

Yale University

Workshop in Urban Ethnography

Spring 2013

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



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Gary Alan Fine is the John Evans Professor of Sociology at Northwestern University. His research interests include social psychology, sociology of culture, collective memory, rumor and gossip, and social theory. His recent books include *The Global Grapevine: Why Rumors of Terrorism, Immigration and International Trade Matter* (with Bill Ellis, 2010); *Sticky Reputations: The Politics of Collective Memory in Midcentury America* (2012); and *Tiny Publics: A Theory of Group Culture and Action* (2012). From 2006 to 2010, he served as editor of *Social Psychology Quarterly*.

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 allow them to understand forces that, though unrecognized by participants, can be profitably scrutinized by disciplinary colleagues.

Lunch Served *** All Welcome

Monday, April 29, 11:30a-1:20p

210 Prospect Street, Room 203, New Haven

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