (bought) if one works on oneself—spends time on self-realization, and remains sufficiently committed. This “training strategy, which sets specific goals and ways of achieving them, is a disciplining practice that produces a subject who pursues values promoted by the neoliberal ideology, an important part of which is constantly expanding consumerism, hyper-individualism, and a culture of narcissism and attention-seeking. It does not question the patterns themselves, instead teaching how to follow them; this is functional insofar as the subject undergoing adaptation feels truly happy” (Rydlewski 2020:128 [trans. RD]).

instrument of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral transformations, the goal of which is not only to change the individual but also their value systems and, consequently, their lifestyle. By employing “modes of training and modification of individuals, not only in the obvious sense of acquiring certain skills but also in the sense of acquiring certain attitudes” (Foucault 2000:249 [trans. RD]), individuals influence themselves, constituting self-controlling elements of the social order that reproduce the logic of functioning of late-stage capitalism. Thus, popular Stoicism offers a new type of social competencies, which can be acquired via a set of practices, although one which has been processed and with the market as an intermediary.

Effective “self-management” was of key importance in this context—managing that which is within the power of the individual (their beliefs, thoughts, feelings, behaviors, etc.). A contemporary popularizer of Stoicism describes it thus: “Stoics are happy because they know how to live well, they have the right attitude towards themselves, others, and the world. To put it in managerial terms: Stoics are people who have mastered the art of managing their souls, minds, and bodies, which is why they can deal with any issue with calm in their hearts” (Stankiewicz 2014:494 [trans. RD]). It is no coincidence that Pop Stoicism makes references to the science of management—its terminology is used by the culture of capitalism to define individual lives and delineate their obligations based on a culturally-defined ideal. Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) remark that the modern culture of entrepreneurship offers opportunities for personal development, rewards those who are active and creative, promotes flexibility, and gives opportunities for innovative projects. A new spirit of capitalism “sanctions ways of keeping people on the straight and narrow—individuals are supposed

to develop their inner potential and communicate effectively to master that which is desired, and not that which constitutes their material surroundings” (Stachowiak 2014:20 [trans. RD]). Managing oneself and one’s emotions is also common for the type of pragmatic counseling promoted by popular psychology. While it does use therapeutic practices employed by professional psychologists, it does so in ways that lead to the privatization of mental health problems (Rydlewski 2020). As a consequence of this, individuals focus on privatized survival strategies, withdraw into their worlds, devote themselves to ‘spiritual’ and physical perfection, introduce various regimens into their lives, and become alienated from the outside world (see also Lasch 1979).

### The Dichotomy of Control

The Stoics recommend several such practices indispensable to being able to work on oneself (see: Hadot 2003<sup>17</sup>). The most popular of which include examination of conscience or introspection to ascertain one’s condition and situation and planning actions (see: Seneca 2017); mentally separating that which is and is not within one’s power, and focusing on that which is under one’s control; a fixed daily schedule based on discipline and regularity, including spiritual exercises (e.g., morning and evening meditations, see: Fabjański 2020); adopting

<sup>17</sup> Pierre Hadot describes several types of “spiritual exercises,” including the more well-known morning and evening meditations, in which an individual looks ahead at the day to come or reflects on the day that has passed and considers how the individual either will or did follow Stoic teachings and pursue a sage-like path. He also discusses *premeditatio malorum*, in which an individual can imagine misfortunes that could befall and think about how one will meet them with strength and grace, as they are “indifferent,” are not up to us, and are, therefore, not evil. Hadot goes on to briefly mention “active” Stoic exercises, including self-mastery, the accomplishment of duties, and indifference to indifferent things (Hadot 2003:45).

a cosmic perspective (concerning space and time); skepticism—self-detachment combined with trust in oneself and one’s abilities (Mazur 2014); “taming” the situation (see: Fabjański 2021); voluntarily experiencing discomfort and visualizing potential troubles (*premeditatio malorum*) as a way of counteracting the negative emotions resulting from adversity (Irvine 2009; 2020b); building the inner citadel (see: Hadot 2004; Paczkowski 2017). I focus on division into that which is and is not within the power of the individual and the emotion work in Stoicism.

The distinction between that which is within one’s power and that which is beyond it, although appears unconvincing from a modern perspective, is viewed by Stoics as distinct, unambiguous, and complete. The Stoics rejected degrees; things do not depend on us to a larger or smaller degree, they can only be contingent upon us in their entirety or be completely independent of us. Things that are independent of us include the body, health, wealth, status, and reputation, which are currently viewed differently—as dependent “goods” and “one’s achievements.” These are listed as the main objects of concern via which individuals self-identify in the consumerist culture of capitalism. They form the basis for a hierarchy of consumerist and materialist values, although certain axiological reorientations do occur here to reflect the distinction between happiness and welfare (see, e.g., Zawadzka 2014). As Paulina Seidler (2022:35) mentioned, distinguishing between that which is within the power of the individual and that which is not changes how reality is perceived, which, in turn, affects one’s mood and sense of happiness, and when followed consistently, also increases self-confidence. According to Piotr Stankiewicz (2014:91 [trans. RD]), the tenet of not striving for external things stems from “avoiding the woe that is a lack of fulfillment” and is thus a form of preventing negative feelings,

particularly disappointment and a sense of failure. From this perspective, a better—according to the Stoics—stance is to abandon certain goals (that potentially lead to suffering) rather than risk not achieving them.

Even though external things are outside of the power of individuals, their relationship with them is not and may (and should) be modified. When analyzing this tenet concerning materialist and consumerist values, the conclusions that follow contradict the actual state of affairs. According to the Stoics, control over wealth and finances is illusory as material goods are beyond the control of individuals (they can be lost, decrease in value due to inflation, etc.). One may strive to acquire and keep them (these actions are within the power of the individual), but it is not possible to have complete control over what happens to them as this is determined by external factors (e.g., economic crises, political instability). In line with the absoluteness requirement (as the defining criterion), the individual lacks this control. The approach recommended by the Stoics thus focuses not on achieving wealth and social status but on becoming independent of them; disconnecting happiness from external factors, including wealth, is in line with psychological research results on what influences well-being. Although material wealth no longer correlates with happiness after a certain point, Piotr Stankiewicz's (2014:77) statement that happiness and the good life are possible regardless of income is unfounded and unrealistic. While it may suit an ancient sage, contemporary individuals, such as those suffering from precarity, may find it less applicable.

### **Stoic Emotion Work**

One of the elements of working on oneself—necessary for an internal transformation—is working

on one's emotions. This approach to emotions does not involve (contrary to popular belief) achieving a "Stoic demeanor," understood to mean insensitivity, firmness, and indifference, and neither does it recommend suppressing, denying, disregarding, or rejecting emotions (especially the negative ones), and the same applies to succumbing to or escalating them. The goal is to develop the ability to acknowledge emotions—to identify and analyze them (think about what causes them) and then react appropriately (learn how to effectively redirect them). Using Arlie Hochschild's (1979; 2003) words, one must transform how they are felt and expressed; from this perspective, various levels of emotion work exist—surface or deep acting. One of the authors describes that as follows: "we choose how we feel, we acquiesce to emotions, decide how we will experience them. We are capable of effectively making ourselves happy...The Stoics, by placing the sense of meaning within ourselves (within that which is in our power), demonstrate the power present in humanity, they give us a sense of agency and hope, while also presenting us with a difficult challenge. They task us with 'inventing ourselves,' giving life meaning by finding value in it, by setting and achieving new goals...This requires a great deal of mindfulness and self-reflection" (Seidler 2022:232-234 [trans. RD]). What emerges here is an image of the individual who acts in a socio-cultural vacuum, who self-referentially places the sense of meaning and significance within oneself. This individually-designed work of creating oneself is only made possible with the help of instructions provided by various systems of knowledge.

Emotions are related to the opinions, assessments, and judgments that we formulate with regard to reality, others, and ourselves. As these are states that we can change, it is also possible to alter our

emotional responses to what happens to us (if and to what degree we allow our emotions to take control). Emotional flexibility concerning interpreting everyday challenges helps in viewing instances of adversity as tests of character (remaining calm in the face of serious issues), endurance, and creativity in overcoming difficulties. Lowering emotional involvement also helps to find rational and effective solutions to problems, which, in effect, contributes to an increased sense of trust in oneself. If a situation is assessed as good, beneficial, and appropriate, positive emotions are felt, and if a situation is categorized as negative, unfavorable, or inappropriate, negative emotions are experienced (Mazur 2013). Therefore, one should strive to limit negative emotions in favor of positive emotions, which translate into an elevated sense of the quality of life.

As remarked by Eva Illouz, the individual is established and institutionalized in modernity by such means as psychological knowledge related to individuals. This knowledge is applied, more or less intentionally, as part of the language of self-description of individuals and their ways of formulating their goals. In addition, the transformation of the “I” also involves commodity flow networks. In a capitalist culture, psychological knowledge is used to develop and offer services that sell emotional transformations. In a way, emotions are thus manufactured with the use of knowledge and market institutions. “Psychology acts as an intermediary between knowledge, institutions, the market, and the ‘I’; it is one of how culture mediates between the ‘I’ and commodities” (Illouz 2012:13 [trans. RD]). Psychology manifests in individuals turning towards themselves in a bid to explain why their lives are not what they want them to be, without including social or political institutions in their deliberations. It lends an ontological nature to emotions and

personalities, causing individuals to perceive and develop themselves and others as fixed bundles of properties and features awaiting discovery. A new form of subjectivity is thus constructed, one which has more control over oneself, and is also more focused on one’s emotions. This view aligns with neoliberal thinking, which appoints the individual as the only person responsible for their fulfillment, thus making them fully responsible for their life, successful or not. Moreover, this self-determination consists in “managing” experiences and one’s mood, that is, controlling emotions, which “apart from the negative requirements (proscriptions) also entails positive requirements—certain emotions and attitudes are valued highly, and the individual is required to express and experience them to a certain extent” (Dembek 2012:44 [trans. RD]).

## Conclusions

In the analyzed publications, Stoicism is referred to as a project that corresponds with the process of self-management. This illustrates that individual lives and biographies are perceived as (self-reflexive) projects,<sup>18</sup> which have nearly become a contemporary form of cultural codes—“recipes” or “formulae” for life, a kind of “cipher” that separates those who can wield them from those who are not famil-

<sup>18</sup> Barbara Skarga (2009:121 [trans. RD]) notes that a project, to avoid being a copy of a cultural code (given and self-evident) or a fantasy, requires collective labor—convincing others that it is feasible. This requires social competency—a project “not only sketches, draws, and plans something but also proclaims, evokes emotions, and very often resorts to demagoguery.” Projects are created especially when hopes are aroused, when the horizon of imagination is not limited to that which can be experienced, and in extreme cases, when the world begins to crumble, break, and collapse. Projects are impermanent and they often capitalize on desires or imprecise and unarticulated dreams, and their role is to potentially lead to change and development. “A project is a product of social imagination, but one which has not been fossilized in the form of rules, obligations, and prohibitions, that is, various codes, but one which has become a medium for ideas” (Skarga 2009:120 [trans. RD]).

iar with a given behavioral pattern (Rapior 2017:25). Implementing a project requires defining its subsequent stages and completing them one after another (consistently) until one achieves their goal, that is, happiness and the good life. Various resources are necessary for this purpose—in this case, Pop Stoicism, which William Irvine refers to “as a tool that, although requires sharpening, not only is useful but can also have a very positive impact on the lives of modern people” (Irvine 2020b:21). Stoicism posits that happiness can be achieved by anyone, from which follows that effective “self-management” is also available to anyone. Although it is assumed that we all are equally able to consciously work on ourselves, it is debatable whether everyone is indeed capable of doing so.<sup>19</sup> Individualism as a value, subjectivity, and sense of agency was unknown to the ancients. Similarly, Athenian democracy was based on exclusion, whereas modern-day Western democracies are, on principle, inclusive. The goal of moral development in classical Stoicism was not happiness, but *eudaimonia* (the full meaning of this term is difficult to explicate). Today, happiness is a subjective feeling (often a euphoric experience), while for the ancients, *eudaimonia* was close to being objectively measurable (it could be achieved despite physical or mental suffering). Stoic life advice interprets happiness in a more modern way, as an experience or a type of “self-actualization.” The culture of individualism disciplines and oppresses in that it requires self-control and self-actualization, the defining characteristics of the lifestyle of the new middle class.

<sup>19</sup> William Irvine proves that not everyone has a temperament compatible with Stoic techniques, and would instead benefit more from Epicureanism or Cynicism. Stoicism may thus be universally compatible due to its rationalism, but may not appeal to everyone. Martha Nussbaum believes that Stoicism (in its basic sense) is an indispensable element of modern global citizenship and should be promoted as the best philosophy of life (Mazur 2010).

The nature of the popular Stoic project is practical, selective, and, at times, eclectic. Noticeable is the interweaving of traditional Stoic practices with Eastern religious elements (e.g., Buddhism)<sup>20</sup> or mindfulness,<sup>21</sup> which leads to the diffusion of ideas, and thus the loss of their originality and detachment from the context in which they emerged and first operated. For the proponents of Stoic practices, the most important aspect appears to be their utility—the use of these concepts as a set of hints and tools for achieving the overarching goal, which is the idea of the good and happy life. What emerges here is applying selected Stoic principles and exercises to a specific aspect of life or individual needs and expectations, which aligns with the processes of personalization and customization of consumer goods as part of capitalist culture. What is striking is that nearly all analyzed publications emphasize the pragmatic and functional applications of Stoic ideas to achieving a narrowly-defined goal, for example, mental hygiene, stress reduction (Irvine 2020b:81), emotional intelligence, and psychological resilience (Seidler 2022:17). As Nancy Sherman notes: “Stoicism is not so much a philosophy as a collection of life hacks for overcoming anxiety, meditations for curbing anger, exercises for finding stillness and calm through discourse that chastens a mind: ‘The pain isn’t due to the thing itself...but to your estimate of it.’ In this mindset, the impact of the outer world can fade away as the inner self becomes a sanctuary. The focus narrows to that self—me, isolated from the social structures that support me or bring me down” (Sherman 2021).

<sup>20</sup> It may be valid to claim that Stoicism is the Western method of achieving the state experienced by Buddhist monks. For a comparison of similarities between Stoicism and Buddhism, see: Stankiewicz 2012.

<sup>21</sup> Mindfulness has a special status in Stoicism—it is the essential spiritual attitude manifested by constant vigilance, presence of mind, and self-awareness (Hadot 2003).

The market provides the tools and means necessary to transform the identity, as well as comprehensive projects that can be implemented by those looking for meaning and happiness in life to achieve a particular effect. That is aimed at individuals who expect to attain the good life and a high quality of it. Ideas of different provenance are used for that purpose and diverse sources of inspiration are sought in oriental religious, spiritual and philosophical systems. One such source is Stoicism, which assumes the form of Pop Stoicism when adapted to modern conditions. Popular Stoicism primarily focuses on proper conduct and the meaning of the good life, which is why it is primarily psychological and not philosophical in nature. The belief that well-being is contingent

upon that which we can control—judgments and actions, as well as upon detaching oneself from that which cannot be controlled (other people, their opinions, events), is important from the perspective of individuals in postmodern societies characterized by uncertainty and unpredictability. If one of the measures of postmodern uncertainty is the loss of material security due to economic crises and the unpredictability of international relations, the belief that happiness is independent of external material factors—prestige or wealth—seems attractive. That, of course, is an illusion—such expectations are not completely eliminated, but simply reformulated to provide a greater subjective sense of agency and control.

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# Mapping Environmental Commitment: A Situational Analysis of Illegal Dumps in the City

**Anna Kacperczyk**   
University of Lodz, Poland

**Remigiusz Żulicki**   
University of Lodz, Poland

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**Abstract:** The paper refers to the research *Trash in the Wild: A Pilot Project Mapping Citizenship Environmental Activism in the Collaborative Study in the Lodz Area*. In the study, inhabitants of Lodz (Poland) were invited to participate in data gathering and create a map of unauthorized dumps in their city. The collaborative mapping was intended to localize problematic spots in the city of Lodz, but it also shows civic commitment and the inhabitants' ecological consciousness level. The authors based on ethnographic data (observations, walk-alongs, interviews, and data obtained from institutions), attempting to develop a situational analysis of the phenomenon of illegal dumps in the city. The analysis reveals how different positions of the City Guard, Municipal Economy Department, waste disposal companies, journalists, environmental activists, researchers, and citizens participating in the project vary their standpoints and views on the studied problem. Presenting the context and first results of the research, the authors refer to the issue of building relationships with researched subjects during the investigation process. Trying to navigate between them, researchers strive to introduce their different, sometimes contradictory, viewpoints into the research, not losing their commitment and the valuable data they can submit. The analysis shows that the issue of illegal dumps lies at the intersection of many discourses and involves numerous social worlds, organizations, and entities. In this dynamic situation, many practices and conditions contribute to the persistence of the problem of illegal waste disposal.

**Anna Kacperczyk** is an Associate Professor of sociology at the University of Lodz, Poland. Substantive areas of her research included palliative and hospice care in Poland (2006), the sustainable development of an Amazonian village (2013), the social world of climbing (2016), and trash (2021). She is

interested in the theory of social worlds and the methodology of social research, especially the issue of the position and role of the researcher in the investigation process. In her field research, she refers to the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism, using ethnography, autoethnography, and

the methodology of grounded theory. She is a chairperson of the Section of Qualitative Sociology and Symbolic Interactionism of the Polish Sociological Association and a member of the European Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction board. She serves as an associate editor and cover designer of the *Qualitative Sociology Review*.

**email address:** [anna.kacperczyk@uni.lodz.pl](mailto:anna.kacperczyk@uni.lodz.pl)

**Remigiusz Żulicki, Ph.D.**, works at the Department of Social Research Methods and Techniques, Institute of So-

ciology, Faculty of Economics and Sociology, University of Lodz. His research interests include social science research methodology, social worlds/arenas, critical data studies, and digital sociology. He harmonizes panel survey data regarding precarity—*CNB-Young* project and maps citizenship environmental activism—*Trash in the Wild*. His Ph.D. thesis was concerned with the social world of data science in Poland. He is an open-source and open-science enthusiast.

**email address:** [remigiusz.zulicki@uni.lodz.pl](mailto:remigiusz.zulicki@uni.lodz.pl)

**This** article refers to the research study *Trash in the Wild: A Pilot*

*Project Mapping Citizenship Environmental Activism in the Collaborative Study in the Lodz Area*<sup>1</sup> carried out in the fourth largest city<sup>2</sup> in Poland in 2021–2022. The project concerns social practices related to littering and environmental pollution by illegal waste disposal. The object of our interest is trash and waste left by people in forests, parks, or the

neighborhood green areas in Lodz, as well as the inhabitants' perception of such places and related practices.

An *illegal dump*<sup>3</sup> is a material artifact consisting of items discarded onto land in a site with no license to accept waste. Trash deposited in unauthorized places threatens living beings (Kacperczyk 2021:67–69) and can cause various environmental damages. Since these places are not prepared to contain waste, hazardous materials and other toxic byproducts can infiltrate the surrounding environment, causing water and soil pollution. Therefore, there are significant health risks associated with uncontrolled waste disposal,<sup>4</sup> which “raises significant

<sup>1</sup> The project was financed by the University of Lodz from the grant Initiative of Excellence—Research University (IDUB), contract No.22/IDUB/DOS/2021.

<sup>2</sup> After Warsaw, Cracow, and Wroclaw, Lodz is now the fourth city in Poland, with a population of 670,642 inhabitants. From the fifteenth to the eighteenth century, Lodz remained a small rural town. However, in the nineteenth century, the city became the main hub of the textile industry in central Europe (Dzionek-Kozłowska, Kowalski, and Matera 2018:526–527). During the systemic transformation in Poland in the 1980s, the textile industry in Lodz collapsed, causing unemployment and pauperization of the working class. Currently, Lodz is an academic, cultural, and industrial center. For the specificity and history of Lodz, see: Liszewski and Young (1997).

<sup>3</sup> To name an illegal dump in Polish, we use the term *dzikie wysypisko śmieci* [wild trash dump]), which appears in administrative documents, public statistics, the media, and the common language. In other countries, creating unauthorized dumps is recognized by the names “fly dumping,” “midnight dumping,” or “wildcat dumping” (U.S. EPA 1998:1); other popular terms are: “open dumping” or “fly-tipping” (EnCams 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Literature indicates short-term and long-term health issues due to environmental pollution caused by illegal dumping.

concerns regarding public health and safety, property values, and quality of life” (U.S. EPA 1998:1). Among other numerous negative consequences<sup>5</sup> of illegal dumps, the most frequently mentioned are aesthetic criteria translating into a decrease in the value of the land, like the loss of the beauty of the place, ruining the appearance of a neighborhood (EnCams 2003:6), and discouraging economic development.<sup>6</sup> Attention is also drawn to the cumulative nature of illegal dumping and the need to counteract and remove unauthorized dumps. The Environmental Protection Agency emphasizes, “If not addressed, illegal dumps often attract more waste, potentially including hazardous wastes such as asbestos, household chemicals and paints, automotive fluids, and commercial or industrial wastes” (U.S. EPA 1998:2).

Illegal dumping remains a major problem in many communities around the world. In Poland, at the end of 2018, there were 1,607 illegal dumps reported.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the year 2018, over 10,500 wild

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Asthma, congenital illnesses, stress and anxiety, headaches, dizziness and nausea, and eye and respiratory infections are mentioned as short-term issues. Long-term problems include cancer, kidney, liver, respiratory, cardiovascular, brain, nervous, and lymphohematopoietic diseases (Triassi et al. 2015).

<sup>5</sup> It is also noted that thrown objects can alter the normal course of runoff and make areas more prone to flooding or erosion, as waste clogs streams, storm drains, and gutters. Sometimes the possibility of spontaneous self-ignition or arson of the accumulated waste and the environmental and material damage related to the fire is also raised. Finally, abandoned items are also a resource of raw materials that could be recycled (*Crackdown...* 2008:7). Other major environmental hazards include groundwater contamination (Breg et al. 2008).

<sup>6</sup> The North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ). Retrieved September 27, 2022 (<https://deq.nc.gov/about/divisions/waste-management/solid-waste-section/compliance-and-monitoring/illegal-dumping>).

<sup>7</sup> 453 such places were reported in cities (an increase of 11.3% compared to 2017) and 1,154 in rural areas (a decrease of 8% compared to 2017) (the data of the Central Statistical Office

dumps in Poland were liquidated (of which 80.6% were in cities), with the amount of around 25.1 thousand tons of municipal waste collected during these cleanings. For the last four years (2017-2020) in Poland, the total number of wild trash dumps being reported has increased. At the same time, the number of liquidated dumps decreased.<sup>8</sup> While the number of existing illegal dumps at the end of each year decreased from 2008, the numbers of those liquidated in a year are similar to 2008 when reports on wild trash dumps in CSO started appearing.<sup>9</sup>

Statistics hardly capture this dynamic phenomenon and reflect in the figures the activities of discovering, reporting, and removing illegal dumps. There was a peak in liquidation numbers during 2015-2016, with almost a 60% increase for Poland and over 300% for Lodz, compared to 2008. However, the numbers have returned to the values of the first years of running the reports. “In 2021, fewer illegal landfills were removed compared to 2020 (in 2021—309 units, and 2020—357 units) [trans. AK & RŻ].”<sup>10</sup> Liquidations of illegal dumps in Lodz accounted for from 3.58% in 2020 to 31.78% in 2016 (2008-2020 median = 13.30%) of all reported in Poland. It is a high share compared

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[CSO] as of December 31, 2018; see also Adamczyk, Różańska, and Sobczyk 2019:56).

<sup>8</sup> The data of the CSO Category K9, group G223, subgroup P3196. Retrieved June 21, 2022 (<https://bdl.stat.gov.pl/bdl/metadane/cechy/szukaj?slovo=dziki%20wysypisk>).

<sup>9</sup> In Poland, there were 3,481 existing illegal trash dumps as of December 31, 2008, and 9,705 were liquidated throughout 2008. In Lodz, only eight dumps existed, and 1,155 were liquidated. In 2020, there were 2,008 existing and 9,972 liquidated dumps (from 2019 +7% in existing and -12% in liquidated) in Poland. In Lodz, there were, respectively, 120 existing and 357 liquidated dumps (in 2019, zero existing and 1,150 liquidated, -69% from 2019 to 2020).

<sup>10</sup> See: <https://www.teraz-srodowisko.pl/aktualnosci/gios-nielegalne-skladowiska-odpadow-11257.html>. Retrieved August 28, 2022.

to other major cities.<sup>11</sup> In their *Analysis of the State of Municipal Waste Management in Lodz for 2021*, the Municipal Economy Department of the City of Lodz reported a slight decrease in the number of illegal landfills removed in 2021, yet still reaching the number of about 300.

Despite residents being provided with municipal waste collection directly from the property or by handing it over to the PSZOK,<sup>12</sup> the problem of illegal dumps lasts. Illegal landfills still appear in remote unattended areas, unsecured properties, and places with many access points. The Chief Inspectorate of Environmental Protection estimates that the 'gray zone' of illegal waste dumps may constitute even 30-40% of the value of the entire waste management in Poland. The Department for Combating Environmental Crimes (GIOŚ) informed that in 2021, 424 places where hazardous waste was collected were detected in Poland, and 16 notifications on environmental crimes were submitted to law enforcement agencies.<sup>13</sup>

Collecting data on illegal dumping sites is challenging not only because illegal practices can occur almost anywhere but also because there is no

<sup>11</sup> Warsaw: from 3.53 in 2016 to 8.71 in 2008 (Mdn. = 5.63); Cracow: from 3.35 in 2018 to 17.13 in 2013 (Mdn. = 9.53); Wrocław: from 0.07 in 2015 to 0.43 in 2019 (Mdn. = 0.25). Using the number of dumps liquidated allows us to relate the data for cities to the whole country. In the case of the number of existing landfills at the end of the year in large cities, it is often zero, which makes such a reference not possible.

<sup>12</sup> PSZOK (*Punkt Selektywnego Zbierania Odpadów Komunalnych*) is a Point of Selective Collection of Municipal Waste. In Lodz, there are three such points.

<sup>13</sup> See: <https://www.gios.gov.pl/pl/dla-obywateli/raporty-publicacje-opracowania>, <https://www.teraz-srodowisko.pl/aktualnosci/gios-nielegalne-skladowiska-odpadow-11257.html>. Retrieved August 09, 2022.

single formal registry of such events. Various entities, stakeholders, and institutions (like the Municipal Economy Department, the Chief Inspector of Environmental Protection, or The City Guard) keep their statistics and collect information necessary for their operational work. As a result, "the data is not collected in a consistent way, so it cannot be used to paint a realistic picture of illegal dumping" (*Crackdown...* 2008:7). And more so—to make them the basis for effectively counteracting the phenomenon.

In this article, we aim to reflect on the complexity of the studied phenomenon, seeing it as a social practice that functions in diverse dimensions—legal, administrative, organizational, logistic, spatial, material, discursive, sociological, and psycho-social. Our research is mainly based on qualitative data collected and organized according to the logic of situational analysis proposed by Adele E. Clarke (2005). We believe that following this method opens new insights enabling us to present and comprehend the phenomena under study.

Despite the interest in illegal dumps, few studies have considered this phenomenon a social one (Ichinose and Yamamoto 2011; Šedová 2015; Quesada-Ruiz, Rodriguez-Galiano, and Jordá-Borrell 2018; Jakiel et al. 2019). Qualitative research was especially rare; thus, our work seems to be the first attempt to use situational analysis for this subject.

## Methodology of the Study: Situational Analysis and Collaborative Mapping

In this study, we aimed to address the problem of illegal dumps in Lodz by developing a situational

analysis that remained the broadest interpretive and analytical framework. Situational analysis is the methodological approach developed by Adele E. Clarke (2003; 2005; 2019), also in cooperation (Clarke, Friese, and Washburn 2015; 2018), that is rooted in conceptualizations of grounded theory. In this research method, the ultimate unit of analysis is the *situation of inquiry*, and the primary goal is to recognize elements of the situation and understand their relations (Clarke 2005:xxii; Clarke, Friese, and Washburn 2018:xxv). Clarke assumes that the researcher constructs “the situation” empirically by making three unique ecological and relational maps: (I) maps of situations including all the key human and nonhuman elements; (II) maps of social worlds/ arenas (see Figure 6), and (III) maps of positionality along salient analytic axes.

The concept of an arena in relation to social worlds was introduced by Anselm Strauss (1978:124) as “various issues [which] are debated, negotiated, fought out, forced, and manipulated by representatives of implicated subworlds.” Strauss (1978:124-125) pointed out that “larger public issues [as] what to do with pollution or alcoholism” can be analyzed as arenas, which is what we do in this paper.

During a situational analysis, a researcher collects data and analyzes them following the procedures of the grounded theory methodology, generating codes, naming analytical categories, saturating categories with properties, and looking for new samples to compare instances. In parallel, they try to outline relationships between codes and categories and, sketching by hand or with the support of electronic tools, prepare maps representing that relational thinking.

Clarke (2005:xxii) suggests that “situational analysis can deeply situate research projects individually, collectively, organizationally, institutionally, temporally, geographically, materially, discursively, culturally, symbolically, visually, and historically.” Therefore, it “promotes the analysis of extant narrative, visual, and historical discourse materials” (Clarke 2005:xxii).

In situational analysis, mapping is a form of analytical exercise aimed at generating new forms of theorizing that capture the complexities and multiplicities of social life. Making maps is an open-ended, ever-evolving process that “centers on elucidating the key elements, materialities, discourses, structures, and conditions that characterize the situation of inquiry” (Clarke 2005:xxii). The effect should be a “thick analysis” that “take[s] into account the full array of elements in the situation—human, nonhuman, and discursive” (Clarke 2005:xxii).

These procedures were reserved for analyzing and interpreting the overall situation of inquiry. We deployed them in our internal teamwork on **mapping the situation of inquiry** (MSI). However, as researchers, we also actively created the situation, inviting inhabitants to joint work on the project and build—together with us—a map of illegal dumps in Lodz. It was another form of mapping—**mapping illegal dumps** (MID). We asked residents for pictures of illegal waste dumps, and they have been sending us geolocated photos of dumps using their smartphones or a website. To gather data and create the map, we used the Epi-collect5 application (Aanensen et al. 2009).

Thus, by implementing MID, mapping in collaboration with residents who experienced specific



problems daily, we introduced a new element to the situation of inquiry (MSI). That way, not only an additional artifact was created (an interactive map), but a new reference point, a vibrant and rich data layer, was provided in the course of this quasi-participatory research.

Expanding a classic multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995), we used various methods of data collecting and analyzing: *building the map* for citizens and with citizens through *participatory smartphone research*; using *visual studies* (Banks 2001; Konecki 2009); using *extant data*; *group interviews*; *individual in-depth interviews* with experts and participants of mapping; personal CAWI for participants of mapping activity; using data from email submissions; *walk-alongs*.

## Mapping Illegal Dumps (MID)—Results Overview

The project followed the idea of inviting inhabitants as participants of the study and asking them for a favor of sending information relevant for the scholars to create a map of a particular social problem. Mapping as a collective endeavor, especially addressing some important practical issues of everyday life, has recently become very popular. There are many examples of such pragmatic strategies of using geotagging technology to address practical problems, like creating a map of trees in the city<sup>14</sup> (to protect them and take care of

<sup>14</sup> The founders of the Map of Trees of Lodz (*Mapa Drzew Łodzi*) see trees as a treasure and great ornament of the city, making it a better and healthier place to live. They initiate a social inventory of trees to respect and protect that treasure. They count and describe them and locate their positions on a map. This meticulous inventory provides detailed knowledge of how many trees we have, what species, and what condition, which allows them to plan systemic actions

them), a map of stink<sup>15</sup> (to avoid it) around the utilization plant, or a map of ticks<sup>16</sup> (to protect oneself). In our study, the most visible effect of work was supposed to be a *map of illegal waste dumps in the city of Lodz*. There is a growing interest in such usage of GPS and GIS for online mapping in various academic and practical projects (Currie 2020; Łaszkiwicz, Czembrowski, and Kronenberg 2020; Martini 2020).

The participatory mapping lasted six months, from the 1<sup>st</sup> of March to the end of August 2022. In this period, 56 collaborators get involved in data gathering. They created 208 records that localized illegal dumps (Figures 1 and 2). The optional description was given for 31% of the records (64 of 208). Collaborators could have sent from zero to four photos. A total of 454 photos were sent to the map. We present gathered data in open access.<sup>17</sup> From the very first record, the results of participants' work are available for those who visit our website.<sup>18</sup> Everyone can access gathered data, browse the records, watch pictures, study the map, or even filter data by categories.

for many years. Retrieved June 15, 2022 (<https://www.mapa-drzewlodzi.pl/>).

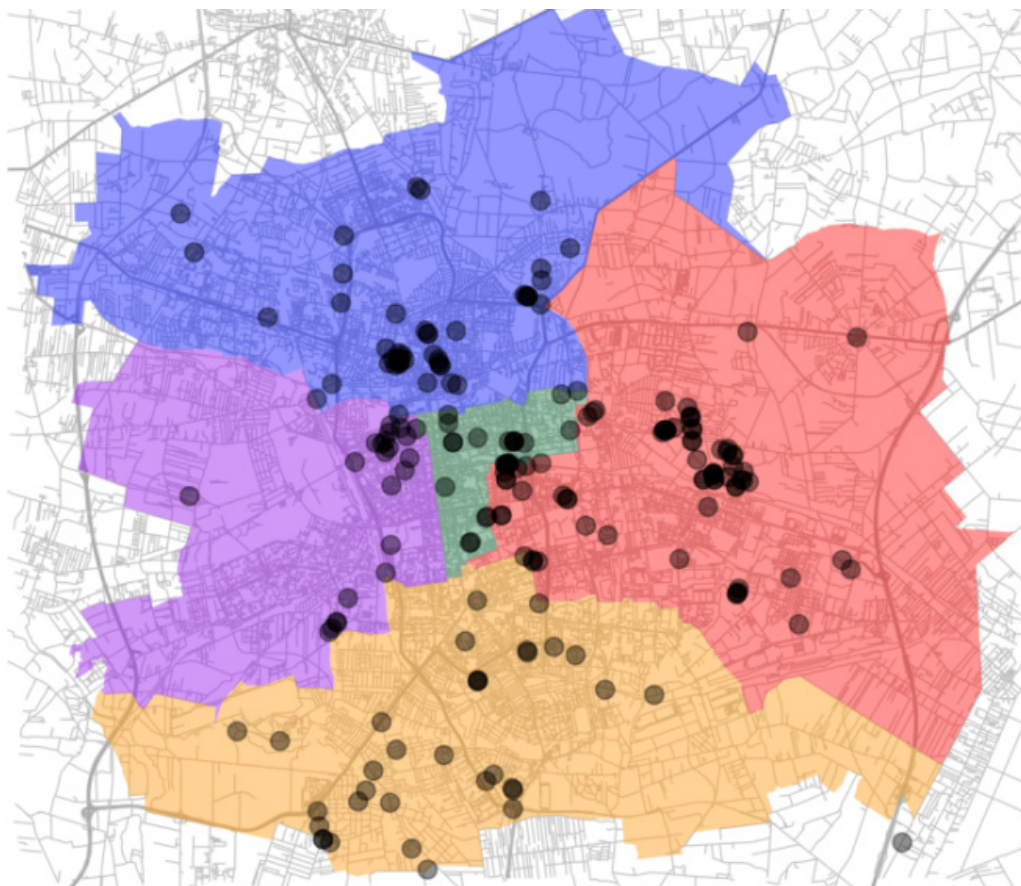
<sup>15</sup> The Map of Stink (*Mapa smrodu*) was created by citizens of Gdansk to solve the acute problem of stinking areas in the city. Inhabitants established an association to control activities of the Utilization Plant in Szadolki. Retrieved June 27, 2022 (<https://www.szadolki.pl/mapa-smrodu/>).

<sup>16</sup> The interactive Map of Ticks (*Interaktywna mapa kleszczy*) addresses the problem of ticks, attempting to indicate where walks can turn out to be dangerous. The map shows ticks that volunteers reportedly found on animals or people. It is real-time updated. Retrieved June 27, 2022 (<https://ciemnas-tronawiosny.pl/mapa-kleszczy>).

<sup>17</sup> Interactive map and table view available at: <https://five.epi-collect.net/project/dzikie-wysypiska/data>.

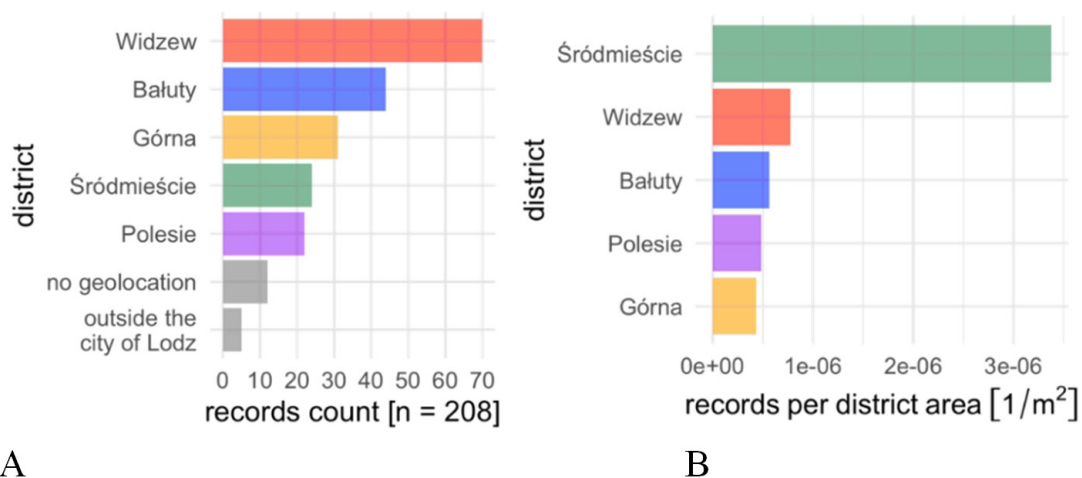
<sup>18</sup> The project's website: <https://www.dzikiewysypiska.uni.lodz.pl/>.

Figure 1. The map of the city of Lodz with a division into districts with illegal trash dumps indicated



Source: Self-elaboration.

Figure 2. Distribution of the records in the respective districts (A); the number of records in respective districts concerning the area (B)



Source: Self-elaboration.

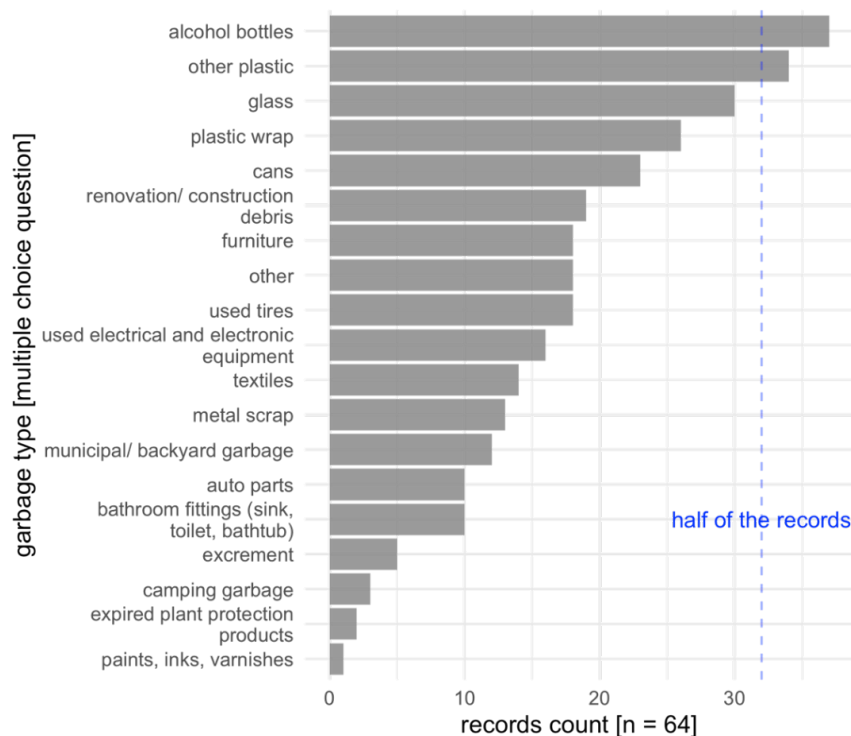
Entries located in all districts of Lodz were sent (Figure 1). The highest number of entries was in Widzew, the largest of the districts (70 of 208 records, 34%). The fewest were entries from Polesie (22). Entries without geolocation were sent (12), as well as entries outside the administrative borders of the city (5; Figure 2A). The highest density of entries concerning the area of the district occurred in the smallest downtown area, Śródmieście (over  $3 \times 10^{-6}$  records per  $m^2$ ), and the lowest in Górna (under  $0.5 \times 10^{-6}$  records per  $m^2$ ; Figure 2B).

Among other characteristics, we asked the participants to indicate the material content of illegal dumps, that is, the types of garbage found. By far, the most common were alcohol bottles (37 records of 64 described dumps) and plastic (34 records). Those

types of waste were indicated in more than half of the records. Slightly less frequently, glass, foil, or cans were spotted. Nearly 1/3 of the wild dumps found included renovation or construction debris, furniture, or used tires. About 1/5 of the indications were for electro-waste, textiles, scrap metal, municipal, or household garbage. Less than 1/6 of the wild dumps found included bathroom fixtures and car parts. Less than 1/10 of the indications were excrement and camping garbage. The least frequently noticed types of waste were expired pesticides (2) and paints, inks, and varnishes (one record). Note that data were collected using a multiple-response question (Figure 3).<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> The team still works on the collected data concerning the characteristics and location of illegal landfills.

**Figure 3. Material content of illegal dumps**



Source: Self-elaboration.

First, one should be aware that the created map does not represent the objective picture of all illegal waste dumps in Lodz, but rather a subjective depiction of the space as inhabitants viewed it. To report a place as an illegal dumpsite, one had to come across and spot the dump place, assign it to the illegal dumpsite category, and then report it via the application. That means we missed all the scenes not spotted by inhabitants (i.e., not accessible or just not accessed) and not assigned as problematic. We also missed cases of places spotted by inhabitants and defined as illegal dumpsites, but combined with no will to join the research or with technical problems to accomplish it properly.

Second, the map not only shows particular spots where municipal wastes are illegally disposed of but also visualizes citizens' sensitivity to environmental problems. As we did not precisely define what we meant by the "illegal waste dump," we could have observed how that term worked for the participants. Therefore, besides typical, picturesque piles of garbage, we could have seen photos of just littered, messy places, or uncleaned areas (Figure 4). Apparently, for the residents, trash disposed of there presented a "matter out of place" (Reno 2014:3), problematic enough to be reported.

**Figure 4. Illegal dump vs. littered space**



Source: Own Epicollect5 database (photos: 2022-04-05 084850 and 2022-03-04 142919).

Given that there is a limited amount of quantifiable information on illegal dumps, and much of the data collected on the subject are scattered and inconsistent, as various institutions collect them for their purposes, we see the idea of mapping illegal dumps (MID) as a valuable contribution to the knowledge of the problematic phenomenon.

## Illegal Dump as the Essential Boundary Object

Attempting to describe the situation of inquiry, one should start with researchers' presuppositions. We assumed that responsible waste management occurs when waste circulates in a closed circuit and goes to the designated storage or recycling sites.<sup>20</sup> The very fact of the existence of illegal waste dumps in the urban greenery remains a real threat to the environment, but also stands in opposition to *the idea of a circular economy*. From the researchers' point of view, dumps in the forest or urban greenery represent trash that got out of control, eluded the waste management system, and polluted 'nature.' We assumed that if the garbage does not end up in the containers and then into the treatment installation, it is 'outside the system' of proper waste processing. We included this point of view in the outline of our study.

<sup>20</sup> This standpoint represents the discourse of a *circular economy* promoted by the European Union legislation. Since 2013, the EU has been redefining environmental protection policy, introducing, in 2018, the Circular Economy Package that aims to reduce waste generation by maintaining resources as long as possible in the economy. The concept of a circular economy is focused on solving waste issues, but also covering the entire economic sphere regarding how we extract raw materials and produce things, how we use them, and what will happen to them after the use cycle. Circular economy strictly regards the way of designing, managing, and processing products that will someday become waste. It is worth remembering that even though the idea of a circular economy has nowadays become a standard, having high social acceptability, it is still a concept made in a particular socio-economic and environmental context and for a specific purpose. However, starting the project, we shared the belief that in a world full of trash, where waste contributes to the destruction of the environment, a circular economy is a wise solution that should be treated as something worth aspiring to.

The project concerns social practices related to littering the natural environment. The object of our interest is trash and waste left by people in forests, parks, or the neighborhood green areas in Lodz, as well as the inhabitants' perception regarding such places and related practices. Ultimately, we would like to create an interactive map of such 'wild' dumps (littered places, abandoned waste, illegal dumps, and debris in the wild) in cooperation with the inhabitants. That would be a **map of Lodz garbage that remains outside the waste management system.** [from the first description of the project, 2021]

Just before we started the data-gathering stage, the chief of the project, Anna Kacperczyk, was invited to City Hall for a meeting with the vice president of the city, who expressed her interest in the research and asked how they could help. After this invitation, we sent her secretary the precise information about our research.

During the meeting, the vice president and the director of the municipal department had printouts of our project description with handwritten notes on them. Looking at me with a little reserve, the director instructed me that we should not use the phrase **"this garbage is out of the system."** She emphasized that we cannot write something like that publicly because, in fact, illegal dumps **"are in the system."** They are included in the waste management procedures since the citizens pay for unauthorized dump treatment in their waste fees. The special fund is created to cover the costs of illegal dumps' disposal from citizens' contributions. [field note, January 27, 2022]

In Poland, *The Act of Maintaining Cleanliness and Order in Municipalities* (September 13, 1996) is in force; thus, every municipality has to address the problem of illegal dumps. In 2021, the Municipality of Lodz city spent approximately 1,5 million PLN for removing

waste from illegal dump sites. From this administrative, legal, and bureaucratic standpoint presented by the municipality, the illegal dumps have become a 'normal' part of waste management procedures.

The main difference between our vintage points was the definition of illegal dump, which became a **boundary object**<sup>21</sup> here. While we saw illegal dumps as something that intrudes on nature and presents dangerous leaks in the waste treatment, the municipality seemed to see those as a part of a calculated waste management system. Furthermore, the idea of the system differed here. For the municipality, the 'system' meant a configuration of administrative decisions made in City Hall regarding communal waste (contracts, logistics of garbage collection, cooperation with companies collecting waste from residents, et cetera). Saying that our waste management system is leaking was like accusing the managers of this system.

After the meeting and exchange of thoughts, our team decided to change the description of the research not to provoke tensions between us, the researchers, and City Hall. We also altered the forthcoming press releases that described our project, and instead of the notice about "a map of Lodz garbage that remains outside the waste management system," we named them "a map of Lodz garbage that is in places not intended for their storage."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Susan L. Star and James R. Griesemer (1989) developed the concept of the "boundary objects" to capture "things" that are at a critical moment at the boundaries of worlds, at the junction points, or the place of transition between them. The boundary objects can be treaties between countries, software programs for users of differently "located" computer worlds, and even ideas or concepts themselves (Clarke 1991:133). The basic social process here consists of the fact that the object is "read" depending on the needs or requirements placed on it by numerous social worlds that meet around the border object and argue about its definition (Kacperczyk 2016:40).

<sup>22</sup> This is in line with the definition used by the Central Statistical Office in Poland, classifying an illegal dumping site in the category of municipal waste and defining it as "a place not intend-

## Subjects Involved in the Situation of Inquiry: Journalists

The interesting question was, why were we invited to the office of the vice president of the city? We owed that to the journalists. Since we were vitally interested in having contact with residents of our city and sharing information about our project, we never refused contact with press and radio journalists. During the project and just before it started, we gave 23 statements of short interviews for local radio stations or daily newspapers.

The attitudes of the journalists ranged from positive to enthusiastic, but sometimes how they presented information about our research created some tensions and exaggerated expectations. The day after the first interview, in which we presented the idea of our project, its aim, and our tools, we found our statement in the recognizable journal under the suggestive title "No more wild dumps in Lodz? Scientists are waiting for photos of such places" (Gontarek 2022 [trans. AK & RŻ]). That put us in the position of an entity that could, or should, introduce some positive changes concerning illegal waste dumping and brought with it many expectations regarding the final effect of our work. Meanwhile, we had a much lower opinion of our abilities in this field. We were only a few people with few resources, and our study was meant as a pilot, so we were under no illusion that we would make a profound change during or just after summarizing the results. But, recognizing expectations expressed directly or indirectly by the

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ed for waste disposal, on which municipal waste is abandoned [trans. AK & RŻ]." In the English version, it reads: "unauthorized site, on which municipal waste is dumped." Retrieved October 23, 2022 (<https://stat.gov.pl/en/metainformation/glossary/terms-used-in-official-statistics/2412,term.html>, <https://stat.gov.pl/metainformacje/slownik-pojec/pojecia-stosowane-w-statystyce-publicznej/2412,pojecie.html>).

people we contacted, we started negotiating our role in the project. Who are we in the research? What are the limits of our activities? What do we expect from ourselves in the study? We spent hours discussing these issues. Some of the discussions were induced by the participants of our study, who expressed their views on our position and role.

## Who Can Solve the Problem?

Although the Epicollect5 application was supposed to be the main method<sup>23</sup> of submitting photos and geolocations, some residents of Lodz decided to communicate with us via email. We received the first email submission on the matter in February, a month before we released a map. And they continued in September after the formal completion of data collection. Since the start of the mapping in March 2022, we have received a dozen emails from residents of Lodz. In addition to photos and geolocation or addresses, email senders expressed their negative emotions concerning the problem. We received requests for intervention, sometimes desperate pleas for help.

About a week ago, in our housing estate, next to the cooperative's garbage can, someone threw a pile of various rubbish—a wild dump. Pictures attached. You want to cry...I am asking for help, tips, anything :( [email sent to the project's mailbox, April 17, 2022]

Some messages were addressed simultaneously to the researchers, the City Guard, and the Municipal Office. That led us to conclude that we have been

<sup>23</sup> Potential project participants could have communicated with us via the website [www.dzikiewysypiska.uni.lodz.pl](http://www.dzikiewysypiska.uni.lodz.pl), where we posted information on how to download the Epicollect5 application and how to use it. Our recommended way of reporting illegal dumps was by uploading photos via the app. However, we have also provided an email address for contact: [dzikiewysypiska@uni.lodz.pl](mailto:dzikiewysypiska@uni.lodz.pl), and over a dozen people contacted us that way.

seen as an entity that could have contributed to solving the problem of wild dumps.<sup>24</sup>

I have a question, is it planned, thanks to your research, to report this state of affairs to City Hall or other cleaning authorities? I wrote a letter to City Hall on this matter. Last year it resulted in a short-term improvement in the situation because some of the rubbish has been cleared away, but it is still in arrears. Of course, I have reported the matter this year as well, but so far nothing has been done. [email sent to the project's mailbox, March 31, 2022]

Individual interviews showed that map co-creators were motivated to participate in our study because they wanted the problem of the illegal dumps to be solved. During one of the group interviews, our framing of the wild dumps phenomenon as 'interesting' has even been met with objection—for an interviewee, it was an "unwanted" phenomenon, not interesting at all. Some participants described their struggle when they had been trying for many years at various institutions to remove or prevent wild dumps, especially near their place of residence. They saw our research project as a new hope to solve the problem. We also learned that "research for research's sake" was rather negatively perceived by participants. Some participants presented particular strategies for sharing data on illegal dumps making subsequent entries on the map depending on what was happening with the previous ones and, that way, checking the effectiveness of our study.

**Remigiusz:** Are there any such wild dumps that you know of in your area that you haven't sent us?

<sup>24</sup> We were responding to the submissions with thanks and an invitation to co-create a map via Epicollect5, but realized that the senders were unlikely to do it. We decided to post the submissions on the map under a separate ID, *email\_dzikiewysypiska*, and should email senders call us to action, we would send an official report to the City Guard or a proper Municipal Office department.

**Marek**<sup>25</sup>: Yes. I sent only one, only one.

**R**: I see, and may I ask why only this one and those others you know not?

**M**: I thought that if this one turns out to be effective, I'll send another one [pause] so far, the garbage is still lying there peacefully.

**R**: Effective in the sense that the garbage won't be there [will be removed]. I see.

**M**: Yes, because I thought that, I had no knowledge that this was scientific research. I thought that it simply works in such a way that some organization, a group, such places of garbage will be reported to the Municipal Office, to the appropriate departments, and using the fact that it is an institutionalized group, it will more easily get the effect that we would all like. [Marek, IDI, June 29, 2022]

They thought that the purpose of the project was to put pressure on the local authorities and get the dumps cleaned up. We were aware that our project might be treated as leverage for a change, and even expressed it in one of the answers to our email receiver.

It seems to me that a study like this gives a chance to collect in one place in a transparent and publicly accessible way the voice of residents who do not agree with such a state of our common space. Therefore, we hope that during these few months of the project, the participants of the study—through their activity—will be able to create some pressure leading to positive changes. We very much hope that will happen. [email answer from Anna Kacperczyk, April 01, 2022]

As part of the recruitment strategy for mapping, we referred to our possible cooperation with local authorities. Additionally, on the project's webpage and Epicollect5 platform, we stated that data making up the map are available to the public, including those involved in

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<sup>25</sup> Name changed.

liquidating wild dumps, and are used by researchers at the University of Lodz to make statistical summaries. The summaries can be provided to the media and local authorities, including the Municipal Office.<sup>26</sup> We, therefore, expected that the motivation for participating in the project would be a desire to contribute to solving the problem. However, we saw our role rather as researchers who provide data collection strategy (building the map), insights, and the understanding of the problem at hand, and not problem solvers. That way, we had to negotiate our role as the entity primarily aimed at knowledge production. And, although we did not move away from solving the problem of illegal dumps—its final solution was equally important to us—we understood that it would not only come about by reporting the dumps and cleaning them up. We comprehended that we had to look at the process of deleting unauthorized dumps.

## Reporting Illegal Dumps

Reporting an illegal dump is not a simple task. Primarily because there is no universal deleting procedure. For Lodz residents, we identified at least 40 particular paths to report wild dumps within ten entities (see Table 1).

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<sup>26</sup> We informed the participants that “our data are publicly available on the [www.dzikiewysypiska.uni.lodz.pl](http://www.dzikiewysypiska.uni.lodz.pl) project website—both for city residents, officials, and city guards. During previous talks with the services responsible for cleanliness in the city (both at the Municipal Economy Department of the Municipal Office of Lodz and the City Guard), we were assured that these services were interested in the results of our study” (email answer from Anna Kacperczyk, April 01, 2022). Getting an answer that, “data availability and ‘ensuring interest’ in research are not enough. All units responsible for the cleanliness of the city should be informed about the alarming condition of our housing estates and other parts of Lodz. Rubbish is lying around all the time, and nobody is interested in it. Please notify City Hall as soon as possible. System solutions are needed” (email answer in the project's mailbox, from participant, April 04, 2022). Furthermore, that possible cooperation was not only a part of recruiting rhetoric but also came to fruition. We interviewed the City Guard authorities several times and provided them with mapping data, and obtained administrative data regarding the scale of dumping perpetrators' identification.



**Table 1. Possible ways to report illegal dumps for Lodz residents**

1.	City Guard ( <i>Straż Miejska</i> ) <sup>1</sup>
	a. Emails: sekretariat@strazmiejska.lodz.pl, ogolnomiejski@strazmiejska.lodz.pl, specjalistyczny@strazmiejska.lodz.pl
	b. Facebook page: <a href="https://www.facebook.com/strazmiejskalodz/">https://www.facebook.com/strazmiejskalodz/</a> (not indicated whether to use Messenger or another feature of the platform)
	c. Phone: 986
	d. SMS: 600 480 986 (for people with hearing loss or hard of hearing)
2.	Police
	a. Mobile application <i>Moja komenda</i> (My Police Station) <sup>2</sup>
	b. Web form <i>Krajowa Mapa Zagrożeń Bezpieczeństwa</i> (National Map of Safety Threats) <sup>3</sup> [category “wild dump” included]
	c. Email: dyzurny@lodz.ld.policja.gov.pl
	d. Phone: 997 <sup>4</sup>
	e. SMS: 603 392 438 (for people with hearing loss or hard of hearing)
	f. Contact with the district police officer via email, mobile, or office phone. <sup>5</sup>
3.	Chief Inspectorate of Environmental Protection (GIOŚ, <i>Główny Inspektorat Ochrony Środowiska</i> ) <sup>6</sup>
	a. Web form: <a href="https://www.gios.gov.pl/pl/zglos-interwencje-formularz">https://www.gios.gov.pl/pl/zglos-interwencje-formularz</a> [category “wild dump” included]
4.	Regional Inspectorate for Environmental Protection (WIOŚ, <i>Wojewódzki Inspektorat Ochrony Środowiska</i> ) <sup>7</sup>
	a. Web form: <a href="https://www.wios.lodz.pl/Formularz_kontaktowy,166">https://www.wios.lodz.pl/Formularz_kontaktowy,166</a> [category “wild dump” not included, report topic as an open question]
	b. Email: awarie@wios.lodz.pl
	c. Phones: 721 111 213 (24-hour number), 42 633 33 43 (during office hours)
5.	Within the City Hall of Lodz (UMŁ, <i>Urząd Miasta Łodzi</i> )
	a. Lodz Resident Contact Center <sup>8</sup> (ŁCKzM, <i>Łódzkie Centrum Kontakt z Mieszkańcami</i> )
	i. Web form: <a href="https://lckm.uml.lodz.pl/Issue/New">https://lckm.uml.lodz.pl/Issue/New</a> [category “wild dump” included]
	ii. Email: lckm@uml.lodz.pl
	iii. Phone: 42 638 44 44
	iv. In-person report: at ŁCKzM office (Lodz, Piotrkowska 110) or at Information and Clerical Points of City Hall (five locations) or Clerical Points (two locations)
	b. Municipal Waste Management Department (WGK, <i>Wydział Gospodarki Komunalnej</i> ) <sup>9</sup>
	i. Emails: czystosc@uml.lodz.pl ( <i>czystość</i> means cleanliness), smieci@uml.lodz.pl ( <i>śmieci</i> means trash), komunalny@uml.lodz.pl
	ii. Phones <sup>10</sup> : 42 638 50 00 ( <i>Zielona Linia</i> —the Green Line for reporting wild dumps); 42 638 54 53, 42 638 49 73, 42 638 49 22, 42 638 49 50, 42 638 52 36 (City Cleaning Division [ <i>Oddział Oczyszczania Miasta</i> ]); 42 638 59 11, 42 638 48 97, 42 638 49 84, 42 638 49 04, 42 638 53 53 (Waste Management Control Division [ <i>Oddział ds. Kontroli Gospodarki Odpadami</i> ])
	c. Road and Transport Authority (ZDiT, <i>Zarząd Dróg i Transportu</i> ) <sup>11</sup>
	i. Webpage form (same as ŁCKzM): <a href="https://lckm.uml.lodz.pl/Issue/New">https://lckm.uml.lodz.pl/Issue/New</a> [category “wild dump” included]
	ii. Email: zdit@zdit.uml.lodz.pl
	iii. Phone (same as WGK): 42 638 50 00 (The Green Line).
6.	Interpellations and inquiries of Lodz city councilors
	a. In-person or letter submission of paper document asking a particular councilor for interpellation or inquiry regarding an issue—possibly a wild dump of which we write more below
7.	NGOs
	a. TrashOut mobile application: <a href="https://www.trashout.ngo/">https://www.trashout.ngo/</a> , a global project owned by Slovakian NGO
	b. BrudnoTu mobile application: <a href="https://brudnotu.fundacjabos.pl/">https://brudnotu.fundacjabos.pl/</a> , Polish project by Bank for Environmental Protection Foundation ( <i>Fundacja Banku Ochrony Środowiska</i> ), which claims reports are automatically forwarded to the relevant local government.

Note: For footnotes in the table, see pp. 203-204.

Source: Self-elaboration.

All the mentioned government institutions also accept reports via registered post. In our research, we also learned that residents report wild dumps to employees of companies cleaning their houses, to the administration of their properties, and to various neighborhood councils.

The example of interpellations and inquiries of Lodz councilors clearly illustrates the administrative complexity of the process of reporting and further processing a report of a wild dump in the city. A resident usually visits councilors on duty in person and makes a request for an interpellation or inquiry. The councilors, if they accept the request, become an advocate for the issue raised by the citizen. They forward interpellations and inquiries to the President of Lodz, Vice Presidents, and other entities. All these entities are legally obliged to respond (but not to act). The documents are easily accessible online.<sup>27</sup> Currently, there are 28 interpellations or inquiries regarding illegal dumps. The first one is dated March 14, 2007, and the last one is May 16, 2022. At the beginning of the analyzed period, the content of the documents embraced more questions and attempts to determine who was responsible for the area and the particular dump. Over time, there were more and more demands to clean up, renewal of these demands, and further calls to accept responsibility. Sometimes, the same locations are mentioned repeatedly. The example of the interpellations and inquiries of councilors shows the persistence of the problem of wild dumps. During the analysis of those documents, we also learned about other institutions not mentioned above, but involved in the arena—to which the existence of wild dumps should not be reported, but which may be responsible for cleaning

it up if it is located on their land. These include, for example, the Lodz Municipal Forestry (*Nadleśnictwo Łódź*) and the Municipal Sports and Recreation Centers (MOSiR, *Miejski Ośrodek Sportu I Rekreacji*). Additionally, various entities are negotiating their relationship with the wild dump by arguing over responsibility for and financing ‘dump activities.’ Those negotiations mainly concern who is to clean up and dispose of waste.

Such a large number of reporting pathways seems to be a positive solution, giving the average notifier more options. In practice, however, it can create confusion. The more places where a problem can be reported, the more responsibility for solving it is dispersed. That shows the administrative complexity of the problem of illegal dumps.

## The View from City Hall

The municipal waste management system is set up as a part of fees paid by property owners. Theoretically, 100% of residents are covered by the municipal system—they are obliged to pay a fee for managing municipal waste, the so-called “garbage fee.” Historically, the presence of illegal landfills and dumps was the most important justification for communities to take over the management of municipal waste. The introduction of the obligation to manage municipal waste by the commune was mainly to prevent the creation of illegal dumps.

The City of Lodz has an annual budget of around 2 million PLN to spend on cleaning illegal dumps and presents full readiness to deal with them. Asked about a decisive criterion of which illegal dumps to choose to clean up and which to leave as they are, the official in the Waste Management Control Division answered:

<sup>27</sup> <https://bip.uml.lodz.pl/wladze/rada-miejska-w-lodzi/interpelacje-i-zapytania-radnych/>. Retrieved April 27, 2022.

We execute all that is. At the moment, we have not yet said that we will not take a wild dump. No. Not everything we get as an illegal dump is classified as an illegal dump. For example, if somewhere in front of a single-family property there are bags with grass, and it is reported as a “wild dump,” we do not qualify it as a “wild dump.” Because it should just be picked up by the company that collects the waste. However, for some reason, it really wasn’t, right? Such situations happen...We have not refused to clear any illegal dumps yet. We do not even have the option to refuse because the commune is obliged to clean it up under the law, right? There’s no way we’ll say we won’t clean it up. We have the resources. We have to do this. [interview in the Department of Municipal Economy, February 10, 2022]

However, with that enormous fund, the city has many internal limitations. Mainly because it can operate freely only in municipal areas, and outside of them, its agency drops almost to zero. Unfortunately, many illegal dumps are located in areas that do not belong to the commune, that is, are privately owned. Also, lands of unclear legal status (unknown to whom they belong or whose owner is not interested in it) are places conducive to the emergence of illegal dumps. The Municipal Economy Department estimates that approximately 30% of illegal dumps are situated in non-municipal areas, and the municipality cannot use public money to clean up private properties. In such cases, the Municipal Economy Department will refer the matter to the City Guard, which will try to identify the perpetrator who can be held accountable and forced to clean up the area at their expense. If it is impossible to identify the perpetrator, the obligation to collect abandoned waste rests with the landowner.

According to the regulations, the landowner is responsible for the disposal of waste, as well as for the sanitary and orderly condition of a given area. Since there are plenty of landowners in Lodz, many subjects are also responsible for proceeding with illegal dumps. Apart from the private owners of plots, part of the area is the responsibility of the City Greenery Authority, forest areas are subject to the State Forests, and the Road and Transport Authority is responsible for roadside lanes.<sup>28</sup> If an illegal landfill occurs in an area that does not belong to the commune, the Municipal Economy Department cannot pay for its removal.

Well, we cannot allocate funds to finance the cleaning of an area not ours because we have public finance discipline. We cannot spend the money...This is a huge problem. What can you do about it? It often stings the eyes...these are the dumps that we say: no, we can’t just [clear them up]. These are not landfills that we don’t want to remove, they are landfills that we just can’t clean up. [interview in the Department of Municipal Economy, February 10, 2022]

Thus, the ‘inappropriate’ location of an illegal dump (meaning: in areas not belonging to the commune) prevents the city authorities from operating effectively. Another problem is the ‘inappropriate’ content of the unauthorized dump.

<sup>28</sup> For example, in the area of the Łagiewniki Forest and its buffer zone, the responsibility is divided into at least four units: the Lodz Municipal Forestry, covering areas of municipal forests; the Municipal Sports and Recreation Center, in the areas administered by the Arturówek Tourist House (about 12 ha); the Delegation of the City of Lodz Office Lodz-Bałuty, in the areas of roads managed and on real estate owned by the city, for which no administrator has been established; and the Road and Transport Authority in the road lanes of managed streets (source: the response of the Deputy Mayor of the City, Marek Michalik, of May 16, 2008, to the interpellation of the City Councilor, Bartosz Domaszewicz on the issue of illegal dumps in Łagiewniki Forest [[https://uml.lodz.pl/files/bip/public/rada\\_miejska/interpelacje/5/1306.pdf](https://uml.lodz.pl/files/bip/public/rada_miejska/interpelacje/5/1306.pdf), retrieved April 27, 2022]).

**Figure 5. Illegal dump containing tires**



Source: Own Epicollect5 database (photo:2022-03-01 181122).

In their *modus operandi*, the municipality clearly distinguishes *municipal waste*, collected within the municipal system, and other *non-municipal waste*, which the commune is not responsible for, nor does it take part in their collection. *Non-municipal waste* is generated as a direct consequence of specific economic activities conducted by entrepreneurs in various industries. The Voivodeship Inspector of Environmental Protection is responsible for the treatment of such kinds of waste. The problem starts when the illegal dump consists of the remains from car repair workshops, tires, debris, or other waste classified as *non-municipal* since they have been created as part of entrepreneurial activity. Illegal dumping of used tires especially is a common problem, not only in Poland (U.S. EPA 1998:6). The municipality has no legitimation to remove these sorts of things. The tension can arise here on the line between the obligations of the Voivodeship Inspector of Environmental Protection and the Department of Municipal Economy. When the rubbish reported as an illegal dump is the result of economic activ-

ity, the municipality cannot proceed with it. The Chief of the Waste Management Control Division explained that referring to the case of abandoned tires:

This issue, personally, hurts me the most; it just stings because I know that it is not...The residents' money is used for this purpose [removal of illegal dumps], and this is not waste from residents. Because we have already started collecting these tires from the residents, right? Because that is really a problem. The resident has nothing to do with it... it is evident...well, one resident did not bring it. One resident will not bring a hundred tires, right? Well, because they are expensive [to utilize], that's why they are thrown away. [interview in the Department of Municipal Economy, February 10, 2022]

Deciding what is and what is not municipal waste can sometimes be problematic. Under Polish law, the concept of municipal waste is defined as "household waste," that is, waste generated by natural persons through their activities related to satisfying living needs carried out as part of a "household."<sup>29</sup> They can also be produced out-

<sup>29</sup> According to the Directive (EU) 2018/851 (Article 1) 2b. "municipal waste" means: (a) mixed waste and separately collected waste from households, including paper and cardboard, glass, metals, plastics, bio-waste, wood, textiles, packaging, waste from electrical and electronic equipment, waste from batteries and accumulators, and bulky waste, including mattresses and furniture; (b) mixed waste and separately collected waste from other sources, where such waste is similar in nature and composition to waste from households. Municipal waste does not include waste from production, agriculture, forestry, fishing, septic tanks, and sewage network and treatment, including sewage sludge, end-of-life vehicles, or construction and demolition waste. This definition is without prejudice to the allocation of responsibilities for waste management between public and private actors; 2c. "construction and demolition waste" means waste generated by construction and demolition activities (Directive [EU] 2018/851 of the European Parliament and the Council of 30/05/2018 amending Directive 2008/98 / EC on waste).

side the household as long as they arise directly in connection with satisfying the living needs of natural persons and are similar to household waste in quantity and composition (Górski 2021:27-28).

The Municipal Economy Department must act according to the law; however, officials have some room for interpretation and making their decisions during classification. Apart from the clear cases, such as the identification of hazardous waste (e.g., asbestos) or the evident origin of waste from economic activity, there are also illegal landfills with an unclear composition that are difficult to classify unambiguously. Then recognizing waste as municipal—even if there are some doubts about it—allows for removing that waste using municipal funds. “Counting waste as municipal will include it in municipal waste management systems” (Górski 2021:30 [trans. AK & RŻ]). Therefore, sometimes officials, suspecting that a given waste may not be purely municipal, decide to classify it as such to be able to dispose of it.

### City Guard and Eco Patrol

Many entities are involved in the arena of illegal waste dumps (Figure 6). Not being able to discuss them all, we will try to introduce some of the most important entities on the scene and describe their relations instead. The leading actor here is the municipality, with its departments dedicated to waste management. Equally important is the position of the City Guard and their special section named Eco Patrol, whose mission is to strive for a clean environment.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Eco Patrol of the City Guard, established in 2014, carries out controls related to waste incineration and illegal dump investigations.

For the City Guards, the problem of illegal dumps is related to a broader issue of waste management. They perceive the abandonment of garbage in forbidden places primarily as the final effect of what is happening earlier in the process of waste management. Firstly, they pay attention to the fact that

there is a large group of people in our city who do not have these garbage declarations<sup>31</sup> submitted...We know from practice and, the municipality knows, that there are big distortions and understatements here. Hence, for example, different cities try to seal this system in different ways. With us, it is currently happening by combining data on water consumption with the price of rubbish. Before that, only a declaration based on the number of people living on the farm was valid. [interview with the Chief of the Eco Patrol, February 18, 2022]

Thus, city guards always check that declaration when inspecting properties. Having access to the municipal waste declaration database, they can notify the municipal office about the results of controls. Afterward, the municipality continues its activities. The owner can get an administrative penalty and overdue fees from the office (from the city guard independently a caution or a fine).

Information about illegal dumps reaches the city guard through several routes. They can search for dumps using drones and camera traps or just by walking in the field. Moreover, they get cases for clarification from City Hall. However, most often, they are continually informed about the locations of illegal waste by residents.

<sup>31</sup> The contract with the municipality for garbage collection.

There are so many reports, so many to the hotline and email reports here, that we go according to the order in which the reports are received. And there is also a big problem making it on time because we are not able to do it, there is a notification, we get in and go. It is simply not realistic because there are not enough people, and there are three times as many notifications, right? [interview with the Deputy Chief of Eco Patrol, February 18, 2022]

Suppose a guard finds in an illegal dump any element allowing the identification of the perpetrator, such as a license plate, an invoice, or a bill. In that case, it is a 'starting point' for further explanatory activities. Usually, identifying the offender is very time-consuming and may take up to a year.<sup>32</sup> However, a penalty notice does not solve the problem.

Because we care, not so much about criminal sanctions, you know, these criminal sanctions, of course, they are, and it is the guard who decides which ones will apply there. But, we want this area to be cleaned—for this person to clean up. because a ticket will not do the trick. A site needs to be cleaned up. [interview with the Deputy Chief of Eco Patrol, February 18, 2022]

The detection of this type of misdemeanor remains relatively weak. According to the data of the City Guard, out of 163 spots of illegal dumps detected in 2019-2022, the perpetrator was identified only in 23 cases (14%). In 140, the wrongdoer was never caught. Of the 163 discovered illegal

<sup>32</sup> According to the data provided by the City Guard in Lodz, regarding the period 2019-2022, the time of the proceedings, that is, determining the perpetrator of the misdemeanor, may take from several hours to several months. The longest lasted 11 months. Most often, however, it was from one to two months.

dumps, 29 were cleared up by the landowner; 18 were removed by the perpetrators; and, in 18 cases, the area was handed over to the city's institutions.

In the case of an illegal dump located in the commune, the city guard does everything to reach the perpetrator and oblige them to clean up. When they exhaust all possible measures and do not find the perpetrator, the case is referred to the WGK (Department of Municipal Economy), and the city, as the landowner, removes the dump.

If a dumpsite is located on a private plot, its owner is responsible for the waste left there, even if they did not put it there themselves. According to law regulations,<sup>33</sup> the landowner must bear the costs of waste disposal since "the property owner is obliged to take care of their property also in such a way as to prevent illegal activities from the point of view of waste regulations, including waste collection in a place not intended for this purpose" (Górski 2021:134 [trans. AK & RŻ]).

The scopes of responsibility for illegal dumps of the City Guard and City Hall overlap where the case concerns a commune area, and they split when it comes to private plots or land belonging to entities other than the municipality. Also, the guards' narratives are quite different from the municipal ones

<sup>33</sup> Art. 3 ust. 1 pkt 19 ustawa z 14.12.2012 r. o odpadach (Dz.U. z 2020 r. poz. 797 ze zm.) [Art. 3 sec. 1 point 19, the Act of December 14, 2012, on waste (Journal of Laws of 2020, item 797, as amended)]. The Waste Act states that "the owner of the territorial land is the owner of the waste on the property." That means "in the case the actual owner of the waste is unknown, the obligations of that owner are borne by the ruler of the territorial land" (Górski 2021:133 [trans. AK & RŻ]). So, "if the owner of the property has not collected the waste on his own and is unable to indicate the real owner, then he is responsible for this waste as the owner" (Górski 2021:134 [trans. AK & RŻ]).

in that regard. Creating illegal dumps is seen by the City Guard primarily as a misdemeanor. Their accounts focus on the practices of the perpetrators, on the attempt to reconstruct the way the offender operates, and indicate some favorable circumstances and characteristic conditions of actions.

Well, I think these are such uninhabited places, undeveloped so that no one would just catch them. Bushes, some wooded, such a secluded place, oh! Or those where it's easy to just drive up, deposit, and quickly disappear...Well, as a rule, someone always comes there by car. [interview with the Deputy Chief of Eco Patrol, February 18, 2022]

City guards also pay attention to the situational context of the offenses they pursue.

Because these are usually some deserted areas, where there is a piece of forest, with trees and some bushes, so there are good conditions to throw this garbage away...these are usually more secluded, bushy places, right? So, a nice way to get it under cover, I don't know, evening, night, and throw it out there. Although, some [of them] are brave and throw out during the day. [interview with the Deputy Chief of Eco Patrol, February 18, 2022]

Reconstructing the perpetrator's mentality and motives allows us to situate them in the field of understandable practices, having some reason and internal rationality—despite their unacceptability from the normative point of view.

Someone has money, let's say he lives in a house. He could honestly declare that six people live with him, and he declares two people, produces more rubbish, and we all pay for it, then there are raises. Or this surplus [of waste], so that it does not ap-

pear, he takes it somewhere, right? [interview with the Chief of the Eco Patrol, February 18, 2022]

All the time during the controls, it turns out that people are just cheating on the number of people reported, or there is no declaration [signed] at all—all the time, it goes out somewhere during the controls. [interview with the Deputy Chief of Eco Patrol, February 18, 2022]

The accounts of the city guards provide another form of 'normalization' of illegal dumping here as they present this activity as somehow unavoidable. Just as there are people who break the law in various spheres, they also dispose of their trash where they are not allowed to do so. Thinking about the phenomenon of illegal dumps that way gives the view of an unsolvable problem. Just like in the case of any other kind of crime being the subject of the work of guards or the police, it seems that we will not get rid of it completely. There will always be those who break the law and the rules. We can, perhaps, only think of some limitation or diminution of this phenomenon, but not of eliminating it.

## Relations

The relationship between the Department of Municipal Economy and the City Guard in the field of combating illegal dumps seems to be symbiotic. The City Guard is indispensable for the Municipal Office to conduct proceedings, search for perpetrators of illegal dumps, and impose penalties on them or bring them to court. In addition, the City Guard has the right to enter the property, check whether a given resident has a signed waste contract and pay the fee for garbage collection, as well as to inspect the vehicle registration numbers in

the CEPiK<sup>34</sup> database, and has a statutory access to the PESEL<sup>35</sup> database. The municipality does not have these powers, but has direct access to data on waste declarations of residents and other entities. It is the Municipal Office that most often initiates inquiries and cases, which are then handled and resolved by the City Guard.

Both sides complement each other, emphasizing that they have excellent relations. “We cooperate very well with the City Guard, especially with a special unit established to solve these problems, Eco Patrol. They are doing a great job,” the chief of the WGK (Department of Municipal Economy) assured.

In turn, Eco Patrol confirms that they exchange data on reports with WGK on an ongoing basis. “We are up to date with everything. If there is any urgent intervention, it is marked ‘urgent,’ or we contact by phone, and this is the first one,” says the Head of the Eco Patrol, and his deputy confirms: “Yes, they have a lot of reports from residents, and they send them later to us to simply control it. We have very good cooperation. So, like us [to] them, so they [to] us.”

In that coherent setting, our investigation could have been a slight disturbance or a new element to the established relationships. As researchers (with the people we have drawn into mapping illegal dumps), we have become, in a sense, a new subject in this arena—probably, from their point of view, a subject not needed when it comes to the problem of fighting illegal dumps. Perhaps that is how the

statement of the head of WGK, who commented on our mapping project as interesting, should be interpreted. However, the head immediately made a reservation that they, that is, the Department of Municipal Economy, have a very well-developed system of reporting illegal landfills—people who call provide them with information, send them photos. “We know everything. We know exactly the map of wild dumps in Lodz. We know where the wild dumps appear and where they will reappear after being cleared.”

## Homeless People in the City

While wandering around the neighborhoods, we sometimes came across places that, at first glance, looked like a wild dump, but a moment of closer inspection was enough to guess that it was rather a place of someone’s dwelling. A kind of separation from the outside world, a place to sit or lie down, hanging clothes, cardboard boxes, blankets, food leftover—a colorful disorder typical of abandoned things.

Officials are aware of such cases when homeless inhabitants of the city transformed some fragments of space for their needs, using old furniture to make their living place more bearable and a bit more convenient (see: Krajewski 2012:9; Martini 2021:57).

Sometimes, to be honest, we don’t want to take it away from them. But, always, we take it to the winter, just to discourage those people from staying in this place, right?...We have an arrangement with the City Guard that when they notice, we just take it for the winter so that these people don’t get frozen there. But, there are places where we have these sofas, some tables. Well, these places are arranged for their everyday stay. Here, it also seems to me that

<sup>34</sup> CEPiK is an abbreviation for the Central Register of Vehicles and Drivers (*Centralna Ewidencja Pojazdów i Kierowców*).

<sup>35</sup> A PESEL is the national identification number used in Poland.



there is no point in fighting it because if we take it from them, they will come here anyway, there are already such places. A bit like a fight with windmills. Besides, I don't know, I kind of know, I just understand these people. [interview in the Department of Municipal Economy, February 10, 2022]

Similarly, while commenting on such situations, the city guards do not see homeless people as contributing to creating illegal dumps.

But, they usually don't... Because they do it for some reason, for themselves and their convenience. It's hard to call it an illegal garbage dump, right? Unless, I don't know, someone will chase them away, and what they leave behind begins to look later like a dump as it decays. Maybe it looks like a small rubbish dump, but they usually don't make any visible traces around them so as not to be identified. Well, if this rubbish builds up, eventually, someone will notice, right? At least I don't remember [such a case]. [interview with the Deputy Chief of Eco Patrol, February 18, 2022]<sup>36</sup>

According to the narratives of the City Hall employees, the homeless people, with their practices of "dwelling" in urban greenery, constitute a minor problem. They are presented as someone who rather needs help and support, not a problem the municipality would like to fight.

<sup>36</sup> Our interlocutor seemed to defend the image of the homeless as someone rather exposed to rubbish left behind by others than creating it themselves: "During one inspection, the city guard visited a large, abandoned post-production area, where people were transporting various waste, such as construction waste and window waste, washbasins. When the guards went there to check on them, they came across such homeless people. But, it can't be said that they were making a mess out there somewhere. Rather, other people who transported their waste there and left it behind were to blame." [interview with the Deputy Chief of Eco Patrol, February 18, 2022]

However, they start to be seen as difficult when executing their agency. In one of the first talks in City Hall, there was a mention of some troublesome activities of people in the homelessness crisis who would "drag" the bulky waste left by the inhabitants into the bus stop. Thus, they may be perceived as problematic when they act, and their actions' effects become visible to others showing how much they differ from regular citizens' conduct.

Unfortunately, we also have a big problem with people who collect scrap metal, homeless people. We have places where garbage bins pile because someone is taking scrap metal to a scrap collection point in a garbage bin or a shopping cart. There is a place near the scrap collection point where we have it regularly. Someone brings [scrap] just in this cart. The purchasers do not want to accept a cart, despite the fact that it is made of metal. Well, we are not able to deal with that. [interview in the Department of Municipal Economy, February 10, 2022]

Therefore, effective acting that disrupts the order contradicts the idea of what the proper activities should look like and what rules they should follow.

The most intriguing incident during our research concerned an email report from a citizen who sent us photos depicting an illegal dump, including a picture of a homeless person lying on an old sofa in a neighborhood green area in a housing estate.

I wanted to report a wild garbage dump and the devastation of the natural environment between [names of the streets] in the green square next to the wall [coordinates]. Someone has nailed a swastika on the tree; there is a lot of rubbish after a libation around; and a homeless man is sleeping. And yet, there is a social

welfare home on the same estate. It all happens under our windows...I am sending photos in the attachment. [email sent to the project mailbox, September 05, 2022]

One photograph depicted a man being watched from behind, resting in the bed. He leans his body on the elbow with his legs covered with a blanket. A crutch is lying on the ground next to the couch. In the other pictures, one can see a quarter of a watermelon, beer cans spread all around, a porcelain dinner bowl with soup remnants, a stoneware ashtray, and some scattered cigarette butts. An upholstered chair stands under the tree. Another eye-catching photo shows a cardboard box on the ground in which empty fish-in-oil cans, drained alcohol bottles, bottle caps, and an empty sunflower have been put away. Evidently, in all this littered area, a man living there prepared a place for his garbage disposal—a small substitute for order in that messy place.

Those pictures showed traces of someone's existence rather than a wild dump. Probably even the municipality would not categorize that situation as an illegal dump, but rather as a neglected area, a place not kept clean. However, from the informer's point of view, those traces of the homeless presence were 'unwanted things' that disturbed the aesthetics of the place.

The fact that a person could be framed as part of an illegal dump made us look at urban space differently and discover new categories that organize human practices there. It became clear that the category of space aesthetics—understood as paying attention to the prevailing order, cleanliness, and beauty of the place—may be separate from the category of ecological sensitivity and alter from the category of com-

peting for space. Although in the latter, the author directly refers to the category of "devastation of the natural environment," and the photos might be seen as a sign of high sensitivity to environmental problems, the appearance of the homeless man makes us introduce a new thread to this interpretation and shifts our focus toward new dimensions of the research problem.

First, it becomes clear that we are dealing here with a struggle for space and the definition of this space. The axis dimension was the vision of the proper organization of the environment and the idea of dirt and disorder expressed by our informer. As Mary Douglas (1966:2) stands:

dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder...Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the environment.

In that instance, the image of a homeless person concerned not only what was dirty, or messy, but also the helplessness due to the inability to impose a preferred appearance on a space. Moreover, such an organized space contradicted the concept of social order, in which a homeless person should not 'take over' the place reserved for others so that they could enjoy its aesthetic values. The clash of definitions concerned not only space and the vision of cleanliness and dirt but also reached deeper into the notions of a social order in which a homeless person should not dictate conditions, appropriate space, and live in a green area next to a block of flats. The social hierarchy is also revealed here, and with it, the performative resistance of the homeless 'brazenly' living near the apartment block, creating his world by appropriating the space, marking it with

his everyday objects, as well as his garbage collected in a hastily prepared wastebasket.

From the environmental justice perspective, the accessibility and attractiveness of urban green spaces may be seen as a form of the “provision of environmental amenities for the most disadvantaged communities” (Koprowska et al. 2020:1). The research held in Lodz by the team Karolina Koprowska, Jakub Kronenberg, Inga B. Kuźma, and Edyta Łaskiewicz showed how vital urban green spaces are “to people experiencing homelessness, not only from the point of view of necessity or a lack of any other choice but—more importantly—from the perspective of individual preference and the fulfillment of personal needs” (Koprowska et al. 2020:1).

That case was also unusual in that it allowed us to surpass the limitations of our original view that wild dumps and trash as a matter “out of place” (Reno 2014:3) should be interpreted primarily along the axis of ecological activism. Here, other dimensions of the phenomenon emerged: the issue of space and the struggle for space of various entities, the hierarchical nature of these entities, the helplessness of one of them towards the other, the creation of space for living in conjunction with the delimitation of the space for littering (a hastily prepared waste basket). Thus, that case allows us to go beyond the initial conceptualization scheme toward discovering new dimensions of creating and understanding order and disorder. The presence of a swastika on a tree proves that that space also serves other categories of users: rebellious youth, bored jokers, or nationalists. That also made us look at urban space and practices differently.

Furthermore, an illegal trash dump can be seen as a wild place, an ‘un-tamed’ or ‘feral’ area in urban

space. Various unwanted phenomena occur there: the pile-up of garbage, the presence of homeless people, alcohol libations, vandalism, destruction of greenery, and the display of Nazi symbols. It is an outlawed, out-of-control place that should be under control, but is not.

### Culprits, Wrongdoers, Offenders

People illegally disposing of waste in remote locations are the most mysterious, invisible, and unknown group in this study. They are permanently present—as we see the effects of their conduct. The traces of their activity are visible and tangible. They are experienced narratively (many stories about them in the form of rhetoric questions) and materially (much illegally deposited waste). However, at the same time, we can only infer their socio-demographical or psychological features<sup>37</sup> based on the remnants they left behind.

Usually, we confront the offenders’ image rather than interact directly with them. People react to the figure of a person discarding waste in unauthorized areas in two ways. First, with a strong emotional reaction: outrage, indignation, rejection, disgust, and a desire to punish the wrongdoer who violates the order. There appear very emotional expressions: “How could someone do that?” Indicating not only the unacceptability but also the complete incomprehensibility of such a demeanor. Often in the discourse, there is a powerful narrative showing

<sup>37</sup> Culprits, wrongdoers, and offenders remain a significant but hard-to-reach group. We can only guess their characteristics and motives. In the 2021/ 2022 academic year, two groups of second-year undergraduate students in our classes researched, among other things, the social image of people who create wild dumps. The students obtained a consistent stereotype—it is a middle-aged, drunk man. Laziness, backwardness, stinginess, and selfishness are associated with a person who creates illegal dumps.

the pointlessness of throwing garbage into the forest and getting rid of it in a way that is as unethical as it is, indeed, troublesome. It points to the irrationality of the culprit's actions, who must overcome many obstacles to deposit garbage illegally. "Why did someone make such an effort to carry garbage to the forest and not to PSZOK (legal point of municipal waste collection)? It would be more civilized and convenient." Therefore, the default explanation of the phenomenon is the irrationality, stupidity, or even dullness of the person depositing garbage illegally.

The second line of reaction is trying to unveil the motives behind such practices and reconstructing some rational reasons to comprehend that illegal conduct. The audience evaluating those actions refers to the low environmental awareness of the culprit. One can assume that people who deposit their trash in unauthorized areas do not care about the environment, lack elementary education in this regard, or do not understand the importance of recycling. Very often, they are ascribed laziness. Some explanations indicate the offenders' cunning and their actions as a "sharp practice." However, the most tangible and understandable explication refers to money.

To me, the offenders of illegal dumps are just people who do not pay for this rubbish; they do some repairs and will accumulate some additional municipal waste. And they have a plan just to throw it away somewhere. I think this is a category of people whom I don't think can afford to simply pay for this waste and take it somewhere. [interview with the Chief of the Eco Patrol, February 18, 2022]

I wonder why these people throw away this rubbish. Well, let's take the allotment gardeners. I have a plot

of land outside [name of the city]. And if you enter the forest there sometimes, it's really weird. Maybe the money...Certainly also money. Until a few years ago, the allotment gardeners paid a small fee a month. In my case, it was 5 PLN per month. And then, the statutory flat rate came in; for example, almost 200 PLN is segregated in Lodz. Some people ask if I am not here in January, I am not here in February, we are not here in March, I am not here in December, I am not here in November, and suddenly, let's say this piece? [interview with the Chief of the Eco Patrol, February 18, 2022]

Those colloquial ways of reasoning attempt to make sense of incomprehensible and illegal practices. However, if we move to the level of scientific analysis, it is worth asking whether we really should see such an action as irrational and senseless. Suppose we assume that there is some rationality behind those operations, that they are a calculated method that brings the actor some profit. In that case, it should be assumed that PSZOK is not a rational alternative for the acting entity since, for some reason, they cannot access this site of disposal. So, perhaps, they do not have the status of a resident who has the right to bring their rubbish there, or their garbage does not have the status of municipal waste. An offender who disposes of municipal waste in an unauthorized place must not be the holder of the rights to its legal disposal. By extension, either they do not have a signed waste disposal agreement (garbage declaration), which, as it turns out, is possible, or their garbage is not *municipal waste*, but resulting from economic activity. The assumption about the rationality of practices related to the creation of illegal dumps enables us to present them as the result of broader processes and situate them among particular administrative, legal, or organizational conditions.

Perhaps there are cases when individuals do not see the need for waste recycling or following the proper waste disposal, or even there are some people too lazy to bring their trash to official dumping sites, or perhaps some illegal dumps arise as an act of despair of someone who does not know how to proceed and what to do with garbage, but such reasoning condemns us to a naive approach that overlooks those motives resulted not from ignorance or specific relevance systems, but for very mundane, financial reasons.

For sure, people who dump their trash illegally solve their practical problems. The offenders probably choose the most straightforward way to get what they need: avoiding additional fees or earning extra money. Wrongdoers may save not only their money but also their time and effort. And even if this activity costs them more energy and effort than legal conduct would demand, it still confirms that some additional conditions of this action justify it in the eyes of the actor.

Offenders are not only individuals who illegally deal with 'their own' household waste. It is not uncommon that they act as advocates for a company's interests, either as its employees or owners, disposing of waste generated by business activities. Those include, for example, the aforementioned tire and car repairs, renovation and construction companies, or waste pick-up companies (see: U.S. EPA 1998). Dumping waste that someone entrusted to them and paid for their disposal by throwing it in a roadside ditch is pure profit.

In Poland, "distrust in public institutions is glaring" (Sztompka 1996:50), which explains the motives of illegal dumping in two ways. First, since there is distrust in institutions legally dealing with

waste, one should expect a rather complicated and unpleasant fight with those institutions for the legal return of waste. Second, it is also distrust in institutions that prosecute and punish illegal waste disposal—so being punished seems unlikely, if the institutions are ineffective, perhaps the punishment is not severe.<sup>38</sup>

Looking for the other possible explanations for creating illegal dumps, one can specify the collateral motive that trashing can be viewed as a form of resistance. Not the effect of getting lost in the system nor misunderstanding its principles, goals, and measures, but a rebellion against it; 'unsubscribing' from the society that organizes and arranges, as negating the rules of order.<sup>39</sup> Is illegal dumping the behavior of unsocialized individuals? Are they anti-social?

The method of depositing garbage—carried out anonymously, never openly, under cover of darkness, among bushes, in the absence of witnesses—proves that the offenders recognize the prevailing

<sup>38</sup> Polluting or littering in public is punished by a fine of no less than 500 PLN (Art. 145. Zaśmiecianie miejsc publicznych [littering public places Kodeks wykroczeń [Code of Petty Offenses] Dz.U.2022.0.2151) because elsewhere in the world, the penalties for "unlawful disposal of waste, including illegal dumping or unauthorized stockpiling" can reach \$250,000 (on Antipodes, see: [https://www.epa.sa.gov.au/environmental\\_info/waste\\_recycling/waste-management](https://www.epa.sa.gov.au/environmental_info/waste_recycling/waste-management) [retrieved September 18, 2022]), the fine in Poland is small. Nevertheless, the new legislative proposal on counteracting environmental crime announces increasing those penalties from 10,000 PLN up to 10 million if the perpetrator is convicted of an offense against the environment.

<sup>39</sup> In his study, *Litter as a Sign of Public Disorder?*, Thaddeus Müller explored littering as a mundane example of low-level disorder and a form of self-presentation in public places as a rule-breaker. He finds that young people react to littering in three ways: conforming to the rules of a clean and tidy environment, bending the rules, or breaking them. All "the reactions of the teenagers towards disorderly behavior were shaped by the way they wanted to present themselves in public" (Müller 2015:27).

norms accurately. If the creation of illegal landfills did not involve a strong norm prohibiting this practice, wrongdoers would not have been hiding it. However, the persistence of the problem and the presence of so many illegal garbage dumps in visible places prove the violators' conviction of impunity.

### **Arena around the Illegal Waste Dumps (MSI)**

Arena—one of the most specific concepts in the theory of social worlds—is a dispute 'place,' a 'battlefield' between various entities that maintain a specific vision of action and a definition of the situation due to their location and adapted ideology. Adele E. Clarke (1991:128) defines the arena as "a field of action and interaction between a potentially infinite wide variety of collective entities" that do not agree with a specific definition of a situation or an action taken concerning that definition. The arena 'works' around a problem and ultimately means disagreement with the direction of action taken by the social world or its segment (Strauss 1993:227; see also: Strauss 1982a; 1982b). In the arena, various problems are discussed, negotiated, fought for, forced, and manipulated by representatives of the social sub-worlds involved (Strauss 1978:124; Kacperczyk 2016:40).

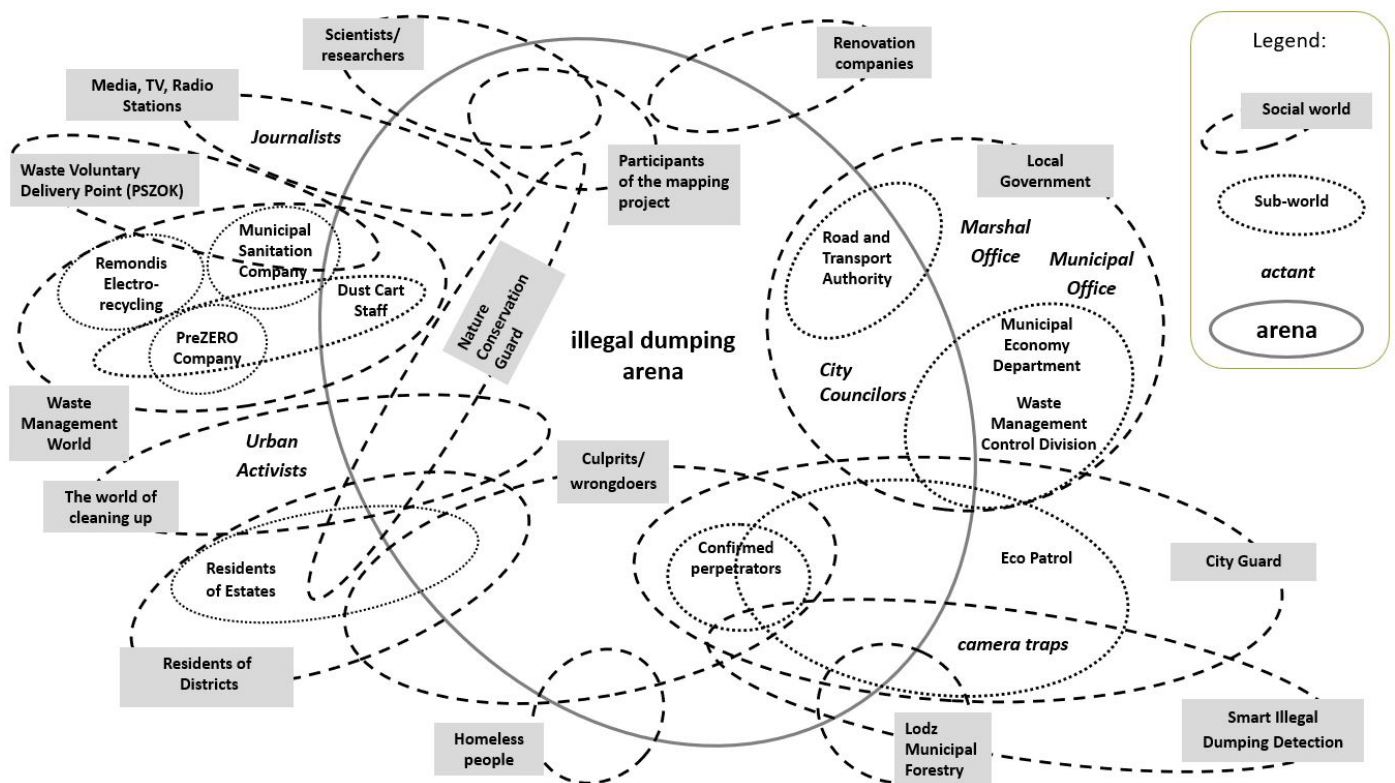
Situational analysis of the phenomenon of unauthorized dumps in the city reveals how different entities position themselves around the problematic issue. Many subjects are involved in the arena of illegal dumping (see Figure 6). City Guard, Municipal Economy Department, city councilmen, waste disposal companies, journalists, environmental activists, researchers, and citizens participating in the project, other citizens reporting illegal dumps

to the authorities—all of them vary their standpoints and views on the studied problem.

The critical group that ignites the issue and makes it persistent are 'invisible' dumps' creators. These 'great absentees' maintain the manifestation, duration, and scale of the phenomenon. Their phantom presence is marked in space by the effects of their actions; only they are hard to grab by the hand. There are cases of accidental recording or deliberate capture on a camera trap, but these are, in fact, isolated cases.

Diverse entities in the arena are coupled with their specific audiences. For City Hall, that primary audience is residents. Their opinion and assessment count. In the narratives, it is constantly mentioned what the inhabitants expect from the municipality, what the municipality can offer them, and how, in the light of the law, authorities can respond to the demands of the residents. In turn, the City Guard focuses on investigating irregularities and reconstructing the motives of offenses in their narratives. Detecting them, punishing them, looking for solid evidence—that is what they are occupied with, and the target authority is an alleged (then materialized in specific cases) judge whose verdict summarizes the effectiveness of their work. In both cases (the City Guard and City Hall), the internal auditors of the work environment in which they operate also have an impact. Urban bureaucracy, here represented by City Hall and the City Guard, could be a gatekeeper for environmental progress (Putkowska-Smoter, Smoter, and Niedziałkowski 2022). Both institutions play such a role in the arena. They focus on operating within legal, administrative, and budgetary constraints. Thus, both entities perpetuate the described arena and their position within it, normalizing that way the problem of illegal trash dumps.

Figure 6. Social Worlds/Arenas Map: Illegal dumping arena



Source: Self-elaboration.

Reconstructing possible paths in notifying illegal dumps, we attempted to show how distracted and fragmented are activities aimed at their monitoring and disposal. How many entities with divergent competencies are involved in this issue, and how confusing the reporting procedure can be from the citizen's stand?

Space is also a very salient dimension of the problem of illegal dumps. When a homeless person was treated as part of a wild dump, we discussed the right to define space and impose its definition on others. In that case, the question was whether it was a dwelling place, a neglected area, or a wild dump. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that

the creation of a wild dump is also a moment of taking some space not only from humans but also from other non-human beings living in the vicinity of illegal dumps. The discursive theme that an illegal dump takes land from them, poses a threat to them, or that they feed on a dump never appeared during our study. Animals and other non-human entities do not appear in that discourse. They are one other great absentee—true silent actors of this arena.

Also, our map, prepared in cooperation with residents, may be seen as a form of actant in the arena of illegal dumping. Even though the dumps depicted and localized on the map do not constitute

an official notification in the legal sense, they remain a reference point for guards and city officials. Yet, we have no data on whether and how the map was perceived and used by entities involved in the arena.

From the beginning of its announcement, the project *Trash in the Wild* met with great interest and very favorable reception from scientists, journalists of local and national newspapers and radio stations, as well as city authorities and IT entrepreneurs. Those entities, when contacting us, expressed their willingness to learn about the results of the research, offered us their ideas for improving the methodology, and congratulated us on the research idea, usually seeing it as a way to solve a troublesome problem. However, that kind of ‘cheering’ for our activities did not translate into taking part in them. Participation has been replaced here by expressing concern for urban space, providing media support, promoting the research, observing the progress of the project, and waiting for its results.

As researchers, we had to navigate between our image as knowledge producers and the agents of change. We tried to build relationships with research subjects during the investigation process and introduce their different viewpoints into research, not losing contradictory data and their commitment and valuable data they could have submitted.

Although an actual change, understood as a final solution to the problem of illegal dumping, really interests us, we assume that, in this particular situation, it would hardly be achieved. The problem of illegal dumps has not disappeared for many years. It can be said that it has been ‘normalized.’ It is embedded in citizen reporting procedures, the funds for their removal secured in the communes’ bud-

gets, and the contracts with companies specializing in waste disposal. Those measures are a rational response to the persistent problem, but not its final solution. Although it is indispensable, finding and cleaning out illegal dumps does not solve the problem. Just like the activities of the volunteers who organize the cleaning up actions, it is valuable and relevant, but not eliminating the illegal practice since volunteers and offenders operate in parallel, mutually canceling out the effects of their practices.

Arena participants often play conflicting, symbiotic, complementary, or mutually exclusive roles. Companies that collect waste, the municipality that is responsible for cleanliness and order, residents who do not have signed contracts, dishonest entrepreneurs, and other human actants are strongly affected by technologies, legal regulations on waste disposal, and even indirectly by European Parliament’s resolutions implementing the idea of the circular economy. Somewhere at the intersection of the fields of activity of all participants of the arena, a node is created that stabilizes this unresolved yet still-being-solved problem.

All of that is connected with the materiality of the waste itself—objects thrown around as inert and quiescent matter, but with the power to influence and its non-human agency.

## Conclusion

Wild dumps have become an integral part of our reality. The persistence and indelibility of that problem are worrying. Creating the map of illegal dumps in the city, we attempted to situate the problem in the physical space and gather data on their features and locations. However, in this study, we



were mainly interested in the whole phenomenon of illegal dumping, the phenomenon that consists of the combination of subjects, things, activities, and processes that create, support, and reproduce the problem at hand. That assemblage includes people who deposit their rubbish in places not intended for this, people who use a given area and notice the effects of those littering acts, people who decide to do something about it and report it to the appropriate authorities, the institutions themselves with a mandate to seize the problem, accepting those reports and advising on what to do about it, and finally, the services responsible for cleaning the area (if the perpetrator cannot be identified beforehand).

Creating an illegal dump does not encapsulate the act of abandoning waste in an improper location. It spans beliefs on how to use space and whose terrain it is. It is embedded in social perception about what is correct and what is not correct. It is settled in legal provisions indicating how to store and collect the garbage, stigmatizing and punishing perpetrators' practices, and the effectiveness of the system of prosecuting offenses.

We are convinced that the problem of illegal dumps cannot be solved only by repeating the same procedures iteratively (residents report—the city removes—the guards track the perpetrators). We do not discourage those actions and consider them indispensable. Discontinuing that routine would likely have caused an even greater rash of illegal dumps. The point is that, on the same path, we can only keep the unauthorized waste under control as such, but we will not be able to eliminate it.

New elements must be introduced into this equation for a change to occur. Nevertheless, to know what kind of change would be required and how to implement it, one needs to discover more about the phenomenon itself, its context and conditions, how illegal dumps are created, what else they are associated with, and what they are involved in. That was mainly the purpose of this preliminary situational analysis based on several months of data collection and joint mapping of illegal dumps with the inhabitants.

Although this initial outline of the arena cannot be considered a complete description, we hope it sheds some light on the problem of illegal dumps.

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## (Footnotes)

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# To Be an Autoethnographer or Not to Be—That Is the Question

**Lukasz Marciniak**   
University of Lodz, Poland

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## Keywords:

Autoethnography;  
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Theory

**Abstract:** It is the most personal article I have ever written, revealing my fears, hesitations, reflections, and decisions. I am still striving to write a scientific and academic paper, still looking for that academic framework that would allow this article to be recognized as a scientific text, with the reflection on that internal pressure and need to make it scientific. This is an article about the process of becoming an autoethnographer, creating a tool, shaping identity and research strategy, and becoming one.

**Lukasz Marciniak** (Ph.D. in Sociology) is an Assistant Professor at the University of Lodz, Department of Sociology of Organization and Management. The former Chair and Vice-Chair of the Qualitative Methods Research Network within the European Sociological Association (ESA) and co-founder of the Transdisciplinary Qualitative Research Symposium. He was a member of the Advisory Board of the *SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory* (eds. Kathy Charmaz and Antony Bryant), editor of the translation of the Polish edition of the *Handbook of the Qualitative Research* (eds. Norman Denzin and Yvonne Lincoln). His current academic interests include research on altered states of consciousness, identity transformations, and communities of spiritually awakened. He specializes in qualitative social research, grounded theory methodology, social pragmatist inquiry, and systemic research.

**email address:** [lukasz.marciniak@uni.lodz.pl](mailto:lukasz.marciniak@uni.lodz.pl)

## Introducing the Story

Underpinning the article, and more broadly, my first experience with autoethnography is anxiety. My fear is about methodological correctness, compliance with the intention of the creators, the conditions in which my work may be considered correct, or errors due to which it could be considered inconsistent. I am even more afraid that I do not feel like a young researcher anymore, even though I am taking my first autoethnographic steps, I have a lot of field experience, analytical practice, and thorough methodological education behind me (Marciniak 2020). Perhaps even too thorough, providing me with a wealth of beliefs, values, and ideas that evoke that fear. I am afraid of what I have been taught to be afraid of—crossing methodological boundaries, procedural decadence, and squander-

ing my achievements and traditions. Being a novice researcher would give me an excuse for possible mistakes, and it would make me more flexible in my learning to take these first steps. Being experienced raises my expectations of myself and, at the same time, causes fear of how much ability I have to open up to what is new. Now, I can feel the challenge of ‘shifting’ from one approach to another, from one paradigm to another (Klevan and Grant 2022). In this article, I am writing about that shift.

Since I am going to write about autoethnography, I do not perceive my article as an example of autoethnography, at least not in terms of the more or less classic autoethnographic approaches pointing out that there should be at least several criteria fulfilled to call a particular research (first-person perspective) an autoethnography (see: Adams, Jones, and Ellis 2015). My intention here is to share with the readers my self-reflective writing about my path of experiencing the new method (or even new research paradigm) and shifting from one methodological mindset and habitus (as Pierre Bourdieu or Loïc Wacquant would define it, see: Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) to another. I have been educated and trained in qualitative procedural research to think and conclude conceptually in grounded theory (GT) terms. Even in the constructivist version of the GT (see: Charmaz 2014), there is still much attention directed to the outside, to the conceptualization of the outside, and not much left for the self-reflective and, especially, the evocative narration of the researcher.

Another salient note to complete the introductory story is that this article is, itself, a process. It started with my doubts about how to write it, then my attempts and failures, mainly related to my dissatisfaction and, at the same time, anxiety, about which I will write more in the next paragraph. The writing

was a process of weaning off objectivist research narration, discovering new paths of expression, and learning myself, my new Self. It was not easy or quick—I still have an image in front of my eyes, the scene I have repeated hundreds of times—me sitting by the laptop and deleting the next version of the line, paragraph, or part of this article. After a long time, I noticed how the criteria and reasons for my deletion changed significantly. At first, I did not dare to express myself. Therefore, everything I wrote seemed insufficient academically, sounding completely unscientific, and not serious enough. Later on, everything changed drastically, and the reason for my dissatisfaction with what I had written was feeling more and more often that it could have been more reflective, evocative, deeply subjective, and confessional. In the beginning, I was scared that my article would be rejected by those I know—researchers with whom I have a reciprocity of perspectives (Cicourel 1974), researchers from my previous lived experiences (*Erlebnis*) of the academic and scientific in the life-world (*Lebenswelt*, see: Schütz and Luckmann 1973). Over time, the prospect of not being accepted became much more terrifying, of being not recognized and rejected by those who do not know me—autoethnographers, contemplative researchers, and all others from similar thought collectives. It was like a fear of being excluded from the tribe and by the tribe to which I would have liked to belong. My fears and perspectives changed over time, but the process of emerging and creating this article continues until the moment here and now when I sit down to the text once again to revise it according to the reviewers’ recommendations. Being thankful for their work and comments that play a salient and last role in writing this article, I stop reshaping my narration here and convey this piece of my self-reflective work to further interaction and co-creation with the readers.

## Boundaries of Autoethnography

My journey with autoethnography began when my research apparatus and precise qualitative technology failed while studying the social resonance of the altered states of consciousness, spiritual awakenings, and self-sufficient ecological and spiritual communities. Those phenomena are difficult and sometimes impossible to grasp in external observation or inducted, question-answer driven narrative, requiring different, and new to me, epistemological approaches. I went from doing sensual, self-reflective ethnography to autoethnography, experimenting with the method and myself. The reasons for such redirection were both pragmatic and transformational. On the one hand, during my research, I needed a method to go deeper into the lived experiences and understandings (*Verstehen*, see classic concept derived from works of Max Weber 1978). On the other, there was my personal need to become more authentic, expressive, and evocative as an interpretive human researcher, subjective in experiencing, but still focused on knowledge production, using the personal to tell about the social.

When you start doing something from scratch and learning, it can often be accompanied by uncertainty—can it be done wrong? If so, the risk is considerable and associated with ridicule, flawed results, or wasted opportunities. When I started my experience with autoethnography, I had that question in mind: can autoethnography be performed incorrectly? Are there rules, dogmas, and criteria that allow deciding what is and what is not an autoethnographic study? I have acquainted with various criteria for an autoethnography to be ‘good’ (Denzin 2000; Richardson 2000; Adams, Jones, and Ellis 2015), but I found them too blurry to be a useful hint on how not to make a mistake. Or, perhaps that ‘obfusca-

tion’ of criteria shows that it is only about a trend, an approach, about determining whether a specific autoethnography is in line with a particular school or tradition. Does autoethnography have precise or fluid boundaries?

It depends on how we grasp and understand the methodology. If it is a garden, as Antoni Sułek (2002) metaphorically puts it in his methodological textbook, the role of the method creators and their continuators is to cultivate the purity of species, separate them from each other, designate their place, and define essential morphological features. The garden has gardeners who will reduce brushwood and pull out the weed. As Barney Glaser (1992; 2003) had been doing for years concerning the methodology of grounded theory and any new procedures, analytical techniques, or modifications to it, even distancing himself from Anselm Strauss, with whom he created that methodology and who wanted to develop it in later years (Strauss 1987; Corbin and Strauss 2008). In a similar vein, I read Mitchell Allen’s reaction to the articles published in a thematic issue of the *Przegląd Socjologii Jakościowej* (the Polish version of *Qualitative Sociology Review*) and the statement that their authors do not use the method as it is taught by Carolyn Ellis (see: Kafar 2020:20). The set boundary marks the dividing line between what is correct and incorrect, and what is consistent and inconsistent. I know that methodological ‘boundary work’ well as I have repeatedly assessed and judged methodological correctness, believing that the best I can do for the development of the research methodology is to guard what has been recognized and to defend it against what has not been recognized as essential for a particular method—that there was no place for the unrecognized in the garden. It is a metaphor that we live by in science, a metaphor through which we organize our study and research



(paraphrasing the title of a classic book by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson [1980]). What if we change the metaphor, if the methodology becomes a meadow for us, with an innumerable variety of species, each creating a variety of varieties? What if, instead of guarding the purity of species, we support evolution? Research methods and techniques may lose their relevance, just as paradigms will change, and yet learning will be possible not because of unchanging duration but because of constant change in response to changes in the environment. In such a science, each new emerging species, new variety can complement and supplement the wealth of resources and opportunities. In such science, each approach will find its place, it can be developed, discussed, modeled, and the final criterion of its existence will be the usefulness in the notion of social pragmatism (cf. Marciniak 2015; Bryant 2017).

The discovery of a different metaphor for methodology, going beyond the genre's pure 'garden,' imagining a methodological 'meadow' instead, was a breakthrough on my way to autoethnography. I am not the researcher I was a few years back. It seems obvious and yet not fully realized. Reviewing my achievements, field practices, and analytical techniques, I can see how much I tried to make them unchanged—more and more perfect, but not distant from their original form. At the same time, seeing other methods as shaped in their final form left me with only a limited choice of those that would fit my previous practice. How liberating and developmental was the possibility of not remaining the same researcher, combining approaches, and, above all, discovering that it is not me who is at the service of the method, but that the method is to serve me and my research practice. The beginnings, however, were not so obvious, and my path to becoming an autoethnographer began with taking the opposite

direction. At this point, I will recall the appropriate story in three scenes from the beginning of my autoethnographic writing.

It's fall 2018, one of the evenings when my home research practice is a remedy for the fall weather. I clean up my computer archives by browsing through field notes from the study of street vendors. I remember meetings and conversations, events that I witnessed and participated in. The viewed photos evoke vivid images, despite the fact that several years have passed since the end of my work in the field. This note is my reflection on the course and the effect of my work. I asked myself, would I have conducted that study from years ago differently now? How could I have created stories about my experiences, organized the conclusions that appeared in the field, and translated them into words? I begin to describe memories from a collection of photos, short notes from the field, and more extensive notes; I begin to compose fuller descriptions of my experiences. Especially those that have left such a strong impact on my research and me as a researcher, [like] meetings with the local mafia and the criminal world, and local friendships that I have observed and that I have created over time. About how I was afraid, how I missed, and how I became biased in emotional games between different groups of street vendors. I want to write again about everything I did not give space for in that study, the truth about myself. [November 10, 2011, from my personal notes]

I've been sitting for two hours trying to turn my data into thick descriptions of my experiences. And it doesn't work for me at all. Instead of expanding the narrative, my mind tries to organize everything. As if writing a story, I was simultaneously coding and organizing it conceptually. Coding, coding. Could I stop coding and not generate categories? Can I see

the whole picture without its internal conceptual structure? With each subsequent sentence that I am not happy with, I feel an internal critic appearing within me. The critic that criticizes not me but the method—autoethnography. What a strange idea of autoethnographic writing; I am a grounded theory researcher. The more difficult it is for me to feel at ease in autoethnographic trials, the more I am strengthened in my identity as a grounded theory researcher. And I easily reject as ‘not mine’ and ‘not for me’ everything that is not related to that identity. I feel my attempts to redirect me to the known and safe harbor, to the working techniques I know and with which I feel comfortable. And then, my attention and my assessment follow. Here and now, I have a hard time writing even a page describing my experience that I would be really happy with. But, writing an article critical to autoethnography would come to me with satisfying ease, even fulfillment, listing all those first-person methodological mutations that I am now forcing myself to do. Maybe that’s what I should start doing—writing critically. [November 11, 2018, from my personal notes]

Today, I experienced a specific catharsis; I feel how much tension there was in my attempts at self-reflective writing. As if I were looking for internal enthusiasm, flow, and release, but, on the contrary, I did not feel free; I felt embarrassed by the fact that instead of categorizing and structuring thoughts, I would compose these thoughts into literary or even poetic descriptions. Writing that way is enjoyable, but I felt as if I had compromised my entire scientific education. And the mentioned catharsis came to me like enlightenment. Staring at the computer screen, hunched and motionless and suspended in thinking about the next sentence to be written, and at the same time, generating new categories in my mind: “resistance,” “emptiness in thoughts,” “body reactions,” I suddenly exper-

ience a flash in my thoughts. I will not write about becoming an autoethnographer! I will write about how I do not become one! How it did not work out, how it is not for everyone, and how I tried and experienced disappointment with the results. Suddenly, all the tension in my body is released, and I can take a deep breath of relief and relax in the chair. I got it! That is my desired flow—how not to become an autoethnographer! [December 08, 2018, from my personal notes]

That moment was groundbreaking and surprising for me at the same time. I saw myself as a rebel, but turned out to be a traditionalist. My attempts at evocative writing caused me a lot of frustration and confusion; I stopped feeling the difference between what is my literary and scientific descriptions. Autoethnography fell outside my scientific framework of research. At the same time, I understood that the scientific and methodological correctness criteria depend on our background, scientific competence, and personal stories as researchers and humans (Pillow 2003; Sykes 2014; Kacperczyk 2020; Klevan and Grant 2022). When I read about the factors Lauren Richardson (2000) uses when reviewing personal narrative papers, her openness for emotional affection, dramatic recall, unusual phrasing, and metaphors as a means to take the reader for the “evocative ride,” I reflected on her personal background. In the criteria mentioned by Arthur Bochner (2000), I recognize his attitude and mindset with all the means to simultaneously understand and feel the story, search for concrete details as experienced facts, on the one hand, and need to move beyond superficially releasing vulnerability and honesty of the experienced feelings, on the other. As an activist, Norman Denzin (2000:256) is primarily interested in making autoethnography contribute to changing the world and making it a better place, presenting

cultural and political issues, and articulating a politics of hope. Everyone is looking for a part of themselves and their truth by reading autoethnographies of others and writing their own (Bochner and Ellis 2016; Hughes and Pennington 2016). For me, it was not the moment to formulate my criteria of ‘good autoethnography’ because the only thing that interested me at that moment was not to cease to be a social researcher. My choices have been shaped by my beliefs about what was necessary for research to meet the criteria of scientific research so that I could have considered that what I have been doing concerning autoethnography was genuine research (see: Zgrzebnicki 2020), not merely the everyday and mundane experiences of life in its various aspects and contexts defined by the research topic. Being convinced that it was impossible to reconcile my criteria of good qualitative research with the specificity and essence of autoethnography, I decided to write without giving up my habits or views on the methodological correctness of qualitative research. In my descriptions and practices, I discovered and reconstructed more and more strategies for coping with genre purity inside a garden of the social research methodology.

### **How Not to Become an Autoethnographer**

Contrary to appearances, my intricate plan did not assume either a methodological subversion or some sublime form of epistemological self-aggression. I genuinely wished to give the autoethnographic approach a try, but without making any concessions, giving up my experience-based perception of research and analytical practices, which turned out to be my failure as I predicted that one could not become an autoethnographer without ceasing to be a social researcher. Even in my phrasing—autoethnographic approach—my cautious and skepti-

cal attitude is revealed. It is easier to try out some new approach, check, and taste to see whether it fits or not, whether we like it or not (like a wine or a dish) than decide to immerse in the experience, do autoethnography as a holistic strategy rather than trying it out as an optional approach. Minimizing immersion in my experience, reflection, and writing took many other forms.

### **Emotional Distancing**

In 2019, I entered the field of research with an autoethnographic approach and readiness to explore the New Age subculture from a first-person perspective, describing my experiences of a community of people experiencing spontaneous spiritual awakenings. By participating in group practices and meditations, entering into various interactions, conducting conversations, and observing everything around me, I experienced emotions and body, reflected on my thoughts, and described everything intensively. And when I read my descriptions afterward, I noticed a specific way of approaching and presenting my feelings. I wrote about them in the first person as about my experiences, emotions, thoughts, and feelings in the body, but, at the same time, keeping a distance from them. As if my inner observing ‘I’ was detached from my feelings, making them the subject of observation, reflection, and description, in the way that ‘I’ describes ‘Me.’ At the same time, I felt that this internal distinction between ‘I’ and ‘Me’ is related to a different dimension than George Herbert Mead’s (1967) “Me” as the socialized aspect of the person and the “I” as the active aspect. That time, it was about ‘I—emotionally distanced’ in describing ‘Me—emotionally engaged’ in the situation, as if one part of my Self were inside the lived experience and the other part outside that experience, narrating from a distance. Perhaps, it is

nothing new for the general mind and self-association, but in that particular situation, I realized such a divide was a kind of sophisticated cognitive strategy. Doing autoethnography in that manner, I replicated a typical split into the researcher ('I') investigating, analyzing, and describing experiences of the participant ('Me'), and in the same way, I distanced myself from the emotions, feelings, and sensations of the one under study (see: Pitard 2017). In a common research tradition, we were all trained in emotional distancing; even when we enter the research field with sensitivity, we still distinguish between being empathetic with those we inquire about and being open to our emotions and reactions (Kacperczyk 2020; Konecki 2022). We maintain being researchers studying humans and avoid being humans studying humans. And so, it happened in my early autoethnography. All my excitement, sorrows, fears, all other lived experiences became not exactly mine because I was the one keeping an emotional distance, investigating analytically, and describing reservedly.

I have described today's group meditation in which I participated, and now I have read it aloud. The meditation experience was very emotional for me. I felt it all over my body; the sensations were literally flowing and burning inside me. I have described it all vividly, using metaphors, and choosing the words that best reflect the meaning of my experiences. I did everything to make my description stirring and evocative. And while reading this description, I have a feeling that I have achieved my goal. And yet, as a reader myself, I feel nothing. I didn't really feel anything while writing and reading the whole thing. As if I am describing not my experiences, not my emotions, as if I feel I should remain impassive about what I am writing about. It is quite an unusual experience, I can feel excited when I write, I can feel what I have writ-

ten, and I can even feel what the readers will feel, but I do not feel it myself. As if I were a fantasy novel writer, maybe even slightly attached to my characters and their fate, maybe even excited by what I come up with, but still not getting emotionally involved in the fiction story. I am looking for these feelings, I am looking for an authentic experience of my own experiences, but I feel that what separates me is my research attitude. Although this is autoethnography, and although I describe my experiences in it, I am the researcher who stays outside. [March 12, 2019, from my personal notes]

### Producing Data

After a few weeks of my autoethnographic practice, another deadlock has come. I began to wonder to what extent my experience in the research field and writing about that experience alone would be sufficient to saturate topics, threads, and issues. Once again, I felt that my thinking about the study was driven by grounded theory methodology, eagerness to saturate categories, and to make conclusions integrated and dense. In line with my intention to not force myself to become (an autoethnographer) free from my previous methodological background, I decided to follow my research intuitions, even if it meant failure in my autoethnographic endeavors. In the absence of inspiration for writing, I started collecting field data in a way that was familiar and traditional to me. At last, I could have written notes about something, not myself. I wrote about situations with almost detective insight and meticulousness, about people, their experiences and reactions, and about conversations. I wrote in the first person about everything I saw, heard, and felt. I wrote as if I were (just) a data collector, a camera, a microphone, and a synthesizer. I wrote about what was on my mind as if I were writing about the contents of

the ‘hardware’ in my head. I reported on the process of gathering data in me along with the entire course of its formation. And I felt that the only way to ensure myself that I was doing scientific work was to produce data (in terms of creating tools to collect and then gather data). Of course, I was aware that when writing autoethnographically about myself, I also reflect on the set of information, but it was difficult for me to agree that that information was only the result of my experience and reflection and not a result of intentional searching, selecting, and collecting.

Thus, I discovered another strategy of escaping from full immersion into the autoethnography experience, focusing all attention and all activities on data production, moving from simply ‘being’ in the research field or situation to complex and often procedurally defined ‘doing’ in the field. Doing gives a sense of activity and agency and allows a researcher to maintain the impression of control over the course of the research process (Stephen 2017; Konecki 2021). This is **my** process during which I gather **my** data that become mine because **I have decided** how, when, and what should be collected. As an ‘owner’ of my research, I create the research, data, method, and result. It becomes clear to me that I am touching here on a paradox and trap of autoethnography. The more I try to **do** autoethnography, the more I risk forcing data and conclusions; I begin to construct phenomena and processes that are the result of my doubts and distrust of my experiences as a sufficient source of reflective data. The more I allow myself to **be**, autoethnography becomes and shapes in the line of the states, feelings, and processes manifested in my experience. When I allow myself to be, I allow whatever is essential to emerging. That, of course, gives me another concern that the data can be so ‘easily’ available, at my fingertips,

in me. As a researcher, should I start reaching inside myself instead of hours and days spent laboriously accessing key informants, followed by hours, days, and weeks of interviews, conversations, field observations, taking photos, and collecting other visual data? Well-educated and methodologically trained, I am ready for such an effort because it will increase the value and importance of the collected data. In the face of everyday immersion into my experiences to catch emotions, thoughts, and reflections from them, I feel not only unprepared but also intimidated—as if I have chosen the easiest way. Although, it is a complicated, long, and uncertain road, leading to undefined results.

### God Bless Leon Anderson!

The discovery of analytic autoethnography (Anderson 2006) must have been a real salvation for many researchers in my position. At least it was for me—like a lifebuoy or even a raft thrown on a stormy ocean over which atmospheric fronts of objective and subjective methodologies are pressing against each other. In this raging methodological ocean of approaches and paradigms, an ordinary researcher looking for the horizon or directions can quickly drown or crash into rocks. From the one direction, wind gusts are coming, driven by “postmodern sensibilities” (as Leon Anderson calls it [2006:373]) that open a wide space of possibilities for evocation and first-person experience-based inquiring. From another direction, the same steady wind has been blowing for years, the wind of longing for the realist and analytic research praxis. Amid the storm, lost researchers are trying to find their way. Some people, like me, feel that those old winds “no longer help me do the kind of work I want to do” (see: Denzin 2006:419) and sail where I want to sail. But, at the same time, those researchers, just like me, feel

not ready enough, not courageous enough to put the sails out and catch the new winds. Other researchers, especially those of the tireless sea-wolf type, value traditions too much to change their sailing style, feeling ready only to slightly change course towards the new. Everyone is doing their best not to get carried away by the waves and winds and not to stop floating on the surface to survive. And when it started to get difficult, Leon Anderson and his analytic autoethnography came to the rescue; thanks to this, we can have the cake and eat the cake. We can analytically do autoethnography, study from the first-person perspective without giving up the analytic research agenda, and write about emotions, but not get too emotional during the course (cf. Ellis and Bochner 2006). We can still be objective, external, and emotionally distanced from our emotions and their descriptions, which become just material for analysis, just like the rest of the data we produce. Analytic autoethnography seemed to me the perfect solution, a solution that dozens of qualitative researchers around the world were waiting for, and maybe even thousands. Certainly, many of my colleagues with whom I spoke at that time.

Today, at the University, we discussed the possibilities of using autoethnography, more of a backstage conversation than an official scientific discussion, but it allowed me to better understand the motives behind the choice of analytic autoethnography. Of course, among the arguments, there were many expressions of appreciation for the compromise introduced by Anderson's approach, the advantages, and the possibility of combining analytic autoethnography with other methods. But it didn't hit me at all. We talked, and I had stopped listening to the words, the content was relegated to the background, and all my attention was drawn to the sensations from the body. Relief. This is the first thing I felt. Relief and

such freedom as when you find out that you will be forgiven for something. It is a relief for my colleagues that this new method is not so different, so scary. A relief that allows you to join the conversation more freely, as experts again who know what they are talking about because this mysterious and maybe even dangerous autoethnography turns out to be quite manageable. A wild and unpredictable evocation can be domesticated and arranged into an analytic pet. "God bless Leon Anderson"—one of the colleagues exclaimed, with a hint of a joke and genuine gratitude. We all laugh as we indulge in the blissful feeling of relief. We no longer have to fear our own emotions, we don't have to become evocative autoethnographers who would inevitably be confused with humans. We can remain scientific researchers investigating humans, even if from a first-person perspective, still analytically. [May 14, 2019, from my personal notes]

Then I realized how much we do to avoid leaving our methodological and cognitive comfort zone. As researchers in the process of transitioning from the methodological garden to the meadows of methods, we will develop many strategies that allow us to leave at least one foot in a place known and safe for our scientific identity, our emotional constitution, and our scientific ego. Sometimes we will weave familiar techniques and research routines into our autoethnography, and sometimes we will even create new versions of the method to justify our resistance to full immersion in the experience. And sometimes, our actions will give the impression of bizarre hybrids, and other times of methodological *déjà vu*, as Denzin (2006) put it. In the end, even Leon Anderson shifted his view on autoethnography and confessed that the ideal and true autoethnography is evocative (Anderson and Glass-Coffin 2016).

## Justifications and Explanations

On my way to becoming an autoethnographer, I discovered another interesting practice—masking the truth. I asked myself why I had chosen autoethnography in the first place. And then, going further, why had I opted for qualitative sociology, for the interpretative paradigm? And it began my process of reconstructing the context and causal conditions, all that tangle of biographical, interactive, situational reasons and aspirations that ultimately shaped my choices. And then, I asked my colleagues about it, listening to their plethora of reasons and myriads of complex factors, both intentional and accidental. And I read texts, articles, and books, looking for traces of those individual determinants of autoethnography selection, often dramatic turning points that inspired me to become an autoethnographer. The justifications and explanations that we create to each time convince the readers (and maybe ourselves) about the rightness of our choice. Sometimes those will only be methodological arguments about adjusting the method to the research problem. At other times, life circumstances that leave no doubt in the experience of a converting researcher—meetings on the verge of life and death, experiences of our own or those of our loved ones—as if we wanted to testify that the power of that moment triggered an irreversible decision to embark on our autoethnographic journey.

However, are we not running away from a salient truth when arguing in favor of autoethnography, regardless of whether that argument is evocative or more analytic? The truth is that we enjoy being autoethnographers. In addition to all those vital, situational, and scientific factors, we choose autoethnography because we find pleasure in being truthful with ourselves and our subjects, the plea-

sure in being authentic and experiencing authentically, and the joy in being wholesome in our mental, emotional, and embodied existence. For me, escaping the truth that autoethnography gives me more and more pleasure every day and week was the last bastion of internal resistance. I asked myself the same question over and over again: can the method I had chosen give me pleasure? Could the criterion of my methodological choice be that I like that way of conducting research? When asked about the reasons for pursuing autoethnography, apart from all the sophisticated justifications in the field of research practice and principles of methodology, can I also write that it is pleasant? As a researcher, do I have the right to pleasure while conducting research? Allowing myself to do so and facing the truth about the enjoyment of autoethnography was the final step on my way of bantering with myself. I was no longer interested in how to deceive myself anymore and not being an autoethnographer. From that moment on, I wanted to let my autoethnography become.

## Rite of Passage

Just as I have exposed myself to the reader in this article, so have I exposed myself to myself. But, first, I made my every reflection, hesitation, perverse thought the subject of my reflection. I allowed my skepticism to develop and reflect on every critical thought allowing those thoughts to form my protective layers, methodological shields, and scientific armor. By succeeding on the path of not becoming an autoethnographer, I finally felt safe enough, protected, and stable on my methodological foundation to enjoy freedom of choice—to be or not to be an autoethnographer. Exposing my internal processes and external masks, I became ready to undress from my previous researcher uniform.

I felt that I wanted to symbolically leave behind all the habits I no longer needed for my research practice. Leave the beliefs about what is correct and incorrect, judgments about what is consistent and inconsistent with the scientific framework of research, and leave patterns and unreflective choices. I want to leave all the thoughts that I cannot or that I am not suitable. I want to leave all my internal limitations that stand in the way of combining my achievements and my current interests, practices developed in research experience and new possibilities of autoethnography. And I saw in the mirror all the layers applied to me, all garments symbolically representing veils and shields creating my professional academic image, constructing my previous authority of the reliable qualitative researcher. Breathe in and out; it seems simple. By taking off each subsequent layer and piece of clothing, I take off another surface I no longer need. Nothing special. And yet the next movements did not come to me as easily as I imagined. Without effort, without rushing, I began to feel a growing fear. Nothing, such a play, it doesn't matter; I take off my clothes while standing in front of the mirror. It's getting weird with each subsequent move. My breath starts to get shallower, and I begin to smile nervously at my mirror reflection as if I want to make fun of what I am doing, downplay the meaning of it and turn this transformative experience into an eccentric performance in front of myself. I feel ashamed and judge myself. Such feelings stop the process of undressing, and the whole thing is more and more filled with long moments of stillness and staring in the mirror. I feel sad. As if I were saying goodbye to something important to me, as if something was irretrievably gone, and I forget about my breath in all this. Inhale and exhale, deeply, with sound. What do I mean—I ask myself. And I'm starting to realize that now it's not about the fear of peeling off and leaving all of them behind. Now it's about the fear of being exposed, of standing in my

naked truth, my emotions, mentality, and body. Am I ready to be fully exposed to the reader, to others, and to myself? I take off the last items of clothing, slowly, carefully, a bit as if I were following the movement and its inertia. And I watch. Surprisingly, I have no shame, no pride. I feel calm. I look at myself, without decorations, without uniforms or protective clothing. I am just like the others, I am a human. [August 12, 2019, from my personal notes]

### Autoethnographer Is Becoming

The consent to be me, seeing myself in my truth, and the willingness to show myself to others in its narrative form was, for me, a transition from the dimension of 'trying' to the dimension of 'becoming.' In that way, the time of learning myself and discovering the aspects of me that make up my autoethnographic experience began.

The first thing I started to learn was trust. But, first, there was a discovery of how much my practice was based on a lack of trust so far. I did not trust the methods I used, still suspecting they were limited, insufficient, and requiring mixing and refinement. I did not trust the data that still seemed incomplete, one-sided, and required triangulation. I did not trust the respondents, considering that even if they were honest and open with me in sharing their experiences, they would not be aware enough to be a source of complete and consistent information. I did not trust myself, my research decisions, my analytical competencies, my 'shortcuts,' and that 'somehow it will be.' I did not trust that as a social researcher, I and my research work may deserve appreciation. Trust that I do not have to defend myself in the sociological and scientific mainstream and that there are enough references to the existing body of literature and still up to date. Lack of trust made me feel



constantly insecure about my actions and hostile to the actions of others. I was afraid of my creativity and authenticity, not sure where it would lead me (probably leading me astray), and therefore I preferred to choose ‘what is known and accepted’ even if it often meant “pretentious and nebulous verbosity, interminable repetition of platitudes and...research for things that have been found long ago and many times since” (Andreski 1974:11). Building trust meant being ready to experience autoethnography, curiosity, and willingness to explore the method, its possibilities, limits, and variations. It also meant patience, letting the specifics of the method emerge in experience and, at the same time, being grounded in it. As I deepened my confidence in the method, I deepened my confidence in myself. In the beginning, it was about the (research) choices I made, and with time, about the deeper aspects of me—trusting my intuition and the fact that feeling or not feeling something is always about something, trusting my emotions even if they are sometimes difficult to explain or ambiguous, trusting my truth, readiness to express it, and that everything comes at the right moment.

By deepening my confidence as a researcher, I discovered dialogical selves that interplay with each other during an autoethnographic journey (cf. Coffey 1999). The experiencing self—involving, encountering, confronting, and feeling situations, events, and occurrences. Reflecting self—rethinking, revising, and reconsidering own emotions, states of mind, and physical sensations, naming them, defining, and shaping them into impressions. The expressing self—reconstructing experiences and reflections into meanings, symbols, narratives, and performances to evoke experiencing and reflecting selves of readers and resonate with their expressions. The interplay between those three selves of

the autoethnographer and similar selves of the recipients creates this unusual, often elusive, but powerful interaction between the writer and the reader that constitutes the uniqueness of autoethnography. Being aware of that, I let myself become a writer, artist, performer, and spiritual being while still being a social researcher. I allow myself to have empathy, intuition, sensations, and multiple ways of expression (cf. Berger 2013). And I discovered my researcher’s body (Valtonen and Haanpää 2018).

Today, I have a reflection on my body, which is becoming more and more important to me in my autoethnographic work. It seems that as researchers, we have an extensive arsenal of cognitive tools, richer and more perfect than what we have in everyday life. And yet, our ordinary cognition is still more sophisticated. As a researcher, I need a tool, and I limit myself only to the information that I gather through that tool. When I interview—I listen; when I observe—I notice what I see. I exclude all other information and sensations, ignoring my gut feelings, neck pains, smells, and skin reactions. Of course, all those embodied impressions and signals have always been within my field research, but till now, I had nothing to do with them. There was no space for them in my observation notes, no space for them in the interview recording comment, or in my personal memo while working with data. And all because, as an analytical researcher, I would have to interpret and give them meaning and define their significance, role, and influence, which is, of course, risky and often impossible in a clear, unequivocal way. That is so scientific—if you don’t know how to classify and disambiguate something, it’s best to assume that it doesn’t exist. But, it exists, it is all that appears in my body, in my embodied experience, and I can include it in an evocative way to enrich and saturate my experiences, discoveries, and narratives. I welcome my body as a partner, a tool,

and a source. [January 08, 2020, from my personal notes]

## Autoethnography Is Becoming

Just as I become an autoethnographer, so does my autoethnography. It is a process that, once started, continues in a changing dynamic, with varying intensity, but incessantly. Autoethnography continues regardless of whether we are currently in the research field or at home, or whether we observe others or ourselves. Even if it seems our attention is focused on those we observe, with whom we talk, and whose behaviors we analyze, our autoethnographic lived experience lasts. Everything shapes our experience, perception, and reflection. The dichotomy and division between me and them are blurred. I shape myself towards others; others interact with me. However, I choose to describe what I experience; it will be my experience of interacting with me and the world. And everything in that process will matter, what is recorded in our experience most clearly and what comes to us only upon reflection, what is available on the surface while writing and what is hidden in deeper memory resources. Memory, remembering, and forgetting are also part of the process—what we forget and agree not to remember is going beyond the attempt to describe facts and the objective course of phenomena in favor of descriptions of experience and experiencing, along with what is written in and what flies away. Autoethnography is becoming not a device to record objective reality from the subjective perspective but a way of articulating lived experience from the first-person perspective.

Autoethnography is also becoming in its methodological shape. We can define common criteria or divided, interchangeable bases, but still, each

autoethnography will be different, developed by a different person with their own unique set of experiences, methodological background, and conceptual and linguistic resources (Chang 2008; Chaplin 2011). Looking at my way of writing, I noticed that each of my reflective descriptions is formed and developed around some conceptual cognitive category. My thinking is organized into categories—concepts that are intended to convey the meaning of my experience. My reflections are driven by the juxtaposition and comparison of my thoughts and feelings; in my experiences, I look for contrasts, contradictions, and similarities in various dimensions. Entering into new, different experiences, experiencing new, different emotions, and reflectively comparing them with each other—that is my cognitive way. My narratives are filled with concepts and conclusions, saturated with subsequent insights sampled from my experiences. It is not hard to see how my autoethnography develops and shapes from my grounded theory background. Coming out of the methodological garden, I agree that no species will be pure and disjointed anymore. In the meadows of methods, new varieties and variants, for example, my ‘grounded evocative autoethnography’ or perhaps ‘comparative emotionally saturated autoethnography,’ will be created, and I will allow them to grow in my research experience. And finally, I will give myself time to grow, learn, and become mature in my narrative and evocation. Perhaps this text and my writing are still not vivid enough, not fully evocative, and confessional, as one of the reviewers suggested, but I perceive it as a stage of my journey, not a destination. I will give myself time to learn, experience, explore, and write more, opening my mind and my heart to the new way of researching and communicating the research, following the suggestion of the second reviewer to “go on down this path.”

## Closing the Story

While sharing my story of experiencing autoethnography, I have probably shared many of the plots discussed here with other ‘becoming’ researchers and autoethnographers (Glesne 1999; Konecki 2018; Kacperczyk 2020; Klevan and Grant 2022). At the same time, everything I share here is more of a ‘trip report’ than a post-factum story. My becoming goes on; my learning goes on. This article, as my first recap of my autoethnographic

experience to date, is the next step on my way to becoming a self-reflective researcher. Hopefully, it will also be an inspiration for other confused researchers, especially those who are in dilemmas and have doubts about their path to scientific knowledge. I am grateful to all my teachers, critics, reviewers, and the named and unnamed people who shaped my experiences. This story ends with the impression with which the reader remains and the readiness for the next narratives with which I remain.

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