

Yale University  
**Workshop in Urban Ethnography**

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**The Authority of the Stranger: Analytic Distance, Ethnographic Authority,  
and the Presentation of Causal Inference**

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**The Authority of the Stranger:**

Ethnographers have long struggled with issues of causality. This struggle has often motivated them to avoid the terminology even if their accounts include an implicit form of causal logic (i.e., *ethnographic causal inference*). Strategies of random or quasi-random assignment that are well established in experimental research and other diachronic forms of quantitative analysis prove challenging for ethnographers. Yet ethnographers have analytic tools to address causation that often pass unexamined. Because of their extended time frame and focus on contingencies of action, ethnographers can examine change—and hence, cause—in situ. But how? Two factors provide the grounds for making causal connections. First, the reality that (many) ethnographers begin as strangers in their scene permits them to understand socialization processes while observing how group cultures change. Along with this otherness—the “stranger paradigm”—their professional perspective and awareness of comparable studies allows them to understand forces that, though unrecognized by participants, can be profitably scrutinized by disciplinary colleagues.