

# Agnostic Interactionism and Sensitizing Concepts in the 21st Century: Developing Shaffirian Theory-Work in Ethnographic Research

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.16.2.07>

## Keywords:

Qualitative Methods;  
Ethnography; Chicago  
School; Symbolic  
Interactionism;  
Sensitizing Concepts

**Abstract:** In this paper, we reflect upon our experiences taking a graduate qualitative methodology course with Dr. William (Billy) Shaffir. We highlight Billy's approach to ethnographic research and his declaration to "just do it." Rather than just absorbing theoretical knowledge from the literature, Billy taught us to be wary of the dangers of a prior theorization and how it can distort rather than shed light on empirical investigations. Despite his belief that sociological theory is far too often abstract and removed from real-world contexts, he nevertheless provided us with a latent theoretical commitment to concept formation, modification, and testing in the field that guides our research to this day. We explore Shaffir's agnostic and at times ironic approach to theory and demonstrate how his specific type of *theory-work*, derived from Everett Hughes' and Howard Becker's interactionist perspective on "people doing things together," influenced how many of his students study occupations and organizations via sensitizing concepts. Billy managed to get us to think differently about how we theorize in the field and how to cultivate a playful and healthy skeptical attitude towards its application. This type of *agnostic-interactionism* does not dismiss theory outright, but is always vigilant and mindful of how easy it is for practitioners of theory to slip into obfuscation and reification. We conclude with a Shaffir inspired *theory-work* that argues for the continuing significance of an agnostic stance towards ethnographic and qualitative inquiry; one that continues to sensitize the researcher to generic social processes through which agency-structure is mediated and accomplished.

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**A**dorjan, downtown in the city, is walking through the streets back towards home. He has a ridiculously large tape cassette recorder on hand, which he is using to capture his verbalized remarks about the interview he just had with a probation officer. He had received ethics approval to conduct a study with probation officers as his major applied project for William (Billy) Shaffir's graduate qualitative methods course. Through discussion of the research with the city's probation office, an agreement was made not to record interviews while they took place; he could take notes, and he was free to record his recollections of the interview afterwards. As discussed during Billy's seminar (which involved sharing one's experiences in conducting qualitative research), one's memory can fade fast, and as he knew his would fade faster than most, he wanted to ensure he got his memories on magnets as fast as possible. So there he is, talking to himself into this device larger than those first 1980s cell phones, and sure enough, he gets some sarcastic remarks thrown his way from observers on the street who probably could not figure out precisely what he was doing. It helps to make clear that the weather was quite warm, and many were enjoying the restaurant patios next to the streets he was walking down.

He did feel the duality acutely, both as an outsider to sociological research in general (he had taken a course-based Masters degree, and the research methods course did not involve engaging in original research), but also as an outsider-insider; a position which soon emerged by *getting out there and doing research* (Merton 1972; Adorjan 2016). He took the role of the hecklers, who did not mean any harm, but who led him to see his oddity reflected through their remarks (Cooley 1964). At the same time, he started to *feel* like a qualitative sociological researcher by getting away from campus, the textbooks and (however fascinating) theoretical debates, and diving into experience research first-hand. He had his written notes from the interviews, and his remarks into the recorder included details of his questions and the answers given, but also a variety of things that would help him contextualize the interview: his impressions of his own questions; his thoughts on the way the interview went; comments about the ergonomic features of the probation office and how this may come to influence the experience of probationers as they visited the office; and other factors that would help create vibrant and textured "thick descriptions" of the *culture* of probation work (Geertz 1973). He was certainly an outsider, too, to this particular probation office, but not to probation

work itself, as he had previous experience as a volunteer probation officer.

This all *positioned* him in a certain way—neither positively nor negatively—in relation to his participants, the questions asked, his interpretation of their answers, and so forth. Moreover, it is this positioning that is our window into the emphasis Billy placed upon direct engagement and experience with participants in the field. With Billy, much like many other interactionists who trace their sociological lineage to the Chicago School, methods are interdependent with theory (Clarke and Star 2008). Billy often instructed us on how to negotiate and manage boundaries with our informants, the data collected, and the theorization based on our understandings of our participants' social world. Acknowledging the barrier between himself as an ethnographer and one of his main informants, Billy (Shaffir 1999:684) writes,

While barriers between us have thinned, it is equally clear that they will never disappear completely. Whereas, previously, I saw this situation as a reflection of my inadequate field research skills, I now accept that successful field research requires a respecting of boundaries between researcher and researched, which, while potentially limiting the scope of the fieldwork, need not detract from it and is, moreover, inevitable.

In a similar vein, Billy taught us that good theorizing has the researcher creating a healthy metaphorical distance between what is found in the field and how such data can help be used to generate, modify, or refute concepts and theories that provide a sociological understanding of participants' worlds. Some distancing and managing the metaphorical boundaries between extant theory and data is a dance Bil-

ly constantly explored with us in class. In this paper, we first go into greater detail into Billy's qualitative research class and our experience of how he presented theory and methods within ethnographic contexts. We then trace Billy's theory-method lineage back to the Chicago School of Sociology, represented by Everett Hughes' comparative methodology and Howard Becker's analytic induction. Billy's students carry his Chicago roots forward into the 21<sup>st</sup> century with an *agnostic-interactionist* perspective informing their research, whether it takes up ethnography directly or uses other qualitative approaches. We highlight some of his students' more recent work that is arguably influenced by Billy's approach. We conclude with a description of Billy's inspired approach to the study of group life, which we term, *Shaffirian theory-work*.

## Qualitative Research as Rite of Passage

Ethnography's "...emphasis should always be on its practical accomplishments—the observation and description of the behavior of a group of people to understand their culture." [Shaffir 1999:677]

The experiences highlighted in Adorjan's field notes above, along with every other student's, were regularly discussed during Billy's weekly 3-hour seminar. He would often read and comment on our fieldnotes and ignore our theoretical memos. When asked why he was so concerned with our data and dismissive of our theoretical musings, he told us we are placing the cart before the horse. Kelly then asked him if he was implying that the data can be compared to a thoroughbred horse, and high brow sociological theories are merely wagons that need to earn the right to hitch themselves onto the experience of our participants. "You got it!" he replied with that classic Shaffir wink and a smile. "Next

time, just make sure the cart is loaded with Honey-crisp apples.”<sup>1</sup>

The time flew and we quickly grew to respect Billy’s directive not to put the theoretical cart before the empirical horse. Students may have felt initially anxious about sharing these experiences; we know we did. Admittedly, we wanted to “get it right” and impress the Zen Master with offerings of richly insightful encounters in the field. Billy’s emphasis, however, was not just on the data itself, but the encounters and *going concerns* which led to obstacles, frustration, and also reimagination and reconsideration (Hughes 1971). We learned much more from our failures than our ostensible successes. Ethnography, interviewing, and participant observation alike all required commitment. Some students shared challenges related to accessing participants in the first place—entering the field—and recalled stories of a “doc”-like character who would grant access to a new social realm (Whyte 2012). Others disclosed that they are not “morning persons” and abjured getting up early to meet with participants whose schedules demanded an early rise. Still, others raised questions of data and theoretical saturation—knowing when additional collection of data does not lead to new and significant knowledge. This, relatedly, would lead to questions about exiting from the field: how does one know when to stop, and in ethnographic work in particular, *how* does one retract from a group of people where often friendships have been made? And despite one having a formal role as a researcher, how does one negotiate “mutual influence” (Kelly 2010), “competing obligations” (Grills 1998), and the moral dilemmas

that make up the “underside” of ethnographic work (Fine 1993)?

No doubt the challenges of exiting were facilitated by the fact that we had a course to complete in a few months, with a final research report to submit. Nevertheless, while many qualitative courses feature readings and discussion about such things, it was integral to us in taking Billy’s course that we went out to experience research for ourselves.

Billy’s class reinforced the idea that qualitative research helps imbue “a clearer and sharper understanding of a slice of human lived reality” (Shaffir 1999:684), with an emphasis on “understand[ing] how social behavior is shaped and organized” (Shaffir 1999:685). Yet what are the “right” approaches to achieving this? As novice researchers, we expected a clear roadmap of steps to follow. Many of us who had little previous exposure to the craft (indeed, most of us had little to none), initially wanted Billy to provide more structure in the form of specific qualitative methodologies. We were, however, greeted only with the bemused smile of the Zen Master, who was trying to guide us on what appeared to be similar to *Leih Tzu’s Taoist pathless path* (Osho 2002). Billy’s approach to teaching and learning initially appeared unorthodox to us. Instructing students to “hang out” with research participants felt anomic; many of us simply did not feel adequately prepared to engage with the field and collect data on our own.

Furthermore, this “baptism by fire” approach generated a fair amount of anxiety that we may not have been collecting data properly. Class discussions, however, greatly helped us learn that our fears were common and, moreover, that we were encouraged to raise such issues to generate rich insights. Soon daunting aspects of fieldwork (i.e., entering the field,

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<sup>1</sup> The Honeycrisp is Billy’s apple of choice. Rare is the student who gets through his qualitative research course without eating at least one.

recruiting subjects, leaving the field) became issues we could grapple with. We often found a sense of confidence in *re-engaging* with our participants despite, or even due to, the challenges we faced.

Each week we would come to class and Billy would get all of us to discuss our experiences in the field openly. So each week through dialogue and collaboration, Billy would help guide us through our projects. We began to “see” our projects come to life out of a theoretical block of marble; our *craft* was not just extracting the perfect statue, but appreciating the process through which it was realized. Billy did not want our projects to be his; he wanted us to see them from our own informed sociological imaginations. Billy was always ready to help, and was immensely helpful, but his help rarely instructed us directly about how to pursue our own research. Billy encouraged us to create and answer our research questions, not his. He knew many of us to be impressionistic and idealistic and required that we learn not from what he wanted, but learn from the insights we gleaned from “just doing it.” With all of this being said, it would be a tragedy if the reader got the impression that Billy was merely a spectator and a passive and uncommitted teacher. On the contrary, he was and still is an inspiring mentor who has the patience, time, and openness to bring out the best in our work.

### **The Shaffirian Theory-Methods Toolkit**

After looking over each of our field notes at the end of the week, Billy would make suggestions on how to fine-tune and further explore the sociological questions we sought to answer. Guidance would consist of strengthening our analysis by slowly introducing us to a few sensitizing concepts and social processes under the light of the comparative method (we

elaborate on these concepts below). He often had us reflect on foundational interactionist tenants, like “role taking” and “definitions of the situation.” The two of us initially thought that a focus on these concepts appeared rather pedestrian. We assumed that “sophisticated” theory had to be front and center in the weekly memos we submitted to Billy; otherwise we were not conducting canonical sociological research (see: Luker 2009). Undergraduate training often conditions students to view all human experience through the lens of Marx, Durkheim, Habermas, Bourdieu, Giddens, or Foucault. It was enticing to apply what one experiences in the field to one of these canonical theorists; indeed, often we were inclined to see connections in many theoretical frameworks and had difficulty finding the ideal fit. Billy, however, encouraged us to see human life in terms of dynamic social processes, allowing us to understand and measure the fluidity of social action and organization in real time across different localities and permutations.

Billy encouraged us never to force sociological concepts, to be ever vigilant that theory should emerge from the data. Billy trusted us to mold theory in creative, innovative, and playful ways. And herein lies the irony: Billy urged us not to get trapped in theory proper, yet encouraged us to theorize. He pushed us towards maintaining a certain level of social distance from our participants; thus entertaining a type of realism which was necessary in order to theorize. We could not simply take our participants’ understandings of their worlds at face value, nor take them for granted. However, we were also not to take the theory derived from our textbooks for granted either. We soon realized the epistemological value in having a healthily balanced agnosticism towards our participants in the field and the theories we studied. Of course, this was not all made

explicit, but something we only later recognized as we made our way through Billy's class, comprehensive exams, and thesis preparation. Billy's approach, which we refer to as *Shaffirian theory-work* (see below) is most evident in his approach towards the study of occupational socialization and identity. We now turn to Billy's links to the Chicago School of Sociology to further demonstrate his unique approach to theorizing and how it shaped his students' research.

### **Agnostic-Interactionism: The Chicago Roots**

One overarching message Billy projected during our graduate qualitative methodology class: the data drives the theoretical application and modification, with an understanding that the two are inseparable. Billy's approach was inspired by his own mentorship with Malcolm Spector (1972; 2019) at McGill University, who was mentored by Howard Becker (1970; 2008; 2017) at Northwestern University. Becker was himself taught by one of the founders of the Chicago School of Sociology, Everett Hughes (1971). Billy, in 1972, was the first sociologist at McGill University in Canada to defend a PhD dissertation committed to symbolic interactionist theory and methodology. An auspicious occasion indeed, as Everett Hughes attended the defense with Howie Becker appointed as external examiner (Shaffir 2011, personal communication). Because Billy is widely considered "a principal interpreter of the Chicago School Diaspora in Canadian Sociology" (Low, this volume), we were very fortunate to experience this Chicago-McGill-McMaster connection, which at the time placed central emphasis on the insights gleaned from the Chicago School and symbolic interactionism. The Chicago School posited a clarion call for sociologists to embed themselves in social life in order to best understand the definitions of

the situation under observation. Rather than pursuing over-cogitated and reified theory claims, Billy pushed his students to respect the nature of the empirical world, where strict operational and "definitive concepts" may not easily map onto reflexive and often unpredictable behaviors and statements (Blumer 1969:146; Prus 1997; Maines 2001).

It is difficult to overestimate the specific influence of Everett C. Hughes upon Billy and, more widely, upon how interactionists approach the ethnographic study of occupations. Hughes sent his students out into the field to investigate and understand how people, situated along various points of occupational and professional strata (i.e., physician, custodian), defined and experienced their work. He showed how such people embodied "going concerns" found in everyday life and broader society in general (Shaffir and Pawluch 2003). Billy and his students not only took interest in the substantive topic of occupations and organizations from a Hughesian perspective, but also understood that his comparative approach, passed down to his students at Chicago (e.g., Becker, Strauss, and Goffman), is essential for any type of qualitative investigation (see: Fine 1995; Chapoulie 1996; Low and Bowden 2013; 2016; Archibald, Kelly, and Adorjan 2015; van den Scott and van den Hoonaard 2016; Kelly and Archibald 2019). Common experiential themes arise via comparison across occupations. Hughes argues for relational conceptualization that can handle social variation and homologies. He states, "We need to rid ourselves of any concepts which keep us from seeing that the essential problems of men at work are the same whether they do their work in the laboratories of some famous institution or in the messiest vat room of a pickle factory" (Hughes 1971:417). Hughes (1970:149-150) defines "the essence of the comparative frame" as one that "seeks differences in terms

of dimensions common to all cases." Also, in uncovering these "common dimensions, the differences become clearer, and more impressive" (Hughes 1970:150). Despite a variety of different statuses and roles, all occupations must manage a series of typical constraints that result in similar forms of adaptation (Shaffir and Pawluch 2003). In our class, Billy showed us how this comparative theoretical approach, sensitive to the emergence of common experiential themes, provides flexibility and playfulness that supports the use of sensitizing concepts (see below) and the discovery of generic social processes.

### **"The Crock" as Sensitizing Concept**

Theory is of value in empirical science only to the extent to which it connects fruitfully with the empirical world. Concepts are the means, and the only means of establishing such a connection, for it is the concept that points to the empirical instances about which a theoretical proposal is made. [Blumer 1954:4]

Billy was the first to introduce us to the methodological and theoretical value inherent in Herbert Blumer's sensitizing concept formation. A cornerstone of agnostic interactionism, a sensitizing concept avoids the sterility of "fixed bench marks [and] gives the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances...directions along which to look" (Blumer 1954:7). Herbert Blumer, a colleague of Everett Hughes and Becker's social psychology instructor at the University of Chicago, felt sociological theory had become "conspicuously defective in its guidance of research inquiry" (Blumer 1954:4). By orienting the researcher to the direct happenings of the empirical world, the sensitizing concept alleviates the researcher from over-committing to deductive-nomological methodology and

all its flaws. Blumer recognized that researchers do not enter the field as a *tabula rasa*; that is, without any preconceptions or conceptual ideas that they wish to explore. The sensitizing concept serves the purpose of an epistemological placeholder, that is subject to (i.e., confirmed, refuted, augmented, reappropriated, etc.) testing against the lived experiences of people in their situated environments. Blumer (1954:8) here writes:

If our empirical world presents itself in the form of distinctive and unique happenings or situations and if we seek through the direct study of this world to establish classes of objects, we are, I think, forced to work with sensitizing concepts.

It was Billy's teaching of Howard Becker's discovery and application of "The Crock" as a sensitizing concept that "awoke us from our dogmatic slumber" and officially ushered us into a lifelong commitment to agnostic interactionism. Howard Becker, Blanche Geer, and Anselm Strauss, under the direction of Everett Hughes, conducted fieldwork at the University of Kansas Medical School (Becker et al. 1961). Becker began his fieldwork by "hanging around" third-year students in the Internal Medicine Department and "finding out what the hell was going on, who all these people were, what they were doing, what they were talking about [and] finding [his] way around" (Becker 1993:28). Upon first hearing medical students identify some patients by the demeaning term "crock," Becker pursued a line of inquiry via interviews and observations and discovered that a "crock" "referred in a derogatory way to patients with many subjective symptoms, but no discernible physical pathology" (Becker 1970:35).

Once Becker identified the term "crock" as a common usage among the medical students he inter-

viewed, it behoved him to inquire further and uncover the reasons behind the students' negative attitude towards these patients and how multiple meanings of a crock shaped student-patient behavior, and pointed to the broader social organization of the hospital. Upon closer investigation via analytic induction, he theorized that what first appeared as simple frustration with individual patients was actually refracting students' broader dislike and disparaging attitudes towards the medical school in general. A crock represented a lost opportunity to move beyond book knowledge and gain "clinical experience." Students had expectations that they would receive hands-on training in which to diagnose and treat disease. However, "crock" patients were seen to block professional pathways towards genuine "medical responsibility" necessary for acquiring medical expertise—"You can't cure anyone unless you can kill them" (Becker 1993:35). Viewing a "crock" as a patient without "real" symptoms who denied medical students' opportunities to learn best practices led Becker to link up student-patient interaction and the students' expectations of professional socialization. Billy had us read Becker's methods paper in class, describing "crock" as a folk concept that transcended its everyday use, sensitizing us to how the social processes of meaning-making within the student-patient interaction and student expectations of professional socialization connects to broader social structure and social organization. As Becker (1958:658) states,

Questions concerning the genesis of this perspective led to discoveries about the organization of the student body and communication among students... Since "crocks" were also disliked because they gave the student no opportunity to assume medical responsibility, we were able to connect this aspect of the student-patient relationship with...the value system

and hierarchical organization of the school, in which medical responsibility plays an important role.

The crock as a sensitizing folk concept is a subset of a Hughesian comparative generic social process, *anticipatory socialization*. Billy's own research, inspired by Becker and Hughes's *Boys In White*, would take Robert Edgerton's (1967) "cloak of competence" and use it as a sensitizing extant concept to further contribute to common patterns and variations associated with the social organization and experience of anticipatory socialization within medical professionalization in Canada (Haas and Shaffir 1987). The generic nature of social *assimilation* implicitly embedded within the experience of "the crock" and "cloak of competency," demonstrates how sensitizing concepts can migrate across social settings and offer greater generalizability. Will van den Hoonaard (2009; 2013), a friend of Billy's and an influential Dutch-Canadian qualitative sociologist, reminds us that we can bump up sensitizing folk concepts to higher orders of sociological analysis. He writes, "for this reason, sensitizing concepts are so highly transferable that they constitute a parallel model of explaining social behavior in other social settings" (van den Hoonaard 1997:74). In the next section, we explore the significance of the cloak of competence, demonstrating how sensitizing concepts can be applied, and extended, to varying empirical contexts. To do so, we refer to more recent work conducted by Billy's students.

### **Anticipatory Socialization: Extending Shaffirian Theory Work into the 21st Century**

When trying to understand people's experiences and interpretations of the world, Billy, clear with Blumerian conviction, expressed that we not con-



cern ourselves with individual internal psychological states, but rather explore what Becker (1970:276) calls, “social structure and its patterned effects on human experience.” Of course, in line with symbolic interactionism, Billy viewed social structure as an intersubjective and ongoing accomplishment. Gary Alan Fine (1991:164) once observed that “it is not that individuals cannot act as they wish. It is simply that they do not, knowing what they know of the world, whose forces are accepted by the self.” This approach to social structure again exemplifies the one Billy embraced; one that is not antagonistic to social structure *per se*, but one which takes seriously people’s understandings of the social contexts they are situated within.

Billy’s reflections on qualitative research evidence the saliency of these influences, perhaps most singularly Thomas and Thomas (1928). For instance, Billy (Shaffir 1999:684-685) writes:

the most credible understanding of social phenomena requires the researcher to discover the actor’s definition of the situation—that is, his or her perception and interpretation of reality—and that such discovery and understanding are best accomplished by placing oneself in the other person’s situation.

Note here that Billy is not suggesting *sympathy* for the participants one studies. Numerous interactionist examinations involve engagement with criminal populations that researchers may not necessarily sympathize with (Hamm and Ferrell 1998). Here Billy is suggesting the methodological significance of *empathy*, or what Cooley (1964) refers to as “objective introspection,” which is best achieved through a sustained embedding of oneself with the population under study so one can account for various perspectives and forms of social organization.

Several of Billy’s former students have taken his agnostic interactionist approach towards generating theory into the field; many successfully applying and modifying various sensitizing concepts that explore the lived experiences and social processes through which social structure is mediated and accomplished (Puddephatt, Shaffir, and Kleinknecht 2009a). Often the focus of our research was within occupations and organizations, perhaps based on Hughes’ influence on Billy. We recall Billy recommending to us Hughes’ classic work *The Sociological Eye* (1971). Billy was not “pushing” Hughes in a forceful way, but recommended we take a look at Hughes based on our interest in studying professions and occupations. The following case studies are not an exhaustive list, but a brief snapshot of Billy’s legacy at McMaster University in the agnostic-interactionist perspective on occupations and organizations.

Antony Puddephatt, a Canadian interactionist who studied with Robert Prus at the University of Waterloo and Billy Shaffir at McMaster University, took us under his wing during our first year of graduate school and showed us first-hand the inner workings of Shaffirian theory-work. Our reconceptualization of the *cloak of competence* is quintessential agnostic-interactionism. Originally coined by Edgerton (1967), Billy and Jack Haas use the *cloak of competence* concept to describe how medical students attempt to manage and elicit favorable impressions from critical audiences (i.e., patients, medical school evaluators, and each other) during their medical student role performance. These critical situations select for a feigned competency that results in successful reputational outcomes during the ritual ordeal of professionalization (Hass and Shaffir 1977; 1982a; 1982b; 1984; 1987). Extending this generic social process into oc-

occupational subcultures within the sociology of education and inequality, we argue that being overly concerned with managing other's impressions of one's competent sense of self, under conditions of intense asymmetrical interaction, can trend towards unhealthy manifestations of conformity. Indeed, reflecting even more widely on the graduate student subculture, we worked with Puddephatt on a response to an argument by Gabrielle Ferrales and Gary Alan Fine (2005) that suggested ways graduate students should conduct effective face work towards their supervisors in order to generate a positive impression. Our argument was, again, that too much concern among graduate students putting on airs of competence would produce anxieties and eventually supervisory problems (Puddephatt, Kelly, and Adorjan 2006). For example, the subsidized Canadian post-secondary system reflects a relatively flattened hierarchy compared to the heavily institutionalized symbolic capital found in the winner-takes-all ivy league privatized schooling markets in the United States. These structural differences highlight international variation in the socialization of graduate students. We found that otherwise insipid mistakes occurring in the classroom and during scholarly meetings tend to be much more costly evaluation rituals within elite social structures (i.e., top-tier American schools). A student's fear of making a mistake and appearing incompetent in the co-presence of faculty gives way to a toxic culture of learning that encourages *deceptive interactional routines* and inauthentic, cynical character contests. Such pathological forms of impression management may stunt creativity and innovation at the highest levels of graduate training. We call this occupational over-socialization process the *cloak of conformity* (Puddephatt, Kelly, and Adorjan 2006; Leigh 2017:614).

Arthur McLuhan, another student of Billy's, further extends this to consider the flip side of the concept, a *cloak of incompetency* within the sociology of everyday life (McLuhan et al. 2014; see also McLuhan, this volume). It is thus clear that a core sensitizing concept like "anticipatory socialization" can be refined to pinpoint certain behaviors found in particular organizational contexts, such as a "cloak of competency." The extension and in some cases reappropriation of the concept, for instance, of how a "cloak of incompetency" may be salient as a presentational strategy in everyday life, indicates the value of broad agnostic interactionism that is playful with theoretical concepts and their application.

Many of Billy's students conducted similar agnostic-interactionist research into occupations and organizations. For example, Carrie Sanders (2014) uncovered how a "hierarchy of credibility" contributed to what she terms an *ideological disconnect* between the intended design of emergency technology and its in-situ application by police, fire, and emergency medical services—ultimately resulting in the ambiguity and subsequent impediment of effective emergency interoperability. Santin and Kelly (2017) discuss how updated airline security policies after 9/11 provided female employees with new corporate guidelines that acted as normative resources in which they could draw on to empower themselves to be more assertive when interacting with untoward passengers. They observe that flight attendants now have more discretion in defining situations in which security trumps courtesy. Such new levels of autonomy not only reduced the emotional labor of female flight attendants, but also leveled the playing field within the gendered division of labor. Prior to 9/11, male flight attendants enjoyed a more pronounced status shield. Santin and Kelly termed this leveling process *role*

*shielding*. This concept links micro interaction and workplace emotion with broader cultural institutional change.

Scott Grills recently completed a book titled *Management Motifs: An Interactionist Approach for the Study of Organizational Interchange*. The book sensitizes us to *management* as a generic concept that can be extended across a number of organizational and occupations settings as everyday office related activities in which individuals or groups target others in an attempt to shape their experiences. *Doing management work*, *management teamness*, and *inaction as social action* are but a few key conceptual tools that help interactionists uncover and understand management as practical accomplishment (Grills and Prus 2019). Steve Kleinknecht explains how defeated politicians use “deflection rhetoric” as a strategy to save face, cope with unanticipated loss, and disengage from the political arena. They term these processes “un-becoming” (Shaffir and Kleinknecht 2005). The value of “front line” empirical research with occupational actors is also highlighted in Ricciardelli, Adorjan, and Peters’ (2019) research examining Canadian correctional officer experiences under changing youth justice legislative contexts. The value of this research is in pinpointing the perceptions and working experiences of correctional officers working within closed-custody youth facilities before and after the implementation of the Youth Criminal Justice Act. Overcoming the often misconstrued structural bias of interactionism and its neglect of power, Sherryl Kleinman and Matthew Ezzell (2012) studied how upper-level campus administrators create positive public perception and control programs associated with reproductive rights with mission statements that hide powerful right-wing influence by framing the debate around the culturally acceptable rhetoric of “both sides,” “tolerance,” and “The Law.”

Billy illuminated the sociological insight that power is both a process to be empirically investigated and an intersubjective accomplishment. We are indebted to this approach since it enabled us to inform our doctoral research using these crucial insights. Both of us were inspired by a broader interactionist perspective on power and situated knowledge, so our focus became the *understanding of understandings* of people, reflected in their lived experiences, what they say, and what they do (Ibarra and Adorjan 2018). What’s more, we learned to attend to the negotiation processes and unintended consequences that constitute these emergent understandings within social interactions (Kelly 2017).

It was perhaps inevitable that the formative experiences encountered in Billy’s qualitative methods course led us to one of his colleagues, and another one of our mentors at McMaster University’s department of sociology—Dorothy Pawluch. Her branch of sociology, social constructionism (Woolgar and Pawluch 1985), led us towards an agnostic examination of social problems (Adorjan et al. 2012; Spector and Kitsuse 2017). Over the years, Billy and Dorothy’s students have produced what can be considered agnostic interactionist studies, including our own which center on discourses of youth crime and youth crime “stat wars” (Adorjan 2011a; 2011b), and ethnographic research on activist engineer-scientists’ attempts to mitigate climate change by developing and managing green technology with corporate, governmental, and lay end-users (Kelly 2011; 2017).

### **Discussion: The Value of Shaffirian Theory-Work**

Shaffirian Theory-Work is inspired by a Hughesian agnosticism towards “armchair” theorization that

his student, Howard Becker (1998:4), succinctly expresses in relation to his mentor:

Like Hughes, I have a deep suspicion of abstract sociological theorizing; I regard it as at best a necessary evil, something we need in order to get our work done but, at the same time, a tool that is likely to get out of hand, leading to a generalized discourse largely divorced from the day-to-day digging into the social field that constitutes sociological science.

In this paper, we have argued that Billy's lineage within the Chicago School of Sociology, grounded in a few core SI tenants, makes for an ambivalent and playful approach towards theorization in the field. We further demonstrate how Billy passed on this interpretive theory-method toolkit to students who continue to study occupations and organizations from his agnostic-interactionist perspective. We call this line of qualitative sociological inquiry *Shaffirian Theory-Work*. And while Billy encouraged a marked playfulness when it came to theory, his approach was still very systematic. The agnosticism applies as a tonic against overconfidence we may have in a theory *before* applying it to our research findings. It guards against being dogmatically wed to any particular theory/theoretical concept, but is flexible enough to apply, refute, or modify the theory given emerging linkages (analytically induced) to broader analytical sociological frameworks of explanation. Agnosticism, here wedded to interactionist perspectives on studying social life, eschews abstract theorization distantly removed from member's everyday experience. Howard Becker, for instance, advocated for a flexible theoretical approach within a qualitative methodology that is "open to multiple possibilities, discovered in the course of immersion in social life"; and further warned us to avoid theory built "on the basis of a priori con-

siderations, the truth of an already established abstract philosophical position" (Pessin 2017:104; also see Becker and Pessin 2006). This approach helps engender discovery, often unanticipated, in the field (Albas and Albas 2009; Puddephatt, Shaffir, and Kleinknecht 2009b). It emboldens students to not rest on their theoretical laurels, which merely recycles established academic doxa. It encourages scientific innovation, which often occurs when we explore what other scholars assume to be banal, uneventful, or mundane (Becker 1998:96).

It is also important to note that despite half a century shaping the interactionist landscape, Howard Becker does not believe a researcher can find a "Serious Theory" in his work and he would be disappointed if one could. He states, "What you could find would be a series of general ideas that oriented my research and writing about the various empirical topics I took up. A vague interest in a sort of Blumerian social psychology that could account for how people communicated and got it together to act jointly." The "theories" that he claims really affected him consciously, the ones he picked up and used, were almost entirely borrowed from people who studied the arts (i.e., Leonard Meyer, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, George Kubler [Becker 2016, personal communication]). This proves once more that a healthy agnosticism towards sociological theory sensitizes us to unexpected reservoirs of creativity; inspirational sources that can move us in and out of our own experiences in the field and those of our participants and the social scientific literature in general.

It is well known that Everett Hughes disliked social theory (see: Fine 1995). But, he nevertheless built outstanding scholarship around the conceptualization of ethnographic data. Roughly fifty years ago,

Everett Hughes' students provided him with a Festschrift. They made it very clear that their mentor was not completely averse to theorization. And today our dedication to Billy sounds eerily similar to what Howard Becker wrote of Hughes:

It may be because Everett needs concrete materials to anchor his magnificent capacity for conceptualization that he has sponsored field research among his students, and done field research himself. His mind is not an empiricist's, careful about facts, insistent that they not be smudged with speculation, skeptical of interpretation or theory. Rather, he has an extremely strong conceptual mind which operates with the materials of concrete reality, which functions by relating apparently disparate observations, presenting them in new perspectives, producing frameworks and concepts for organizing and integrating them. He prefers to develop analyses which retain complexity; to find value, at times delight, in variety...His general aim is to identify the systematic underlying the various; not by simplifying, but by making clear what is essential. We count it our good fortune to have studied with Everett Hughes. [Becker et al. 1968:x]

The *agnostic interactionism* that originated with Everett Hughes at the University of Chicago, perfected

by Howard Becker at Northwestern, and further articulated with Billy Shaffir at McMaster, continues to prosper within Canada and beyond.

Sitting in Billy's graduate qualitative methods class, we witnessed and began practicing first-hand his type of agnostic interactionism. Baked into this theory-method cake, is a distinct blend of comparative methods and generic sensitizing concept formation that we traced back to the Chicago School of Sociology and the occupations and organizational research conducted by Everett C. Hughes and Howard Becker. Billy passed on to us a symbolic interactionism that is agnostic towards theorization. Our interpretation of Billy's *theory-method toolkit* brings attention to subtle aspects of his implicit theorization. Our understanding of his conceptual playfulness and flexibility made us more cognizant of the importance of data being grounded in the emergent and processual nature of group life. As an agnostic interactionist, Billy helped us sit comfortably in this gap; not to fear it and rush to silence it with a pre-configured theoretical framework. We are fortunate to have witnessed and be guided by Billy's flexible and deft touch with sociological theory within his methods course, leaving an indelible mark on our own teaching and research style to this day.

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## Citation

Kelly, Benjamin and Michael Adorjan. 2020. "Agnostic Interactionism and Sensitizing Concepts in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Developing Shaffirian Theory-Work in Ethnographic Research." *Qualitative Sociology Review* 16(2):76-91. Retrieved Month, Year ([http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive\\_eng.php](http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive_eng.php)). DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.16.2.07>