This article explores the analytic choices that drive the selection of units of observation and units of analysis in ethnography. These analytic choices have been underspecified in most of the literature and in most scholars’ training. While debates rage about the proper relationship between theory and data (i.e., induction, deduction, or abduction) and while students are instructed on practicalities like picking a site, getting access, and writing up field notes, there is often little guidance on what counts as observable units or what the implications are of viewing the field through different analytical traditions (e.g., an interactionist or a dispositional approach).

Once someone enters the field, there is simply too much data, too many potential directions the research can take; the most punctilious ethnographer studying the most bounded field site cannot record and analyze everything. To make fieldwork manageable in a way that is methodologically defensible (i.e., not arbitrary), the ethnographer must choose what aspect of social life will be privileged in data collection and analysis—for example, the micro-foundations of interaction, the logic or dynamics of organizations, or the workings of macro forces like power. That is, he or she must select what we call an analytic lens, a particular style of doing ethnography.

In this article, we outline eight analytic lenses that we believe typify ethnography, organizing them into three groups that highlight the affinities and contrasts among them. The first set of lenses deals with the level of explanation: micro, organizational, and macro. The second group focuses on the subject of explanation: people and places and mechanisms. The final group is the location of explanation: dispositions and situations. Researchers can use ethnography to make claims about phenomena at the micro-, meso-/organizational, or macro-level. The second group focuses on the subject of explanation: Researchers can choose to focus their explanations on particular people and the places within which they organize their lives, or researchers can make abstract social mechanisms the “protagonist” of their ethnographies. The final group is the location of explanation: Researchers can explain situated action as resulting from actors’ durable dispositions, or they can prioritize the situational determinants of action. Implicit within the idea of an analytic lens is that researchers have a point of view. Therefore, we conclude by discussing reflexivity and the positioning of the researcher behind the lenses selected. We categorize reflexivity as an analytic lens in order to go beyond the view of embeddedness in the field as “contamination” or as a source of bias. Instead, we suggest how reflexive ethnographers can use the novel situations created by their presence to reveal deeper insight into the social reality of their subjects. Throughout all of our discussions, we show how the analytic lenses that we identify act as “sensitizing devices” (Blumer 1954) that shape the

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kinds of questions formulated and claims made in ways that are independent of whether ethnographers adopt an inductive or deductive stance toward theory.

While these analytic approaches are not exhaustive (we welcome scholars to specify other analytic lenses) or mutually exclusive (one can take a macro-level approach, focusing on people as one’s subjects, and locating one’s explanations within actors’ dispositions), neither are they merely provisional. Our identification of these analytic lenses and the way in which we relate them to one another is a distillation of our own scholarship and teaching of how to read, perform, and write ethnography. We believe that the result augments the traditional emphasis on theory construction (e.g., Burawoy 1998; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Tavory and Timmermans 2014) while providing a novel heuristic for understanding the various ways that ethnographers explain situated social action. We begin with the traditional emphasis on ideal typical theory construction before making the case for shifting our focus away from questions of induction/deduction and toward the analytic approaches ethnographers take in practice. This means outlining the lenses they deploy: the levels, subjects, and locations of explanation.

**Induction and Deduction**

Our focus on analytic lenses is a departure from the customary classificatory scheme of ethnography’s epistemological traditions. Tavory and Timmermans (2009, 2014) have surveyed the vast literature on how to select and analyze an ethnographic case and conclude that two alternative approaches hold tremendous sway: grounded theory and the extended case method. Grounded theory is a quintessentially inductive approach in which analytic categories and formal propositions emerge from deep engagement with observational data (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Conversely, the extended case method is for the most part deductive—instead of “discovering grounded theory,” the researcher begins with a set of theoretically informed expectations and enters the field seeking to test whether they can explain what we observe (Burawoy 1998).

As Tavory and Timmermans (2014:10) point out, grounded theory is “mainstream qualitative data analysis” in sociology and has also spread across “nursing and medical research, computer and information sciences, education, law management, and anthropology.” In its most orthodox version, grounded theory commands the researcher “literally to ignore the literature of theory and fact of the area under study, in order to ensure that the emergence of categories will not be contaminated by concepts more suited to different areas” (Glaser and Strauss 1967:37). In practice, adherents to the spirit (if not all the dictums) of grounded theory emphasize the rigorous coding of interview and observational data so that the analytic categories they construct—which become the foundation of theoretical explanations—are firmly anchored in members’ meanings and not imposed from some “outside” understanding (Charmaz 1990). For many, the presumption that underlies this commitment can be traced back to Thomas and Thomas’s (1928:572) old dictum, “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.” Since people act toward situations and others based on the meanings they ascribe to them, we must erect our explanations of social action on the foundation of subjects’ own interpretations.

Grounded theory suggests that the starting point for any ethnographer should be grasping the actor’s point of view and the shared meanings that make social action possible and intelligible. Yet this inductive approach offers little practical guidance on how to handle the many analytic choices the ethnographer must make in the course of their site selection and data collection. For instance, ethnographers interested in how elite schooling reproduces inequality face many choices for how to direct their work. One could choose to do an “organizational ethnography,” focusing their data collection on the practices and discourses of staffers charged with admitting and cultivating “the best and the brightest” (e.g., Stevens 2007). Or one could adopt a conversation-analytic perspective, drilling down on the discursive “ethno-methods” that students deploy in everyday talk to construct and make sense of privilege (e.g., Maynard 2003). Or one could focus on embodiment, that is, how privilege becomes inscribed on the bodies of students and manifests as a corporeal disposition (Khan 2011). All three of these approaches could ostensibly be carried out inductively (i.e., theorizing from the data). Yet each one molds data collection and analysis in a distinct way. For instance, they require selecting different units of analysis—the organization, a conversation, or physical bodies—which then delineate different units of observation for the ethnography—a set of formal rules, turning, or clothing. And these choices then influence the dimensions of social life that require explanation (and those that are necessarily bracketed).

In contrast to the inductive approach, deductive ethnography, perhaps best represented by “the extended case method,” potentially offers more guidance on how to approach the field and data collection. The starting point for an ethnographer deploying the extended case method is not members’ meanings but rather preexisting theory, which guides case selection and analysis. Burawoy (1998) commands the ethnographer to select a field site that poses a puzzle vis-à-vis a particular social theory. The theory tells the ethnographer “in advance what kind of empirical observations should be seen in the world” (Tavory and Timmermans 2014:18) if that theory were true. Discrepancies between hypotheses and observed realities become the foundation on which the ethnographer (re)constructs theoretical principles. (To be clear, the extended case method is still responsive to data—“surprises” encountered in the field lead the researcher to reformulate hypotheses.) Moreover, because social theories are for the most part explanations about how social structures shape situated action, for
Burawoy, the primary task of ethnography is to reveal how external political, economic, and social forces impinge on the local setting under study. Those who adopt this approach often perform multisited ethnography, with each setting serving as a theoretically strategic research site and empirical variations across cases postulated as result of differences in macro social structures (e.g., Salzinger 2003).

The extended case method seemingly provides clearer instructions than the inductive method on how the ethnographer should handle the analytic choices he or she encounters in selecting a site and collecting data. Some of these decisions are suggested by the theory one enters the field with, which articulates what processes or “variables” should be observed and posits relations between them. For instance, Burawoy (1979) brought Marxist labor theories onto the shop floor that he studied, which delineated the boundaries of the empirical field and allowed him to focus all of his observations and analyses on the discrete question of why workers consent to their exploitation. However, there is a way in which this deductive method may be harder for the first-time ethnographer to use as a guide for organizing field observations—it directs the ethnographer to look for something he or she often cannot tangibly see in the field (e.g., social structure, power). As Burawoy (1998:15) notes, although observed phenomena are theorized as “effects of other social processes,” these macro forces are difficult to directly observe and “for the most part lie outside the realm of investigation.” Furthermore, as Burawoy (1998:20) recognizes, straightforward deduction may “fail” to explain one’s object of interest: “We need . . . the imagination to sustain our courage with theoretical reconstruction. If these reconstructions come at too great a cost we may have to abandon our theory altogether and start afresh with a new, interesting theory for which our case is once more an anomaly.”

Moreover, among ethnographies that begin with a theoretical puzzle, one still finds tremendous variation in how their authors approach data collection and analysis. For example, both Desmond (2008) and Vaughan (1997) looked at how bureaucracies shape members’ perceptions of risk; both were motivated by theories that failed to explain their case. Their shared level of explanation is the organization. For Desmond, who asked why U.S. Forest Service firefighters risked their lives for so little recompense, the foil was theories of masculinity and thrill-seeking. For Vaughan, who asked why NASA engineers green-lighted the ill-fated Challenger space shuttle launch despite knowing of design flaws, the foil was conceptions of managerial misconduct. Yet Desmond and Vaughan deployed different analytic lenses to solve their particular puzzle—Desmond made unconscious bodily disposition (habitus) his location of explanation, whereas Vaughan focused her observations on discursive organizational culture. The selection of these foci reflects the researchers’ particular analytic sensibility and guided their selection of observational units in ways unrelated to whether theory came first or last (or somewhere in between).

The Analytic Lenses of Ethnography

It is curious that the “inductive versus deductive” narrative persists as the master frame for delineating the possibilities of approaching and carrying out ethnographic research and analysis. After all, many ethnographers do not locate their own work within this rigid typology, and even those who rhetorically position their analysis as inductive or deductive routinely tack recursively between data and theory in practice (Tavory and Timmermans [2014] refer to this theory-data dialogue as “abductive analysis,” which they see as a third way).

Left unsaid is the fact that ethnographers typically approach the field with distinct “socially cultivated ways of seeing” (Tavory and Timmermans 2014:40) that pattern how they go about making and making sense of observations in ways that may be only loosely connected to induction or deduction. Thinking about ethnography in terms of analytic lenses is useful because it provides the would-be fieldworker with a schematic compass. Like Blumer’s (1954:7) idea of “sensitizing concepts,” these analytic lenses do not “provide prescriptions on what to see” like theories do but rather aid us in parsing the buzzing confusion of the field by “suggest[ing] directions along which to look” during one’s fieldwork and analysis. It bears repeating—the fieldworker cannot observe and analyze everything, so he or she must make a choice about what to look at and how to look at it. Given this, ethnographers should have a working knowledge of the ideal-typical approaches and understand what the trade-offs and consequences are for adopting a particular way of seeing. Delineating these approaches also helps us evaluate ethnographic texts because it provides the reader with a heuristic tool for identifying the presumptions and interpretive frames that undergird authors’ analyses.

We derived the eight approaches specified herein through a broad survey of ethnographic research. For ease of presentation, in the following, we select one or two cases that nicely represent the kinds of choices that ethnographers make when deploying each lens. We have divided the approaches into three groups to juxtapose some key contrasts in analytic focus. These groups are the level, subject, and location of explanation. Yet it is important to remember that some approaches are often combined and interwoven.

Levels of Explanation: Micro, Meso/Organization, or Macro

The first set of analytic lenses we identify are tied to the levels of explanation ethnographers explore—micro, organizational, and macro. Micro-level approaches are most often thought of as aligned with grounded theory, and macro-level approaches are most often thought of as aligned with the extended case method. There is more than a grain of truth to this categorization. However, it is often the case that this dichotomy does not neatly map onto the actual practice of
ethnography. For instance, microsociological conversation analysis (e.g., Maynard 2003) may appear to be radically inductive (if not anti-theoretical), but it is in fact premised on a strong commitment to a theoretical prior that structures data gathering and analysis at every turn—that social order is situationally constituted through members’ “ethno-methods” (Garfinkel 1967).

The choice of a particular level of explanation (micro-/organizational-/macro-) can in theory be combined with either a deductive or inductive logic to produce a rich and rigorous text. Of course, ethnographers may observe and analyze more than one level—for example, in generating an organizational account of power in a large bureaucracy, the ethnographer may touch on small-scale interactions and conversations between members of that organization and zoom out to the larger political and economic context in which such organizational processes are embedded. Yet even though the ideal-typical approaches are commonly blurred in actual practice, we maintain that each level of explanation adheres to a distinct analytic sensibility and that there are central differences across these levels in defining the unit of observation. For instance, when an organizational ethnography touches on micro-interactions, it usually interprets them through an organizational analytic lens—for example, as instantiations of organizational culture (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006) rather than, say, as indexical expressions.

**Microsociology.** The microsociology lens is grounded in the analytic presumption that face-to-face interaction is far more than a context where actors reproduce stable features of society by invoking readymade symbols and conforming to preestablished recipes of action. Whether inspired by ethnography, phenomenology, or symbolic interaction, ethnographers who adopt a microsociological approach focus on how meaning and social order are made, modified, and transformed through mundane social encounters. The unit of analysis is interaction (including turn-taking, body positioning, and other social mannerisms) precisely because the approach presumes at the outset that shared meanings and formulas of action arise endogenously—that is, within the context of the interaction—from active social negotiation among interactants.

Consider Jooyoung Lee’s (2009, 2016) research on street-corner rap “ciphers.” For years, Lee video-recorded aspiring rappers in Los Angeles, many of whom were lower-class African American men, as they engaged in “freestyling”—or improvised rhyming—sessions outside of a community space. Usually, groups of rappers took turns rhyming with each other as a small audience looked on. Occasionally, two rappers would engage in a “battle,” in which they would “spit” insults at each other and escalate threats of violence. The conventional view of these tense rap battles, which appear to be a clear break from the casual group freestyle sessions, frames them as ego-driven competitive interactions aimed at asserting dominance and demonstrating one’s commitment to “the code of the street” (Anderson 2000). Such an explanation highlights the role of macro-level variables—especially race, class, and gender—in shaping the rap battle. Indeed, this is often how rappers spoke about battles to Lee (2009). But as a microsociologist well versed in conversation analysis, Lee’s point of departure was the fact that battles are only possible if the ostensible rivals are willing to coordinate and sustain face-to-face interaction. By closely observing utterances and patterns of turn-taking, Lee shed light on the fact that ironically, battling was premised on intense cooperation in which “adversaries” mutually agreed to construct a play frame in which it was understood that what was said was not meant literally. Even at the height of apparent conflict (e.g., threatening to shoot one’s rival), rappers routinely engaged in sympathetic “repair work”—for instance, flattering one’s rival by borrowing one of his lines or literally backing off—to help other emcees save face. In Lee’s view, the structure and content of the battle resulted from active negotiation among the rappers in response to the immediate shared goal of sustaining the freestyle session. No one wanted these pretend fights to become real. Contradicting gender theory expectations, Lee’s (2009) analysis reveals that these young black male rappers actually lost respect when they broke the play frame by inciting real violence.

Although the microsociological approach is not always allergic to macro explanations of social action, this analytic lens presumes that the closer one looks at the contours of interaction, the more leverage one gets on explaining social action. In a chapter analyzing how the (mostly) homeless black book vendors Duneier (1999) wrote about in *Sidewalk* attempted to “entangle” middle-class white women passersby in conversation, Duneier’s close attention to speech led him to conclude that it was not so much the men’s race or what they said that women deemed threatening (e.g., “good morning” or “Hi beautiful”)—it was how they said things. For instance, they broke the normal rules of interaction by continuing to talk to the women when they clearly signaled that they wanted to end the conversation. Duneier acknowledges that differences in race, class, and gender exacerbated the social tension, but he insists that it was the men’s flagrant disregard for the norms of public encounters that made these interactions so uncomfortable for women. This is the essence of the microsociological approach: Units of observation are movements, manners, actions, and speech acts within clearly delineated interactions; this observational focus is premised on the analytical stance that everyday situated action has an internal logic and can give rise to—not just reproduce—“structure,” “culture,” and other ostensibly macro forces.

**Organizations.** By contrast, adherents to the organizations approach prioritize meso-level phenomena and are attuned to how the formal, structured, and (often) hierarchical groups that actors are routinely embedded in (e.g., the workplace) mediate the meaning and content of situated social action. Fieldworkers in this vein tend to have as their level of
analysis the organization itself. However, they are likely to make observations across a range of phenomena, from the ways that organizations set the “ground rules” and influence the cognitive frames (Fliqstein 2001) that actors use to interpret and respond to situations to how routine interactions both maintain and transform organizational forms. The organization is more than just a setting; it is an analytic locus. It nudges the researcher, for instance, to focus his or her observations and analysis on “standardized interaction sequences” (Lawrence and Suddaby 2006:216) and the “customs shared by all members” (Fine 1979:734). And it inclines the researcher to interpret shared habits of thought and action as instantiations of organizational culture (Vaughan 1997).

Katherine Chen’s (2009) research on the Burning Man festival illustrates this approach. Like Lee, she observes the actions of people involved in an ostensibly creative and spontaneous social scene. But her analytic focus is very different, as are the claims she makes. Rather than analyzing how meaning and order emerge from situated interactions over the 10-day festival, Chen traces how festival organizers work behind the scenes year-round to shape participants’ experience of Burning Man, recruit and socialize members, and navigate legal issues. Her level of analysis is the organization; this means that her observations track the many instantiations of its logic, from business documents like meeting minutes, to conversations that reveal how people respond to Burning Man’s structure, to the “controlled chaos” of firestarting. She emphasizes key organizational tasks—the recruitment and training of members, their integration, organizational communication of purpose, and struggles with other organizations within the field—to generate an account of how Burning Man works. By analyzing the organization behind Burning Man, Chen is able to reveal how its shadow shapes individual actions of people involved in an ostensibly creative and anarchic.

Diane Vaughan (1997) similarly adopts an organizational lens when asking about the reasons behind the Challenger disaster. Instead of focusing on individual interactions, her observations are on the character of institutional life—in particular, how a set of cultural beliefs shapes individual actions. Vaughan argues that it was not individual interactions that mattered but instead an institutional history and set of intergroup dynamics that created a perception of competition for scarce resources that led those working at NASA to undertake high-risk behaviors. Belief systems, institutional rules, and history are core observational units of such an organizational approach.

**Macrosociology.** Finally, the macrosociological approach draws the analyst’s attention to how structural forces and institutions impinge on particular settings and groups. This approach is the closest to C. Wright Mills’ (1959:8) classic (if not cliché) notion of the “sociological imagination,” in which the analyst explains actors’ personal “troubles” by situating them in relation to “public issues.” In this approach, often associated with the extended case method, members’ meanings generally take a backseat to analytic categories (e.g., gender, race, alienation, power) that are presumed to pattern the interactions observed. The level of analysis can vary tremendously but is ultimately “structural” in one way or another because this approach presupposes that the patterns of social (inter)action observed in situ are for the most part shaped by factors that are exogenous to the situation—for example, symbolic, political, and economic forces. Many macro-oriented ethnographers perform multisited ethnographies (Marcus 2009), leveraging differences across cases to specify the role of particular social contexts in shaping local settings.

A classic example of the macro approach is Leslie Salzinger’s (2003) analysis of how female workers in Mexican maquiladora factories understood and enacted gender. In comparing four different factories, Salzinger found four distinct gender logics that were integral to managers’ efforts to maintain workers’ quiescence. “Panoptixem,” for example, was characterized by male managers’ intensive policing of workers’ traditional femininity (especially women as “docile”), whereas “Particimex” managers erased femininity by allowing women to perform traditionally “male” work (e.g., heavy lifting). Transcending traditional gender norms on the shop floor led female employees at Particimex to feel empowered (some even began questioning the traditional gendered division of labor at home), and they appeared to have considerable autonomy in how they organized their work. But as a macrosociologist, Salzinger did not privilege members’ meanings in the final analysis. Comparing across the cases and “extending” them beyond the shop floor, Salzinger focused on how gender subjectivities were produced “from above”—that is, by managerial styles and transnational networks geared toward profit maximization. Her analysis focused on the macro-machinations of power, and her task was to trace how those who wielded it were able to “produce” the “working subjects” they needed through disciplining gender performances. In this light, Salzinger saw that male managers at Particimex enabled and promoted seemingly disruptive gender roles because they found it useful—namely, more productive. In Salzinger’s view, the gender performances she found on the shop floor only made sense in relation to these broader economic and political processes that subjugated workers.

To take a macrosociological approach does not mean ignoring members’ meanings or reducing people to puppets of structure. Nor does it require a multisited component. But it does start from the presumption that situated actors are always in some ways responding to structures that constrain their habits of thought and action. For instance, in her ethnography of scavengers living on the streets of San Francisco, Gowan’s (2010) interest in the broader political and economic context of homelessness led her to focus on how pervasive cultural discourses surrounding homelessness...
influenced the ways the men understood their lives. Like Duneier (1999), Gowen notes how ideas of homelessness and work are transmitted through interaction and how they allow some men to resist the stigma of homelessness. Yet, unlike Duneier, she insists that these shared understandings do not reflect local idiocultures (Fine 1979). Rather, Gowen identifies three common tropes that the men deployed—sintalk (e.g., I am a bad person), sick-talk (e.g., I am an addict and I need help), and system-talk (e.g., society is unfair; it is not my fault). These narratives reflect institutionalized “discursive logics” rooted in three different spheres that govern the lives of the homeless—the criminal justice system (sintalk), the shelter system (sick-talk), and the advocacy movement (system-talk). Homeless people, Gowen argues, are held accountable to one or more of these institutions so frequently that they construct images of themselves that map onto these institutionalized discourses. It is this move that is the signature of the macrosociological lens: Observations seek to locate the people and setting in relation to institutions, power, culture, and political processes that transcend the field of study; this focus is grounded in the assumption that these larger social forces structure much of what the ethnographer observes in the field.

Micro, organizational, and macro lenses may well rely on the same units of observation: Lee, Vaughan, and Salzinger all spend a lot of time observing interaction. Yet the analytic focus differs across each level—for example, local social order, organizational culture, and political and economic forces. By articulating which analytic lens they are using for their claims, ethnographers narrow the field by outlining what counts as an observation and an inference. This limiting means that total explanation is impossible—but it makes a logically and empirically defensible explanation possible.

**Subjects of Explanation: Character-driven Versus Process-driven Ethnography**

No matter their level of analysis, ethnographers must also decide on the subject of their explanation. While we often think of the subjects of our study as the people and places we observe, the primary subject of explanation may instead be the mechanisms that operate through our participants. Researchers frequently make a choice between emphasizing the biographies and character of the people and places they study or in foregrounding more abstract social processes. This may seem to be mostly a rhetorical decision: Developing people and places can make our text more readable and our participants more deserving of sympathy (e.g., Desmond’s 2009) ramifications of laughter as a collective act provides a clear sociological rebuttal to psychological theories of how emotions work). But we view these as two distinct analytic lenses with disparate logics: One prioritizes the identification of generic social forms and mechanisms; the other prizes actors’ humanity, resisting typification.

**Character-driven ethnography: People and Places.** “Character-driven” ethnographies provide a complex portrait of participants and allow them to tell their own story. The classic *Talley’s Corner* (Liebow 1967) comes to mind. This is also the approach taken in Duneier’s (1999) *Sidewalk*, in which readers follow Hakim Hassan’s journey from selling books on the street to working in an office (Hakim also wrote the book’s afterword). While Duneier (1999) and others who adopt this ethnographic style recognize the ethnographer’s “mandate” to generalize, their in-depth portrayals of particular characters show that people’s motivations and decision making cannot be adequately explained by reducing actors to social types or “outcomes” of structural forces. The focus is on getting the person right, and in so doing, challenging general accounts of social relations. Relatedly, work in this tradition also often shows how places embody singular traditions and meanings that shape local culture and social identities in particular ways.

Much of Douglas Harper’s varied corpus exemplifies the tradition of locating the subject of explanation within “people and places.” Two of his books are, in fact, devoted to a single character. In *Good Company*, Harper (2016) traces his summer “train-hopping” with a “hobo tramp” named Carl who is on his way to migrant labor in Washington (picking apples). Harper is committed to allowing Carl’s individuality to manifest. Readers are treated to the story of how he drifted to the trainyards after having trouble adjusting to civilian life in the wake of World War II, and Harper devotes a large portion of the text to describing Carl’s transformation from a “drunk” living on skid row at the start of the summer to a laborer who is proud of his work ethic by the time they leave the apple fields months later. Through Carl, the reader learns about “tramp culture,” the various “types” of tramps that ride the rails, and the social context that produced the social world of the tramp. In this way, Harper does allude to more general social forms and makes some generalizations from his case. Yet built into the text is a portrait of someone who is aware of the social forces shaping his particular circumstances and who transcends those circumstances. The same imperative is evident in Harper’s (1987) portrayal of Willie, a jack-of-all-trades repairman who fixed cars, tractors, appliances, and other mechanical equipment for his neighbors in a poor, sparsely populated region of upstate New York. Willie was, quite simply, a character—inquisitive, charming, contrarian, and anti-capitalist (he often bartered his labor). Much of the task of the book centers on Harper’s efforts to catalogue the vast “working knowledge” that Willie drew from to keep the creaky equipment of an entire farming community going. Harper came to see Willie as a social type, a “bricoleur” (Lévi-Strauss 1966) who is able to draw on different skills to solve novel problems in creative ways. But Willie’s character could never be contained in that concept. The
reader, then, learns about the broader social forces that gave rise to “people like” Willie (e.g., rural isolation, poverty, and self-reliance). Yet by documenting how Willie narrates his life and work over time, Harper shows how Willie is not simply a product of those social forces.

At the crux of this approach to ethnography is a subtle but important claim: “Giving voice” is not simply an act of compassion or a narrative device; it is in service of the idea that the idiosyncrasies of people’s biographies shape their life course in ways that are irreducible to their social circumstances. The in-depth depiction of place in ethnography reflects a similar sensibility. For instance, Harper and Faccioli (2010) show how the uniquely egg-rich pasta dough that is central to the culinary heritage of Bologna, Italy, resulted from the necessity to add eggs to the soft wheat that is native to the region to create pasta that does not break apart in spaghetti presses. In this way, they show how cuisine, culture, and identity are emplaced. Whatever sociological generalization one may want to extract from Bolognese foodways, they are incomprehensible without taking into account precisely what is exceptional about them. Another example: In the opening pages of Jackson’s (2001:1–2), *Harlemworld*, a man questions why he cannot use a McDonald’s coupon that excludes “the borough of Manhattan.” He rejects the cashier’s factual explanation that Harlem is in Manhattan: “This is Harlem, not Manhattan! Harlem is not Manhattan!” This hints at a deep truth that forms a cornerstone of Jackson’s ethnographic analysis of the neighborhood: Its distinct racial and cultural history makes it a world apart from its surroundings for many of the residents who live there. As Jackson reveals, we cannot understand their racial identity without situating it in this unique place.

### Process-Driven Ethnography: Mechanisms

Those ethnographers who are interested in processes and mechanisms have a different relationship to showing the lives of their participants. Adherents to this approach are rarely concerned with depicting the idiosyncratic dimensions of a place or with “giving voice” to particular people. Instead, inspired by Georg Simmel, this approach typically starts from the premise that situated interactions are instantiations of what Simmel (1971) called “social forms.” The ethnographer’s task is to better understand these generic social patterns rather than the people and places through which they operate. In this sense, processes (or “mechanisms”) are the subject of the ethnographer’s explanation.

Iddo Tavory’s (2016) book *Summoned* deploys such an approach; his work suggests how this lens facilitates the discovery of causal mechanisms and specifies how we can generalize from our case. *Summoned* is concerned with how patterns of social identification sustain religious life among Orthodox Jews living in Hollywood. As an interactionist, Tavory closely analyzes mundane social encounters, including jokes and turn-taking. Over the course of the book, he uses these interactions to build the case that the social networks and routines within which the Jews he observed are embedded—their social world—entail “a patterned structure of summoning” (p. 9). That is, the environment and the people in it constantly remind people who they “are” (Orthodox Jews) and often demand that they foreground their religious identity such that they have little choice but to perform the identity of a “Jew” in almost every situation. For Tavory, these analyses form the basis for a more broad-ranging explanation of the process by which all kinds of identities—from celebrities to racial self-understandings—are created and maintained through patterned structures of summoning. Because the ultimate aim of *Summoned* is to specify the mechanism of identification, the text emphasizes transposable patterns rather than people’s specific biographies and narratives. We are usually given only minimal details about the actors described in the ethnographic vignettes, such as the fact that “Mr. Alstein” is an engineer. In fact, there are no identifiable protagonists at all because the true subjects are the generic social processes that Tavory aims to distill from comparing across thousands of social situations. Thus, Mr. Alstein’s joke about running away from his Arabic colleague is not interpreted in light of his personal biography but rather as an example of how Jews work to solidify their religious identity by symbolically erasing links to the secular world.

Though some mechanism-driven ethnographies give some attention to developing people and places, in the end they are for the most part still “stand ins” that help illustrate the workings of generic social processes. For example, Auyero and Swistun (2009) describe in depth the local history of an Argentinian shantytown called Flammable and the struggles of several families who live in the midst of environmental contamination. The book opens with an extended narrative that details the medical maladies that Sandra Martinez and her family endured and their confusion over who is to blame. Yet once the social processes of interest have been introduced through Sandra’s story—“toxic uncertainty,” the “relational anchoring of risk perceptions,” and the “labor of confusion”—Sandra drops out of view. It is precisely this move of prioritizing the social processes that operate through Sandra and other families living in Flammable that Auyero and Swistun elucidate a mechanism that can be readily transposed onto other cases—namely, that gradually worsening environmental problems (e.g., lead contamination or climate change) are less likely to generate local resistance than abrupt catastrophes (e.g., oil spills) because “uninterrupted routines and interactions work smoothly as blinders” that prevent exposed people from perceiving “increasing environmental hazards” (p. 10). In contrast to the character-driven approach adopted by Harper and Duneier, the aim of the mechanism approach is not to document the characteristics of particular people and places but rather to elucidate a general set of social patterns; these patterns may not hold in all specific situations, but they reveal an essential social form.
Locations of Explanations: Dispositions and Situations

In explaining situated action, ethnographers can choose to focus on what actors bring with them to the situation or on the situational determinants of behavior. This means locating their explanations within bodies or within situations. In practice, these approaches often adopt quite different conceptions of actors. The dispositional approach usually dovetails with the macro lens—the focus is on how structure becomes embodied as durable, and often unconscious, habits of thought (schemas) and action (habitus) that pattern how people respond to situations. The situational approach usually complements the micro lens—the focus is on how behavior results from negotiation and sensemaking among the participants in a given situation.

Dispositions. The dispositional approach—which in recent years has increasingly been called embodiment—focuses on how durable and often unconscious habits of thought and action structure situated interaction. Scholars who use this analytical lens draw inspiration from Pierre Bourdieu’s (2001:63) idea that “the body is a memory pad” to show how prior social experiences imprint themselves on the bodies of actors and produce patterned ways of acting and being—dispositions (Wacquant 2004). While the unit of observation is almost always the bodies and interactions of people, the unit of analysis can be far less micro.

Black Hawk Hancock (2013) takes the reader into two worlds of Chicago—on the Northside, where white dancers today celebrate Lindy Hop, which was first danced in African American neighborhoods in the 1920s, and then to the Southside, where African American communities today are “Steppin,’” a new dance almost invisible to whites. Hancock shows how cultural expressions are appropriated, spatially separated, and racialized. Yet his arguments do not rest solely on passive observations of who dances what; instead, Hancock subjects himself to the relations under study. He shows how dancers develop dispositions that embody racial histories in part through learning this craft himself. Embodying the relations under study, Hancock argues, enables one to become a practitioner of a particular cultural form and with competence, comprehend the details and subtleties that remain invisible to those who have not acquired that practical knowledge. And it is this invisible “habitus,” stamped on the body, that structures action and inscribes racial domination. Here the location of explanation is the body, and the observations center on how individual bodies become vessels for reproducing the structure of race relations.

The emphasis on embodiment implies an analytic commitment to the idea that social action is structured by more or less stable dispositions that people bring with them to particular social situations. And though observations may center on mundane bodily practices, the explanans or the explanandum—or both—usually lie beyond the scope of observation.

Bourgois and Schonberg (2009), for instance, argue that the different manifestations of “addicted bodies” that they observed among heroin users in San Francisco are patterned by structural factors like race. And Wacquant (2004) argues that the boxing habitus creates a disciplined self that helps the poor black men he studied avoid trouble later in life. In short, the embodied approach prioritizes how structural conditions—say, class background—are manifest in dispositional differences. This means observing the embodied tendencies of actors and grouping and comparing them across their structural variation.

Situations. By contrast, those who take a situational approach are less interested in the embodied dispositions of actors and more interested in locating their explanations within local social contexts—that is, how the immediate situation influences what people do. A strict situationist approach suggests that it is not primarily something “inside” actors that determines how they act; rather, the situation—how it is defined, understood, and experienced—determines the possibilities for action. Thus, situationists aim to understand how actors define the kind of situation they are in and specify how social action is a response to the “demand characteristics” of the situation (Faulkner and Becker 2009). And their work often reveals how “the resultant collective activity—and the meaning of the activity—is . . . largely a product of negotiations among the participants” (Jerolmack and Khan 2014:197).

As Katz (2015) shows, Monica McDermott’s (2006) study of black-white interactions in two convenience stores exemplifies the situational approach. Through “sampling” on thousands of cross-racial encounters among strangers that she witnessed during her fieldwork at stores in Boston and Atlanta, McDermott shows the power of this approach to enumerate how particular factors distinct to the setting shape the way that people think about and interact with members of another race. Specifically, she exploited variations across situations in the race of the participants (e.g., mixed race vs. mono-racial encounters), most of whom were working-class, to show how actors took aspects of the situation into account when deciding how to interpret others’ social cues and respond. Not surprisingly, she found that whites tended to make racist comments only in the absence of blacks. She also found more expressions of racial hostility by whites in the Atlanta store than the Boston store. Drawing on Blumer’s interactionist theory of “status threat,” however, her conclusion is not that whites embody a racist disposition or that whites in Boston “are” less prejudiced than whites in Atlanta, but rather that whites tend to denigrate blacks in situations where they feel that their own respectability is in question. McDermott recounts, for instance, how her white neighbor was embarrassed when her white landlord introduced him to her as he worked on his truck because the landlord commented on how dirty he looked covered in engine grease. This prompted the neighbor to retort “Usually I look like a white man”; McDermott concludes that he reacted to
perceived disrespect from a more affluent white person by asserting his own respectability at the expense of blacks. The same situational response explains the increased racial hostility of whites in Atlanta. They are more stigmatized than their Boston counterparts (who live in an ethnic white enclave) as it is commonly thought that “there must be something wrong with them [whites] to live in this majority black area” (Katz 2015: 114); McDermott argues that this makes whites defensively assert their racial superiority when situations arise in which they fear that their own self-worth is threatened.

The situational approach does not necessarily deny the existence of schemas or dispositions or structure, but it implies that they do not guide situated behavior in a straightforward way. This explains its affinity with the micro lens—both presume that meaning and formulas of action are made and altered in situ and that both the explanans and explanandum are located within the time horizon of one’s observations. The emphasis is on how the social situation generates behavior, and explanations are derived from comparing across a universe of hundreds or thousands of bounded situations. Katz’s (1999) study of funhouse mirrors is illustrative. He video-recorded hours of footage of how people responded when they encountered mirrors in a museum that distorted their image. One important observation is that almost no one laughed at the mirrors when they were alone. When in groups, people usually first discussed the mirrors and experimented with different poses. Laughter came later, once a group had come to an intersubjective agreement that the mirrors were funny. These observations of people whom Katz knew nothing about reveal how aspects of the situation shaped when and how people came to see the mirrors as funny—regardless of their biographies, culture, and so on.

**Reflexivity**

Implicit in the idea of a lens is that there is a researcher behind that lens. As critical race and feminist theory has argued for decades (as well as the unaffiliated Bourdieuan framework), researchers have a point of view—a biographical stance from which they look through their analytic lenses (Collins 2009; Smith 1990). We therefore end by discussing reflexivity and the positioning of the researcher behind the analytic lens. A basic condition for a successful ethnography is becoming part of the lives, organizations, or situations under study. One consequence of this integration is that the ethnographer becomes part of—and therefore influences—the very thing she studies. To address how such positioning shapes observation, ethnographers regularly reflect on their role within their field site. The aim is both to interrogate the generation of data and make clear to the reader the conditions of observation. Yet thinking of reflexivity as an analytic lens requires going a step further: Rather than view their embeddedness in the field strictly as “contamination” or as a source of bias (or conversely, of solidarity), ethnographers who deploy reflexivity as an analytic approach focus on how the novel situations created by their presence can reveal deeper insight into the social reality of their subjects. Seeing themselves as a research instrument, they may even consciously intervene in the processes they observe to test out ideas they have about how social life is organized.

Forrest Stuart (2016) reflects on his experience researching police-resident relations in Los Angeles’s “Skid Row.” When Stuart first began his fieldwork, he found that many people avoided or distrusted him. At first, he thought it had to do with his conspicuous note-taking (most of what people were doing was illegal, like selling loose cigarettes). However, after being slammed against a fence by police officers looking for a white suspect, he discovered the true reason: Though his father is black and his mother Mexican, he was read on Skid Row as white because of his skin tone and bodily comportment. Through this experience, Stuart learned that being read as white was a disadvantage on Skid Row because police believed that white people only came here to obtain illicit goods such as drugs. Soon, his subjects were offering tips to “blacken [him] up” so that he would not bring additional police scrutiny to the block. Thus, it was Stuart’s own experiences that generated the insight that Skid Row’s predominantly black inhabitants shunned and chased off whites because they feared their presence would attract the police. It also helped Stuart see what his research subjects saw as the core defining characteristics of “blackness” and “whiteness.”

Stuart’s approach reflects the somewhat classic understanding of reflexivity as a moment to reflect on the observer’s position within the matrix of social relations and how that might influence what is seen (and not seen). Michael Burawoy (2003) suggests another dimension of reflexivity, suggesting that the “focused revisit” to sites can help generate a similar moment of consideration of what one saw and did not see and how one’s position may have influenced that process. Burawoy draws on anthropology, within which revisits are more common, but he also notes how such revisits might be achieved in a “rolling” fashion—where the ethnographer experiences similar relationships again and again and each time refines his or her understanding of them and reflects on what might influence earliest and subsequent impressions. In particular, “disruptions” to the field site—where the same thing happens but under a new set of conditions—create opportunities for the ethnographer to reflect on previous impressions and the conditions of their making.

Both Stuart and Burawoy suggest an empirically grounded reflexivity, but not one where the researcher simply suggests that “as a person of this kind of race, gender identity, sexuality, class, etc. I saw these things.” Instead, reflexivity is a sensibility toward research in which the ethnographer actively intervenes in the setting to empirically test out different ideas about how their presence or their own attributes may matter locally (another example: After a landlord told a black woman that he did not have any available units, Desmond [2016]—who is white—queried the landlord and
was told that he had vacancies; Desmond used his presence to back up claims about housing discrimination). The goal is not simply to document the ethnographer’s “bias” but to use one’s self as a research instrument to uncover unspoken norms and understandings.

Conclusion

We aimed to provide a provisional outline of the major analytic approaches that ethnographers take into the field and trace the implications that each lens has for selecting units of observation and generating explanations. Each approach privileges a distinct aspect of social life. When observing social relations, one cannot explain everything; to try and do so weakens rather than strengthens the analysis. Yet ethnographers have focused so much on induction and deduction that they have failed to be explicit about the other analytic choices they make. We hope to have made clearer what it means to focus on, say, situations instead of dispositions, to help readers see how one conveys a convincing account of social life through that lens with data, and to prompt ethnographers to reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of using particular analytic lenses.

These analytic choices may not determine observational units, but they guide them. The field becomes a more clearly delineated space where analyses concentrated on a particular realm of social life (e.g., the situation, structure) allow the researcher to interpret data within a distinct analytic tradition. Analytic lenses also provide the ethnographer with guidelines for sampling. While quantitative social science methods seek to sample across demographic difference to “represent” a population, ethnographers often develop different sampling strategies for their observations. For example, we may be interested in how the same situations influence different people (e.g., the situational approach); this would mean observing the same kind of situation repeatedly, “sampling” on how different actors experience it. Conversely, the observer could be interested in how the same person experiences different situations (e.g., the dispositional approach). As such, the sampling would be across situations and over time. In turn, an ethnographer interested in how macro forces structure situated action might choose to sample across several field sites that vary along a key dimension (e.g., gender). Thus, ethnographers can sample across many domains—kinds of situations, time, kinds of places, and so on. Although they may only observe a small number of people, they can build robust claims by sampling across thousands of observations. The analytic lens that one deploys plays a large part in determining which sampling strategy is appropriate. Working within a particular approach allows the ethnographer to construct empirically defensible claims; readers attuned to the approaches identified herein are better positioned to evaluate the plausibility and generalizability of those claims.

As ideal types, each approach is useful for decoding and designing ethnography. As mentioned, in the practice of ethnography scholars commonly deploy more than one analytic style. And so scholars who choose to focus on mechanisms will, at times, “show the people” if members’ narrated meanings turn out to be a crucial cog in the ethnographer’s causal story. Yet as practitioners plan their ethnographies and as readers evaluate them, making clear the necessary set of analytic choices is a first-order priority. Moreover, it is crucial to understand the logic by which different approaches can be stitched together—for example, there is a “natural” affinity between micro and situational approaches (e.g., Katz 1999) and between macro and dispositional approaches (e.g., Bourgois and Schonberg 2009), but dispositional and situational explanations of social life are less likely to coexist in one text because they are grounded in contrasting analytic sensibilities. This article helps us understand the range of analytic sensibilities found in ethnography and how they fit together. Doing so not only shifts ethnographers away from tired debates about the advantages of induction or deduction (or more recently, abduction), it also provides a foundation for methodological advances by outlining a set of best practices for making critical observations—from micro to macro—and for capturing and conveying a process, situation, disposition, or narrative.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank Iddo Tavory for comments on an earlier draft, three outstanding anonymous reviewers from Socius, and the editors for their clear guidance.

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