PUBLICIZING AND MEASURING THE VOLUNTEER SPIRIT: HOPE AND HARM IN THE ERA OF BIO-POLITICS

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Asking ethnographers' usual questions is more urgent than ever. We have, for a long time, been preoccupied by divisions between different formal and informal organization, between face-to-face and distant relations, between private and public, state, market, family, and all of modernity's other borders. Lately, it seems as if everyone has gotten in on the act of demystifying these boundaries: The World Bank and similar organizations says they sponsor "grassroots, sustainable, participatory democratic, civic" development (Thomas and Boli 1999, e.g.); the US government, Coca Cola and The Disney Corporation plan and pay for American teenagers to do "local, self-organized volunteer work (see showyourcharacter.com for Disney's version!);" good nursing homes and preschools have to measure and schedule time for unscheduled time and have to plan spontaneous conversation and make sure it happens. In all these ways, boundaries of institution and scale look as if they are collapsing. These are precisely the borders that we sociologists have been decrying as "artificial" and hypocritical all these years! Ordinary people (as opposed to ethnographers, who are usually not one bit ordinary!) are puzzling over the borders now, too, and sometimes challenging them. Should we, ethnographers and critical sociologists, cheer?

In Snowy Prairie (the pseudonymous city in the middle of the US that I studied), no officials wanted to act like bureaucrats, because they recognized that bureaucracies don't operate according to formal rules, and are too distant from grassroots, local knowledge of people and places. In a way, it is as if critical sociology of the past 150 years won. Has it, and should we cheer?

No, not too much. Maybe a little. Just because organizations *try* to run on the principle that all frontiers can be transgressed does not make it so. Just saying that all knowledge is local does not make it so. Just saying that international NGO's can make democracy happen from the top down does not make it so, no matter how hard the aid workers try. Something else happens instead, and while it is not always awful, it is certainly not the

“grassroots democracy” that these organizations have in mind. My questions are, “Why can’t people just make any organization do whatever they want it do? What happens, for example, when organizations try to make these divisions disappear?” and more generally, “What is the connection between, on the one hand, the stories that organizations tell themselves and others about their actions, and, on the other hand, their everyday practices?”

My case is a set of US youth civic engagement and afterschool[1] programs that aim to blend different forms of togetherness: These programs get money from non-governmental organizations, corporations, and government agencies. Organizers aim for a "family-like" atmosphere. They aim to encourage grassroots “civic” participation in two ways: by making the kids plan and carry out volunteer projects, and by inviting adult volunteers to come help in the after-school programs. Through numerous public events, they aim to “celebrate diversity” and “tradition.” They aim to change kids’ habits, desires--racist feelings, love of junk food, dislike of exercise, and to encourage them to “bond” with distant others. Some of these youth programs are for poor kids, and those aim to keep them out of jail and in school, not pregnant, not taking drugs.

The organizers’ assumption is that if they *try hard enough*, they can make government, big NGO, voluntary association, family, and tradition all blend harmoniously here. But they can’t do it! Why not? Ethnography can reveal the connections and disconnections between local, familiar, “carnal” practices, on the one hand, and the programs’ distant audiences, that help organize people’s bodies and environments so that the practices feel immediate and direct,[2] on the other. These youth programs survived on mostly short-term grants from NGO’s and the government, so the organizers constantly had to communicate

[1] The school day ends in the early afternoon and there is no universal after-school care for kids; parents pay privately or rely on organizations like the ones I studied, that scramble for money from multiple, temporary sources

[2] I take this as an application of Wacquant’s analysis in Body and Soul, asking how organizations organize people’s bodies and feelings. But to grasp my cases, I need to add something to his analysis, because there is more slippage in the youth programs than in his boxing gym; the process of shaping bodies doesn’t work as well, because there are so many crisscrossed organizations pulling people’s bodies in different, incompatible, sometimes impossible directions vis-à-vis the environments in which the organizations operate.

quickly, in rapidly digestible formats, to distant publics, to demonstrate that their programs were worthy of public and charitable monies. But to do that required not just *translating* local, familiar carnal practices into measurable quantities; it also meant often *creating* practices that were already prepared—prepared the way primer prepares a wall for paint, flattening it and making it easy to use for any purpose. Below, or simultaneously with all of this, were *also* relationships and practices that stubbornly refused to be communicable to any distant audiences.

So, here are layers upon layers, of practical action, stories told about the action to faraway others, practices, stories, practices, all seeping into one another, all happening in different ways in different relationships, "sedimenting (Ricoeur 1998)" into patterns that members come to experience as solid. My job is to trace the patterns. What does this constant need to for publicity do to members' quotidian relationships?

Let's start with one example, and then go back to the questions of the conference, about how ethnographic research can have a relation with a "public." I think the answer is that the people in these organizations *themselves* felt nervous about their efforts at collapsing distinctions and communicating to all the different publics with their different exigencies. In our sensitivity to the ways that knowledge is both always local and never local, always in the present and always haunted by ghosts from the past, we can develop a new kind of critical sociology that we might call "moral ethnography."

The project thus gets beyond two poles that are common in sociological ethnographic studies: on the one hand, denunciation of bad global power that pollutes local relations, and, on the other hand celebrations of the little local folks who manage to stay human, "despite it all." We will come back to this distinction, between what a common thread in a lot of the ethnographers' work represented here vs. most ethnography.

Documenting the Volunteer Spirit for Many Distant Audiences

Youth program organizers try hard not to act like (their image of) bureaucrats: they need to show that they were making the kids become self-motivated, creative, autonomous, not just making them into passive clients.[3] Government-sponsored and NGO-sponsored grant application often demand evidence of local grassroots involvement: in numbers of hours spent volunteering, number of people served, number of adult volunteers involved in the youth programs, number of youth volunteers, tons of food delivered to the needy. This volunteer work has to happen at the right moment in the NGO's and government's yearly budget planning, to influence legislators while they plan the following year's budget. Some of these programs were for impoverished youth; they also had to document that their programs prevented teen pregnancies, school drop-outs, drug abuse, and crime, because these programs were "prevention programs" for "at-risk youth."

Teens often overheard these public justifications and took them very much to heart: when asked to speak "from personal experience" at local events, they often cited statistics. "1 out of 4 African American males graduate from high school in this city," said one black boy at a Juneteenth celebration, or, in response to the question, "What can you do to serve your community," one said, "I can be an example to others by not going to jail."

Unlike "classic volunteer groups (Hustinx 2001)"—unfunded, local, face-to-face little groups whose members band together to accomplish something that is in all of their collective interest--these top-down organizations have to make their charity work very visible, so the kids' volunteer work –the sign of their autonomy[4]—must come into being in quantifiable formats. In other words, for the purposes of publicity, "autonomy" is okay, but only if it can be measured and made explicit, in rapidly digestible formats, so that distant publics can assess it quickly.

So, measuring volunteer hours is important. This typical meeting of a county and NGO-sponsored service club is all about the forms that kids have to fill out so they can get

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[3] The Search Institute, for example, is an NGO that sponsors "assets-based community development," with a list of 40 "assets" other than money on which your community can "build community," and many of these include volunteer work.

[4] This need to make recipients of aid appear autonomous is a theme discussed in Pattaroni 2006. I borrow somewhat from his analysis, here (though inevitably distorting it).

credit for "President's 100 Hour Challenge," a national award (established by Clinton in the 1990's) for youth who complete 100 hours of volunteer work. It's a typical meeting: more time is devoted to the question of how to measure the hours spent volunteering than to any other question:

> An NGO worker asks, "Would you remember to send the form in?"
> Some of the eight teens in the meeting answer: No.
> Another adult: What if you got a reminder? What if you forgot to sign the form? who'll pay for copying and postage? Would it just be an extra burden, after having already done the volunteer work, to have to fill out a form? What if you couldn't find them. How can we distribute them to you? We just want to encourage reflection. What if some of your hours didn't get recorded? What if you forgot to send in the sheets? Should there be an event mid-year, to give recognition to youth who've performed fifty hours of service? 30 hours? 20 hours? Who will record this data?

Teens got volunteer hours credit for entering the data about volunteering. If the work was unpleasant, adults let the teens count the hours double. Since some university scholarships also require volunteer work, kids could get credit for each hour in two different programs at once.

And teens got credit for "volunteer hours" for attending meetings deciding how to document and count volunteer hours!

The organizations were trying hard to tell a story about their action: that it was voluntary, free, spontaneous, grassroots. But the grassroots, spontaneous "volunteer spirit" comes to life here through the "medium (Joas 1996; Dewey 1926; Quere 2001, e.g.)" of many distant publics' requirements and accounting devices (Boltanski and Thevenot 1991). Even if the accounting devices don't tell people how to act in a bureaucracy (as 50 years of sociology has argued: Gouldner 1958, Blau 1954, Garfinkel 1967, e.g.), the need to appeal to formal rules is, itself, a form of action. As this example shows, it takes a lot of time, if nothing else.

This institutional setting is not the usual medium for grassroots volunteerism. So, some youth are confused when they first join, because they don't realize that the main agenda is to display volunteer work for many publics and funders—one new teen, for example,

asked if the group kept “records” and another responded that the organizers “record” your volunteer hours for you. The new kid replied, saying that he meant “records” like “notes,” so that the group could learn from past mistakes.

Some new kids are confused when they are called “leaders” when they have never lead anything, till they realize that there is a way of “doing things with words” in these groups: if you call someone a leader, the hope is that they will become one. By learning this “group style (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003),” kids quickly learned how to make “volunteering” and “accounting” play hide-and-seek.

Soon, this hide-and-seek game becomes predictable—kids learn a method of managing the situation so as to appear to be autonomously volunteering, even when they know they are not, to show that their afterschool programs are doing a good job taking care of them, so that their programs will get more grants.

The programs inadvertently taught kids a great deal about how social service agencies work, how to make public appeals for funding, how to plan and count relationships that can’t really be planned and counted, how to think about statistical predications of your personal fate. They learned that government money funded the loving relationships that they had with some adult organizers. Here was a lesson about the connection between love and social conditions that a feminist would love (see Tronto 1996, e.g.)-- not the lesson they were supposed to learn.

At the same time, the programs inadvertently cultivated relationships that were impossible to package neatly for distant audiences. A small group of kids in one after-school program would gather with their adult leader while eating, teasing each other, putting food in each others’ hair, gossiping about each other—and *at the same* time, planning public events or fundraisers for their program, making a list of phone calls that needed to be done, taking notes on the proceedings, and making a schedule. One adult organizer, Emily, for example, knew how fast her favorite kids’ hair grew! Bringing those four favorite kids to every civic event was not acceptable, however; it did not fit

with the story that the programs were supposed to communicate to their many publics; Emily was supposed to be making *all thirty* kids in her group into “leaders,” not just her four favorite kids. So when a city official told her not to bring “the usual suspects” to every public event. Emily was furious. While “numbers of children participating” could easily be communicated quickly, to distant public, evidence of her intimacy with these few kids was not (just as it is impossible to describe quickly in a talk, as I am trying to do here…). Here, as in many moments, participants’ emotions guide us, telling us where members themselves feel a twinge, a bad disconnection in the circuit of stories and practices.

These organizations’ methods for making the relationships public became, themselves, part of the relationships. Sometimes, this need to create close-up relationships that will look good to distant audiences is harmful. For example, the programs have to invite adult volunteers to come to the afterschool programs. Adult volunteers’ presence shows to distant funders that these organizations really are grassroots and community-supported. But the adult volunteers’ efforts failed, because they simply didn’t have enough time with the kids—two hours per week for a few months, usually. It was even worse when white adults tried to get instantly intimate with black and Latino kids whose lives were foreign to the volunteers. Teens often complained about the useless and time-consuming volunteers—some kids hid in a basement room to get their homework done away from the overly friendly volunteers! Adult employees agreed, but they could not explain it quickly to the distant funders who were all so very eager for “grassroots” volunteers’ presence.

These organizations also aimed to promote “traditional cultures,” through food, colorful clothes. But, there was a level of “culture” that could not be communicated as quickly to distant audiences, that caused trouble in the youth programs. But it could not be “celebrated” as “diversity.” [5] Members of the local majority’s ethnicity (white, Protestant,

[5] Like Emily’s knowledge of the rate of hair growth on her kids’ arms, this intuitive set of practices *still exists*, despite the silly public presentations (and, the silly presentations, in turn, had their own unsaid, implicit way of doing things: in them, people learned that “appreciating cultural diversity” meant learning that there were differences, and tolerating them without trying to understand them—an okay message, but

descendents of northern European countries, tall) prized indirect speech, for example. Often other people spoke more directly, thus offending the indirect speakers. Anthropologists (Goodwin and Goodwin, 1985, Gumperz 1988, Philipsen 1988, Meyerhoff 1985, Gershon 2003, e.g.) describe these patterns of directness, indirectness, knowing how to say thank you, how to praise and how to tease (often salient but unrecognized at international conferences!). They are consistent patterns that take a long time to learn, and are hard to measure and display quickly for distant audiences.

Inuit mothers' milk is so full of toxins from the Inuits' "traditional, natural" diet of animal fat from the ultra-polluted northern seas, it would be classified as "toxic waste" if it were not so "natural" and "traditional." Enjoying "unnatural" foods and living in racially segregated neighborhoods felt natural to youth. The programs are funded partly to change those desires and feelings of comfort--yet without making the kids uncomfortable and without criticizing their parents, or the corporations and schools that fed them the "unnatural foods." To naturalize the critique, organizers had to posit some *other* food as more natural—but then we're back to the Inuit problem. There are multiple of ways of extending outwards from the "natural," "local," incarnate.

In all relationships, there is *always* an indescribable layer of experience. People have to coordinate their intuitions and visceral feelings, whether working in a cubicle (Dubois 2003) or organizing political activism (Auyero 1998) or organizing an afterschool program. They need an exquisite sense of timing, of, in Auyero's study, for example, *when* and *how* to say thank you. An etiquette book could never specify such unwritten, un-write-able intuitions.

So, ethnographers desperately need to notice people's "feel for the game," but we need more, if we want to grasp how people coordinate action. In the youth programs, participants have to know how to talk about and valorize their love of Coolwhip and McDonalds, or their fondness for racist jokes, differently in different situations. The face-to-face relationships are both "here" and "not here (Glaeser 2003, e.g.). Face-to-face

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not the one that the organizations hoped to give).

relations extend backwards in time (officials are haunted [Viaud-Gayet 2004] by the ghost of the bureaucrat), and forward in time (the volunteer may easily leave tomorrow; the paid employee will probably stay on site for a year; the parent will probably never completely leave), making planning possible. And face-to-face relationships come with a whole entourage of audiences, visible and invisible. One face-to-face relationship extends to *other* face-to-face situations through implicit metaphors that allow participants to treat the two as "similar," even though the details are never completely similar. Implicit "typifications (Schutz 1956, Cicourel 1985, Cefai 2001, Smith 2005, e.g.)" tell people "who we are together" and "what are we doing together" allowing people to make these extensions, to know what their relationship is "an example of," so they can know how long to expect it to last, and when to expect and show gratitude, what to hide, what to say, what goes without saying.

The ethnographers' puzzle is that there are often, in any organization (but especially in ones like these, where people are intentionally trying to make their organization operate *not* like a bureaucracy; but think also of dot.com industry workplaces, that emphatically claim *not* to operate like normal businesses) *many* possible typifications, in competition. Members translate between their embodied, practical knowledge of the situation, and the stories that their organizations tell to their various publics (including their own members). While the stories constantly switch, participants nonetheless usually find relatively steady ground.

Ethnography can discover the qualities of those gaps, showing what members take for granted about their relationships and environments what they already know to be in play ("background knowledge," "prudence," in the classical sense, a feel for the relationship and the situation), the stories they tell (the usual stuff of cultural sociology—scripts, schemas, justifications[6]), and how they try to make it fit the various stories ("group style").

[6] Boltanski and Thevenot (1991) do the first two—embodied knowledge + justifications. But "group style" shows how organizations make the two feel coherent, in patterned ways. In other words, it's not just improvisation when people balance between what they know in their bodies and how they justify action before larger publics: there are predictable ways of doing the balancing act.

To ask how people themselves connect the face-to-face and the distant together, you need to ask how people work actively to "typify their relationships—how they develop patterned methods for ignoring some aspects of the relationships and highlighting others, methods that makes the action feel coherent, appropriate, "prudent." You need to ask what publics they have to speak to, and what publics they imagine. In tiny steps, you need to ask what it is that they take for granted in their immediate environs, and what stories—those demanded from distant audiences, those preferred by members themselves—run into impossible friction from participants' built-in, bodily wisdom of the situation: when, for example, the adult volunteers tried to get up-close and intimate with kids whom they would know for only a few dozen hours; or when Emily became furious when asked to bring someone other than "the usual suspects."

Most sociological ethnography manages to miss BOTH the carnal aspect of groups' existence AND the story-telling aspect.

On the one hand, on the side that misses bodies, timing, "devices," ensembles of props and stages, are studies of cultural sociology that *say* they are "ethnographies," but really rely on interviews (on site, perhaps, but interviews nonetheless), so they can't show how people create *situations*, in motion, in relation to the "things" in the environment –the architecture, smells, account books, places to sit, etc. Here, too, are neo-institutionalist studies that treat "schemas, rules, scripts," as if they dictate organizations' actions. On this same side are some recent studies that say they do the "extended case method" but often offer little direct observations of subjects' timing, or movements in space, or use of "things," or jokes, or much speech at all, other than interviews. This reveals a lack of attention to the "how," to embodied patterns of relationships—relations that members experience as emotionally and morally compelling, partly because of the varied ways that they themselves "extend" their own cases.

On the other hand are studies that glorify the face-to-face, breathlessly showing that face-to-face relationships really do have a local order! That the local folks really are human

despite oppression! I don't need to say why romanticizing the local folk misses what is interesting—that is, the constant extensions that people themselves make (see Glaeser 2001 on this). Even ordinary people can't avoid noticing connections between face-to-face relationships and distant ones. In some of the recent "extended case method" studies, the narrator "extends" to only one set of "conditions." In a way, this is just as bad as a study that does not extend at all, because in any one organization, there are often *many* ways that participants themselves extend their own case, not just one that is always in play. There are often many implicit and explicit audiences, each one demanding different extensions, inviting participants to travel on different metaphors in time and space. Ethnography can trace members' multiple methods of extension (this raises the problem of narrative form, though: how can we write about a reality that is ambiguous with our realist writing style? But I'll save that for another paper).

Ethnography is the ONLY art that can intervene in a policy discussion here, in ways that could be both convincing and accurate, as we can show problems that participants feel but cannot name publicly, because it would be rude, or because the problem goes without saying, or because the problem is a problem in one of their "extensions" but not the others.

Ironically, then, extended case method and the overly local studies of streetcorners are really two sides of the same coin: they both ignore the ways that members themselves make sense of the multiple, overlapping, discordant possible connections between face-to-face and distant, local and global. Without recognizing the problems that people of scale that people themselves recognize, it is easy for the ethnographer to locate a nice, solid list of social problems, and to ally himself with the oppressed of the earth while simultaneously pretending to know better than they do. For the kind of ethnography I propose, you have to work harder, pragmatically following members as they themselves navigate through their own multiple publics, where the *only* wrong way to do ethnography is to presume only one live connection between the face-to-face and the distant. These multiple, shifting publics sorely need ethnographers, to help them puzzle through these shifting borders.