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“Membership in these various and fluid forms of community can enable West African traders to cope with the deep cultural alienation they experience in New York City.”

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This article focuses on the relevance of the notion of community to contemporary urban studies. The results of a six-year ethnographic study of West African traders in New York City suggest that the notion of community—however problematic—is one worth retaining. Given a conception of community that is refined to confront the complexities of postmodernity, the authors suggest, the social scientist is able to demonstrate how macro-forces (globalization, immigration, informal economies, and state regulation) affect the lives of individuals living in the fragmented transnational spaces that increasingly make up contemporary social worlds. This premise is reinforced through the presentation of ethnographic data that demonstrate how contemporary dispersed communities of West Africans in New York provide economic, social, and cultural resources that enable many, though not all, West African traders to cope with the cultural alienation of “city life.”

The notion of community has long been central to the ethnographic enterprise. In sociology, the landmark study of community was Robert and Helen Lynd’s *Middletown* (1929). In their highly descriptive book, however, the Lynds did not attempt to construct a theory of community. Robert Redfield took up that task in the 1940s and 1950s when he published *The Folk Culture of Yucatan* (1941) and *The Little Community* (1955). Redfield depicted the community of Teplotzlan as bounded, harmonious, and homogenous. His work inspired the criticism of Oscar Lewis who had studied the same community but found a very different kind of society. Where Redfield uncovered harmony, homogeneity, and social adjustment, Lewis found violence, sociopolitical schisms, and social maladjustment (see Lewis 1951). As Sherry Ortner (1997) has recently pointed out, Lewis’s criticism still rings true to contemporary scholars who have, for the past fifteen years, underscored the fragmentation and hybridity of socio-cultural processes and organizations. Although the concept of community has been plagued with epistemological and conceptual problems,
Ortner thinks it is a notion well worth preserving in the era of globalized, transnational settings. For her,

the importance of community studies is this: such studies have the virtue of treating people as contextualized social beings. They portray the thickness of people’s lives, the fact that people live in a world of relationships as well as a world of abstract forces and disembodied images. (pp. 63-64)

In this article, we attempt to extend Ortner’s (1997) insights to dispersed communities of West African street vendors in New York City. Several of the emergent “postcommunities” that Ortner identified conform to community forms found among West African traders in New York City. Congregating at the African market on 125th Street or now at the Malcolm Shabazz Harlem market, West African traders have constructed an “invented community” of “African brothers” linked by shared economic pursuits and Africanity. The traders also participate in what Ortner called translocal communities. Despite being dispersed over great distances, they are linked through common interests like religion or ethnicity. As mobile merchants who follow the circuit of African American and Third World cultural festivals, West African traders from New York City form periodic links of support and friendship with fellow Africans as they travel across the United States. They are also linked to their families and to economic networks back home in West Africa. Another form of community in which the traders participate is a community of mind—a community engendered primarily through Islam.1 No matter where they are, West African traders, most of whom are Muslims, try to pray five times a day and obey the various dietary and behavioral dictates of Islam. One of the central themes of Islam, in fact, is the “community of faithful,” the Ummah (see Ortner 1997, 68-75; see also Connerton 1989). The themes of this community of the mind are reinforced through daily prayer, daily behavior toward others, and Jumma services during which localized communities of believers are asked to assemble at the Friday mosque. During these services, the imam delivers readings from the Qu’ran and sometimes speaks to the faithful about the values of their religion.

Membership in these various and fluid forms of community can enable West African traders to cope with the deep cultural alienation they experience in New York City. Consider briefly the case of Moussa Boureima, a West African trader from Niger, who has sold caps, gloves,
and scarves at the Malcolm Shabazz Harlem market since 1994. He suffers from rheumatism and back pain but is hesitant to go to a hospital or see a physician. As an undocumented immigrant, he distrusts public agencies, which will ask him for identification and perhaps compromise his precarious immigration status. He puts off seeing a physician out of shame and embarrassment; his English is poor, and the doctor may not be able to understand him. In New York City, his life is socially, culturally, and linguistically alien to him. How does Moussa Boureima cope? In this article, we suggest that the degree of his adaptive success—his well-being—in New York City results from his cultural competence as well as from his ability to make use of support-system resources provided by various forms of West African communities.

Cultural competence, for us, refers to a person’s ability to adapt to an environment by making effective choices and plans and by controlling—as much as possible—the events and outcomes of daily life (Sansone and Berg 1993). Although community support systems have been shown to diminish feelings of loneliness, help resolve social problems, and buffer cultural dislocation, our data indicate that they afford only the potentiality for these outcomes. It is up to the individual to tap community resources—however they might be structured—to foster his or her well-being. Boureima, for example, can find help for his medical bills from informal associations constructed by his compatriots but only if he chooses to seek treatment.

DATA AND METHOD

The data on which this article is based were gathered between 1992 and 1998 in New York City. Over a six-year period, we conducted repeated informal interviews with a group of sixty-two male African traders. More detailed and extensive semistructured interviews were conducted with fifteen of these sixty-two traders. These resulted in highly detailed life histories. Future studies, we realize, would benefit from interviews with female traders. We also engaged in participant observation at the following field sites: 125th Street between Lenox and 7th Avenue, 116th Street and Lenox, Canal Street between Broadway and West Broadway, 14th Street between 7th and 6th Avenues, and in and around Rockefeller Center in midtown Manhattan.
Given the delicate legal status of many of the West African traders, we employed a gradual approach to fieldwork. Many of the traders we interviewed have been undocumented immigrants who sold counterfeit goods that violated trademark and/or copyright statues. Accordingly, the semistructured interviews were conducted toward the end of the project when a foundation of trust had been established. For the same reason, we have used pseudonyms to protect the privacy of the traders. In the remainder of this article, we attempt to demonstrate how dispersed community structures provide the framework for West African cultural adaptation to a global city like New York. More specifically, we document ethnographically what West African traders consider the major social problems of their city life in New York and how those problems shape their feelings of cultural isolation. In the concluding sections of the article, we attempt to identify community and individual factors that affect West African traders’ highly variable cultural adaptation to an alien environment.

**STATED CONCERNS**

At least one-half of the West African traders in New York City are part of the estimated 5 million undocumented immigrants who live in the United States (Ojito 1997). In reaction to economic downturns and political instability in West Africa, the majority of West African traders came to New York in the early 1990s. Many of the traders, who come mostly from Senegal, Mali, Niger, and The Gambia, have little if any formal education. Most of them live as single men in Harlem, the South Bronx, or Brooklyn. Many of the men, like Boureima, try to avoid hospitals, doctors, and nurses, not because they mistrust Western medicine, but because of their fear of U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) detainment and deportation. Although no West African trader in our project’s subject pool has been deported, nearly all of the undocumented traders have expressed fears of detention and detainment.

The reasons for these seemingly unfounded fears are clear-cut. Traders do not want to be sent home in disgrace, let alone languish in an INS detention center. During hundreds of conversations between August 1992 and March 1998, West African street vendors asked our
opinions on current events. Many of them read the *New York Post*. More of them got their news from television. Some of the traders watched the news in English; others tuned into a French-language station in New York City. During lulls in the market, they invariably discussed new cultural trends gleaned from MTV and periodically debated international, national, and local politics culled from local and cable news programs. These viewing habits have made them critically aware of the shifting U.S. attitudes toward immigration—especially the presence of undocumented immigrants in places like New York City. “Why are people so against us?” Boubé Mounkaila wondered.

They say that even though we don’t pay taxes, we use your services. We don’t. All we do is work, work and work to make money to send to our families. If there is a problem, we try to help each other. We are not criminals. We don’t rob or steal. Why not worry more about drug dealers and petty thieves than about hard-working people like us.

In the summer of 1995, there was much talk of immigration politics at the Malcolm Shabazz Harlem market. Traders expressed concern over Congress’s proposals that would bar the children of illegal immigrants from public schools and force public hospitals to report undocumented aliens seeking medical treatment. Mayor Giuliani’s sharp criticism of these proposals won the praise of West African traders. Giuliani, himself the son of immigrant parents, condemned both ideas. He said that to bar some forty thousand to sixty thousand students, whose parents are undocumented immigrants, from the public schools would create tens of thousands of new street kids, which would, in turn, increase crime. He also said that refusing to treat sick people in public hospitals was morally wrong. “It’s just out of a sense of decency,” he said. “I can’t imagine, even in parts of the country where views are harsher than they might be in New York, that they’re basically going to say, let people die” (Firestone 1995, A1, B2). Indeed, in 1985 former New York City mayor Ed Koch signed an executive order that prohibits city agencies from supplying information on a particular immigrant to the INS unless he or she is accused of a crime. The executive order remained in effect until 1998 when, despite Giuliani’s resistance, it was rescinded in federal court.

Mayor Giuliani’s public assurances about maintaining the confidentiality of undocumented immigrants seeking New York City services—especially at public hospitals—seem hollow in retrospect. Men like
Boureima continue to take such assurances with a grain of salt. Their overriding concern continues to be, Can they trust outsiders, people who they feel misunderstand them? Although several public officials seem to support the rights of immigrants, most Americans, from the standpoint of the West African street vendors in New York City, think immigrants pay no taxes and use up the ever-shrinking pot of public service resources. These antipathetic attitudes, they say, are clearly expressed in the way that the INS treats inmates at its detention centers.

In 1996, they often brought up the case of a West African detainee who received media attention—Fauziya Kasinga of Togo—because of her horrible treatment at an INS detention center. Kasinga left Togo to avoid being subjected to a clitoridectomy. Kasinga’s family, she reported, insisted she become the fourth wife of an older man who demanded her clitoris be removed. To escape these circumstances, Kasinga fled Togo and attempted to enter the United States with another woman’s passport bought from a Nigerian man in Dusseldorf, Germany. She thought that she would be granted asylum in the United States. Instead, the INS detained her immediately after her arrival at Newark Airport on December 17, 1994. They sent her to the infamous Esmor detention center in Elizabeth, New Jersey.

At Esmor, guards placed her in a windowless cold room and told her to strip off her clothes. Because she was menstruating, she asked to keep on her underwear, but the guard refused. She sat on the room’s toilet, shivering, and at one point she saw a male guard spying on her. Eventually, guards gave her a pair of sandals, both for the right foot, and a stained pair of underwear much too large for her. Because she violated a rule against using the showers before 6 A.M., which she did to perform ritual ablutions before the early morning Muslim prayer, guards put her in an isolation cell for five days. In June 1995, fights broke out at Esmor in protest of poor jail conditions and extended incarcerations. Guards teargassed and beat the detainees during the disturbance. The INS “issued a report after the melee that documented many of the abuses Ms. Kasinga said she had endured. The agency concluded that the poorly paid guards had treated the inmates with capricious cruelty” (Dugger 1996a, A1; 1996b, A1).

Following the Esmor incident, the INS moved Kasinga to York County prison, then to Lehigh County prison, both in Pennsylvania. In January 1996, the INS again moved her from Lehigh County prison back to York, where, due to a lack of space, Kasinga was put in
maximum security along with Americans convicted of drug dealing, robbery, and murder. At York, guards routinely strip-searched Kasinga. After close to two years of legal rankling, the INS finally released her in late April 1996, perhaps as a result of public sympathy for her case.

From the perspective of West African traders, especially if they are undocumented, the importance of this horror story about INS detention lies less in the specific details of the case than in the graphic descriptions of the brutal conditions of INS detention centers like Esmor. Although it is unlikely that undocumented traders, already in residence, would be treated as harshly as people detained for illegal entry to the United States, the graphic stories about INS detention make those traders extremely prudent in their dealings with outsiders.3

HOUSED FRUSTRATIONS

Since coming to New York City in September 1990, Boubé Mounkaila, whose robust health obviates the need for modern or traditional medical treatment, has lived in three apartments. For six weeks, he lived in a single-room occupancy (SRO) hotel in Chelsea, which he disliked. “Too many roaches and bandits,” he said, “and the place smelled bad, too.”4 Since then, he has lived in Harlem, first in a building on 126th Street and then in an apartment on Lenox between 126th and 127th street. He lived alone in this rundown apartment building, the hallways of which stank of stale onions and cabbage. His neighbors included two other Nigerian immigrants who lived on his floor, a Senegalese immigrant married to a Puerto Rican woman who was a U.S. citizen, two Senegalese merchants, and a large Puerto Rican family. He lived in a one-room, second story walk-up that had no toilet or bath or shower facilities. Each floor featured one toilet and one bath/shower situated at the end of a dark hallway.

In 1994, Boubé said he paid his landlord four hundred dollars per month for the room, a sum that did not include utilities. At that time, he sent a monthly money order of five hundred dollars to support his wife, daughter, and his mother. This sum also helped to support his two sisters, their husbands, and their children. His father had died some years earlier. These expenses created a considerable financial strain. Like that of most peddlers, Boubé’s concern about money has seasonal ups and downs. At the 125th Street market, he might take in seven hundred to
eight hundred dollars on the weekends in the spring, summer, and fall. During the week, however, he might gross two hundred on a good day. In the winter, these sums decline precipitously. He also expressed concern over his living conditions.

“They take advantage of us,” he said.

Look at this place. A small room without a toilet. And I pay $400 per month plus utilities. They know that many of us don’t have papers, and they expect us to pay in cash and not cause problems. What choice do we have?

Boubé wanted to move to a two- or three-room apartment with a bath and toilet, but his monthly expenses prevented him from doing so. “I want to leave here,” he said, “but when I finish paying for food, gas, electricity, telephone, inventory, parking and car insurance, and family expenses, there’s not much left.”

Boubé was finally able to move to his current two-room apartment, which is on Lenox Avenue between 126th and 127th Streets in January 1995. According to Boubé, a local entrepreneur who respects Africans owns the building. In March 1995, Boubé pointed out a man dressed in a black leather jacket, dress slacks, and a black Stetson who was getting into his Jaguar. “That’s my landlord,” Boubé said. “He likes Africans.” He explained that when he moved in two months earlier, he had had some cash-flow problems. He needed to get his phone turned back on and had been having difficulty paying his rent. The new landlord, however, was willing to accept four hundred dollars per month for a space considerably larger than his previous apartment. Sensing that Boubé was hard working and would turn out to be a reliable tenant, he allowed him stay rent-free for the first month. Sometimes, he let Boubé use his phone. “And he is always respectful,” Boubé stated emphatically. “He’s a fine man.”

Boubé’s new apartment was on the third floor of a tenement in an apartment that looks out on Lenox Avenue. The stairwell was dark and creaky and smelled fetid even in winter. Mailboxes were located on the first floor, but because mail was so frequently stolen, Boubé had a post office box at the local post office. Above the mailboxes was a sign: “Anyone caught throwing garbage out the window will be punished.” In March 1995, Boubé’s neighbors included his compatriots Sala Fari and Issifi Mayaki, who shared an apartment; several African American
men; and a young white man who studied at Columbia University. His new apartment consisted of two rooms, perhaps seven feet by twenty feet. One room remained empty. Boubé planned to make this space his salon but had not yet bought furniture for it. He installed a curtain to cordon off the other room. A new double bed and a chest of drawers had been placed in the front room near the window. Boubé had adorned the bedroom walls with print portraits of African American women. His salon consisted of his old plastic deck chairs and several low coffee tables. A cheap cotton carpet with Oriental designs stretched between the chairs and tables. On one table was a large boom box. The second table supported a television and VCR. He explained that he had bought a multisystem television so he could play PAL as well as VHS videocassettes. Many of the French and African videocassettes, he said, could be viewed only on the PAL system. “I used to have a much larger TV. I paid $1,400 for it,” he mentioned, “but I sent it to my older brother in Abidjan.” In the small foyer that separates the two front rooms from the kitchen and bathroom, Boubé had hung three images on the wall: a poster of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, a print of a beautiful African American woman, and a picture of Jesus.

“Why the picture of Jesus?” we asked during an interview in his apartment one afternoon. He replied,

A woman from Canada gave it to me. We spent one whole day talking at the market and she gave me the photo. She thought that because I am Muslim I might refuse the picture. But I like all religions.

Although Boubé had tired quickly of his experience in a SRO hotel in Chelsea, many West Africans are forced to remain in SROs despite their deplorable living conditions. Perhaps the best known African “village” in New York City is the Park View Hotel at 55 West 110th Street. Francophone West Africans who live there call it the Cent Dix (the 110th). The building is in a state of advanced disrepair. In 1994, city hall cited it for a variety of code violations that included the presence of leaks, urine, feces, roaches, trash, and garbage in public access. The cracked and peeling plaster walls that lined the hallways have attracted numerous drug dealers and other hustlers.

Still, along with a few other Manhattan single-room occupancy hotels, this rundown, 200-room warren of dark hallways and gloomy corridors
has provided the first and enduring taste of America for hundreds of peddlers, taxi drivers, students and others from the nations of West Africa, fresh off jets from Dakar or Abidjan. (Nossiter 1995, 11)

In 1992, the building’s owner, Joe Cooper, said that perhaps three-quarters of the residents were West Africans. In 1995, however, less than half the occupants remained West African. Cooper said the deteriorating conditions compelled West Africans who had the funds to either leave the building or return to West Africa. The owner complained that the more recent occupants in the hotel were destructive. As soon as he fixed something, he asserted, someone destroyed the repairs or created new problems (Nossiter 1995, 23). Despite Cooper’s claims, however, the local police say that crime is not widespread at the Park View (Nossiter 1995, 23).

The juxtaposition of African and African Americans has led to a number of social tensions. Several Africans said they had been disappointed to encounter hostility from blacks in the neighborhood. They reported with bitterness that they were sometimes accused of selling the Americans’ ancestors into slavery. Some of “the Africans, on the other hand, believed that African Americans were unwilling to work hard” (Nossiter 1995, 23). Many African Americans at the Park View, in contrast, praised their African neighbors, saying that they were friendly, respectful, and hard working.

If the West African residents at the Cent Dix hate the building in which they live, why have so many remained there? They stay, in part, because they do not know where else to go and because, despite everything, the Cent Dix offers something very essential: fellowship. Charles Kone, from the Ivory Coast, summed up this painful mix: “It’s misery... There’s no security, no maintenance. But I knew that when I got to the airport, there was a place I could go. It’s like a corner of Africa” (Nossiter 1995, 23). In fact, at the Park View Hotel, West Africans have even set up convenience stores and established communal kitchens. From the vantage of many West African residents, it has become a “vertical village.”

These vertical villages, moreover, are well known in far-away West Africa. Experienced West African businessmen, who routinely travel to New York City, instruct first-time travelers to look for African taxi drivers on their arrival at John F. Kennedy Airport. These drivers, so it is said, know to take the new arrivals to one of several SRO hotels in
Manhattan. When Boubé Mounkaila first came to America in September 1990, he found a West African taxi driver, a Malian, who took him to a SRO hotel in Chelsea.

The idea of West African social cooperation, a theme deeply embedded in the cultures of most West African societies, is not limited to shabby, run-down SRO hotels. Islamic practice is centered on cooperative economics and the establishment and reinforcement of fellowship in a community of believers. West African traders also have constructed elaborate personal and professional networks that create a sense of fellowship. Many West African traders at the Malcolm Shabazz Harlem market share information on the best product suppliers, exchange goods, and recommend clients to their colleagues.

CULTURAL ISOLATION

Although the vast majority of West African street vendors in New York City have expressed profound appreciation for the economic opportunities they enjoy and exploit in the United States, they have invariably complained of loneliness, sociocultural isolation, and alienation from mainstream American social customs. These conditions, moreover, seem to have an impact on the subjective well-being of men like Moussa Boureima, Boubé Mounkaila, and Issifí Mayaki.

Studies focusing on well-being have isolated a number of interconnected factors that appear to influence a person's subjective well-being. These factors include a sense of control, feelings of competence, subjective health, and the availability of and satisfaction with social and emotional support (see Mirowsky 1995; Mirowsky and Ross 1991; Krause 1990; Rodin 1986; Kahn and Antonucci 1980). A sense of control over one's life is perhaps the key factor affecting the well-being of men like Moussa Boureima and Boubé Mounkaila. If one feels out of control, he or she is more likely to be socially isolated (Zukerman et al. 1996; Baltes, Wahl, and Reichart 1992; Krause 1990). Research suggests, moreover, that social isolation can subsequently increase chances for physical deterioration, mental illness, and even premature death (Dugan and Kivett 1994; Windriver 1993).

Immigration usually reinforces social isolation. Intensified by cultural difference, feelings of isolation from the larger sociocultural environment can have a significant impact on physical and psychological
well-being. Isolation limits the range of activities and interactions in which people can participate; it also reduces feelings of control and competence (Tahmaseb-McConatha, Stoller, and Obudiate in press). Mirowsky and Ross (1991) have discussed how cultural alienation—living in a social environment where one cannot control, affect, or shape one’s surroundings—can lead to feelings of powerlessness and helplessness. This lack of control compels Moussa Boureima, who is sick, to avoid hospitals; it convinces Boubé Mounkail to do little to resolve regulatory dilemmas provoked by the city of New York or the INS.

Sustaining such social and emotional support systems as family may diminish some of the negative effects of immigration. One of the greatest detriments to feelings of well-being among many West African street traders in New York City is, indeed, the absence of family. Constructed as lineages, their families are usually their primary source of emotional and social support. Caught in regulatory limbo, Issif Mayaki, a principal figure in our study, is unable to return to West Africa to see his family, whom he misses and longs for. He says this situation frustrates him and sometimes makes him mean spirited. For most of the West Africans living in New York, family is paramount. Even though they feel isolated and lonely in New York City, they have come to America, they say, to support their families back home.

For the African psyche, the collective or the group is the ideal. For the African, the clan, the ethnic group, is the base for unity and survival. The unit of identity among Africans is “we” and not “I.” According to an Ashante, Ghana proverb, “I am because we are; without we I am not and since we are, therefore I am.” Therefore all shame, guilt, pain, joys and sorrows of any particular individual are partaken by the group. The major source of identity is, therefore, for the African is the group, beginning with the smallest unit: the family. (Nwadiora 1996, 118)

Although this statement essentializes Africa and Africans and misses the fascinating tensions that collectivism triggers in individuals routinely subjected to group pressures and responsibilities, it nonetheless captures an essential cultural difference between West Africans and most Americans (see Hofstede 1980). For most West Africans, the ideal, if not the reality, of a cohesive family that lives and works together is paramount. This ideal, however remote, has survived
regional, national, and international family dispersion. It compels men like Moussa Boureima, Issifi Mayaki, and Boubé Mounkaila to phone regularly their kin in West Africa; it compels them to send as much money as possible to help support their wives, their children, and their aging parents, aunts, uncles, and cousins.

The absence of an extended family has several psychological ramifications for West African traders. Besides support, families provide a sense of trust and feelings of competence. As Issifi Mayaki has said, one can usually trust her or his blood kin. Generally speaking, the closer the blood ties, the greater the degree of trust. Absence of family therefore creates an absence of trust, which leads to a considerable amount of stress and anxiety. For young men, the absence of wives also means that they are in a kind of sexual and social limbo. They share profound cultural and social mores with their wives in whom they place great trust. In Niger, for example, marriage, which sometimes involves cousins, ties family relations in webs of mutual rights and obligations. Men expect their wives, even during their long absences, to remain faithful to them. To avoid opportunities for infidelity during long absences, long-distance traders often insist that their wives live in the family compound, surrounded by observant relatives who not only enforce codes of sexual fidelity but also help to raise the family’s children. Many of the men, on the other hand, believe it is their inalienable right to have sexual relationships with other women—especially if they are traveling. As Muslims, moreover, they have the right, if they so choose, to marry up to four women, although this practice is increasingly rare. These are some of the cultural assumptions that many lonely and isolated West African traders bring to social/sexual relationships with the women they encounter in New York City. To say the least, these assumptions clash violently with contemporary social/sexual sensibilities in America.

El Hadj Moru Sifi, like many Nigerians in New York City, talked of being socially and culturally isolated during his time in America. A rotund man well into his fifties who hailed from Dosso in western Niger, El Hadj Moru did not like the food, detested what he considered American duplicity, and distrusted non-Africans. Between 1992 and 1994, he sold sunglasses on 125th Street in Harlem. Work and sleep constituted much of his life. El Hadj supported two devoted wives in Niger. “Our women,” he said in August 1994, just prior to his departure,
show respect for their men. They also know how to cook real food. None of these Burger King and Big Macs. The make rice, gumbo sauce with hot pepper, and fresh and clean meat. That’s what I miss. I want to sit outside with my friends and kin and eat from a common bowl. Then I want to talk and talk into the night. I want to be in a place that has real Muslim fellowship.

During his two years in New York City, El Hadj said that he had remained celibate—by choice. He did not trust the women he met. The women, he said, often took drugs, slept with men, and sometimes even gave birth to drug-addicted babies. “Some of these women even have AIDS. Soon, I will be in Niger in my own house surrounded by my wives and children. I will eat and talk well again.” El Hadj Moru’s attitudes are not uncommon among West African traders in New York City. Many of his “brothers” have also chosen to remain celibate.

Boubé Mounkaila has been anything but celibate during his time in New York City. Like his brother traders, he misses his family, including a wife whom he has not seen in eight years and a daughter born several months after his departure for America whom he has never seen. Sometimes, when he thinks of his family, says Boubé, “my heart is spoiled. That’s when I listen to the kountigi [one stringed-lute] music.”

From the time he arrived in New York City in 1990 as a twenty-eight-year-old undocumented immigrant, Boubé has attracted the attention of many women. He is a tall, good-looking man who can be charming. He also has become fluent in what he calls “street English.” Because he sells handbags, most of his clients are women, old and young. On any given day, a young woman might be sitting in Boubé’s stall waiting patiently for him. In speaking of Boubé, some of his compatriots shake their heads and say, “Ah Boubé, he likes the women too much.”

Boubé’s domestic circumstances are exceptional among West African traders in New York City. For most of the traders, life is much less dramatic; it follows the course of a man like El Hadj Moru Sifi—one works, eats, and sleeps, with occasional interludes or with long-standing relationships with one woman. Issifi Mayaki’s situation has been more typical. Issifi is a forty-year-old handsome and well-dressed man who speaks good English. Between 1994 and 1997, Issifi had a girlfriend, a social worker who was a single African American woman with a ten-year-old daughter. Issifi met his girlfriend when he sold African print cloth on 125th Street in 1994. She expressed interest in him.
He told her of his wife and children in Africa. She said that was okay; she appreciated his forthrightness. They began to see one another but maintained separate residences.

When Issifi began to travel to festivals far from New York City, his relationship with the woman began to unravel. She did not like the idea of him traveling to festivals. She became jealous of his wife in Africa. When he told her about plans to travel home to see his family, she did not want him to go. She did not want to share him with anyone. Issifi began to believe that American women wished to totally consume their men, which, he said, was not the African way. This cultural clash became the source of contention, and eventually they drifted apart.

Other traders have made other domestic arrangements. Abdou Harouna, who like El Hadj Sifi comes from Dosso, Republic of Niger, is not a trader but a “gypsy” cab driver. Abdou came to New York City in 1992. In 1994, he married an African American woman, not simply because he wanted a way to obtain immigration papers but because he had fallen in love with Alice, who is a primary school teacher. They now have a daughter and live in Harlem. “Alice,” Abdou said, “has a pure heart. She is a good person, and I’m a lucky man.”

One of the Nigerian traders, Sidi Sansanne, has two families: one in the South Bronx and another in Niamey, Niger. In his thirties, Sidi has become a prosperous merchant who runs a profitable import-export business, which requires him to travel between Niamey and New York City seven to ten times a year. Sidi is perhaps the ideal model of West African trader success. He came to the United States in 1989 and sold goods on the streets of midtown Manhattan. He invested wisely and realized that the American market for Africana was immense. He saved his money and went to Niger to make contact with craft artisans. He began to import to the United States homespun West African cloth, traditional wool blankets, leather sacks, bags, and attaché cases, as well as silver jewelry.

In time, he established a family in New York City, obtained his Employment Authorization Permit, and in 1994 became a permanent resident—a green-card holder. As a permanent resident, Sidi has been able to travel between the United States and West Africa without restriction. Because he has traveled to and from Africa so frequently, Sidi became a private courier. For a small fee, he has taken to Africa important letters or money earmarked for the families of various
traders. From Africa, he has carried letters and small gifts to his compatriots in New York City. The freedom to travel has also enabled Sidi to find new craft ateliers in Niger. During his six-week sojourns in Niger, he, of course, has tended to his other family.

This pattern is a transnational version of West African polygamous marriage practices. In western Niger, for example, prosperous itinerant traders establish residences in the major market towns of their trading circuit. In this way, they attempt to pay equal attention to their wives and children and minimize the inevitable disputes that are triggered when cowives live in one compound.

**FELLOWSHIP AND COMMUNITY**

As can be seen, there are West African traders in New York who have adapted well to city life. And yet, no matter the public or private situation of these traders, they invariably complain about the loss of African fellowship in America. This sense of loss takes on many dimensions. Traders often have complained, for example, of the formality of American social interchange. In March 1998, a Malian art trader even said that for him, America was like a prison.

“There are so many rules, here,” he said.

Your time is scheduled. You cannot go and see someone. You have to make an appointment. People are in too much of a hurry. They take no time to talk to one another. In Africa we are freer. Even if you are a stranger, people will invite you into their house and talk to you. Here, that never happens. America is a prisoner. In Africa, there is more fellowship.

This perception, as we have seen, has compelled some West Africans in New York City to endure deteriorating conditions in vertical villages like that of the Park View Hotel, the Cent Dix, at 110th and Lenox in Harlem. The West African desire for fellowship in a foreign land has entailed the construction of a set of dispersed communities, a set of associations that putatively provide them a sense of belonging and a buffer against the stresses of cultural alienation (see Inglehart 1990; Malfiosi 1996).
For the West African traders at the Malcolm Shabazz Harlem market and elsewhere in New York City, a central component of community is Islam. In Islam, any adherent is a member of the community of believers. Islam unquestionably structures the everyday lives of the traders and keeps alive their sense of identity in what, for most of them, remains an alien and strange place. During six years of conversations with West African traders, the subject of Islam was invariably raised, especially when the conversation broached the subject of the quality of life in the United States. They have said that in the face of social deterioration in New York City, Islam has made them strong; its discipline and values, they have said, have empowered them to cope with social isolation in America. It has enabled them to resist divisive forces that, according to them, ruins American families. But the greatest buffer to cultural dislocation is the perception, held by almost all the traders, that Islam makes them emotionally and morally superior to most Americans.

El Hadj Harouna Souley is a Nigerian in his forties. He made the expensive pilgrimage to Mecca when he was thirty-four, which is an indication of his considerable success in commerce. El Hadj Harouna embodies the aforementioned sense of Islamic moral superiority. Between 1994 and 1997, he sold T-shirts, baseball caps, and sweatshirts from shelves stuffed between two storefronts on Canal Street in Lower Manhattan. Like most West African traders, he is a member of a large family. Although his parents are dead, he has one wife, fourteen children, four brothers, five sisters, and scores of nieces and nephews.

On a rainy afternoon in December 1995, El Hadj Harouna sat under an awning on the steps of Taj Mahal, a radio and electronics store on Canal Street near West Broadway. He pointed out two street hawkers, both African Americans, employed by the owners of Taj Mahal.

“You see those men there,” El Hadj Harouna said, referring to the hawkers. “They only know their mother. Sometimes they don’t even know who their father is. That’s the way it often is in America. Families are not unified. Look at him,” he said, referring to the older of the two hawkers.

He’s from Georgia. His family sends him money every month, and as long as I have known him he has not returned there to visit them. Why do some people here not honor their parents? Why don’t families stick together—at least in spirit? I want to get back to my family compound where we can all live together,
El Hadj Harouna stated emphatically. He continued,

Can parents here depend on their children to take care of them when they are old? I don’t know. I’ve seen children who sit at home and eat their parents’ money, but they think that they owe their parents no obligation. My children phone me every week and ask me to come home. When I am old, even if I have no money, my children will look after me. I will do no work. I will eat, sleep and talk with my friends.

El Hadj Harouna continued his conversation but now concentrated on religion:

My Muslim discipline gives me great strength to withstand America. I have been to Mecca. I give to the poor. I rise before dawn so that I can pray five times a day, every day. I fast during Ramadan. I avoid pork and alcohol. I honor the memory of my father and mother. I respect my wife. And even if I lose all my money, if I am able, Inshallah, to live with my family, I will be truly blessed.

West African community structures in New York City take on several forms that are more concrete than the “community of believers.” Personal networks in which kinship, ethnicity, and nationality affect the density of contact and degree of trust and cooperation are baseline community forms. In addition to these personal networks, there are translocal communities based on national origin. These are formal associations like L’Association des Nigeriens de New York, L’Association des Maliens aux USA, L’Association des Senegalais aux USA, and the Club des Femmes d’Affaires Africaines de New York (a New York African businesswomen’s association). These associations are usually connected to, if not organized by, to the diplomatic missions of the various Francophone African countries. Meetings are held once a month in the evenings, usually at a particular nation’s United Nations Mission, at which issues of mutual concern are discussed. The associations hold receptions for major Muslim and national holidays. They collect funds to help defray a compatriot’s unexpected medical expenses. In the case of a compatriot’s death, they also contribute funds to ship the body back to West Africa for burial. L’Association des Nigeriens, for example, has raised money to buy food for hungry people in Niger.
It would be easy and perhaps facile to suggest that these West African communities—formal and informal, economic and personal, translocal or imagined—supply community adherents with financial and emotional support. Such support, it could be argued, also provides social harmony and a sense of belonging that protects members from the disintegrative stresses of cultural alienation. On one level, this statement is most certainly true. Belonging to the community of the faithful provides a religiously sanctioned set of explanations for the West African’s situation in America. As participating members in the Association des Nigeriens aux USA, Nigerians engage in a mutually reinforcing set of rights and obligations based on mutual citizenship. This organization represents the interests of Nigerians in New York City. Participation in personal networks yields both economic benefits and, in some cases, the concrete fellowship desired by most West African traders in New York City.

Closer inspection of these community forms, however, reveals a more complex scenario. Although West African traders speak highly of their various “national” associations, their participation in the regular activities of the organizations—the monthly meetings—is infrequent. There are a few traders, of course, who are active members, but the majority of the traders have neither the time nor the inclination to attend association meetings or events. The meetings are held in the evenings at the Nigerian Mission on East 44th Street between 1st and 2nd Avenues. Many traders do not want to travel there from Harlem or the South Bronx after a long day at the market.

More important, the presence of the association in New York City brings into relief a primary tension in Nigerian society—one that exists between members of the Niger’s educated elite and its peasants. In western Niger, peasants often express a distrust of the literate civil servants, whom they sometimes refer to as anasarra, which can mean, depending on the context, “European,” “non-Muslim,” or “white man.” Less educated Nigerians, including village traders, sometimes say that civil servants who command state power, having learned the European’s language and ways, have become foreigners in their own country. In Niger, this strong statement may well be a means of articulating class differences. A similar distrust has been expressed in New York City. In February 1994, a former Nigerian civil servant and no friend of the government of Niger, who sold goods on 125th Street on weekends
only, claimed that the Association des Nigeriens had deceived the merchants. “There is a clear division,” he said, “between educated and uneducated Nigerians in New York City. The Association recently collected money from the street merchants and stated that the money went to help people in Niger. In fact,” he said, “the money helped to pay the electric bill at the Nigerian Mission to the UN and the traders didn’t know.”

By the same token, participation in economic networks can produce negative as well as positive results. In Issifi Mayaki’s case, his participation in a transnational network of African art traders, one based on the trust of cooperative economics, led to betrayal and the theft of his inventory. Boubé Mounkaila lost the entire contents of his Econoline Van, which had been parked in a secure, fenced-off space in Harlem. The complicity of one of his economic associates enabled thieves to enter the guarded space and steal his goods. Neither Issifi nor Boubé reported these thefts to the police, whom they distrust.

Membership in the community of the faithful, the community of Muslims, creates a spiritual bond and provides a source of support as well as a buffer against the stress of city life in New York. As we have mentioned, Islam, like any religion, provides explanations to the traders about the absurdities of life. It supplies an always-ready set of explanations for problems encountered by Muslims in societies in which Islam is not a major sociopolitical force. For many West African traders in New York City, Islam, as a way of life, is morally superior to other faiths practiced in the United States. And yet, being a member of the community of the faithful does not dissipate a West African trader’s financial difficulties, nor does it eliminate the stress of potential illness or existential doubts brought on by cultural alienation.

Seen in this light, community, however defined or typified, produces a framework, both abstract and practical, within which a member struggles to make his way. The struggle is easier in known environments but more difficult in alien settings. No matter where these struggles take place, no matter the mix of social, economic, and political resources, some people prove to be more competent than others. The communities that West Africans have constructed for themselves in New York City, then, provide resources for, but not necessarily solutions to, their individual confrontations with social life in America.
COMMUNITY AND COMPETENCE

The key, perhaps, to comprehending the adaptability of West African traders to city life in New York is to consider their competence. The notion of competence has a long history in the social sciences. In linguistics, it refers to capacity of speakers to master the grammatical rules of a language such that they produce comprehensible sentence strings (see Chomsky 1957, 1965). In sociology, scholars isolated “rules” of competence through microanalyses of social interaction (see Goffman 1974, 1981; Garfinkle 1967). In psychology, there are differing perspectives of competence. One perspective relates to therapeutic practice. “Cultural competence (along with the broader concept of multiculturalism) is the belief that people should not only appreciate and recognize other cultural groups, but also be able to effectively work with them” (Sue 1998, 440). In this view, competence refers to the therapist’s sensitivity to other cultural systems. Another view, which is relevant to the case of West African traders in New York City, is that competence is a measure of a person’s ability to adapt to an environment, which, as it turns out, is an early psychological definition of intelligence (see Binet and Simon 1908; Piaget 1972; Sansone and Berg 1993). In the early model, psychologists linked adaptability to performance. They explained the variation in personal performance by citing differences in cognitive ability. Put another way, the greater a person’s intelligence, the greater her or his capacity to adapt to shifting situations in changing environments.

In this article, we have briefly considered the social, material, historical, and psychological dimensions of West African city life in New York. As we have seen, West Africans have skillfully used their traditions as Muslim traders to build personal and economic networks that result in a variety of communities. These communities, in turn, provide them the potential for economic security, social cohesion, and cultural stability in an alien environment.

Despite this rich set of resources, however, some traders have succeeded better than others have, which brings us back to the issue of competence. The issue of competence influences the perception of control among West Africans in New York City. There is, for example, a wide diversity of linguistic competence among the traders. Men like Boubé Mounkaila and Issifi Mayaki speak English well. Boubé’s linguistic competence makes him socially confident. His facility in English enables him to construct transnational exchange networks with
Asians, African Americans, and Middle Easterners. Since transnational transactions in New York City are usually conducted in English, his linguistic competence has enabled him to expand his operations. Using his skills in English, Boubé arranged to purchase a vehicle, buy automobile insurance, and obtain a driver’s license. Boubé also employs his considerable linguistic skills to charm his mostly African American customers. Mastery of English, in short, has increased Boubé’s profits and expanded considerably his social horizons. That expansion has made Boubé a keen observer of shifting social and economic environments, which, in turn, increases further his business profits. The same can be said for Issifi Mayaki and scores of other West African street vendors.

Lack of competence in English, however, results in missed opportunities. Even though men like Moussa Boureima and his roommate, Idrissa Dan Inna, have been in New York City for more than three years, they speak little if any English. In 1994, they enrolled in a night school course sponsored by a church in Harlem but dropped out after one week. “I don’t know,” said Idrissa, who sold West African hats and bags on 125th Street at the time, “I just can’t learn English. I don’t have the head for it. I know it hurts my business. I can’t really talk to the shoppers about the goods.” When confronted with various financial, social, or personal problems, men like Moussa and Idrissa have to rely on more linguistically competent traders, which, in accordance with the findings of social psychologists, affects their self-image negatively and makes them even more socially isolated.

Although West African street vendors in New York City display various linguistic abilities, they must all confront the problem of cultural competence. Many seem to have mastered the culture of capitalism (see Millman 1997; Stoller 1996, 1997, forthcoming), but their lack of a more general cultural competence has cost them dearly. In this important domain, one of the key issues is that of trust. According to Islamic law, traders are expected to be completely honest and trustworthy in the dealings with suppliers, exchange partners, and customers (see Mennan 1986). Among West African traders, who are mostly Muslims, trust is paramount. Most of the traders, the majority of whom come from families and ethnic groups long associated with long-distance trading in West Africa, adhere to the Muslim principles of economic transactions. Not surprisingly, their trust has often been betrayed. An exchange partner stole Issifi Mayaki’s textile inventory. Betrayals cost Boubé Mounkaila his inventory. And yet, these men had the competence to use
community resources to rebound from these defeats and move along their paths in New York City. Other traders who have suffered similar setbacks have drifted into isolation, changed occupations, or returned to West Africa.

Perhaps the answer to the problem of social adaptation to transnational environments like New York City lies in the flexibility of an immigrant’s cultural competence. In a foreign environment, the key to psychological well-being may well be the ability to develop and maintain competence in both cultures. The more a person maintains active and functional relationships by alternating between cultures, the less difficult acquiring and maintaining competency in both cultures will be. (Damji, Clément, and Noels 1996, 494)

The communities that West Africans in New York have constructed do not, then, define their city lives; rather, they provide resources—economic, social, and cultural—that dilute the stress of living in an alien environment. More specifically, these communities enable many, but not all, West African traders to enhance their subjective feelings of well-being and control. The sense and reality of community, as we have suggested, is no panacea for the ills associated with state regulation, poverty, and sociocultural alienation. For West African traders, then, city life is molded by the congruence of historical, material, social, and psychological factors. These factors not only define a sense of community but also shape the cultural competencies that affect their adjustment to an alien environment.

The results of our study also underscore Ortner’s (1997) contention that the notion of community—however problematic—is one worth retaining in the social sciences. Given a refined framework of “community,” the social scientist is able to demonstrate how macro-forces (globalization, immigration, informal economies, and state regulation) affect the lives of individuals living in the fragmented transnational spaces that increasingly make up contemporary social worlds.

NOTES

1. See Hodgson (1974). The model for the Islamic notion of community is Muhammad’s Medina in the seventh century, in which Muhammad delineated an individual’s responsibility before Allah, his or her responsibility to the community, and the com-
munity’s responsibility to the world. “It was the mission of the community to bring God’s true ways to all the world; hence the rule of the Muslim community should be extended over all infidels” (p. 322). And yet, peoples brought under the hegemony of Muslims were allowed the practice their religions as long as they did not defame Allah and as long as they accepted Muslim authority. The Sharia code of law was the attempt to extend these principles, having emerged from a small-scale society to the caliphal state. Hodgson, however, was careful to point out that the integrity of the Ummah has been quite fragile. In the history of Islam, the sacred principles of the Islamic community of believers and the political realities of Muslim states have often been at odds. From early Islam to the present, the tensions between a lingering Bedouin egalitarianism and statist absolutism have sparked political disputes, military clashes, religious schisms, and social change.

2. In a recent book titled *Sidewalk*, an account of mostly homeless African American used-book vendors in Greenwich Village, Mitchell Duneier (1999) advocated more accountability in urban sociological research. Using the real names of one’s informants, he asserted, compels more accurate research and more ethical results. *Sidewalk* is an admirable work, and Duneier’s approach works well for the population he represented. The legal and cultural realities of West Africans, who place high value on their privacy, are different. That is why we have chosen to change the names of people we write about in the article.

3. According to Celia Dugger (1996b), asylum seekers are detained in part because of a quirk in the law that treats people entering the country illegally at an airport more severely than those who are caught within the nation’s borders. Detained asylum seekers are placed in prisons far from their lawyers and families. They are also placed in facilities that are poorly supervised by the Immigration and Naturalization Service, which leads to kinds of abuses reported by Kasinga.

4. Single-room occupancy hotels (SROs) have long been the way that poor people have been housed. In New York City, many people who had been homeless have been moved into city-subsidized SROs. In 1960, New York City had 142,000 SRO units. Between 1960 and 1985, this number declined precipitously to 42,000. That combined with the fact that in 1974 the state of New York began to release 200,000 psychiatric patients into the community increased exponentially the population of homeless people on the streets of New York City. Now the city is helping non-profit agencies create new SROs once more. City-provided loans for the units have reached a total of $262 million. The state has chipped in a subsidy to pay for support services, such as TB testing and employment assistance. The city now has 10,500 beds in “supported” SROs’, and around 35,000 private rooms. (Room at the top 1996, 24)

5. Among brothers in Songhay and Hausa families, there is a strict code of respect accorded to the oldest brother in a family. Because age denotes rank and prestige, the oldest brother can make serious and substantial requests of his younger brothers. If younger brothers refuse these requests, the refusal brings them great and irrevocable shame.

6. These networks are described and analyzed in chapter 3 of *Money Has No Smell* (Stoller, forthcoming).
REFERENCES


THE PROFESSIONAL EX- REVISITED

Cessation or Continuation of a Deviant Career?

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"... professional ex-status not only results in new career opportunities and a new positive 'identity' but provides new opportunities for deviance as well."

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TRINA L. HOPE is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Oklahoma. Most of her research centers around testing control theory, including applying the concept of self-control to gang membership, gang and dating violence, maternal smoking, and adolescent pregnancy.
An ongoing question is whether participation in deviance is fluid or stable. In a 1991 article, Brown introduced the concept of the “professional ex-,” an individual who uses former deviant status as a springboard into a counseling career. The professional ex- thus exits a deviant career, transforming it into a legitimate status. In the current article, the authors present a different perspective, grounded in self-control theory. The 1990s substance abuse treatment industry scandals in Texas provide the framework. A case study of one agency, in-depth interviews with fifteen professional ex-s employed by the agency, official records, and newspaper accounts of the scandals are used to explore the issues of stability and generality. Findings suggest that at least some professional ex-s continue to engage in other forms of deviance, providing support to Gottfredson and Hirschi’s claim that the propensity to engage in deviance is both general and stable.

The process of exiting a deviant career has been the focus of a number of studies (cf. Meisenhelder 1977; Anspach 1979; Luckenbill and Best 1981). Brown (1991) used this perspective in his study of professional ex-s, “persons who have exited their deviant careers by replacing them with occupations in professional counseling” (p. 219). The individual is thus transformed, abandoning a deviant lifestyle for a more conventional one that is grounded in the former deviant status. The former prisoner, eating disorder victim, addict, or alcoholic deliberately embraces the deviant status to qualify as a counselor for others similarly afflicted. Indeed, the abandoned deviant lifestyle ultimately provides both legitimacy and income. The individual now shares his or her personal recovery process, seen as almost sacred, having undergone “a transforming therapeutic resocialization” (Brown 1991, 223). In the current study, we focus on one type of professional ex-: the former substance abuser who becomes a substance abuse counselor.

The current study offers an alternate view of the professional ex-. It suggests that becoming a professional ex- may not always signify “salvation” (Brown 1991, 228). Instead, at times it may provide a facade of legitimacy, behind which deviant behavior continues. The distinction between a deviant role and a deviant career is relevant to this approach.

AUTHORS’ NOTE: We would like to thank the anonymous reviewers as well as Rob Benford for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this article. We would also like to thank Lisa Hernandez for her assistance in obtaining official records from the Texas Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse.
While Brown’s (1991) description is linked to a particular type of devian-
tance, we suggest that the professional ex- may continue to engage in
deviant behavior, having merely exited one type of deviant role. The
alcohol and drug treatment industry scandals that occurred in Texas
during the mid-1990s are presented in support of our contention.

PROPENSITY TOWARD DEVIANCE:
FLUIDITY VERSUS STABILITY

Sociological approaches suggest two widely divergent views of
deviant careers. On one hand, we find those who explore the processes
of entering and abandoning deviant careers and lifestyles. In this
approach, deviance is seen as fluid, with individuals moving into and
out of deviant careers. The professional ex-’s transformation to legiti-
macy exemplifies this approach.

However, other experts suggest that the propensity to engage in devi-
ance is virtually immutable. If this is the case, one might expect the pro-
fessional ex- to continue to engage in deviant behaviors. This perspec-
tive is exemplified in Gottfredson and Hirschi’s (1990) general theory
of crime, also known as self-control theory. A brief examination of
these opposing perspectives may help clarify the issue.

DEVIANT CAREERS:
SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONIST
THEORY AND FLUIDITY

Symbolic interactionist theory supports the idea of fluidity, suggest-
ing that individuals move into and out of deviant careers. This perspec-
tive focuses on ways in which identity is continuously renegotiated
through interaction with the social environment (Cooley 1902; Mead
1934; Goffman 1959; Blumer 1969). “Here the self is constructed
through adjustment. The issue is for the actor to fit his/her self into the
dominant character of the situation or structure: adjusting to an obdu-
rate reality” (Fine 1993, 78). From this viewpoint, the self is constantly
in flux, and identity is continuously emerging. This ties in well with the
concept of exiting a deviant career. Fine (1993) suggested that, in a dif-
f erent situation, the individual will adjust his or her self-concept to fit
the new reality. Thus, a former alcoholic who has become a profes-
Abandonment of a deviant career may occur due to either internal forces or external ones. For example, Braithwaite (1989) argued that “shame” can be a constructive force, coercing the deviant back into compliance with group norms. Others suggested that deviants are pushed or pulled into conventionality. Adler (1992) applied this approach to drug dealers. Significantly, she noted that the movement away from deviance and toward conformity was characterized by inconsistency. Cessation of drug dealing was often followed by lapses back into the behavior. Over time, the periods between lapses became longer, ultimately resulting in transition into a new nondeviant lifestyle. Still others suggest that the deviant may go through a process of withdrawal in preparation for return to the larger society, as in the case of prisoners (Irwin 1970; Schmid and Jones 1991) and female street criminals (Sommers, Baskin, and Fagan 1994).

According to this approach, the deviant individual may go to great lengths to avoid detection or to control the information others obtain about them (Goffman 1963; Herman 1993). Alternately, he or she may attempt to redefine the behavior or condition as nondeviant (Horowitz and Liebowitz 1968; Meisenhelder 1977; Anspach 1979; Stall and Biernacki 1986). Still others may extend the old deviant role into a new “conventional” one (Brown 1991; Rice, 1992; see also Ebaugh 1988). Indeed, the individual may even rely on former experiences to develop an entirely new field of endeavor, as in the case of the emergence of codependency treatment professionals (Rice 1992).

DEVIAN'T CAREERS: SELF-CONTROL
THEORY AND STABILITY

The current study proposes a different approach to the idea of the deviant career, within the framework of Gottfredson and Hirschi’s (1990) self-control theory. Self-control theory provides a unique perspective on the professional ex-. First, in contrast to the notion of deviance as fluid, Gottfredson and Hirschi not only emphasized the stability of deviance over the life course, they critiqued the use of the term career to refer to crime and deviance over time. Second, the specific case studied here provides a nice example of Gottfredson and Hirschi’s...
discussion of white-collar crime and offenders. Before applying their theory to the issue of the professional ex-, however, a discussion of their distinction between crime and self-control is necessary, along with the importance of stability and versatility.

In 1983, Hirschi and Gottfredson suggested that age has a direct effect on crime—one that is invariant across time, culture, sex, race, and various criminal acts. In a follow-up piece (Hirschi and Gottfredson 1986), they introduced the distinction between crime and criminality as a way of solving some of the problems introduced by their age-crime argument. Here, they noted that the tendency to engage in crime remains stable, even though criminal behavior follows the age-crime curve. This distinction between crime (behavior) and criminality (tendency) is important in understanding the questions of stability versus fluidity, especially with regard to the professional ex-.

Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) defined criminality as the stable differences across individuals in the propensity to commit criminal acts: “Criminality may be defined as the tendency of the actor to seek short-term, immediate pleasure without regard for long-term consequences” (Hirschi and Gottfredson 1986, 58). Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) later defined criminality by self-control, the differential tendency of people to avoid criminal acts regardless of the circumstances in which they find themselves. They began their discussion of the concept of self-control by describing six elements of criminal acts and the corresponding characteristics of those engaging in such acts. According to the authors, crime and analogous behaviors provide immediate gratification of desires; easy or simple gratification of desires; excitement, thrill, and risk; few or meager long-term benefits; little skill or planning; and pain or discomfort for the victims (p. 89). Correspondingly, those lacking in self-control will “tend to be impulsive, insensitive, physical (as opposed to mental), risk-taking, shortsighted, and nonverbal, and they will tend therefore to engage in criminal and analogous acts” (p. 90). Furthermore, they suggested that deviance, criminality, and recklessness are parts of a single larger category that is characterized by a focus on the attainment of immediate pleasure coupled with lack of concern about future harmful consequences. The low self-control individual is thus one who is likely to choose, when the opportunity is presented, immediate gratification, despite the potential of long-term negative consequences.
Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) asserted that their concept of self-control is unique because it explicitly addresses stability as well as versatility. The former suggests that the tendency to engage in criminal or deviant acts emerges early in life and persists over time (Caspi, Bem, and Elder 1989; Sampson and Laub 1993; White et al. 1990; Wright et al. 1999). Versatility suggests that low self-control manifests itself in a variety of criminal and analogous acts (Britt 1994; LeBlanc and Girard 1997). When discussing versatility, Gottfredson and Hirschi asserted, “In our view, the common element in crime, deviant behavior, sin and accidents is so overriding that the tendency to treat them as distinct phenomena subject to distinct causes is one of the major intellectual errors of positive thought” (p. 10).

Gottfredson and Hirschi’s (1990) theory of self-control provided a clear distinction between criminality and crime, suggesting that those with low self-control will be more likely to engage in crime and behavior analogous to crime. The theory has been empirically tested by a variety of researchers, and the overall results have been favorable (Pratt and Cullen 2000). It has not, however, been used to explore the phenomenon of the professional ex-.

When using the concept of self-control to further our understanding of the professional ex-, one of the first critiques that Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) applied to the fluidity argument is the use of the word career in reference to crime. They said,

> What is the meaning of the idea of a career? Whether applied to dentistry, college teaching, or crime, the concept of a career implies several things. It suggests a beginning, as in “When did you become a teacher?” and end, as in “When did you quit teaching?” Given a beginning and an end, the career concept also implies variable duration or length, as in “How long did you (or how much longer do you plan to) teach?” (p. 266)

Central to the career paradigm are the assumptions that offenders should engage in more serious or specialized crime as they age and that the concepts of “onset, duration, and desistance might lead to a better understanding of the crime problem” (p. 266). Gottfredson and Hirschi pointed out that offenders do not specialize and do not engage in more serious crime over time, and those who are deviant at one age are more likely to be deviant at another age. They concluded,
If offenders do not specialize in particular types of crime, if they do not become progressively more criminal or more skilled in crime as the years pass, and if they do not make enough money from crime to live, then how do we account for the continued interest in career criminals? (p. 267)

Thus, low self-control is not a career choice. Instead, it is a propensity toward crime and analogous behaviors that is established early, persists over time, and manifests itself in a variety of behaviors. It does not necessarily involve an embracement of the role of deviant or a transformed self-image—it is simply an “individual characteristic relevant to the commission of criminal acts” (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990, 88).

From the perspective of self-control theory, then, we would expect the professional ex- (someone who has exhibited low self-control behavior in the past) to continue to participate in deviant behaviors. This is not because of limited choices or poor self-concept, as suggested by the labeling approach (Lemert 1951; Becker 1963; Erikson 1966; Schur 1971). Instead, he or she is attracted to behaviors that result in immediate gratification given the right opportunity. Cessation of drinking or drug use, as in the case of the “recovering” substance abuse counselor, may be the result of “natural sanctions” rather than improved self-control, “governed more by its physiological effects than by its social consequences” (Hirschi and Gottfredson 1994, 4). However, compared to others of the same age, low-self-control individuals remain more likely to engage in a variety of criminal, analogous, or reckless behaviors. The professional ex- who has stopped using alcohol or drugs should thus still be likely to engage in other behaviors that provide short-term gratification.

Although Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) asserted that low self-control is a major predictor of criminal behavior, they also recognized that it is the intersection of low self-control with criminal opportunity that produces crime. Routine activity theory (Cohen and Felson 1979) reminds us that crime occurs when a victim, an offender, and opportunity come together in the legitimate and illegitimate routines of daily life. Working as a counselor in a drug treatment center provides the professional ex- with ample opportunities for a variety of deviant behaviors.
Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) have always maintained theirs to be a general theory of crime and deviance—explaining all types of crimes, including white-collar crimes and white-collar offenders. They said,

In fact, we would suggest that any theory of crime making claim to generality would apply without difficulty to the crimes of the rich and powerful, crimes committed in the course of an occupation, and crimes in which a position of power, influence, or trust is used for the purpose of individual or organizational gain. (p. 183, emphasis added)

Contrary to the assumptions held by both academics and laypeople, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) challenged the image of white-collar crimes as complicated, well-planned acts and the image of white-collar offenders as intelligent people of high status and influence. The problem with most research, they contended, is that it compares high-status white-collar offenders to low-status “street” offenders—ignoring high-status, white-collar, nonoffenders, as well as low-status white-collar offenders. They reminded us that white-collar crime is relatively rare and that “when opportunity is taken into account, demographic differences in white-collar crime are the same as demographic differences in ordinary crime” (p. 196). In other words, when opportunity is taken into account, embezzlement is more often committed by those of lower status (i.e., the young, nonwhites) than those of higher status.

Overall, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) reminded us that because occupations generally require traits like dependability, punctuality, and self-control, people with jobs will tend to be less criminal overall than people without jobs. They argued that if the typical street offender were given the opportunity to commit white-collar crime, he would certainly take it, even without extended exposure to a crime-producing “business culture” (p. 198). By hiring the professional ex- (a person with a history of deviance), treatment programs are essentially providing us with an experimental test of Gottfredson and Hirschi’s assertions.

One reason white-collar offending is relatively rare is because the opportunity to engage in such behavior depends on an occupation, and generally employers try to avoid hiring employees with deviant histories. The professional ex-, however, is hired because of his or her de-
viant history. From the perspective of self-control theory, the fact that professional ex-s engaged in enough occupational deviance to cause the treatment industry scandals in Texas is certainly not surprising.

THE PROFESSIONAL EX-:
IMPLICATIONS OF THE TWO APPROACHES

To explore the utility of low self-control as an explanation of continued deviance among professional ex-s, the current study focuses on individuals involved in the field of alcohol and drug abuse treatment. Events that occurred in the state of Texas during the early 1990s will be offered as evidence. In particular, we present a case study of an agency that was embroiled in the funding scandals.

Brown (1991) has presented an image of the professional ex- making a transition from deviant to conforming behavior, using past deviance as the foundation for the new legitimacy. In contrast, we argue that the role of professional ex- may also represent a continuation of deviant behaviors. This approach is important in extending our knowledge of career deviance, as research has concentrated on the “exit” from a particular type of deviance (cf. Irwin 1970; Shover 1983; Adler 1992). Scant attention has been paid to whether the individual is engaging in other types of deviance. A distinction between deviant career and deviant role is germane to the argument. If the concepts of the generality and stability of deviance are accurate, cessation of a particular form of deviance would not necessarily indicate cessation of all forms of deviant behavior. Instead, it may only indicate cessation of one deviant behavior in favor of another.

One final issue must be addressed: the conceptualization of deviance. Perhaps no other issue is more controversial in the field of sociology, with conceptualizations of deviance ranging from moral or absolute stances to social constructionist approaches. However, the debates about what acts should be considered deviant fall outside of the scope of this work, and we use a definition of deviance that is in keeping with the theoretical basis of the study. Following Hirschi and Gottfredson (1994), deviance is conceptualized as “acts of self-interest” that “provide immediate benefit at the risk of long-term cost to actors who find opportunities for such acts appealing” (p. 10). In other words, for the purposes of the analyses that follow, an act is deviant if the goal is short-term pleasure or gain, the act has a high potential for negative
consequences, and the actor engages in it despite the consequences. Thus, financially lucrative crime, smoking, illicit sex, and gambling all meet the criteria of the definition.

METHOD

The analyses center on a case study of one nonprofit substance abuse treatment agency (hereafter referred to as ARC). This organization became the focus of a scandal that occurred in Texas during the early 1990s. A large nonprofit organization, ARC administered substance abuse treatment programs for medically indigent individuals. The programs operated by ARC included a detoxification program, two outpatient programs for adults, inpatient treatment for adults, inpatient treatment for adolescents, a halfway house for recovering individuals, a halfway house for criminal justice referrals, a program for offenders under the supervision of the federal criminal justice system, and a long-term residential facility for adults. At times, ARC also operated an adolescent outpatient program, a female adolescent program, a women’s program, and a satellite program in a neighboring county.

During the 1990s, Texas was rocked by a series of scandals in the alcohol and drug abuse treatment field. Eventually, criminal proceedings against a number of individuals resulted, as well as the investigation and restructuring of the Texas Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse (TCADA). TCADA funded and supervised substance abuse treatment throughout the state. The case study of one organization is imbedded in the larger context of the investigations that began with this agency.

The case study method is suitable for two reasons. First, it provides a richness of detail not as readily available through survey data (Feagin, Orum, and Sjoberg 1991; Geis 1991; Orum, Feagin, and Sjoberg 1991). Although limited in generalizability, the data derived in a case study can provide insights into human interaction not accessible through questionnaires (Sjoberg et al. 1991, 32). Equally important, case studies may bring into question a current theory by uncovering new information. “Although they cannot establish a generalization, they can invalidate one and suggest new research directions” (Reinharz 1992, 69). In the current study, this is our primary objective. Our focus is to suggest that cessation of a deviant career may not be an accurate description.
Instead, we offer an alternative view—that individuals may cease one type of deviance due to natural sanctions but continue to engage in other forms.

The data came from four sources: newspaper accounts, official records of investigations conducted by TCADA, direct observation, and in-depth interviews. By using this variety of sources, a detailed picture emerges.

First, we obtained copies of all currently available articles documenting the treatment scandals from the archives of the primary newspaper in the city where ARC was located. In addition, we obtained articles on investigations in two other Texas cities. Attempts to locate articles in the archives of three other cities were unsuccessful. A total of thirty-two newspaper articles from March 1994 through June 1997 were examined.

We also obtained reports of official investigations of ARC from TCADA. These were used to substantiate the veracity and accuracy of the newspaper accounts (see Wolcott 1990, 27). The official documents included the original complaint, the summary report of the complaint, summaries of findings, the agreed administrative order between TCADA and ARC, and correspondence between TCADA and ARC related to the investigations.

The third source of data was direct observation. Like Brown (1991), one of the authors worked in the field of substance abuse treatment. Furthermore, from 1989 through late 1991, she directed a program for ARC. These personal observations allowed insider’s access to events as well as familiarity with the agency and the individuals involved (Reinharz 1992; Lofland and Lofland 1995). In late 1989, she began keeping a journal of questionable events that occurred in the day-to-day operation of the agency. The journal was kept due to concerns about possible illegalities and self-protection. Other journal entries followed conversations with the two top administrators of the organization as well as with employees. Copies of invoices for questionable purchases and internal memorandums were also kept. These records became a postfacto source of data, as the original purpose was not research.

The final source of data consisted of relevant observations by other “insiders.” During 1995, the same author conducted in-depth interviews with fifteen treatment professionals employed by the agency. Participants were obtained using a modified snowball sampling strategy, beginning with five former employees and coworkers. All
participants were counselors or supervisors who had worked for ARC during the early 1990s, and all but one claimed professional ex-status. Interviews were semistructured. Participants were asked open-ended questions about illegal behavior or deviant behavior they had observed as well as about behaviors in which they had personally participated. The interviews were conducted under strict assurances of anonymity. Thus, to protect these participants, audiotapes were destroyed, and pseudonyms were used. Eight interviews were taped; in the others, extensive notes were taken. Behaviors were deemed deviant if they met the criteria used by Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) as acts of self-interest engaged in without consideration of the potentially negative consequences. (See the Appendix for summary descriptions of the interview participants.)

FINDINGS

PROFESSIONAL EX-S IN THE DRUG TREATMENT INDUSTRY

In the state of Texas, all substance abuse counselors must be licensed by TCADA, which also acts as a watchdog over counselor behaviors. In addition, TCADA licenses all substance abuse treatment programs in the state and is a major funding source. In mid-1999, there were 5,271 licensed chemical dependency counselors in Texas. There is, however, no way to determine the percentage claiming professional ex-status since alcoholism is covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act. This makes it illegal to inquire whether an applicant is an alcoholic. It is noteworthy, however, that TCADA requires two years of abstinence from alcohol and drugs prior to licensure, suggesting that the agency has reason to believe that many applicants have substance abuse histories (Hernandez 1999).

Personal experience suggested that the majority of those working in the substance abuse treatment field were former substance abusers. For example, during the two years that one of the authors ran a program for ARC, twenty-seven direct service employees self-identified as professional ex-s. Only one employee during that period (a cook) did not claim to be in recovery from substance abuse. This pattern was consistent throughout ARC. Indeed, many employees were former clients, as
was the case with ten of the fifteen interview participants. At the time of hiring, the author was the only program director out of nine that was not a former client. Furthermore, the executive director, the director, and the chairman of the board also claimed professional ex-status.

**ARC AND THE TEXAS TREATMENT SCANDAL**

On March 29, 1994, the general public in the state of Texas became aware of scandal brewing in the substance abuse treatment industry. The *American-Statesman* headline asserted, “Center’s Audit Uncovers Gifts, Lavish Bonuses” (Elliott 1994d). The story, based on an audit resulting from an anonymous tip (TCADA 1993, 1994d), detailed allegations of financial impropriety, including excessive bonuses, expensive gifts, and overbilling. ARC was a private nonprofit agency funded by state and federal grants. In less than three years, top officials were alleged to have paid themselves and other employees bonuses totaling more than three hundred thousand dollars. In addition, government funds were allegedly used to buy rare books, sapphire cufflinks, and expensive cigars for the two administrators (Elliott 1994d).

Within days, additional allegations were made. Mileage reimbursement to one administrator totaled more than twenty thousand dollars in a two-year period. At state reimbursement rates, this was equivalent to about sixty-seven thousand miles of travel (or two and a half times around the equator). In addition, state funds were used to pay air travel for family members, lease payments on a personal luxury vehicle, expensive meals, and personal interest-free loans (The allegations keep piling up 1994). It was also reported that the chairman of the board of directors received payment for services. This was in direct violation of the contract with the TCADA. Other board members had received fees for services rendered, also in violation of the contract (White and Elliott 1994). Within days, further information was disclosed. During the time the administrators were receiving excessively high bonuses (one received more than three times his annual salary in bonuses in less than three years), counselors providing direct services were significantly underpaid, resulting in high employee turnover (Elliott 1994e). At the same time, official state data indicated that more than half of the intended clients of the center were unable to obtain services (Copelin 1994).
These revelations were even more startling in light of further allegations. One of the administrators, with the knowledge and consent of the other, was accused of setting up a dummy corporation that received an additional $187,500 in payments during 1993. Furthermore, the chairman of the board of directors knew about these additional payments but did not inform other board members (Copelin 1994).

The above scenarios would only hint at the existence of deviant behavior if no further action had occurred. However, actions taken by ARC and the criminal justice system indicated that many of the allegations had merit (Elliott 1994a, 1994b, 1994c, 1994f, 1995a; White 1994a, 1994b). First, ARC agreed to refund more than $1 million to the funding agency (TCADA 1994a; Elizondo 1996). Furthermore, current board members were not to be reappointed or employed by the agency in the future (Elliott 1994a, 1995a; TCADA 1994a).

Allegations against the top administrators were substantiated. For example, the TCADA investigation provided detailed information about the use of ARC funds to purchase rare books, with receipts altered to hide the nature of the purchases (TCADA 1994b, 1994c, 1994e, 1996a, 1996b; Austin Rehabilitation Center 1996). Review of petty cash records indicated frequent withdrawals with little or no documentation, large bonuses, and conflicts of interest (TCADA 1996a, 1996b). Two years after the scandal broke, one of the administrators pled guilty to charges of conspiracy to commit money laundering, whereas the other plead guilty to making false statements (Herrera 1996b). In 1997, the former was sentenced to five years in federal prison and fined two hundred thousand dollars. In late 1996, the latter was placed on probation and fined five thousand dollars (Herrera 1997).

These events were not isolated. Indeed, the events divulged to the public were similar to those observed by one of the authors. The first observation of self-serving deviant behavior occurred only three weeks after employment began. This event was the catalyst that prompted careful documentation. A call from ARC administrative offices indicated that several new televisions had been donated to the program. A staff member was sent to pick these up and deliver them to the treatment site. Hours later, some very used televisions arrived. The staff member relayed the following story:

I don’t know what’s happenin’—it was too—you know—I had to—[the chairman] told me to put the TVs in the van and follow him. We went out
to his house and he said it would be just a minute. This kid came out and carried them inside. [The chairman] told me to help and then to take these old TVs and put them on the van.

The used televisions were delivered to the program, while the new ones remained at the chairman’s home. When approached about the televisions, one of the executives later charged with misappropriation of funds advised the author to ignore what had happened: “Just forget about it—we’ve got lots of money to spend. Go down to [a local appliance store] and buy four televisions. Do any of your staff need a TV?”

The next concern involved the costs of furnishings for the program, which were purchased from a store whose top executive was also a member of the ARC board. The prices reflected in the invoices appeared excessive, particularly in light of the fact that ARC was mandated to provide services to an indigent population. Apparently, TCADA eventually agreed. Subsequent purchases of $153,195 from the same store were disallowed because they were “considered unnecessary and no prior TCADA approval [was] obtained” (TCADA 1996b, 4).

Another incident involved the potential of a TCADA commissioner’s earning a very large fee. ARC was considering expansion of one program and began looking for suitable properties. One property under consideration was selling for almost 1 million dollars, and the realtor trying to arrange the sale was a TCADA commissioner. Essentially, if the sale had transpired, the TCADA commissioner would have received a substantial fee, paid out of the funds that he was involved in providing to the agency. Shortly after this incident, the paycheck of the author began including five hundred dollars per month as a bonus. When the executives were approached about this, she was told that this was a way to get around pay limitations. Furthermore, one of them expressed belief that employees should get extra perks since the company had no retirement plan. It was at this point that the author resigned.

Six interview participants worked as program directors for ARC, five of whom self-identified as professional ex-s. Several reported similar experiences. For example, Val relayed an interesting experience. She received instructions to purchase a grandfather clock from a business operated by one of the board members. The invoice for the clock was for more than nine thousand dollars. In addition, gold-plated faucets were installed in her center. She said, “What was going on? A
$10,000 clock? For these kids? Please—give me that money and I’ll make sure my staff have a good Christmas.” She was told by one of the executives to not worry about “things that don’t concern you.” She also expressed concern about inadequate nutrition for the clients, claiming that her budget did not allow the purchase of much meat or fresh produce. Instead, the clients were fed government commodities. She became concerned about the integrity of the agency and quit shortly thereafter.

That facility was then taken over by Diane, the only interview participant not claiming to be a professional ex-. Initially, she had faith in the two top executives, and after six months, she moved to a larger program as director. It was at the latter facility that she began having concerns. She discovered falsification in the billing procedures and resigned. “Something just smelled bad. At first, I thought it was just a mistake. [The director] got angry and told me the billing was just fine and to quit tilting at windmills.”

Similarly, Andrea claimed that she was instructed to falsify dates on client discharges, allowing ARC to bill the state for clients that had already left. She also relayed a story that provides additional insight into the behavior of professional ex-s. One of her roommates, Joe, was ARC’s accountant as well as coordinator of the aftercare program. Joe was asked to resign after the discovery that he had embezzled almost twenty thousand dollars to cover gambling debts. No criminal charges were filed, Joe received severance pay, and he claimed he was not required to repay the stolen funds. At first, Andrea thought it was compassionate, but in light of later issues, she decided it was a cover-up: “I mean, $20,000? And no consequences? I thought, man, I should be an accountant. You know—I mean, I could do a lot with $20,000. But then, I started thinking, ‘[The director] never does anything without a motive,’ you know.” Joe’s case is interesting for two reasons. First, he was a professional ex-, and the embezzlement and gambling were indicative of both versatility and stability of deviance. In addition, the lack of consequences for his behavior suggests that he may have been aware of questionable financial transactions and able to use his knowledge as leverage.

Not all of the program directors described agency wrongdoing. Lizette staunchly supported the agency and its executives, and she argued that the investigation was a “witch hunt” designed to discredit
the two executives. She commented that the two executives “deserved” more pay and that the bonuses and dummy corporation allowed them to receive fair pay. “People don’t know how hard he works—he’s always up there on the weekend. He hasn’t had a vacation in years. So, this is—I mean it’s only fair.” However, it is noteworthy that Lizette herself benefited substantially from her employment at the agency. She was one of the “others” who had received bonuses equal to almost double her salary during 1993. After the scandals broke, Lizette left the agency. According to Paula, who took over Lizette’s duties, the paperwork was in disarray at the time that she left, and client charts were discovered hidden: “You wouldn’t believe the mess—there were charts that hadn’t had entries in months. We found them in drawers, in closets—it was fucking unbelievable.”

Lizette moved to another agency, where she supervised Belinda, another participant. Belinda reported that Lizette appeared to be misappropriating funds. She had documented numerous instances of checks drawn for cash with no documentation. She eventually reported her observations to TCADA, and Lizette resigned. Currently, Lizette is awaiting sentencing for a number of offenses including forgery and forged prescriptions. “Mmm-hmm. She learned from the best—sitting there nodding out like a junkie. She just come around to get money, her and that no-good [another professional ex-]. They be flying high.”

While the above events are disturbing, alone they provide little evidence of widespread ongoing deviance by professional ex-s. However, they led to widespread investigations throughout Texas. By late 1994, allegations against treatment centers across the state were emerging (Herrera 1996a; Robbins 1996e, 1996d, 1996a). There were reports of expenditures for large bonuses, personal gifts, a professional weight trainer for the executive director, weekend resort trips, mariachi bands, and acrylic fingernails (Ann Richards joins 1995; Herman 1995; Herrera 1996a).

The scandal added to earlier concerns about TCADA’s management (Elliott 1994b, 1995b, 1995c; TCADA: A chronology 1995; Phenix 1995; Oberwetter 1996). In 1995, a state senate committee was appointed to investigate TCADA, followed by the Texas Rangers. Ultimately, TCADA was placed under conservatorship (TCADA: A chronology 1995; Ann Richards joins 1995; Elliott 1995a; Robbins 1996c, 1996b, 1996e; Burton 1997).
SELF-REPORTED DEVIANCE

The interviews also provided evidence of ongoing deviance by the participants, both white-collar and non-white-collar. Lizette was not the only participant engaging in deviant behaviors. Andrea described a scam to obtain money from local restaurants. She would eat at a local restaurant, then she would return claiming a waitress had spilled a beverage on her suede coat. She would present a receipt from a dry-cleaning establishment and demand reimbursement. Andrea obtained reimbursement from seven restaurants in a two-week period. She also reported violation of counselor ethics by engaging in sexual liaisons with two clients during the time she was employed by the agency, including an adolescent:

It was terrible—how low can I go, you know what I mean? I mean, I’m sleeping with [the client] and then going to family group and telling his mother how to have a better relationship with him. I mean, that’s fucked up.

Lizette also reported a sexual liaison with a client. And, at Val’s facility, a female counselor was discovered partially clothed and in bed with an adolescent female client. Lisa became an unwed mother after becoming a professional ex-. It is noteworthy that in all but the last example, these behaviors could have resulted in loss of jobs and/or counseling licenses, as well as arrest and prosecution (TCADA 1998a, 1998b, 1999).

Other activities met the self-control definition of deviance. Theft was commonplace. For example, one morning the lock and the seals on the freezer at the facility run by one of the authors were discovered broken. Interviews with several staff provided no insight, but eventually the clients admitted that one of the staff had used a knife to pry the freezer open to get ice cream. This behavior was not unusual. The general consensus seemed to be that staff members were underpaid and that taking home food and supplies was a way to supplement their income. Furthermore, staff members were aware of questionable activities by those at higher levels in the organization, and they argued that if the “bigshots” could steal, so could they, that it was expected and justified. Greg, the staff member who pried open the freezer, said that he did not believe that his actions were wrong since “everyone” stole from the program.
Lester agreed, stating that the level of theft by “frontline” employees was “minor in comparison” to that of the “biggies.”

A few participants admitted using their professional ex-status to operate as drug dealers. Mark, who worked in a halfway house for parolees, stated that his job provided a low-profile way to sell drugs. Essentially, his argument was that many of the clients had no intention of remaining drug free anyway, so it was not wrong to sell them drugs: “Somebody was gonna make some cash—might as well be me. I never sold to anybody who wasn’t already using, so I don’t feel guilty. Why should I? They don’t pay me enough to do that!” Likewise, Frank argued that he only sold marijuana to clients, not the more “dangerous” drugs such as heroin or crack. Thus, he capitalized on his status as a professional ex-, but he did not consider it to be in conflict with his role in helping addicts to recover from drug use.

Finally, two participants reported engaging in aggressive behavior. Kevin was arrested while at work for threatening his estranged wife with a gun. He was also charged with assault due to a domestic violence episode, whereas Lloyd physically attacked a coworker who called him a “tight-ass.”

**DISCUSSION**

This study calls into question the assumption that individuals exit a deviant career when they cease a particular form of deviant behavior (Brown 1991). Indeed, our examination of the professional ex-calls into question the concept of deviant “careers” in general. It appears that the professional ex-may abandon substance abuse because of natural sanctions such as health issues or legal sanctions. By conceptualizing deviance as general rather than specific (substance abuse, for example), a more detailed picture of deviance among professional ex-s emerges.

We have attempted to present a different perspective. Our data clearly suggest that cessation of substance abuse may be only part of the story. Brown (1991) argued that the professional ex-was a member of “a redemptive community” that “provides a reference group whose moral and social standards are internalized” (p. 228). However, many of our participants continued to engage in a wide variety of deviant behaviors, lending support to self-control theory in several ways.
First, the behaviors are indicative of versatility, including fraud, gambling, drug dealing, theft, illicit sex, and assaults. Furthermore, many of the behaviors identified at ARC meet the criteria of “acts of force or fraud undertaken in pursuit of self-interest.” Clearly, there is a link between the propensity to commit crime and to engage in analogous behaviors (i.e., substance abuse).

Second, our findings indicate that deviance has an element of stability. Individuals who appear to transition out of a deviant career may instead continue to engage in deviance. Participants other than Diane, who was not a professional ex-, claimed to be abstinent from alcohol and drugs. However, the agency executives as well as the majority of interview participants reported ongoing deviance. Consistent with Gottfredson and Hirschi’s (1990) predictions, low-self-control individuals, when presented with opportunities for deviance, are likely to take them. Rather than providing a chance at redemption, the new occupations held by professional ex-s provided ample opportunity for a variety of criminal acts. And, considering the seemingly cavalier way deviance was viewed by the agency, the costs of such behavior (at least in the short term) seemed minimal.

Third, these findings call into question interactionist explanations of deviance such as labeling theory (Lemert, 1951; Becker 1963; Goffman 1963; Erikson 1966; Schur 1971; Thoits 1985). This approach assumes that the detection of and reaction to deviant behavior result in stigma, which in turn contributes to the development of a deviant identity and blocked opportunities. However, professional ex-status not only results in new career opportunities and a new positive “identity” but provides new opportunities for deviance as well. Indeed, our findings support Gottfredson and Hirschi’s (1990) assertion that white-collar crime differs little from other forms of crime—all it requires is the intersection of a low-self-control individual with the right set of circumstances.

The two top executives at ARC used their status as professional ex-s to commit fraud. Indeed, their professional ex-statuses created the opportunity for fraud and embezzlement. Given the opportunity through positions of authority, these administrators did exactly what self-control theory would predict (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990, 183). The white-collar crime of other ARC employees and the widespread reported fraud throughout the Texas treatment industry suggest that these men were not unique.
While our findings suggest support for self-control theory, they are
not, of course, generalizable. First, we do not have a random sample of
professional ex-s. Therefore, it is impossible to conclude that profes-
sional ex-s as a whole are likely to continue in other forms of deviance
on cessation of substance abuse. More important, we have no compari-
son group. Thus, we cannot say with any confidence that the profes-
sional ex-s in our study differ from individuals in similar careers. This
suggests the need for further research. Ideally, we need a comparison
group similar to professional ex-s in terms of licensing requirements.
Nurses would be a potentially good choice. First, like professional ex-s,
nursing jobs range from hands-on direct care providers all the way up to
program administrators. In addition, at some levels of both nursing and
substance abuse counseling, a college education is not required.

Because of their established history of low self-control, we would
predict that compared to those in occupations with similar licensing cri-
teria, professional ex-s should be more deviant. Overall, the profes-
sional ex-s we describe in this study fit the image of the low-self-control
offender described by Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990), as well as their
description of the typical white-collar offender: “The central elements
of our theory of criminality are, however, easily identifiable among
white-collar criminals. They too are people with low self-control, peo-
ple inclined to follow momentary impulse without consideration of the
long-term costs of such behavior” (p. 191). In contrast to those who cri-
tique the general theory as being unable to explain white-collar crime
(Reed and Yeager 1996), our findings concerning the behaviors of the
professional ex-s suggest just the opposite.

APPENDIX
Interview Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diane</td>
<td>Director of two programs for ARC during 1994 and 1995, not a former substance abuser, white female, mid-thirties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrea</td>
<td>Director of three programs for ARC from 1984 to 1993, professional ex-, white female, early forties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lizette</td>
<td>Director of two programs for ARC from 1985 to 1996, professional ex-, white female, mid-forties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belinda</td>
<td>Counselor for ARC from 1990 until 1992, professional ex-, black female, early thirties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lloyd</td>
<td>Counselor for ARC from 1988 until 1995, professional ex-, white male, late forties.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Paula Counselor for ARC, later director of a program, 1993 to 1996 and 1998 to present, professional ex-, white female, early fifties.

Lisa Counselor for ARC, 1988 to present, professional ex-, white female, early forties.

Lester Counselor for ARC, 1990 to 1992, professional ex-, white female, late twenties.


Mark Counselor for ARC 1993, professional ex-, white male, early thirties.

Vince Counselor for ARC, 1989 to 1995, professional ex-, black male, late twenties.

Frank Counselor for ARC, 1989 to present, professional ex-, black male, early thirties.

Pam Counselor for ARC, 1989 to 1994, professional ex-, white female, early twenties.

Val Counselor for ARC, 1989 to 1990, program director 1990, professional ex-, white female, midtwenties.

Kevin Counselor for ARC, 1989 to 1992, professional ex-, white male, early forties.

a. Information concerning these individuals is deliberately sketchy to avoid possible identification.

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“... we should look on researching from afar as one of many tools in a well-rounded ethnographer’s potential toolkit.”

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In this article, the author discusses some of the methodological implications of conducting long-distance ethnographic research. The author suggests that while distance is not without its advantages (such as helping the researcher maintain novelty and/or feign ignorance when appropriate), it also poses serious challenges (e.g., cutting the researcher off from his or her support network and/or imposing an “unnaturally” restrictive timetable). In this light, distance might best be seen as a potential tool in the researcher’s toolkit. The article concludes by situating long-distance ethnography in the tradition of voluntary risk taking or “edgework.”

In recent years, questions of reflexivity have come to the forefront in debates concerning field-based research (e.g., Ferrell and Hamm 1998a; Hertz 1997). No longer is it acceptable to present data from an ostensibly invisible or objective standpoint. Current concern for reflexivity instead demands that the researcher situate himself or herself within the context of the research process and take that situatedness into account throughout all phases of research (i.e., collection, analysis, and presentation of data). Yet, it is also insufficient to assume that insider status yields irrefutable insights. We have to problematize both the insider and outsider perspectives (Becker 1967). As Ferrell and Hamm (1998b) put it,

We can understand the field researcher’s confession as an emerging ritual designed to flesh out the fieldwork experience and to produce situated understandings of field research and field research findings previously submerged under [claims] of researcher objectivity and distance. . . . If we . . . take care to balance reflexivity with scholarly responsibility . . . we may find that . . . we are better able to pay attention to others as well. (p. 12)

Discussing such matters in the abstract, however, can get boring and certainly can be imprecise. Therefore, allow me to present a context for the current discussion. In the following pages, I will discuss how I have negotiated distance in conducting field research on the fine-art tattoo world. After a brief discussion of how I gained entry into the tattoo

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world (and thus established a solid base to which I could return later), I will show how I came to see long distance as a potential advantage in conducting ethnographic research. I conclude the article by discussing how we might situate long-distance ethnography within the emerging literature surrounding voluntary risk taking or “edgework” (Lyng 1990, 1993; Lyng and Bracey 1995; Lyng and Snow 1986). In essence, edgework activities are risky (both physically and otherwise), they require specialized skills, and they are often directed at imposing control on conditions most would see as haphazard at best (Lyng 1990).

RESEARCHING TATTOO ARTISTS AND COLLECTORS

This article is part of an ethnographic study of fine-art tattooers and tattoo collectors in the San Francisco Bay Area (Vail 2000c). As DeMello (2000), Irwin (2001), Sanders (1989), and I (Vail 1999, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c) all have noted, the tattoo world is fairly typical of marginal social worlds in that those who enact it are suspicious of outsiders—especially when they come from academe. The reasons for this mistrust are many and varied and often well founded, as even a cursory review of the psychological literature on tattooing will show (for review, see Sanders 1989; Vail 1999, 2000c). Psychologists and criminologists have been fond of portraying tattooed people as violent, psychologically unstable miscreants. Mistrust in the tattoo world is not reserved solely for outsiders however.

Tattooers, until fairly recently, have been a largely unskilled group, their marketability depending on their capacity to provide a service or feature that their competition does not (McCabe 1995, 1997; Walsh 1977; Sanders 1985; Schiffmacher 1996; St. Clair and Govenar 1981). Since the topics of most stock designs were common from shop to shop, tattooers relied on palette, slight variations in their hand-painted designs, and their abilities to apply tattoos quickly. Also, since many of them began their careers adventitiously (Katz and Martin 1962; Sanders 1985), they are all too aware that their current clients could easily become competitors. Thus, they are well practiced at giving evasive answers to inquisitive clients’ questions. While many have found studying other marginal social worlds challenging for similar reasons, the payoffs have often outweighed the drawbacks.
How, then, is one to research such a group? Obviously, to access the social world of tattooing, one must gain the trust of those who enact it. To date, those who have successfully researched contemporary tattooing (e.g., DeMello 1995, 2000; Govenar 1988, 1995; Hardy 1995; Irwin 2001; McCabe 1995, 1997; Rubin 1988; Sanders 1989; Vail 1999, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c) have gained this trust by becoming part of that social world.

My entry to the tattoo world came when a heavily tattooed friend gave me the name of a tattoo artist in San Francisco. Through this contact, I met my primary artist who introduced me to several other artists, many of whom subsequently worked on me. At the time, I thought of these relationships as nothing more than strong friendships with a very special group of people on the cutting edge of an art form that was beginning to swing toward social acceptance. These relationships later served as entry points (Lofland and Lofland 1995, 11-45) into my study of the social world surrounding fine-art tattooing.

Toward the end of my residence in the Bay Area, I began spending increasing amounts of time at a tattoo studio specializing in custom artistic tattooing. In my final year there, I spent most of my time either getting tattooed or watching other people get tattooed. Many of the tattoos that I got during this period were featured in the pages of the prominent artistic tattoo magazines of the day. I also served a brief apprenticeship at the studio. As an apprentice, and as a shop regular before that, I was responsible for doing menial tasks (e.g., vacuuming, setting up work stations, taking messages, running errands, and the like), entertaining clients as they waited to get tattooed, distracting clients who had reached their pain thresholds, and entertaining visiting artists, some of whom came from as far away as Australia and Japan.

Also during this period, I helped the artists in residence set up and operate booths at two international tattoo conventions. Each of these conventions was well attended, both by artists and collectors. They ran for four days and generated almost continuous business for the three artists with whom I attended. Along with helping to set up work stations, I ran errands, helped customers settle on designs, answered questions, and provided transportation for all the members of our crew. At one of these conferences, I entered two competitions and won first prize in each.

Winning these awards helped make our booth a prime attraction for the rest of the convention. During the subsequent days, I was
photographed for layouts in three magazines, interviewed for a special 
that was scheduled to air on Showtime, and asked to remove various 
articles of clothing for any number of amateur shutterbugs. Since the 
artist who did the award-winning tattoos (Filip Leu) was working in the 
booth, the exposure increased both his business and the business of the 
other artists working in the booth. It was a thrilling and exhilarating 
experience that has had lasting repercussions, not least of which is my 
ability to reference the tattoos for credibility among both tattoo artists 
and collectors.

Over the course of that year, I developed lasting friendships with col-
lectors and tattooers, helped out around the shop, took pictures of new 
tattoos and artists at work, and went heavily into debt. My fifth year in 
California ended with my return to my parents’ house in New York to 
learn marketable skills and work my way out of that debt. I have kept in 
touch with my friends in the Bay Area, and I try to visit them annually.

While living at home, I realized that I missed being in school. I 
applied to graduate programs in sociology and was accepted at the Uni-
versity of Connecticut, where I looked forward to studying with a soci-
ologist whose work in cultural production and tattooing I admired 
(Sanders 1989). Unfortunately, most of my contacts were three thou-
sand miles away, and Connecticut is not known for its thriving or influ-
ential tattoo scene. These problems left me with two potential solutions. 
I could either change what I planned to study, or I could find access to 
artistic tattooing. Since I saw the greatest potential for my making a 
contribution to sociology in studying the growing influence of custom 
tattoos and the training of those who apply them, I began considering 
ways to access that social world.

SOME INITIAL SOLUTIONS 
TO THE PROBLEM OF DISTANCE

One topic that had yet to be addressed systematically when I arrived 
in Connecticut was tattoo conventions. Having already attended a num-
ber of conventions while in California, I had a rough idea of what they 
were like. I knew that they tend to be relatively short (typically three or 
four days), and I knew that they tended to attract serious tattoo collec-
tors and internationally renowned artists. Thus, here was a sort of rov-
ing fine-art tattoo world that stopped at different points around the
country; perhaps Maher (1999) might call it a mobile ephemeral institution.

Conventions initially served as effective intensive immersion sites for gathering both interview data with collectors and participant observation data on the convention floor. However, these data have proven somewhat limited for several reasons.

First, the tattooers in attendance spent their business hours operating booths on busy convention floors. They did not have a great deal of spare time to devote to extended interviews. After business hours, many of them spent their time catching up with friends or tattooing in their hotel rooms and thus did not have time for interviews then either. Here, we encounter one of the potential hazards of conducting research from afar. Since distance research is, by necessity, temporally constrained in a way that local research is not, the researcher has to be prepared to use a variety of methods (or specialized skills) of data collection, some of which may be inconvenient and/or unfamiliar.

I dealt with these inconveniences by holding less formal field conversations with tattooers at their booths and on the convention floor. As often as I was able, I would run up to my room to jot and record as much as I could remember in field notes. Since field note journals can be hard to conceal, I was fortunate to have a microcassette recorder that is small enough to keep in a pocket without drawing much attention. I found that recording verbal jottings was quicker than writing them down. At the end of the day, I fleshed out those jottings in my written notes.

Conventions also proved problematic because they are not focused around the mundane activities that are such an important part of any social world (Becker 1967, 1996; Garfinkel 1967; Goffman 1974; Lofland 1995; Lofland and Lofland 1995; Prus 1987). Excepting the occasional gawker, most convention attendees are serious collectors. Therefore, they tend to be the kinds of people with whom I was interested in talking. However, since conventions are both temporally and spatially constrained, the interactions that take place at them represent a fairly limited snapshot of the diverse kinds of interactions that make up their many composite social worlds. Furthermore, since these interactions are so intensely focused (virtually to the exclusion of the outside world), the snapshot that emerges from their observation cannot capture how they may be similar to, or different from, interactions in less focused settings. These less focused settings, while often less exciting, are important elements of social worlds. Conducting fieldwork at conventions may
be successful, then, if one is interested in how people behave at conventions. It is not, however, an ideal setting for uncovering the more nuanced behavior that takes place outside such a focused setting.2

Conventions provided, therefore, an initial solution to the problems of distance. However, that solution ultimately was of limited utility. To access the everyday reality of the tattoo world, I would need to access the people who enact it, in the setting in which they enact it. In short, I would have to return to California. However, the dual responsibilities of teaching and studying in Connecticut quite severely restricted my access to California. To conquer the problem of distance, then, I collected data during a number of brief, intensive field immersions.

These immersions lasted approximately one month each, during which time I stayed with a close friend in the East Bay. I brought my field notes journal, a microcassette recorder and blank microcassettes, a laptop computer to transcribe and code field notes and jottings, and my transcription machine. At the end of each day, I transcribed taped field notes and jottings, transcribed interviews, and prepared for the following day’s activities. My days were loosely planned around the typical business hours of tattoo shops (i.e., 12:00 P.M. to 8:00 P.M.), with time before and after shop hours set aside for transcribing and data analysis.

CALIFORNIA:
IMMERSIONS IN THE FIELD

A lot has changed in the San Francisco tattoo scene since I moved east. When I left the Bay Area, there were five main custom tattoo shops, several young art-school-trained tattooers were working in a style that had yet to be named, and artistic tattooing had yet to take hold in the East Bay. There are now closer to fifteen established, custom-oriented tattoo shops in the Bay Area, the previously unnamed style—now called “nu skool” tattooing3—has become well established in the vocabulary of all competent tattoo artists, and Oakland is beginning to develop an identity of its own as a thriving tattoo market. When I left California, there were two artistic tattoo magazines and two biker tattoo magazines (see DeMello 2000 for an insightful discussion of the magazines), and artists and collectors still read them. Now, the glut of magazines (at last count, ten appear monthly, plus numerous special editions per year) has made the quality of work they present unpredictable.
Largely because of this inconsistent quality, they have fallen from favor among the wise. In short, much about the fine-art tattoo scene has changed over the past several years.

The fact that these changes happened in my absence meant that the world I was reentering was novel, and it made it easy for me to pass as somewhat ignorant among tattoo collectors and artists. Since I had deep and intimate knowledge of the tattoo world before I left California, the changes stood out.

ACHIEVING NOVELTY

One of the first challenges any ethnographer encounters in the field is discovering “What is it that’s going on here?” (Goffman 1974). In short, the challenge is to access “the everyday world . . . the world people actually act in every day, the ordinary world in which the things we are interested in understanding actually go on” (Becker 1996, 61). Part of achieving intimate familiarity with a social world is discovering how that social world is similar to, or different from, others of its ilk (Lofland 1995; Prus 1987). In conducting ethnography from afar, I was faced with combining these challenges. In essence, my goal was to rediscover the social life among actors in the tattoo world and to discover how that social life was the same or different from how it used to be when I was a more active and regular participant in it. Although this may sound like a daunting task, and it was at times, I found that being away from the site for a year actually helped in a few ways.

The “community” I was researching had changed a lot since I left it, and, like all things processual, it continues to change. The following quotation illustrates some fairly dramatic changes and the subtle effects they have had. It comes from an interview with a tattooer who had recently set up his own shop:

Collectors used to be people who were around the tattoo scene. A lot of times they would just let artists do whatever they want. I mean, I guess collecting has changed in the sense that the San Francisco tattoo scene has changed. I feel really grateful that I had a little opportunity to be around [street shop], L___’s, [street shop], and the [custom shop] situation where everybody kinda knew each other. They had worked together at some point. They were on a friendly basis. Y’know, you could call a shop: “We’re out of pigment, do you have this? Send this over. We’re too
busy, do you want to do this tattoo?” Everybody was on kind of a camaraderie. It was like, the tattoo thing was starting to explode again. Everybody was kind of excited about it. Poor H didn’t have to worry about umpteen shops being opened, Broadway wasn’t closed down yet, B was working at [custom shop], it was just a really neat thing.

The points of reference that make these cultural changes visible (i.e., specific names of people and shops and descriptions of neighborhoods) are dramatic when considered together, but they all happened slowly, and they happened over extended periods. The proliferation of tattoo shops in the Bay Area has been dramatic, but it has taken close to ten years to reach its current state. A lot has changed in that decade, but in my periodic telephone discussions with people in the area, none of these changes came up. They happened slowly, and many did not seem important at the time.

To document some reference points and thus make these changes clear, I spent the first part of my field immersions finding out precisely how things had changed. Who still works where? Who has moved to or from the area? What kinds of work are people doing? Which tattoo shops or studios continue to prosper? Which have not been as fortunate? All of these events stand out to me because I have been away and therefore have temporal reference points with which I can categorize them (see Zerubavel 1996 for a discussion of lumping and splitting experiences). The following example documenting one such change comes from my field notes early on in a field immersion.

I still can’t seem to get through to [tattooer]. This is more than a little distressing since I was counting on him to hook up a few interviews with collectors. I spoke with [another tattooer] who said he hasn’t seen him around much recently. This seems strange to me. It’s summer after all, and business should be screamin’. Last time I spoke with him, he said everything was cool. Business was a little slow, but that was in late Winter [traditionally a slow period for tattooers]. It now looks like [tattoo shop] may have dropped out of the loop.

These subtle changes make the community seem novel, but only because I can compare the current situation with the community of a year ago or five years ago. The subtle changes that happen over the course of a year seem much bolder when we lump them together (Flaherty 1998; Zerubavel 1996).
PERFORMING INCOMPETENCE

Another necessary skill in ethnographers’ toolkits, especially when our work involves interviewing, is convincing the people we study that we are somewhat ignorant of the meanings they attach to all manner of things and events that they encounter on a daily basis. This performed ignorance is important, Becker (1996) reminded us, because “it is inevitably epistemologically dangerous to guess at what could be observed directly. The danger is that we will guess wrong, that what looks reasonable to us will not be what looked reasonable to [those whom we research]” (p. 58). Thus, when interviewees answer a question with some variation of “You know how it goes,” we have to push them into explaining what they mean.

The following note comes from a field conversation I had while setting up an interview with a particularly well-connected collector. He had asked me how my research was going, and I was trying to make him interested without telling him too much.

After setting up my point by claiming that there weren’t any “real collectors” back in Connecticut, I told him that there were some interesting things coming out in interviews with the collectors out here and I’d like to get his take on them. For instance, one really important thing that I’d like to talk to him about was the fact that tattoo collectors really do see custom tattoos as better than flash tattoos. He said, “Not the guys who get the pork chop tattoos!” I responded by saying I’d like to continue our interview in that vein. He was excited to get going.

In pretending to take a somewhat misinformed and fairly rigid stance (i.e., my claim that all collectors value custom tattoos), I got this potential interviewee to open up a new line of discussion. In performing my ignorance, I piqued his interest. However, the skillful interviewer has to balance performed ignorance of the social world under consideration with demonstrated competence as an interviewer.

The following example of asserting competence comes from a particularly difficult interview. As I described the interview in my field notes:

We conduct the interview at [friend’s] kitchen table which has on it several magazines, two of them tattoo magazines. It is a struggle to keep [collector’s] attention on the interview. Compounding his distractibility
and ego are the fact that he has an MA in psychology which he seems to view as Carte Blanche in questioning my research methods.

So, T___ ___a. . . . Who else is in the collection?

Isn’t this going to be a dead giveaway, man?

There are lots of people who have collected from the same people that you have on you and I won’t use this stuff to give you away.

Prominently featured was [custom tattooer] who actually started tattooing because he saw that I came back with the fresh [piece] and was dumbfounded that someone would pay other people to do this to them. So I have [he lists several famous tattooers] and there are probably some other people I can’t remember.

So, how did you learn about these people? Certainly none of these people you’ve mentioned would be considered a hack.

There’s a leading question, of course, and certainly you’re not skewing your research agenda in any way.

This is not a test instrument and I’m not testing hypotheses. I want you to talk about how you became a collector. If that means I have to ask leading questions, so be it. Lay it on me. These things work best if we talk rather than my asking you formulaic questions.

Well, collector is such a key term here that I’m going to respond to precision of collecting . . . [interview with collector]

As the preceding admittedly rough exchange shows, interviewing involves a delicate balance among pushing, prodding, and listening. While performing incompetence in one regard, the interviewer who plays too dumb runs the risk of alienating an interviewee. Since tattoo collectors and artists are inclined to mistrust interviewers, they pose a particular challenge in this regard. Consider, for example, the following quotation from field notes, taken just after an interview:

Before we started taping, [tattooer] said “Y’know, Angus, normally I’d have just said ‘no’ when you asked to do this interview, but I’ve known you for a long time and I know that you’re plugged into the whole tattoo scene, so I agreed. But I’ve gotta ask you, if a someone comes in and wants to get tattooed, can we do this while I work?”

As is evident in the preceding field note, to gain my interviewee’s trust, I had to show evidence of my insider status (see also Sanders 1989; DeMello 2000). Since my collection is fairly extensive, and parts of it are internationally known, I have not had problems convincing
people that I am on their side. However, being known as one of the wise has often made conducting interviews challenging. In the following exchange, the tattooer just mentioned is talking about the “old school” ethic. Although the wise are familiar with the distinction between old school and nu skool philosophies of tattooing, how people define these philosophies is more sociologically important than the fact that people treat them as discrete. Therefore, I had to ask for clarification:

So, none of that “old school” ethic exists at all. People still loosely throw that term around, that “old school” thing, y’know what I mean? “Old school” this, “old school” that, but I don’t think a lot of the people who use that term really have a grasp of what it really truly is. I just don’t really think that exists much any more.

Well, I think I have a pretty good idea of what the “old school” ethic means, but I’ve been away for a while. What does the “old school” ethic mean to you?

I guess what the “old school” ethic means to me is, just like in any trade, there’s kind of a set of rules that goes along with it. With tattooing . . . Y’know there’s all these variables, because I know there’s areas, like in San Diego and stuff where there were tattoo shops that were right across the street or right next door to each other . . . but basically, they just kind kept everything cool in a simple sense, that’s basically what it was. I mean if somebody taught you how to tattoo, you didn’t like work for him until you knew what was up and then go down the street and open up. Y’know, if somebody handed you that gift, that career, you kinda stayed loyal to ‘em for a while. And then if you were going to open up, you’d go to a different town and open up. [tattooer]

Here again, researching from afar has its advantages. When interviewees told me, “You know what I mean,” I had a convincing and legitimate alibi for feigning ignorance. By conducting research in periodic immersions, I could blame the ravages of time on memory and the lack of “real tattooing back east” for my ignorance since members of the California tattoo world often dismiss East Coast tattooing as inferior and derivative. Once again, therefore, distance helped.

Thus far, I have discussed ways that ethnographers can use distance to their advantage. Distance helped me maintain novelty in my field settings, and it helped me perform incompetence. However, elements of conducting research from afar make it quite risky.
SOME CAVEATS

I tend to be a silver-lining kind of person. Rather than dwelling on the inconveniences or hassles associated with a given problem, I prefer to see opportunities for growth or improvement. This article and the methodological tool on which it is based are the direct result this kind of “spin control.” However, ethnography, even when it is conducted locally, can be risky (a point to which I will return in greater detail in the conclusion). Conducting research from afar, it should be noted, adds to the standard hazards associated with fieldwork.

Since ethnography can be a stressful enterprise, many fieldworkers have to manage their emotions throughout the research process (for further discussions of emotion work and fieldwork, see Haas and Shaffir 1980; Kleinman and Copp 1993; Lofland and Lofland 1995; Maines, Shaffir, and Turowetz 1980; Roadburg 1980). Feigning ignorance and other forms of deception require emotion management (Hochschild 1983). Similarly, stepping back from intense emotions like fear, repulsion, or ecstasy is often necessary in analyzing data. Among recent discussions of the emotional hazards of conducting fieldwork, Cahill (1999), Charmaz (1991), Sanders (1995, 1998), and Sanders and Arluke (1993) have offered poignant statements on the profound emotional taxes associated with particular sites and/or social worlds. However, grief and horror are not the only causes of stress associated with fieldwork.

In conducting long-distance ethnography, researchers cut themselves off from many of the standard safety valves that we use when things are going wrong. Ethnographers of local sites have the many advantages of working from home in relatively familiar territory to help them manage the inevitable hassles that accompany fieldwork. When things are not going according to plan, local researchers can leave the field for short periods to relax, recreate, and/or reflect. Field immersions, on the other hand, do not share many of these amenities. In essence, each immersion becomes a focused research setting. The following auto-ethnographic field note speaks to the directed focus I found necessary for conducting long distance ethnography.

OK, it looks like things are starting to come together a little bit. I’ve got shop hours all figured out, I’ve got a few interviews lined up, and a couple people have offered to help me find some collectors to interview. I
was starting to get terrified that it was all going to fall apart, but now it looks like I’m finally going to be able to get productive.

The pressure associated with having to pack the study of social life into somewhat “unnatural” temporal chunks can be a source of considerable stress. Knowing the temporal boundaries of those chunks can, however, be a source of both stress and solace. During my last immersion, predictability and its lack came to a head as I started to realize that, despite my wishes to the contrary, obdurately reality is far from controllable. When circumstances prevented me from getting under way on one project, I was able to take solace in the predictability of another one.

This waiting is driving me nuts! I can’t go to any of the shops because I have to wait for [tattooer] to call back. I can’t call anyone else because if the phone’s busy when [tattooer] calls, he won’t call back for hours. I just want to get the ball rolling. I’m sick of watching Court TV and waiting to do my job. I suppose if [the tattoo project] goes completely into the shitter, at least I’ll have some notes on the opera. Thank goodness The Ring lasts a whole week! [field notes]

While, as the preceding excerpt shows, temporal predictability has its advantages, a potential hazard of conducting long-distance ethnography is the temptation to resign oneself to an unproductive trip when things start to go wrong. Knowing that the trip will “only last a month” makes stress-induced malaise tempting. Therefore, when conducting research from afar, the ethnographer must be vigilant to heed Sanders’s (1998) admonition regarding stress and anxiety in the field:

If our ultimate goal is to truly comprehend the rich variety of perspectives and experiences that shape interaction processes, however, we must not avoid involving ourselves in, and empathetically sharing, the sorrow and joy, pain and conflict, that are integral features of social life. (P. 192)

Perhaps even more important than self-discipline, however, is prior intimate knowledge of the immersion site. Without such knowledge, few of us would know how to recognize the sorrow and joy, pain and conflict of which Sanders (1998) spoke. To study a social world from afar, one must have prior, deep understanding of that world and firm connections within it. This is one of the main reasons anthropologists
no longer practice what might be called hit-and-run ethnography. As Becker (1996) put it,

It was once thought good enough to visit your tribe for a month or two in the summer and to get all your information from informants interviewing with the help of translators. No one thinks that any more, and now there is a minimum standard—know the native language, stay a year to eighteen months, use some sort of rudimentary sampling techniques. (p. 60)

Applying Becker’s (1996) admonitions to my research on tattooing, I was only able to make effective use of these immersion data because I had extensive prior knowledge based on my membership role in the California fine-art tattoo world. Thus, effective research from afar is only possible when the fieldworker has deep roots in the social world she or he is studying. Without such roots, the novelty, performed ignorance, and problems of isolation and temporal constriction about which I have written here could all raise the justifiable concern of those who would read the research. In essence, then, we should look on researching from afar as one of many tools in a well-rounded ethnographer’s potential toolkit.

Using the right tool for the job often yields satisfying results. Misusing tools, however, often causes problems.

Fieldwork is messy work. This messiness is one of the reasons many of us enjoy it. Messiness also can be risky. However, the risk associated with conducting field research can often be a source of great exhilaration. As Lofland and Lofland (1995) put it, “Naturalistic research is first and foremost emergent . . . . This emergent character is what gives ‘being in the field’ its edge, its complexity, its vigor, and, for many people, its excitement” (p. 30).

**CONCLUSION**

When we consider the breadth of topics on which ethnographers have turned their gaze, it is a bit surprising to note how rarely we examine each other. I suspect this is partly because many of us enjoy the freedom of conducting our research at our own pace and on our own schedules (see, for example, Sanders 1999), which hardly lends itself to observation by others. How then, is one to tie a discussion like the
going into a broader literature? I would like to suggest that conducting research from afar fits nicely in the tradition of voluntary risk taking, or edgework as that term is coming to be defined by Lyng and others (Lyng 1990, 1993; Lyng and Bracey 1995; Lyng and Snow 1986). Lyng’s (1990) defining statement on edgework focused on three important characteristics. Edgework activities “involve a clearly observable threat to one’s physical or mental well-being or one’s sense of an ordered existence” (p. 857); they often require specialized skills that allow the edgeworker to test his or her limits; and they are directed at edgeworkers’ attempts to control “a situation most people would regard as entirely uncontrollable” (p. 859). Edgework is, in short, activity that tests the physical, emotional, and intellectual limits of the edgeworker.

Perhaps our penchant for excitement and independence leads many of us to study those who enact marginal social worlds. Clearly, it is difficult to grasp, for example, what it is like to become a tattoo collector (Vail 1999), a graffiti artist (Ferrell 1993), or a biker (Lyng and Bracey 1995) by administering a survey. Studying marginal populations demands achieving intimate familiarity with those populations, and this can be an exciting process. Sanders put it nicely:

Doing this sort of “lone ranger” fieldwork (Adler and Adler 1987, p. 14) in the kinds of social settings I tend to choose has always provided me with a certain measure of adventure and allowed me to escape legitimately from the narrow confines of academia. In general, I am more at ease interacting with junkies, freaks, night-people, bikers, musicians, and other unsavory sorts than I am in rubbing shoulders with academics. (Sanders 1989, 166)

Many among us have gravitated toward the social worlds we study for similar reasons; risk is often exciting and challenging after all.

Clearly, studying those who occupy the margins can be hazardous in a variety of ways. Ethnographers studying marginal populations have been subjected to gunplay (e.g., Sanders 1989; Jacobs 1998), arrest (Ferrell 1998), jail time (Scarce 1994, 1995), and virtually innumerable other physical, corporeal, and emotional dangers. When one also considers the “(dis)courtesy stigma” (Mattley 1998) that academics often attach to those who conduct such research, those dangers become compounded.
When one adds to these fairly obvious threats the fact that ethnography is still seen by many in sociology as a marginal method (unless it is combined with the supposedly value-neutral survey methods), one might reasonably argue that conducting field research of any kind can be dangerous, not only to the researcher’s body but also to his or her livelihood (Young 1981). Many of us draw strength from these dangers. We revel in our marginality precisely because it is exciting.

Conducting research from afar adds to the excitement of the ethnographic enterprise because so much more is at stake. Because immersion sites are both temporally and spatially inconvenient (sometimes, almost inaccessible), the researcher has less time to recover from the unpredictable mishaps that she or he will inevitably encounter. When interviews fall through or contacts leave town, the researcher has less time to regroup and redirect his or her inquiries. Furthermore, the researcher has to regroup and redirect from bases of operation that are inevitably, to at least some degree, unfamiliar and/or undesirable. Thus, long-distance ethnographers must be willing to employ a variety of ethnographic methods—or, as Lyng (1990) would have it, use specialized skills—to compensate for the comfort of local sites. This brings us to issues of control.

We need social scientists because social life is messy (Blumer 1969; Goffman 1974; Lofland 1976; Mead 1956; Prus 1997; Schutz 1962). This obdurate nature of reality creates a conundrum for ethnographers who, by definition, try to explain to their readers how this messiness is organized (see, especially, Prus 1987; Lofland 1995). In essence, the ethnographer’s task is to filter through the myriad of relationships that make up our social worlds and show how they work together in ways that make sense to those who enact them. We accomplish this goal by using our specialized ethnographic skills to help our readers experience the unfamiliar in terms that make it familiar and vice versa. In essence, we try to impose a little order on what could quite easily seem like chaos.

The aforementioned threats or challenges, use of skills, and imposition of order make a strong case for considering ethnography—in virtually all of its forms—a kind of edgework. However, distance ethnography takes edgework one step further: it hinders the ethnographer’s progress by imposing potentially problematic temporal and spatial barriers on the research process (see Becker 1996)—it is a form of voluntary incapacitation. According to Lyng (1998),
A common pattern among risk takers is to increase the risks of dangerous activities artificially by incapacitating themselves in various ways, as when mountain climbers make an ascent without oxygen tanks or rock climbers scale cliffs without safety ropes. The point of such imprudence is to get as close as possible to the “edge” separating life and death, the place where edgework sensations are most pronounced. (p. 225)

Thus, by making already risky behaviors even riskier, the edgeworker tests his or her own limits and in so doing increases the potential payoffs of the activity at hand.

Clearly, long-distance ethnography is risky. Some prominent examples of research on other edgework activities are studies of skydivers (Lyng and Snow 1986), bikers (Lyng and Bracey 1995), search and rescue workers (Lois 1999), graffiti artists (Ferrell 1993, 1998), and “adventurous outdoor leisure” activities (Holyfield 1999). Apparently, ethnographic work of virtually all kinds poses risks that might take its practitioners within view of “the edge.” How close ethnography alone will take one to the edge, we will only know once someone has gone over.

NOTES

1. As I later discovered, in my California field immersions, microcassette recorders are also quite convenient for jotting notes while moving from site to site. My microcassette recorder is roughly the size and shape of a wireless phone, so I often recorded notes as though I were talking with someone on the phone as I walked down the street. I do not know whether this made me any less conspicuous, but it did make me feel less conspicuous.

2. One might reasonably ask at this point, if short immersions in the field are problematic because they are too short, how does the fieldworker know how long is long enough? Ultimately, this is one of ethnography’s fundamental conundrums. The most common answers roughly paraphrase Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) notion of theoretical saturation thus: you know it is time to leave when you stop hearing/finding anything new (see also Strauss and Corbin 1990). Since this standard is so vague, ethnographers have to be mindful of how they frame and present their decisions to leave the field (see Becker 1967, 1996).

3. Nu Skool tattooing is characterized by bright colors and bold outlines, often used in abstract designs. It is also seen as a philosophy embraced by art-school-trained tattoo artists who eschew the value of cultural knowledge gained in apprenticeships. See Vail (2000b) for a more detailed discussion.

4. To make it easier to read, I have italicized my questions where excerpts are not one-sided.
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REVIEW ESSAY
Ethnographically Crossing Chasms

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ETHNOGRAPHICALLY CROSSING CHASMS AFTER POMP AND CIRCUMSTANCE: HIGH SCHOOL REUNION AS AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL OCCASION, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, 216 pp., $39.00 (hardcover), $14.00 (paper).

UNDERSTANDING DOGS: LIVING AND WORKING WITH CANINE COMPANIONS, Clinton R. Sanders, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999, 224 pp., $59.00 (hardcover), $19.95 (paper).

SUDDEN DEATH AND MYTH OF CPR, Stefan Timmermans, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999, 272 pp., $59.00 (hardcover), $22.95 (paper).

What could possibly justify reviewing these three books together? What do high school reunions, canine companions, and sudden death have in common? As these three ethnographies brilliantly demonstrate, each occasions human journeys across portentous chasms, separating autobiographical pasts from the present, human from nonhuman animals, and life from death. We humans are apparently not content to let sleeping dogs lie, waking ones be, or living humans suddenly die. So, we attend high school reunions, live and work with dogs, and attempt to cheat death with decidedly mixed results.

I personally have not attended a high school reunion, and after reading Vinitzky-Seroussi’s telling descriptions and analysis of what occurs there, I consider that my good fortune. Readers who have attended such reunions will undoubtedly find reflections of themselves and their former classmates in the pages of her book. It offers an empirically rich
portrait of the interpersonal dynamics and psychic gyrations that those reunions occasion. Vinitzky-Seroussi observed five different reunions, interviewed many of those who attended them and a handful of their classmates who did not, and collected mailed questionnaires from members of both groups. And, she deftly mines this treasure of empirical information for analytic insights.

As the subtitle of her book suggests, Vinitzky-Seroussi treats high school reunions as autobiographical occasions on which attendees attempt to reconcile hazily remembered social identities from the past, current personal identities, and the situated identities of the evening. All of this is done within the context of the constructed community of a high school class that was never much of a community in the first place. Vinitzky-Seroussi argues that Americans are attracted to high school reunions for this sense of community, however fleeting, that is largely absent from the rest of their lives. I doubt that. As she later shows, people are there to do identity work, and they need an audience, rather than a community, to do that work. I suspect that is the principal attraction of high school reunions and not a one-night community that is largely the handiwork of organizers in any case.

As Vinitzky-Seroussi demonstrates, high school reunions are less about remembering than about reporting. Most attendees want to “catch up” on what has happened to formerly close but now distant friends and former high school celebrities. That, in turn, puts them under an obligation to narrate their own autobiographies since high school graduation. Yes, some are interested in confirming their remembered place in the complex relations of past high school culture. Yet, they are less interested in how they were perceived then than in how they have integrated that remembered identity into their present personal identity. Their present self is what is on center stage at the high school reunion. What is recalled, in practice if not to mind, is the micropolitical maneuvering for peer status that characterized their younger years.

The currency of peer status at high school reunions is success stories, complete with a spouse, children, and prestigious and well-remunerated jobs. Those whose current circumstances cannot support such a progressive narrative or fall short of high school expectations either do not attend or fret about how their stories will be received. They know what is expected, and as Vinitzky-Seroussi notes, those expectations serve as a subtle form of social control. Although some take liberties with the facts of their current lives to meet those expectations, most are deterred
from significant misrepresentation by their own sense of personal integrity and their proclaimed “comfort” with their present personal identities.

So what is the attraction of this perilous time travel? For those with success stories, the attraction is obvious. It is their night to shine. For those with less triumphant autobiographies, the attraction is less obvious. According to Vinitzky-Seroussi, they are seeking a sense of temporal continuity in their own lives as well as those of others. That quest is often thwarted by memories that are not remembered by others; by former high school celebrities who are now overweight, unmarried, or in menial jobs; and by the former nerd who is now wildly successful and the former “wild man” who is now a responsible businessman. Yet, those who attend high school reunions do not let such inconvenient facts stop them from finding continuity between the past and the present. If their or others’ past social identities are inconsistent with their current ones, it is because former classmates never knew their “true selves,” or those presently buried true selves will eventually tell.

Vinitzky-Seroussi marshals this often-torturous quest for temporal identity continuity to argue against those who write about the fragmented and fluid identities of our supposedly postmodern times. Yet, that argument is at least partially undone by the self-selection of those from whom she draws this lesson. She repeatedly notes that attendance of high school reunions is voluntary and estimates that only between 30 to 40 percent of former classmates attend them. She offers some explanations for that low attendance but never considers the possibility that those who do not attend might have laid their past to rest and have no interest in reviving it. Perhaps they are comfortable with a fragmented and fluid identity without temporal continuity. However, that possible objection does not detract from the many lessons in the pages of this book. There are many insights into the subtle interplay between social, personal, and situated identities; the insidious exercise of social control on autobiographical occasions; the contribution of audiences to identity work; the possibilities and limits of self-aggrandizement; and, of course, the creative mining of the past to support current constructions of identity. And, these lessons are all learned while being entertained by the antics of reunion goers.

Like the bored spouses who populate high school reunions, dogs are also living testimony of their companion’s identity. Yet, as Clinton R. Sanders convincingly demonstrates, living with dogs involves far more
than identity work. Like all social relationships, it requires reaching across the inevitable chasm between self and other, only in this case it requires reaching across the chasm between species as well. Sanders ethnographically explores how that divide is traversed by various humans who live and work with dogs, including everyday dog owners, guide dog owners and trainers, and veterinarians. He thereby convincingly shows that this is accomplished not simply by humans going to the dogs but by dogs meeting them halfway.

As Sanders documents, dogs are clearly implicated in the social constructions of their human companions’ identities. The human reputation of their breed provides grounds for the attribution of varied social identities; their behavior in public reflects on the moral identity of their human companions; and, for guide dog owners, their presence sometimes announces their human companions’ social stigma. Sanders does not stop there. He also shows that the relation between dogs and their human companions’ identities is not simply mediated through their effect on their companions’ human contacts but also direct. In Meadian terms, dogs’ human companions not only take the attitude of their human others’ attitudes toward themselves but also their canine others’. And that requires meaningful human canine interaction characterized by effective intersubjectivity.

Sanders tellingly describes how the varied humans he interviewed and observed and the dogs that they live and work with accomplish just that. Everyday dog owners treat their canine companions as virtual persons, and their dogs return the favor with empathy, close attention to their human companions’ spoken and body language, and occasional, often successful, attempts to outsmart them. Guide dog owners learn to understand their canine companions’ “personalities” and subtle communications and to trust them while their dogs repay them with “thoughtful decisions” that often save their human companions’ from themselves and by helping them feel like “complete people.” Veterinarians categorically identify their canine patients so as to know what to expect of and from them and hold their human companions’ morally responsible for those patients’ problematic actions, physical conditions, and requested killing or more euphemistic euthanasia. And, guide dog trainers describe their work in the depersonalizing language of behaviorism while informally admitting the necessity of understanding their canine students’ individual temperaments in order to earn their studious compliance.
As the preceding comments suggest, Sanders’s volume is somewhat mstitled. It is not only about how humans understand dogs but also about understanding between dogs and humans. Sanders’s most dramatic and controversial claim is that dogs understand as much as they are understood. This is not glib anthropomorphizing, although some will undoubtedly accuse him of it. Drawing on a wide-ranging literature from cognitive ethology to that on language-trained primates as well as his human informants’ routine and intimate experiences with dogs, Sanders builds a strong case that dogs are minded in ways that language-based theories of mind deny them. And, if dogs do understand, then they understand those humans who befriend them as long as those humans are equally willing to understand them. The Charles Horton Cooley Award Sanders’s volume recently received from the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction was well deserved. It is entertaining, sometimes moving, always informative, and finally theoretically bold. Hopefully, it will embolden others to recognize that human social life is not limited to humans but includes their varied animal companions as well.

Perhaps the most poignant pages of Sanders’s books are those describing veterinarians’ and dog owners’ tortured and emotionally charged decisions to end the lives of suffering dogs. In stark contrast are humans’ brutal and often-futile attempts to snatch their own kind back from sudden death. Stefan Timmermans’s informative and disturbing descriptions and analyses of the history and practice of those resuscitation efforts are eye opening for readers like me whose only knowledge of cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) comes from television dramas and the propaganda campaign for public CPR education. According to Timmermans, best estimates are that the survival rate until hospital discharge for people to whom CPR is initially administered outside of the hospital is a dismal 1 to 3 percent, a rate far lower than that on television dramas and an inconvenient statistic conveniently ignored in CPR classes. And, that dismal statistic raises the obvious question of why CPR continues to be promoted as a life-saving technique and why the continuation of such resuscitation efforts in hospital emergency rooms is standing protocol. Timmermans deftly answers those and many other literally life-and-death questions in the pages of his book.

He begins with a convincing argument that the death awareness movement launched by Kubler-Ross along with the hospice and right-to-die movements have created parallel but opposite universes of dying
in American culture. There is the lingering death over which the dying and their loved ones should have some control, and then there is sudden death that is aggressively resisted whatever the cost in human choice and dignity. Timmermans then traces the history of resuscitation efforts from the Royal Humane Society’s efforts to save drowning victims in the eighteenth century to the current celebration of CPR as the life-saving response of choice for medical personnel and lay people alike. Yet, the quite limited success of CPR in snatching people away from sudden death and the staggering costs of keeping alive the few who are suggests that this celebration is gratuitous. Thus, there must be some justification for the widespread celebration of CPR other than saved and meaningful lives.

Timmermans convincingly argues that the principal and unacknowledged warrant for routine CPR is that it serves as a secular ritual that takes some of the suddenness out of sudden death. As he observes, CPR consists of a ritual rhythm of the loving kiss of mouth-to-mouth ventilation alternating with the brutal pounding of chest compressions to drive death out. The certainty of death is thereby transformed into a probability. The time between collapse and the termination of CPR gives intimates of the dying person time to come to terms with that probability. Thus, CPR serves as a kind of rite of passage from death back to life, or more commonly, from life to social death.

Timmermans movingly describes in two ethnographic chapters how this ritual plays out in hospital emergency departments. Remarkably, he convinced the personnel of emergency departments in two midwestern hospitals to page him whenever a resuscitative call came in from paramedics. That early warning enabled him to observe 112 resuscitative efforts over a fourteen-month period, approximately half of all such efforts at the two hospitals during that period (p. 209). For legal and other reasons, CPR is standard emergency room protocol when cardiac arrest patients are admitted, almost regardless of the patient’s written wishes. Emergency room personnel are generally unaware of those wishes and make little effort to ascertain them. More important than those wishes are the patient’s perceived medical and social viability. As Timmermans shows, they determine how much time and effort medical personnel will devote to the resuscitation effort. For example, patients who arrive at the hospital much more than five minutes after cardiac arrest have little medical viability. Yet, as Timmermans demonstrates, a patient’s social viability is even more con-
sequential. Younger, seemingly healthy patients; local celebrities; and those with whom emergency personnel socially identify receive more feverish and extensive resuscitation efforts than the old, ill, unknown, and socially different. According to Timmermans, this subtle rationing of medical care is associated with different resuscitation trajectories. CPR is given to those with low social and medical viability only until legal death can be declared, while those with high social viability, whatever their medical viability, are aggressively treated until all hope is lost. In other cases, those with low social viability and high medical viability are temporarily stabilized, and a few with high medical viability, whatever their social viability, are successfully stabilized long enough to permit their transfer to intensive care or other departments of the hospital.

As Timmermans shows, emergency room personnel’s classifications of resuscitation efforts do not correspond with his own fourfold typology of resuscitation trajectories. They consider their efforts successful not only when patients are revived and stabilized but also when they die as long as the medical personnel are convinced that they did everything possible, helped the dying patients’ intimates accept the loss, and followed patients’ and families’ wishes. Bad efforts are those that continue despite apparent futility, cause disputes about continuation or termination among the medical team, or are beset with mistakes and mechanical malfunctions. And, they consider resuscitative efforts as tragic when they lose very young or celebrity patients despite their best efforts as well as when they revive someone against all odds, challenging their commonsense sorting of the potentially living from the hopelessly dead. As emergency room personnel’s own definitions of their efforts suggest, experience has taught them a pragmatic view of sudden death despite being charged with combating it to the death. They accept that death is inevitable and that attempts to cheat it are often futile and, in some cases, devastating despite survival. In emergency rooms, the relation between biological death and social death, when personnel consider the patient dead and treat her or him that way, is fluid. Whatever the biological signs, legal death, certification by a physician, is subsequent to a social death that may come quickly or be tortuously delayed.

Timmermans concludes with some policy recommendations for bringing at least some of the dignity to sudden death that is increasingly brought to lingering death. Perhaps most controversial, he proposes that
rather than requiring specific provision of a do-not-resuscitate order, resuscitation wills should be required for such procedures to be performed. He suggests that those who sign such wills could wear medical alert necklaces or bracelets so that emergency medical personnel would be aware of people’s wishes. Timmermans is convinced that if people were informed of the low survival rates and possible severe complications in cases of survival, few would agree to resuscitation. Short of that, he argues that medical personnel should make an effort to determine patients’ and their intimates’ wishes rather than automatically following protocol. He also suggests that patients’ intimates should be invited to observe resuscitation efforts and describes the success of such a policy at one hospital where it was adopted. At the very least, Timmermans makes a strong case that medical personnel and proponents of public CPR education should be more honest about how seldom resuscitation efforts succeed and how often various indignities are visited on the bodies of the dying for the sake of an often-empty ritual.

Although ranging across diverse topics, these three volumes all attest to ethnography’s continuing ability to inform as it entertains, despite widespread hand wringing over its many crises. The authors of each of these books came to their topics with different perspectives. As an Israeli, Vinitsky-Seroussi brought the perspective of a naive outsider to high school reunions that allowed her to recognize the strangeness in this familiar American custom. In contrast, as a devoted companion to a number of dogs over the years, Sanders brought the perspective of an insider to his study of human-canine relations, giving him an appreciation for the insights of those who are most intimately familiar with dogs. And, Timmermans personally experienced the sudden death of his mother and later of a close cousin, the first with dignity and the second with the indignity of a prolonged resuscitation effort that helped him to recognize the difference. These differing perspectives remind us once again that there are no clear recipes or formulas when it comes to good ethnography. What is required is a widely informed mind, sharp eyes and attuned ears, an inquisitive spirit, a sense of craft when it comes to prose, and the courage to challenge accepted wisdom. All three of these authors clearly possess and exercise these skills and commitments. The results are highly readable ethnographic insights into some of the most profound issues of human social life and existence: relations between identities personally felt and socially attributed, the accomplishment of intersubjectivity even beyond the human circle, and the uneasy
commerce between life and death in our overly medicalized culture. You owe it to yourself to read each of these books. They will amuse, edify, and provoke you. What more can a reader ask?

SPENCER E. CAHILL is an associate director of interdisciplinary studies and a professor of interdisciplinary studies and sociology at the University of South Florida. His current research examines the narrative construction of identities and relationships in the notes adolescents write and clandestinely exchange at school.
THANKS TO REVIEWERS

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