Ethnography, Tactical Responsivity and Political Utility

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Abstract
In this article, we address issues of attribution, utility, and accountability in ethnographic research. We examine the two main analytical approaches that have structured the debate on data collection and theorization in ethnography over the last five decades: an inductivist approach, with grounded theory as its main analytic strategy; and a deductivist stance, which uses field sites to explore empirical anomalies that enable an ethnographer to test and build upon pre-existing theories. We engage recent reformulations of this classical debate, with a specific focus on abductive and reflexive approaches in ethnography, and then weigh into these debates, ourselves, drawing on our own experiences producing and using research in non-academic settings. In so doing, we highlight the importance of strategy and accountability in one’s ethnographic practices and accounts, advocating for an approach to ethnographic research that is reflexive and overtly responsive to the knowledge needs and change goals articulated by non-academic collaborators. Ultimately, we argue for a research stance that we describe as tactical responsiveness, whereby researchers work with key collaborators and stakeholders to identify the strategic aims and audiences for their research, and develop ethnographic, analytic, and communicative

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practices that enable them to generate and mobilize the knowledge required to actualize their shared aims.

**Keywords**

institutional ethnography, research utility, knowledge mobilization, accountability, community based and participatory research

The criteria for the identification of valid descriptive accounts through an ethnographic approach have been the focus of much scholarly attention, as well as numerous debates, in recent years (Jerolmack and Khan 2018; Small 2013; Tavory and Timmermans 2009). For many ethnographers, validity or trustworthiness in research is demonstrated by a detailed accounting of one’s research activities and rich descriptions of the specific social–cultural contexts under exploration (Geertz 1973). Other ethnographers have sought to produce explanatory accounts as a means of improving the utility and relevance of ethnographic findings in non-academic settings (Burawoy, 1998, 2005; Smith, 1999).

Because of a shared desire to use our skills as ethnographers in the interests of collective struggle (e.g., for housing rights), we began exchanging scholarly sources that question the ethical aims and epistemic principles of ethnographic research. In doing so, we began to question whether the utility of findings might serve as an essential indicator of validity for ethnographic research—particularly research conducted with the intention of contributing to social struggle, social policymaking, and/or other mechanisms of social change. If an ethnographic account effectively advances the aims of collective struggle (e.g., by revealing specific institutional and/or political-economic roots of a social problem), we propose that this is a sound indication of the validity of one’s findings. Prioritizing utility ensures researchers can address “so what?” questions when inviting people to participate in a study and when presenting findings in academic and non-academic contexts (Tavory and Timmermans 2014).

In this article, we explore ways that ethnographic research can be used to explain how people co-produce the everyday patterns of social life and develop a “local knowledge” (Geertz 1983) that allows them to make sense of these patterns. We then suggest that assessments of validity in ethnographic research might also attend to issues of political and social relevance or utility. Feminist scholars have long questioned whether conventional methods for assessing validity in research attend to the major themes and concerns of feminist research, such as reflexivity, action, affect, and innovation (Fonow
and Cook 1991; James and Busia 1993). Indigenous scholars similarly observe that Western research tends not to integrate relational accountability in discussions of research validity (Brown and Strega 2005; Wilson 2008). Informed by these scholarly insights, our own position is that the assessment of validity in ethnographic research should also include its utility to political struggle, community organizing, and policy-making that advances the rights and interests of under-represented groups. Recognizing that research has long served to stabilize and legitimize the positions and interests of those in power, and being attentive to the advances made by feminist, critical race, Indigenous, and queer sociologies, we are committed to exploring ways that ethnographic inquiry can be used to reveal and unsettle, rather than entrench, relations of ruling (Collins 1991; Smith 2005).

We focus on ethnography for a few reasons. First, we are ethnographers ourselves, interested in the potential relevance of our academic work in the local and national contexts where we collaborate with policymakers, advocates, organizers, service providers, and institutions seeking change. We also note that ethnography has been identified as the public face of the social sciences, since ethnographers produce and present findings in ways that are appealing to non-academic publics (Gans 2010; Wacquant 2002). Finally, we recognize that widespread public engagement with ethnography increases the potential influence of findings and opens up the research to public critique (Flaherty et al. 2002; Voyer and Trondman 2017). The interest in reaching non-academic audiences is not confined to ethnography, as shown by Michael Burawoy’s famous call for a public sociology (Burawoy 2005) and similar endeavors in anthropology (Checker 2009) and criminology (Loader and Sparks 2011), but ethnography arguably plays a specific role within the project of broadening social sciences’ relevance beyond academia. Ethnographic research connects the dots between patterns of organization, policy and institutional functioning, and people’s daily and nightly experiences. By enabling readers to identify patterns and recognize the links between personal problems and public issues, ethnography also has the potential to influence public debate and make various levels of government accountable (Vaughan 2005).

Ensuring a strong public life to ethnographic knowledge is also important as a way of countering research practices that obfuscate the presence and activities of actual people working together to address social problems. The use of rich descriptive accounts is one way to combat public indifference towards those whose lives and opportunities are influenced by processes of social and political marginalization (Fassin 2013; Scheper-Hughes 1992; Wacquant 2008). Here, we want to highlight several ethnographic strategies for producing explanatory accounts that we see as particularly useful in non-academic contexts as well as signaling the importance of knowledge co-production and
other techniques for strategically producing and communicating findings to increase their utility to non-academic collaborators.

We will first examine the two main analytical approaches that have structured the debate on data collection and theorization in ethnography over the last five decades (Tavory and Timmermans 2009). This is not an effort in categorization; rather, our intention is to highlight several analytic strategies used by ethnographers and other social scientists to explain how particular patterns of social life unfold in the ways that they do. On the one hand, an inductivist stance, with grounded theory as its main analytic approach, has urged researchers to let analytical categories, theoretical statements, and causal claims emerge from a deep, systematic engagement with empirical data (Glaser and Strauss 1967). On the other hand, a deductivist stance has led researchers to frame field sites as empirical anomalies that contradict a given theory, which allows researchers to explore whether or not the theory, and the various causal assertions underlying it, are still valid (Burawoy 1998).

Second, after examining their respective assumptions, we engage recent reformulations of this classical debate, with a specific focus on abductive and reflexive approaches in ethnography. Finally, we will wade into these debates ourselves, drawing on our experiences in producing and using research in non-academic settings. In so doing, we highlight the importance of strategy, utility, and accountability in one’s ethnographic practices and accounts, advocating for an approach to ethnographic research that is reflexive and overtly responsive to the knowledge needs and change goals articulated by non-academic collaborators.

**Inductive Research**

Before spreading to a variety of disciplines in social sciences and beyond, from anthropology to sociology, social work, law, management and medical research, grounded theory—one of the most common inductivist approaches—found its first elaboration in the foundational work of Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, notably with their book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies of Qualitative Research* (1967). Drawing on their previous ethnographic work on death and dying conducted in a hospital in the Bay area of San Francisco over a period of three years (Glaser and Strauss 2017 [1965]), Glaser and Strauss put forward an articulation between theory and ethnographic data in which the former emerges from the careful sampling and coding of the latter, which allows researchers to understand the inner dynamics of a given field without distorting it with pre-existing theoretical assumptions (Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967). Theory then appears as the outcome of constant comparison between various empirical occurrences, which
allows the researcher to bring attention to underlying trends and patterns, while ensuring that the theoretical claims correspond as closely as possible to the data (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

While the grounded theory method has been hugely influential in ethnography, it has also been widely criticized. Scholars from feminist traditions, for example, have critiqued the approach for its positivist orientation to documenting and understanding social reality; its continued pursuit of universal theory-building; and the presumption of an objective standpoint from which the work of theory-building can be pursued (Fonow and Cook 1991). Scholarship that traces how knowledge is produced and used in ways that serve the interests and objectives of particular groups of people, acting in particular geo-political and historical contexts (e.g. Foucault 1975, 2001), or pays attention to the ways through which knowledge enables the operations and ruling effects of institutions (Smith 1999, 2005), challenged the development and use of universal, apolitical categories to explain and predict people’s behavior. To address these concerns and integrate a postmodernist interest in “localities, positionalities, complications, tenuousness, instabilities, irregularities, contradictions, heterogeneities, situatedness, and fragmentation” in research, Adele Clarke (2003, 555) proposed situational analyses. Rather than focus on a singular social process, Clarke proposes a series of analytic mapping exercises that serve as heuristic strategies meant to bring into view the “messy complexities of the situation [of ethnographic focus] in their dense relations and permutations,” the people negotiating collective action and social organization, and the range of positions taken by people and collectivities (Clarke 2003, 559). Analysis solidifies as relations between these dimensions are traced out and explored.

Other scholars put forward a different set of critiques. For example, Bryant observes that grounded theory has failed to propose a set of robust criteria to circumscribe data-gathering—On what ground or threshold can a “theoretical saturation” be reported? When exactly does a researcher have enough observational data to start drawing valid theoretical conclusions (Bryant 2014, 131)? This critique is at the heart of the deductivist reply to grounded theory, since the former argues that the latter could only solve the methodological dilemmas outlined earlier by resorting to a theoretical frame to justify the sampling, sorting out, and coding of data in a given research project (Tavory and Timmermans 2009). The deductivist stance, in line with Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant (Burawoy 2017; Wacquant 2011), argues that theory is always driving field inquiry. The role of research in this case is to test one’s theoretical assumptions, seeking to identify conditions where they do not apply or must be revised and expanded. In sum, if grounded theory, as an inductivist approach, looks for similarities in different settings and empirical
incidents, a deductivist approach looks for differences in similar settings to enrich, qualify, or contest a particular theoretical proposition. We will illustrate this claim in the following section by examining the main deductivist approach mobilized in ethnographic work, namely, the extended case method as it has been theorized and used by Michael Burawoy.

**Deductive Research**

If grounded theory found its origins in a methodological revolt against deductivist macro theories (associated with Parsons and Merton), the extended case method, as elaborated by Burawoy and those inspired by his work, belongs to a Popperian intellectual tradition. According to Karl Popper, theories precede data because they enable researchers to decide which facts are relevant in a field, as well as the conditions for these same facts to offer refutations of a given theory (Popper 1976). Burawoy agrees with such a perspective overall, although he holds, following Imre Lakatos, that researchers should not simply apprehend empirical anomalies as grounds for rejecting a theory; rather, one must seek to “refute anomalies in order to defend their theories” (Burawoy 1990, 777). The point is not to hold onto a theory until it gets refuted but, rather, to find innovative ways of integrating empirical refutations into a theoretical frame to expand and enrich it.

In the context of ethnographic research, such an endeavor involves selecting a field of inquiry (or a research case) that is puzzling in light of a given theory, in order to reconstruct or elaborate the theory. Four principles lie at the heart of Burawoy’s call for a deductive and reflexive ethnography: (a) Intervention of the observer in the life of participants, which implies that researchers must acknowledge and make the best use of their presence and impact in the field; (b) Analysis of local social processes understood as situational experiences and interactions between various actors in a given field; (c) Moving beyond local social processes to delineate external social forces, which structure interactions within the field while lying mostly outside the field of investigation; and (d) Conceiving theory as emerging from a dialogue between the researcher, the participants, and other researchers viewed as belonging to a scientific community (Burawoy 1998). In Burawoy’s extended case method, theory plays a leading role, especially since the delineation of forces operating beyond an ethnographer’s direct line of sight and/or experience is understood to depend on theoretical explanations that account for the structural forces acting on and conditioning people’s lives and experiences (Burawoy 2003, 648–653).

The extended case method, however, has been criticized for a variety of reasons, with three of them of particular importance here: First, this approach’s
reliance on one well-defined theory reduces its capacity to link observational data to a variety of theoretical explanations, and to the interplay between them. Second, the extended case method runs the risk of “substituting the narrativity of social life with theoretical narratives, sacrificing perhaps the one unique tenet of ethnography not shared by other sociological methodologies” (Tavory and Timmermans 2009, 258; 2013, 710). Third, this method seems to presuppose that the central aims and outcomes of research are theoretical/academic rather than practical, which contradicts Burawoy’s call for a public sociology that would be relevant for publics beyond the academy (Burawoy 2005).

Although the two main analytic approaches currently structuring debates in ethnography, grounded theory and the extended case method, have both been highly influential, they also remain open to criticism: grounded theorists skillfully anchor their analytical categories in their participants’ meaning-making processes, but their reluctance to theorize beyond the immediate settings of their case has limited their capacity to connect their observations to translocal dynamics. Analyses inspired by the extended case method, on their end, have elaborated a variety of theoretical tools to link observations to broader social forces, but have tended to treat the latter as a taken-for-granted category, without always delving fully in the specificity of local settings or identifying the mechanisms that link site-specific observations to larger social forces (Tavory and Timmermans 2013). The next section will examine recent reformulations of the debate between inductivist and deductivist methodologies in ethnography, with a specific focus on the concepts of abduction and reflexivity.

Reformulations

A variety of recent contributions have sought to reformulate the debate on approaches to ethnographic research by offering other ways to understand links between theory and data, beyond the usual confrontation between inductivist and deductivist approaches. We examine three of these contributions—put forward by Iddo Tavory and Stefan Timmermans, Colin Jerolmack and Shamus Khan, and Mathew Desmond—here. These scholars offer abductive analysis, “careful ethnographies,” constructed through long-term, in situ observation and participation, and relational ethnography (respectively) as alternatives to the dichotomous opposition between induction and deduction that has long structured the field. In this section, we explore each contribution in turn.

Tavory and Timmermans propose that abductive analysis provides a robust alternative to the usual divide between data-driven and theory-driven
approaches to ethnography. Abduction is defined here, following Charles S. Peirce, as “an inferential creative process of producing new hypotheses and theories based on surprising research evidence” (Timmermans and Tavory 2012, 170). Whereas a deductivist approach starts with rules and uses cases as tests for these same rules, and an inductivist approach starts with cases and then seeks to identify rules emerging from the cases themselves, an abductive analysis rests on the development of tentative explanatory ideas to account for puzzling empirical occurrences. The analytic process relies on a robust knowledge of the literature in a given field as well as sustained analysis of one’s research data, since the idea is to find discrepancies between theories and data, which allow one to refine, deepen, or qualify inferential claims. It should be noted that abductive analysis is not about getting rid of induction and deduction as logical forms, but rather about the interplay between abduction, induction, and deduction within one research project, uniting observations, concepts, and processes in the dynamic identification and creative reworking of causal sequences (Tavory 2016; Tavory and Timmermans 2014). Our own interest in this approach is the utility of an iterative causal chain development and testing process—less in terms of theory generation and more in terms of the identification of potential social change pathways. We are also inspired by the concept of “communities of inquiry”, which highlights the centrality of dialogue and shared inquiry among researchers working in a common field and between researchers, collaborators, participants, and/or stakeholders centrally or tangentially connected to a project as a means of testing and elaborating emerging knowledge claims (Tavory and Timmermans 2013, 2014).

Jerolmack and Khan (2017) also sought to enliven the inferential potential of ethnographic studies by highlighting the importance of in situ observations—the situated and reflexively organized social practices people participate in with others as they accomplish particular social tasks—as a means of moving beyond speculative accounts that rely primarily on participant self-reports. Jerolmack and Khan also advocate flexibility with respect to the adoption of broad analytical lenses, selected based on observational units and research objectives (Jerolmack and Khan 2018). They identify eight main analytical lenses, which can be grouped in four categories: the level of explanation (micro, meso/organization, and macro), the subject of explanation (character-driven and process-driven), the location of explanation (dispositions and situations), and reflexivity (Jerolmack and Khan 2017). The point then becomes less to take a clear stance in favor of either induction, deduction, or even abduction and more to identify the analytical lenses that fit the best with a given observational unit and set of research objectives (Jerolmack and Khan 2017). The aim is to move beyond speculative accounts based primarily on individual level data towards broader explanatory accounts.
Desmond also suggests that the selection of the research object is an important determinant of a study’s aims and objectives, and the “analytic possibilities” and “explanatory structures” available to a researcher (Somers 1998, 769 in Desmond 2014, 553). His concern is that most ethnographic approaches depend on and presuppose the existence of fixed and bounded groups, locations, dispositions, and practices, rather than exploring the dynamic boundaries and interconnections between the entities we have constructed sociologically to enable investigation. He proposes a relational turn in ethnographic research to produce explanatory accounts built from situated analyses of the webs of reflexively organized social relations or “chains of interdependence” or struggle (Weber 2001, 484 in Desmond 2014, 554).

Desmond is working on a view of relationality as realist—what we might, following Marx, describe as a materialist—that is, the complexes of observable relations among actual people unfolding across a field of interrelated institutional, social, economic discursive, and political contexts, and which comprise patterns of coordinated action and relating. This view of ethnography is attractive to sociologists seeking to ensure their research is useful to the people whose lives and interests are portrayed and analyzed. Relational ethnography invites the construction of lines of inquiry emanating from the actions and concerns of research participants and collaborators, linking these ethnographically to the activities and dispositions of other people acting elsewhere. In this way, the ethnographer endeavors to bring into view the institutional and social processes through which the experiences of seemingly different groups and sites overlap to produce the social conditions the ethnographer describes. Desmond’s (2016) own ethnography of evictions is exemplary of this vision of an ethnographic object constructed across an evolving field of struggle rather than via a set of predetermined categories (e.g., landlords) or bounded places (e.g., a trailer park).

As this section has shown, ethnographers continue to experiment with new ways of constructing analytic and explanatory accounts of social life and the reflexive relationship between the researcher and the various communities of inquiry she interacts with. However, our specific interest in making ethnographic work relevant outside of strictly academic circles, by attuning our scholarship to the social change-making objectives of our research collaborators and stakeholders, has not been sufficiently addressed on the mainstage of sociological debate. Our position is that developing capacities to use ethnographic research as part of a strategic and collective social problem-solving effort might drive interest in the field and enable sociologists to use their discipline’s intervention potential to its fullest—that is, its potential to bring social inequalities clearly and fully into view and then seek evidence-informed mechanisms for generating solutions or changes meant to address
the problems so revealed (Collins 2007; Hood 1995). Rather than continuing to study social movements (for example), perhaps the time has come to ensure our sociological findings are useful to those with whom we profess to be in solidarity (Graeber 2014; Mathers and Novelli 2007). As such, in the next section, we describe collaborative and social-change-oriented approaches to ethnographic research that resonates with Tavory and Timmerman’s conceptualization of communities of inquiry, Jerolmack and Khan’s typology of analytic lenses, and Desmond’s relational ethnography, but also draws on the insights of feminist scholarship.

Solidarity Research, Tactical Responsivity, and Sociology for People

In this last section, we explore Smith’s (2005) sociology for people or institutional ethnography and the cycles of inquiry, learning, and action at the heart of community-based and participatory-action research traditions (Brown and Rodriguez 2009; Cammerota and Fine 2010; Yarbrough 2020). We reflect on our own efforts to be tactically or strategically responsive to particular people and political aims. In so doing, we recount how we have drawn on many of the techniques sketched out earlier, infusing these with insights and ethical considerations we associate with feminist, participatory, and community-based approaches to ethnographic research to build our case for tactical responsivity as a research posture (rather than an approach) that enables utility and solidarity in research.

In Dilara Yarbrough’s (2020, 60) intellectual ethnography of the pathologizing, objectifying, and extractive effects of research, she expresses a desire for her ethnographic work to be useful—that is, “to clarify targets for organizing, to raise awareness of the scope and causes of a problem and to instigate policy change.” Yarbrough’s call for “solidarity research” (2020, 59) aligns with some of the points made by the authors in the previous section regarding the pursuit of creative, flexible, and relational approaches to data generation and analysis. But much like our own efforts, Yarbrough’s solidarity research differs in terms of her methodological orientation to participants’ own analyses and political goals, as well as her recognition of the academy’s “voracious hunger for the secrets of marginalized communities” (Tuck and Wang 2014, 233 in Yarbrough 2020, 72). Inspired by Black feminist scholars’ attentiveness to standpoint and dialogue as essential analytic and political strategies in research (Collins 1991), Yarbrough points to a linked ethical-epistemic stance that privileges the political goals of participants, collaborators, and/or stakeholders as relevant to questions of ethnographic validity.
Instead of holding ourselves and each other accountable to abstract, universalist measures of validity in research, we contend that ethnographers be transparent and specific about their political and relational accountabilities and that the utility and relevance of research to specific non-academic publics be a consideration in assessments of validity. Under this formulation, methodological and analytic decisions would be responsive to the social sites and groups where we intend our research to find purchase as a resource for social change.

Community-based and participatory action research traditions offer ethnographers promising strategies for destabilising traditional boundaries between those carrying out the research and those being researched. The first author of this paper has a long history of using community-based and participatory research approaches within institutional ethnography to ensure that findings can be mobilized to inform policy and institutional change, and that research generates outcomes that are useful to stakeholders (Nichols 2014; Nichols 2019). The second author of this paper has a long history of involvement in social movement organizing and, as a doctoral student, an emerging track record combining activism and scholarship in pursuit of community-identified change-goals (Guay and Godrie 2020). In this last section, our practical knowledge and expertise anchors our engagement with the literature, as we elaborate on the ways we seek to be tactical and responsive throughout a research process in order to improve the utility of our scholarship for our non-academic collaborators and for the publics to which our scholarship is often addressed (e.g., policymakers, institutional decision-makers, or community groups).

We propose the notion of tactical responsivity, which we envision as a “sensitizing concept” (Blumer 1954, 7) or a deliberate posture within ethnographic research, rather than imagining that it represents a distinctive methodological approach. We seek to bring this notion in dialogue with institutional ethnography—the sociological approach with which Nichols is most familiar. Institutional ethnography was developed as an approach to doing sociology with and for people. The basic premise is that research should generate findings that are useful to people participating in small- and large-scale social movement efforts (Smith 1999). Indeed, Smith questioned the very premise of much social science research, when she asked: “Why was it that the social sciences wanted to explain people’s behavior (to whom?), rather than, say, to explain the behavior of the economy, or the society, or the political process to people, particularly as these enter into, organize and disorganize people’s lives” (Smith 1999, 32). As such, institutional ethnographers do not study disadvantaged or marginalized communities; rather, we work with people to produce an empirical account of the institutional, policy, and economic
processes that produce conditions of disadvantage and marginality in the first place. In our efforts to discover how particular institutional, policy, and economic processes are organized to produce the patterns of advantage and disadvantage that characterize social life, institutional ethnographers contribute to people’s understanding of the ways macro-level relations structure micro-level (or lived and experienced) outcomes. The aim is to pursue lines of inquiry that extend people’s ordinary knowledge about their daily lives, working with them to discover how their personal experiences are connected to social, institutional, and political-economic relations that transcend and link local sites (Smith 2006).

The lines of synergy between institutional ethnography and the relational ethnography that Desmond (2014) proposes are clear—insofar as the ethnographer deliberately orients towards social processes and social relations, rather than bounded social objects. There are also synergies between institutional ethnography and the extended case method, in terms of their methods and aims, which have been highlighted in the literature (Burawoy 1998; Tavory and Timmermans 2014; Timmermans and Tavory 2012); but institutional ethnography remains a distinct sociological approach, characterized by a commitment to generating accessible empirical accounts that improve participants’ own understanding, and effective navigation of, a particular institution or social environment (Smith 2005). This focus on relational accountability, reflexivity, and utility (what we describe as strategic or tactical responsivity) signals institutional ethnographies roots in feminist political organizing and explains its draw to people who, like us, are interested in the pursuit of solidarity research.

In ways that we believe are quite compelling, given our interests in the social and political utility of research, institutional ethnography involves process-oriented and people-oriented research approaches (Jerolmack and Khan 2017), moving between and analytically linking people’s experiences with one another and the institutional mechanisms, practices, policies, and discourses that, in numerous ways, coordinate people’s lives. Institutional ethnography thus stands at the crossroads between relations described by sociologists as micro and macro, using data associated with—and illuminative of—the former (that is, direct experience and recollection) in order to anchor an investigation of relations of ruling associated with the latter (Nichols and Malenfant 2018). It also aligns with the calls for methodological and analytic flexibility and creativity that we have highlighted earlier; people can draw on a range of methodological and theoretical resources in the work, as long as the research adheres to institutional ethnography’s particular epistemic, ontological and ethical commitments. Ontologically, institutional ethnographers view “the social” as being composed of actual
embodied relations among people—“a concerting of activities that actually happen” even as our experiences of these relations differ (Smith 1996, 172). In this view, the social is not an abstracted social construction; it is “an ongoing process (cf. Garfinkel 1967, 1972), in time and in actual local sites of people’s bodily existence, even when the coordination may be of large-scale organization or of social relations implicating multiplicities as those theorized by Marx” (Smith 1996, 172). Epistemologically, we believe that one can begin to discover how social life gets put together (or coordinated)—from people’s direct experiences of it, rather than from the null standpoint of a “generalized other” constructed sociologically; further to this, we recognize that all accounts of “the social” are produced by actual embodied people, whose work is caught up in and contributes to the textually organized modes of thinking and action (i.e., relations of ruling), through which contemporary social life is organized. Finally, from an ethical point of view, our work as sociologists is to produce knowledge that is useful to people trying to understand how their experiences are connected to, and shaped by, social and political-economic relations that are not fully discernable from the grounds of direct experience. These three dimensions align with post-positivist, feminist, and activist research paradigms, and they afford researchers considerable flexibility in terms of the iterative and strategic use of theoretical and methodological resources, and inductive and deductive research strategies.

For example, community-based and participatory strategies are methodologically, pedagogically, and politically compelling to some institutional ethnographic research projects (Nichols, McLarnon and Griffith 2018; Nichols and Ruglis 2021). As a doctoral student, Nichols produced a community-based institutional ethnography of human service provision from the standpoints of young people without housing. She used findings to create a program to address young people’s expressed challenges maintaining their housing as well as the political-economic constraints faced by emergency shelters. Specific findings about the intersections of youth homelessness and the institutional and policy organization of child welfare services later anchored efforts (with others) to advocate for investments in and reforms to child welfare law and practice, with many of the desired legislative and practice reforms having since been implemented. Methodologically, analytically, and in terms of her communicative practices, Nichols’ activities were guided by her accountabilities—to the youth who had trusted her with their knowledge—and to the pursuit of institutional responses that would better attend to their lived realities and expressed needs. The research also afforded opportunities to strategically apply or test (in situ) the knowledge claims from her MA thesis project on non-profit funding regimes to secure funding for a program developed to address key findings from the PhD research. In Nichols’
trajectory, cycles of inductive and deductive inquiry come into view over a
decade of work, shaped by the strategic application of one’s knowledge in
pursuit of social change goals.

Since finishing her doctorate, Nichols has completed several other partici-
patory and collaborative projects with young people, with non-profit orga-
ization, and with public sector institutions. Each project actively built on and
evolved the findings and strategies of earlier efforts. Across the projects, the
concept of standpoint and a dialogic practice were essential analytic and
political strategies—even as the precise methods and over-arching method-
ological and theoretical resources differed, reflective of each projects’ par-
ticipating members and strategic knowledge and change goals. For example,
Nichols’s postdoctoral research was originally framed as a project on the
institutional organization of community and school safety. But this focus on
the institutional mediation of risk did not help the research team attend to the
ways young Black people and Black youth workers experienced these insti-
tutional responses as racialized and racializing. Nor did it allow our team to
see how our own early framing of the project as a problem of safety for at-
risk youth reflected our own experiences of racialization (most notably such
that we did not naturally employ race as means of coding or making sense of
our experiences). So, we changed the project to take seriously young people’s
embodied and experiential knowledge—specifically their observations that
the problems they were experiencing were not actually about safety and
unsafety but were about institutionally organized processes that produce and
sustain patterns of racial inequality. Drawing heavily on insights generated
by critical race feminist scholars (Razack, Smith & Thomani, 2010), we
focused on how the concept of race organizes institutional relations—that is,
in the ways that it is denied and neutralized and white-washed institutionally,
we sought to show that even (and perhaps especially) where race is not used
as an concept around which institutional actions pivots, institutional pro-
cesses (e.g., school and community safety processes) can still be profoundly
racist in their material effects. While this approach was responsive and rela-
tionally appropriate, it was not always politically tactical—for example,
when we were asked to prepare a submission for the provincial human rights
commission on racial profiling. In this policy environment, statistical demon-
strations of disproportionate impact were viewed as the most institutionally
actionable findings. To improve the utility of our research for human rights
advocacy, we situated young people’s stories of their experiences of surveil-
lance and discipline in schools against school board statistics on school dis-
cipline and race, as well as patterns of police deployment to show how Black
youth were likely to be the targets of institutional surveillance at school and
in their neighborhoods. There are multiple levers through which social
change is pursued. Tactical responsivity requires flexibility in terms of data collection and analytic methods, as well as strategies for communicating findings. These early efforts to enable solidary research have continued to inform Nichols’ participatory and community-based approach to institutional ethnography as a professor—particularly the efforts to balance the pressure to produce peer-reviewed content and the need to produce and mobilize open-access content that engages policymakers and institutional decision-makers directly (e.g., policy briefs, research reports and blogs, and advocacy letter-writing campaigns).

On the political front, collaborative approaches can enrich and expand researchers’ and participants’ interpretations of local and extra-local institutional and/or political-economic processes that impact their daily lives, offering practical analytic tools to identify problems and elaborate on potential solutions (Nichols 2019; Nichols and Ruglis 2021). Perhaps as importantly, institutional ethnography can also be used to learn about the very sites one hopes to influence (e.g., in government)—for example, enabling a research team to discover how to effectively frame and disseminate housing and homelessness research findings in order to ensure they find purchase in the intended social sites (Nichols, Malenfant and Schwan 2020). Institutional ethnography is as useful to shaping one’s tactical research-to-action strategy as it is for uncovering how relations of power operate in and shape the lives of participants. George W. Smith’s (1990) articulation of a political activist ethnography illustrates how institutional ethnography can be used to identify points of tactical focus for movement organizing as well as to develop a movement agenda, based on empirical analysis of how political and other decisions are made. Smith offers a view of ethnographic research conducted as part of and to advance the aims of, political organizing.

Such an approach can lead, as Burawoy suggests, to a “process of mutual education in which both sides work together to explore possibilities that are outside the lived experience. Then, the evicted are no longer victims of their own agency or of the opportunism of landlords but become players on a wider political canvas” (Burawoy 2017, 282). The validity of the causal claims elaborated during the research process, through inductive, deductive, and abductive inferences, then relies not only on their dialogue with academic communities of inquiry but also on their relevance for the conditions of participants’ lives and the ways in which these conditions can be changed and improved. Guay has sought to embody these principles in his doctoral research project. Though not an institutional ethnography, his research has been informed by this sociological approach and has, from its inception, been conducted as a solidarity project, expressly oriented to collective action, social, and political change. Guay is leading a collaborative ethnography
with two community groups in Parc-Extension, a low-income neighborhood in Montreal with a high proportion of racialized, recent migrants amongst its residents. The first community group, Parc-Extension Action Committee (CAPE), is a tenants’ rights association, whereas the second group, Brick by Brick (BxB), is an initiative that seeks to build social and affordable housing in Parc-Extension. Guay’s involvement in the neighborhood, guided both by research questions and by social change goals, follows the principle of *abductive reflexivity*, through which ethnographers treat their own presence in the field and its impact as sites of critical inquiry, inscribed within an “iterative process of theorizing, hypothesis testing, and subsequent theorizing” (Stuart 2018, 213). This principle has led him to revise his research project, following conversations with participants in each community group, to both make sure that the project’s relevance extends beyond academia and avoid the “research fatigue” that can be provoked by projects that are perceived as extractive and irrelevant, or even harmful, for the community (Clark 2008). Guay initially sought to document the impact of gentrification in Parc-Extension, and its consequences for the neighborhood’s most precarious residents but came to realize that such a project did not add much to what the community groups already knew and ran the risk of presenting Parc-Extension’s residents as powerless victims in the face of larger structural forces. Following these exchanges, Guay revised his project by making it focus instead on the strategies and solutions that can be put forward by community-led initiatives to defend access to housing for low-income tenants in a context characterized by increasing rents, a rise in evictions, and a lack of affordable and social housing. This has led Guay to support both community groups with various tasks, such as writing minutes for meetings and assemblies, as well as formal notices on behalf of tenants, applying for public and private grants, helping to organize public events, demonstrations and letter campaigns, raising public awareness around evictions and community resistance through his participation in an anti-eviction mapping project, advocating for socially responsible research through his involvement in the Parc-Extension Community-Based Research Network (CBAR), while documenting ethnographically the tools that the groups can use to reach their goals and face the numerous challenges brought by gentrification, systemic racism and the rise in socioeconomic inequalities in Montreal. Guay also committed to offering both immediate support for the community groups’ various needs and sustained involvement in initiatives that promote social change and the interest of collaborators, by contributing to the activities of the Coopérative Un Monde Uni, a community-led housing coop that seeks to develop social housing in Parc-Extension, and by facilitating the coordination of activities between various community groups, notably by
participating to, and writing minutes for, the *Regroupement en aménagement de Parc-Extension* (RAMPE).

Tactical responsivity in research can thus be conceived as an ethnographic disposition that combines the pursuit of persuasive explanations for the social problems people experience, with a social change agenda that (a) responds to participants’ and collaborators’ expressed concerns as well as (b) is a long-term strategy to address the specific, structural mechanisms that are conditioning the problems that participants stories reveal (Comfort et al. 2015).

**Conclusion**

Our paper puts forward the idea that social and political utility could be considered an indicator of validity in ethnographic research. We signal a need for abductive reflexivity in ethnographic research, proposing that researchers commit to *tactical responsivity* in their designs. In this vision, assessments of trustworthiness would include indicators of transparency, strategy, and relational accountability in the identification of aims and audiences for research. Our position recognizes that different publics have different research needs and interests. To increase the utility and relevance of ethnographic research in non-academic contexts, we propose that research designs and analytic strategies be attentive to, and reflective of, the interests and aims of research stakeholders and collaborators. Rather than designing and carrying out ethnographic research that reflects an abstract ideal balance of deductive and inductive, causal and descriptive approaches to research, one might design a study that is transparent about its social and political accountabilities and is useful to the people participating in it (e.g., as key participants). Such an approach would favor methodological and theoretical dexterity and heightened reflexivity on the parts of researchers. Informed by our histories of involvement with activist efforts, community organizations, policy communities, and institutions, as well as our engagement with institutional ethnographic and community-based approaches to ethnographic research and knowledge mobilization, we argue that decisions about the research questions posed, the construction of the objects of study (i.e., the unit of analysis), the conceptual ideals through which a study is designed and findings are analyzed and shared (i.e., one’s theoretical resources), and the strategies one employ to collect and analyze data are best made in light of the overarching use-aims of scholarship and the publics to which research is accountable. This ethnographic disposition we point to here is best supported by abductive reflexivity, relationality, and tactical responsivity in the field.

We believe that the ethnographic posture we describe in this paper offers a cogent way forward for researchers seeking to ground their research agenda
in close dialogue with the social world, with its various issues, while making the most out of possibilities for inter-academic and extra-academic collaborations (Nichols, Gaetz and Phipps 2015). Moreover, this approach appears to us as a relevant way of balancing the academic and political dimensions of research, both in ethnography and in other methods of data collection and analysis in the social sciences, while resonating with various calls for a “good-enough” research approach that would go beyond the current political paralysis of sociology and anthropology by combining “the scientific and political potentials of collaborative, cross-methodological” inquiry (Messac et al. 2013, 185; Bourgois and Schonberg 2009; Scheper-Hughes 1992).

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