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## Taking social ontology seriously: An interview with Jack Katz

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### Abstract

This interview with Jack Katz offers an inspiring statement about how to study social life. It starts with a discussion of Katz's three-dimensional social ontology; social life is constituted in embodied interactions in which people adjust to others and create transcendent meanings. Contrasting the ontology with anthropology's ontological turn, we note that social ontology is about generating empirically accurate descriptions capturing the flow of social life. This leads to a critical discussion of sociology's preoccupation with explanans-driven theorizing. Touching upon macro–micro relationships, we consider what a phenomenology of collective emotions would look like. This brings us to emotional transformations, notably the notion of 'falling', an important theme in Katz's work. The interview continues with advice of how to think beyond given categories, to consider the validity of ethnographic description and to look for the absurd. Finally, we conclude that ethnography has the potential to appeal to mass audiences.

### Keywords

social theory, phenomenology, emotions, body, ontology, Jack Katz

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In August 2018, Jack Katz, emeritus Professor in Sociology at the University of California, Los Angeles, visited the Department of Sociology at the University of Amsterdam. On this occasion, we interviewed him about his work. Katz is most known for his 1988 *Seductions of Crime* and his 1999 *How Emotions Work*. However, he has written on a variety of other topics as well, including criminal justice, riots, shootings, and publications on theory and methods of ethnographic research. His work is exceptionally creative in various ways. Theoretically, Katz advances phenomenology to open up new ways of understanding social life. Methodologically, he has used diverse inventive methods, ranging from ride-alongs with angry drivers to video recordings. He selects his topics of study strategically to reveal the strangeness in the familiar, for instance, in laughter. Lastly, Katz' writing style makes for engaging and witty reading material.

His work has inspired many social scientists, ranging from anthropologists, criminologists, social psychologists, and sociologists. *Seductions of Crime* paved the way for ethnographic approaches in criminology and helped to create the subfield of cultural criminology. *How Emotions Work* contributed to put phenomenology, the body and emotions on the social scientific agenda. Katz's publications on the theoretical and methodological foundations of ethnography – also in this journal – provide stimulating input for qualitative researchers and they make a powerful claim about the merits of this approach. Important theoretical influences on Katz's work are Durkheim's discovery of the moral realm as social transcendence; Goffman's sensitivity for the dramas, large and small, that make up social life; Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological perspective on the body; and finally Simmel's dialectics and his notion of social forms. Methodologically, his work is among others influenced by the Chicago school's ethnographers' aim to describe urban social life as it unfolds naturally, Becker's methodological considerations about doing fieldwork, and ethnomethodology's focus on unravelling the tacit rules of behaviour.

Upon asking, Katz himself prefers to be called a naturalist. The interview shows why. First, it is of crucial importance to him to remain faithful to the natural flow of social life. Second, the naturalist label circumvents disciplinary encapsulation, be it sociological, anthropological, social-psychological, criminological or else. In his answers to our questions, Katz displays insightful social scientific thinking. Taken as a whole, we think the interview provides an inspiring statement about how to study social life.

### **How to study social life: The tripartite ontology**

*In your 'Start here' (Katz, 2002b) paper and also in How Emotions Work (Katz, 1999), you explain and work with a three-dimensional ontology. To summarize: the first dimension is that social life is constituted in interactions in which people adjust to others situationally; the second is that such interactions are embodied processes; the third is that people give transcendent meanings to these situations, creating narrative*

*projects that link that situation to past and future. We wonder how you developed this three-dimensional ontology; what is the history of it?*

JK: Yeah, it is fun for me to try to an autobiographical investigation. I wouldn't trust that anything I said would qualify as good data. But I can give you some aspects of my intellectual history.

I would say that I was very struck as a student with Herbert Blumer's claim that interaction is part of every moment in social life. (He contradicted himself in some early writings on 'non-symbolic' action, but I'll avoid that diversion.) The way he put it was like:

I dare you to find any moment in social life where people are not interacting with each other. Even when I'm alone writing at my desk, I'm anticipating how the reader will respond to what I'm writing down.

As a student, the nature of that challenge seemed to me terrific.

And then, at some point in graduate school, I was reading Howard Becker. For Becker, who was one of my professors, the phenomenon of becoming a marijuana user was a rationally phased process of learning, including learning to enjoy it. But then, what is it to enjoy it? There was nothing in his interaction account that described being taken in during the experience of getting high. David Matza started to get at that, what it is to be high. Matza shows it's about a different way of embodying, of experiencing your body, and also a different way of relating to the world, in the sense that you are above your body, watching yourself doing things, so you are in and out of your body at the same time. It seemed to me, 'Okay this is clearly beyond what Becker is looking at, beyond the cool, rational analysis which leaves a mystery about why people want to learn anything'. So I found that the embodied aspect needs to be in the explanation.

And the point about embodiment – as it is a phenomenological account – is that it is not about describing a person's behavior from the standpoint or as seen by another. The challenge of studying being high is to capture the smoker's experience of being in and outside his or her body at the same time.

And then, I started to read a lot of phenomenology and, probably for personal reasons, I enjoyed phenomenology, even before I knew the term. I enjoyed reading people who wrote fiction (like James Joyce) and pragmatist philosophy (like William James) that way. When I was at Northwestern, that university's press had published translations of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty in English. The town had a book store, *Great Expectations*, if I recall; and I would hang out at this bookstore, and got hold of the university press's unique publications in English of European phenomenology. So, embodiment started to be something I looked at all the time. And, I suppose through Merleau-Ponty more than anybody else, I came to understand that embodiment is part of every moment of anyone's behaviour, too.

By the way, when you ask me to tell my influences, I should clarify that when I read stuff that works for me, I often forget the author. It just becomes part of me, so I'm not very good at giving credit to those who deserve credit.

*And then, the third dimension of the ontology, what about the narrative project?*

JK: When I write about 'narrative', I have in mind the shaping of an action, expressed to others or at the time of action witnessed only by the actor him or herself, as part of a sequence in which the instant moment's behaviour is meaningful as coming after what happened just before and as preceding what is expected, or proposed to happen just after. Sometimes I write about this dimension as narrative, sometimes as sequencing. Each implicates the other. A person recognizes doing segments in a sequence – whether beginnings, endings, turning points, phase progressions, etc. – by treating an act as a change from a prior and coming before a subsequent action in the unfolding or production of some kind of doing, some kind of narrative, whether mundane (brushing teeth) or life changing (homicidal attack). This moment's action I do as a preparation for the next and as a departure from the last. When in the wide awake, everyday social world, each of us is constantly engaged in the progression of multiple narratives, getting ready for a next narrative phase while abandoning a prior while remaining engaged in another. It's an indication of how little progress we have made in social science that we have yet to explore the density of the narrative construction of social life.

I think narrative or a focus on sequencing in social life probably most vividly struck me as imperative when I got to UCLA, which was my first teaching job. There I got to know what the conversation analysts were doing, and I admired tremendously the interaction sensibility and precision they have. And, also, they had this wonderful ability to go back to the same data again and again because it is recorded data, and you can review it and review it and perfect your analysis.

Sequence is the essential focus in their work. At the time, I was interacting with these people every day, and I had a lot of arguments with them on all sorts of matters. But I felt I had to understand what they were doing, if they were going to listen to me at all.

And then I understood that, basically, sequence flow is part of social life. Everything is moving, everything is constantly changing. All nouns misrepresent social reality. This was an important insight to me and it came to me in different ways. Also, I taught PhD students an introductory course to sociology in a partnership with Rob Mare, who was a demographer. I learned a lot from him, including some of the diachronic analyses demographers were developing.

And when I started to study sociology, Blau and Duncan's occupational status attainment model had recently come out. It was deeply flawed as Duncan subsequently admitted, but it pointed to the importance of history. It led to multiple panel, multiple cohort analyses.

Also, when I was at Northwestern, Donald Campbell's influence in quasi-experimental design was very strong, which was all about before and after, and variations, and this got me very sensitive to causal path differences.

Also, there was a great advance in the kind of conceptual tools for understanding social life in sequence. The notion of path dependency was developed by Arthur Stinchcombe, among others. Now for Stinchcombe the basic message is that the shape of an institution is often a matter of just what's in the ecology of the time it is founded. That ecology, or an assumption that it will persist, becomes part of the institution's character that goes on and persists even as the ecology changes, so you could not look at a later point in time, focus on describing contemporary influences, and think that you would be successful in explaining patterns observed at this later time. Stinchcombe helped sociologists understand why 'history' is often an essential part of explanation.

The notion of sequence has always been there since the beginning of sociology, at least in the US. Darwinian explanations were part of the text book that Park and Burgess developed early in the 20th century, which became kind of mother's milk to generations of students at Chicago and elsewhere. And the natural selection model is all about sequence.

So, it's nothing new, sociologists have always understood this, but the tools, the techniques of focussing on sequence were developing rapidly in the 1970s, with multiple methodologies and multiple forms of data. I always kept Blumer's challenge in mind, and I basically just expanded it to: 'Okay, find me any instance in social life where the people aren't shaping their behavior based on their understanding of what just happened before and what they anticipate will happen next'. What happens in interactions is that people propose sequences to each other. It's not that there 'is' a strictly controlling narrative in social life. Instead, at each moment somebody is proposing a narrative. The other may not accept my proposal, so in my next act I may shift the drama, but I'm always proposing. We're always, as Simmel said by defining life as more life, we're always on-going, we're always looking to the next moment, but we are also always looking at what just happened.

*How would you position your ontology vis-à-vis practice theories, and other theories which take social interactions as the basic unit of analysis as well, such as Randall Collins's (2004) Interaction Ritual Theory?*

JK: From what I understand about each of those, there is a lot of overlap. The practice theorists seem to me to do very valuable work. I just personally think that it's a problem in the institutional organization of social science that we keep spinning off new special vocabulary and subdisciplines, and this creates more barriers to talking with each other. Personally, I don't want to commit to any particular vocabulary.

I'm very disturbed that there's this thing called economics, and that sociologists think it is different than sociology. I mean markets are just forms of interaction. They are very hard to trace down to the individuals, especially now that machines are using algorithms to make trades and all that. But it's interaction, all the way down. So, when sociologists write about markets, they ignore what the economists do because 'That is another field'. And so, they very often end up with, to me, superficial, wrongheaded programmes of research.

I think that's a huge problem; the way we organize ourselves under these increasing divisions. What I'm trying to do is cut to the simplest set of tools with the least commitment to any partial, special vocabulary, so that anybody, any researcher, can go out study anything with these essential tools. You will need interaction, embodiment, and sequence or narratives to describe any moment of anything you are studying. I think that if you do those descriptions first, saturating all of these three dimensions, you will get at what the 'practice theory' people are getting. You will get at what Randall (Collins) is proposing with *Interaction Ritual Chains*. That's why I say: let's just do social ontology. I like the idea that any of us could take these tools that can be easily expressed, and go to any problem, any part of social life, and start investigations, and be able to talk to each other.

*How does your social ontology speak to the ontological turn in anthropology? The main argument is that the prevailing, non-ontological, notion of culture suggests that worldviews vary while the world is universal and given. Culture thus implies a misleading dichotomy between cultural diversity versus natural unity (Heywood, 2017: 2). Similar to your phenomenological social ontology, anthropology's ontological turn highlights the importance of being in the world, or rather in multiple worlds, instead of prioritizing worldviews (Heywood, 2017: 4). But some anthropologists also argue that the existence of multiple worlds of being means that differences between worlds are fundamental and incommensurable. What do you think of this position?*

What anthropologists discuss as the ontological turn is a series of issues drawn from analytic philosophy, and like the pragmatists I would see such discussions as introducing metaphysical confusion, at least for those who already understand three basic points.

One point is that 'social ontology' is a pragmatically useful concept because if a researcher tries to describe the interactive, sequential, and embodied production of any act or behaviour, by anyone anywhere, living in whatever culture, that exercise will produce a better, richer, more empirically accurate description than if the researcher ignores any of those three dimensions. So, this is the universal claim for understanding 'ontology'. And the claim is empirical, that trying to describe all of these three dimensions will improve the accuracy of description.

In my reading of anthropology, researchers have often glossed descriptions by ignoring one or more of these dimensions of social life. While that might sound critical, I understand also that anthropology historically has had various contributions to make. It makes sense to gloss or abbreviate description, by summarizing, stereotyping or otherwise not describing interaction, sequence, and embodiment as done by the actor, when the researcher is trying to give readers a handle on a previously unknown social world. The danger of glossing is that the product becomes, not a description of what actors live in real time in their everyday situations but what culture re-presents, another version of what officials, informants, and people themselves offer as descriptions of action. (Why would you trust an informant's description of his/her society any more than you would trust a politician's description of how your society works?) Describing in situ social

life is the researcher's job, not an informant's, not a subject's. The work of framing naturalistic description, of familiarizing readers or other researchers with what for them previously were unknown social worlds, now has essentially been accomplished historically. So it's overdue to use social ontology to get down to accurate, sound, empirically verifiable description, where-ever our subjects live.

A second point is that all conduct is shaped by incorporating the immediate environment, so that, yes, there are multiple beings in social life. Environments, contexts, material worlds, and their differences matter because each affords certain lines of action and impedes or requires work-arounds if other lines of action are to be realized. Language or more generally cultural differences matter: they facilitate different ways of being, as do sex differences. Each person speaks with others through others' bodies, whether those others are immediately present, in the past (e.g. parents) or anticipated in the future (readers, listeners of recorded speech). The language that another person speaks makes certain next moves by me closer at hand, and others more removed from my immediate reach. The concept of *habitus* nicely picked that up, or at least could have been developed to advance a research agenda into the different forms of being that are 'natural' (at hand) in different cultural contexts. Now, if anthropologists want to get at this way of understanding cultural difference, they may have to look more closely at interaction, at how inter-dependent bodies are at the base of each person's seemingly independent action. I wonder how much the current populist demand for more respect for 'national' identities reflects a sense of loss that we might better understand if we saw the collaborative, context dependent production of individual behaviour.

How to study and specify the relationship between context dependent behaviour and a sense of loss? I tried to show that in a non-controversial, apolitical manner, in my studies of emotion. People become dependent on the car as an extension of their bodies, when driving, and so, when they get 'cut off' by another car/driver, they experience a real loss. Many convert that into anger. And, not unlike populist responses to immigrants, they often respond with demographically formatted insults directed at another driver.

But, I explain a variety of emotions as a response to the experience of a 'fall'. The response may be positive, as when people respond to a fall with laughter. So changes in the ethnic composition of populations are not necessarily a provocation to negative responses. There is a prior moment of shock, surprise, provocation to explain, which comes before and sets up subsequent responses, whatever their valence. That's turf on which ethnographers could make a crucially missing contribution. Now, we may extend that approach to the changing contexts of action that have led to ethnically denigrating forms of populism. But I would contradict the thrust of what I'm trying to convey if I tried to show how that works, here and now, without collecting, analyzing and presenting rich data on the sequence, interaction processes, and embodiment in which the provocations and response emerge.

The third point is that, in a phrase I like as a provocation and summary, 'culture lies'. The job of culture is to turn process into noun, lived life into things, one's

own or others' lived experience into a representation useful for purposes other than what guided the referenced conduct in the first place, a base to step off from in a new action. Culture, be it objects, talk, stories told, exists to go beyond its reference, beyond the lived experience it claims to capture, without acknowledging that it is going beyond. If I say to you, 'Is this what you meant?' and then I offer a summary of what you just said. I'm either feigning that I did not understand or sincerely trying to reduce ambiguity, but in either case, I am setting up my next move in the interaction, not 'just describing'. Every speech act is at once both an expression and a hiding of self.

My body movements precede my speech. As I articulate my body motions into intelligible speech, I transform the corporeal production process, such that any coherent audible utterance I make is at once an effort at self-expression and a hiding, a covering over of the body movements that produced the speech. So, when I say 'culture lies', I mean 'lies' as a verb, not just a noun.

If we understand these three points, do we need to debate 'the ontological turn'?

## **Grand theories, grand delusions**

*How does your social ontology relate to substantive theories? Ontologies are about what constitutes social life, while substantive theories aim to describe social relationships.*

JK: I'm not a strong believer in substantive theory, which I see as trying to explain, as proposing causes, not just as describing. I've never been. As a teenager I read *Capital*, if only the Modern Library edit of it, and I admired what Marx was trying to do. I thought: 'Wow, that's cool', you know, so ambitious. But I couldn't figure out how the labour theory of value explained the value of diamonds. You find a diamond that was on the ground, that nobody did any work for, and it is worth as much as a diamond that somebody had to dig a mile into the ground for. How does this work out? Having been exposed to the American tradition of social criticism from Veblen through Vance Packard, Marx seemed to me very square, a true believer in value, innocent of the street cons used to manipulate demand and price. As with the value of found diamonds, he always had answers but they were tortuous and eventually tautological.

It's probably also a personal matter. My father was a labour (union representing) lawyer who in the Depression was given an opportunity by both the communists and the Italian mob. So, he was tempted from the left and the right. The stories that I always used to hear were that the communist union (District 65) offered him a secure job when there were few and he refused that. Because if you go with them, then you are with them for life. A guy from the mafia ('Tony Ducks' Corallo) took him out for lunch, and told him they would have a long-term relationship if he made a 'sweetheart deal' to sell out a union he represented. And, according to a tale often told at the dinner table, my father grabbed him by the shirt and shook him, not knowing who the guy was. Then the guy drove him back,

in one of these big limousines that you see in the cartoons. He got out of the car and he realized later that he could have been killed for being so disrespectful.

So, while I was not there to verify these stories (although when I worked briefly in union organizing I found that some of the unions my father represented were indeed ‘mobbed up’ and others were run by ex-communists), I think I grew up admiring finding your own way between big reductionist theories. I often think that there is a lot of sociology that tries to be like a totalitarian ideological system and that appeals to graduate students who are hungry to have something powerful to say about anything. Parsons, or Marx, or Bourdieu were like priests. Their theories have had a religious appeal that is contrary to what science is about. People need religion, and so social sciences, like many other cultural institutions, will try to provide it. The real challenge for each individual working in social science is: are you part of another one of these mass delusions that is going to last a generation before dissipating, before the grand analytical framework seems unnecessary, its central concepts recognized as reductionist causal leads that cannot explain observed differences. I was very taken by Ricoeur’s book on Freud, which is also on religion, Marxism, and by extension other ways of looking at social life that promise universal explanation, whether in a hard or soft deterministic sense.

*Reading your work, we noticed that you are not happy with Bourdieu’s theories. You also critique his approach to ethnographic data and his writing style. In ‘From how to why: On luminous description and causal inference in ethnography (Part 1)’ (Katz, 2001: 462), you specify what makes for ‘rich’ and ‘contextual’ research material, arguing that this is about creating varied, massive, and densely textured data sets. On page 463, you note Bourdieu’s use of case descriptions in boxes along the main text in his Distinction. Presenting chunks of ethnographic data as static, separate illustrations without systematically discussing them seems far removed from your plea to create data sets by rigorously observing a variety of cases over time. You then continue to emulate the experience of reading Bourdieu. We quote you at length:*

*Bourdieu also favors complex sentence structures – said by some to be ‘French’ or, what is not quite the same thing, ‘Proustian’ – that layer description, self-portrayal, philosophical commentary, and multiple caveats about how to read a given passage, all compressed with a syntax that the reader must labor breathlessly to keep running, the whole process requiring an effort analogous to the multi-tasking done effortlessly by computers but that, when done by a human reader, recreates the extraordinary, even frenetic energy that has previously gone into producing the fieldwork and the text, with the result that the reader obtains a continually refreshed appreciation, when he finally arrives at the end of a sentence and can take a momentary rest, for his tiniest of friends, the period. (Katz, 2001: 463)*

*While we found this passage hilarious, it also points to a serious concern you have with Bourdieu’s writing: his labyrinthine phraseology may seduce readers to refrain from critically engaging with the many claims Bourdieu makes. Can you explicate*

*further what bothers you about Bourdieu's theorizing, his methodological approach and his writing style?*

JK: When writing that sentence, I had in mind C. Wright Mills' burlesque of Parsons' writing.

You know, to me Bourdieu is a huge killer. Bourdieu picked up Merleau-Ponty, who was, as I understand his formative milieu, probably the intellectual hero of his cohort. But Bourdieu killed the potential that Merleau-Ponty saw because he played to system analysis. The Parsonian Marxist kind of system analysis: there is a bounded social system, and within it there are classes, or different functional sectors, and there's a habitus that's part of the class thing, or a social psychology for each institution... habitus comes in where Parsons inserted a social-psychological level of explanation. So Bourdieu follows Parsons' babushka-like, bounded imagery for society; and with that you can comment analytically about all kinds of political and social inequalities. But Bourdieu killed the potential actually to study embodiment. That just becomes a term used to claim a causal explanation of class or stratification differences. That was a great disservice.

Compare Bourdieu's essay on the Kabyle house (1970) with Charles Frake's 'How to enter a Yakan house' (1975). Bourdieu runs with colonialist stereotyping, writing in a style I have called aristocratic, by which I mean, essentially conveying a sensibility, just what someone with an idle or initial interest in a foreign area of social life would require, giving no details of particular cases that would empower the reader to assess his claims and thus sustaining his authorial power by style not evidence, not showing how he built up or checked his analysis against data, glossing over variations in favour of providing readers with a handy summary model. Frake works like a dentist, or any kind of crafts worker, building up and qualifying claims by creating multiple files and then assessing each case for the differences it reveals when contrasted with other cases. Bourdieu often used evidence like a dilettante. Frake's work requires the craft discipline and acquired skill (habitus, actually) of working repeatedly with sequential, case-framed data.

This glossing approach continues with Bourdieu's work on habitus, which many have now found wanting as a 'black box'. Merleau-Ponty, while writing primarily philosophy, was reading empirical studies in child psychology, and using them in his lectures at the Sorbonne in the 1950s. Had Bourdieu followed that lead, he would have been able to set up an empirical programme to study occupational habitus that would have paralleled what Vygotsky, Jakobson, Bruner and, later, many others, were developing to show how the habitus of language competency emerges.

Now, I'm not saying Bourdieu should have studied language, child development or everyday conversational practices. But the alternative to theory glossing that was emerging in social science, which became especially prominent after the formative stage in his career, was to study the development, the changes, the 'becoming' of any social practice or identity, identifying stages, contingencies, and unique ways of embodying the environment of the action, or 'habitus' in question. He took a historically doomed fork in the road.

Another set of problems weakens his application of the 'field' concept, which he conceives and uses to set up stratification analyses. The alternative that was well established by the time Bourdieu began his work was the 'collective action' perspective as developed by the Chicago school. Becker has made some of the differences clear. Compare Becker's work on Art Worlds with Bourdieu's Rules of Art, his book on Flaubert, and with Bourdieu's studies of cultural knowledge that led to his *Distinction*. Collective action, sometimes captured by Everett Hughes and others in the Chicago tradition as a social 'institution', a phrase specifically going beyond what any formal organization or professional field would encompass or recognize, asks the researcher to describe all who contribute to the production of any phenomenon, whether they are dead or alive, deemed part of the institution (artists, gallery owners, art buyers) or not (the museum worker carrying a portrait painting who is on the cover of Becker's book). It's not that Bourdieu was wrong. It's that the autonomy of art that Flaubert championed was part of a historical era that, like the autonomy of many other institutions, was fading as Bourdieu's career came to a close. The cross-field interactions that Becker emphasizes are just what we need in order to grasp the unprecedented social changes now in progress.

Bourdieu asked me to present at one of his last seminars at the College de France and I regret I did not then have the understanding well enough formed, and that he was already ill and may have lacked the energy to engage, but the view I now have is that he was a mid-20th century social scientist, developing another version of the explanans-heavy intellectual approach that had been the path to high status in academic social science. Greatness depended not on what you could illuminate about any particular explanandum (what we want to explain) but on advancing an explanans or explanatory framework that could be applied across substantive areas . . . social class, social position, where subjects are in an AGIL model; later, gender, race, privilege, habitus, one or another form of metaphorically referenced capital; and applying that explanans across educational institutions, art, crime, suicide, etc. Durkheim, Marx, Freud, Parsons, and Bourdieu all were great not because they knew more about any area of social life than others but because they had a handful of concepts that seemed to warrant application anywhere in social life. The power of the explanans became, in the mid-20th century, the taken for granted key to the power of the social scientist in the competition for academic status. Social science was kind of like an institution in which priests of different monotheistic orders could argue it out. As Ricoeur put it, like religion, Marxism and psychoanalysis – add neo-classical economics as developed by Gary Becker; Parsons' social system model; Merton's functionalism; and Bourdieu's habitus, field, and various forms of non-economic capital – could be applied, and has some relevance to, everything in social life. With any of these theories in hand, you always have something to say about anything. The hermeneutic value is appealing independent of the explanatory value, at least if explanation means ruling out all but a favoured causal explanation of empirically documented differences in social life.

Ethnography's great contribution is, or could be, in illuminating the explanandum, beyond what can be grasped by popular culture, politics, and other ways of doing research on social life. The period of change we have been in, with accelerating dynamics, over the last 50 years – of migrations that for decades were stymied by the Depression, the Second World War, and the Cold War, and which have made individuals' biographies escape the reach of state shaped data sets; of market expansions that had always been blocked by deep rooted state boundaries; of 'disruptive' technologies that quickly eliminate the power of intermediaries; of unimagined but almost instantly normalized identity changes in the life cycle, of which gender, sexual, and race identities are only the most sensationalized examples; of a breakdown of the line between capital and labour such that virtually everyone has a 'portfolio' of both – should hearten ethnographers to rededicate their research towards describing new social dynamics. That means seeing that new social forms are emerging through new activities, commercial, artistic, and playful, that recognize areas of collective action which previously escaped recognition in 'fields' or 'institutions'. It does not serve us well to keep looking to the old or newer nouns – class; status; cultural, social or symbolic capital; network ties or position – for explanatory power. In 'the sharing economy', the line between private and public/economic life breaks down; in a life cycle with greater length and more internal phases, the social meaning of any period of someone's life we study is harder to work out, for the people we study and for us; the seemingly self-defeating drive to populist nationalism gets all the publicity but the irritant behind and the thrust of these movements is the rapidly expanded ability of non-anointed work groups to develop social relation technologies much faster than academic social scientists can study them or governments can control them.

So much of social science seems to presume that we have to have predictive, deterministic explanations, or else we don't make a contribution to knowledge, and we're not scientists. We have yet to realize, collectively, officially, that the assumption that great social science depended on theorizing causes with applicability across substantively different areas of social life was a product of the centralization of power in Western societies in the mid-20th century, just when academic social science was growing as a mass institution.

Social science is maybe the most ambitious endeavour human beings have ever come up with. We are trying to explain, in some sense, everything that anybody does in all its varieties in all times and places, as people are continually inventing, and creating new ways of relating to each other, and new things to do. I don't know enough about physics to say that they've got it easier. But we are trying to come up with these theories as did Marx, or Bourdieu, or whoever, for all of this stuff. It's crazy! We should have the humility to recognize the huge nature of our collective ambition.

At the same time, what has been burgeoning for 50 years is the development of new types of data, whether recorded interaction, comparative/historical, multiple panel multiple cohort surveys, etc. And the craft nature of social science careers has also progressed enormously. People down the hall from each other in the same

academic department can't confidently read each other's work because of the 'habitus' required to make sense of different types of data sets. I would recognize this as progress in social description, in the understanding of the explanandum.

Like other explanans-promoting theorists, Bourdieu has become, at best, a public relations resource for craft-competent data analysts who need to explain what they are doing to outsiders. In his own studies he never developed the craft sophistication to analyse data sets so as to rule out rival explanations. The way he handles data analysis in *Distinction* is particularly weak, as many have observed.

### **Cultural skins: Towards a phenomenology of collectivities**

*As you bring up micro and macro, could you tell us, if you were to write a How Collective Emotions Work, what would it look like? What would be your take on how emotions work for collectivities?*

JK: Right. I work from data sets, so I try to isolate a data set. I first self-consciously create a data set that I think has something to do with the general topic. And then I use social ontology and analytic induction to come up with analysis and an explanation.

When the Rodney King riots went on, I was in Los Angeles. People were driving up and robbing places all around. I got my video camera, went on the streets, and made notes. Only a few years ago I found the right place to write some of them up (Katz, 2016). That may be the first thing I have ever done on collective emotions. In that paper, I propose invisibility is the social-psychological key to riots: it is the moment where people understand that everybody is so visibly committing crime that each is effectively invisible to law enforcers. Now I think the police are getting increasingly effective in battling the invisibility by using technology that will convey to people that they are never going to be invisible. And new laws are emerging to ban masking facial identity in public. But there is a specific social-psychological process at the turning points of riots. So that is one piece on collective emotions.

The thing I would first think of is, 'Okay, what kind of dataset am I going to get?'. I had a clock which has a pendulum. And on the hour, it goes 'ding'. I found that when other people sleep in my house, they are disturbed by it. But myself and my wife, we can kind of like in a semi-sleep know what the time is, and if we have more time to sleep, or have to get up. That is kind of comforting. The sound of the clock has become part of our routine. And it has become actually embodied, because you wake up, or you stay asleep, based on incorporating this audible punctuation of your life.

Presume now a minaret is built in your area. It's a different schedule, and it's a different kind of sound. Well, it's not just an audible matter, and it's not just a symbolic matter but in a way, it is about losing the body that you've had. There is a substratum of lived experience that's being affected, as I see it. The body is being ripped away within you if you're accustomed to the church bell, and now what you hear is the call to prayer from a tower associated with a mosque.

Now of course immediately the mosque gets reified, and treated as a symbol of dominance or other political meanings. Instead, we have to get down to more personal, intimate incorporation, the embodiment of everyday life, to see what is at stake. These issues shouldn't just be treated as symbolic matters or as people pursuing their political interests. Instead, to see where at least part of the irritation comes from, you need to get at something else.

All societies, for some phases of life, at some places in a given society, offer skins that you can inhabit, while in other, times or places you are more likely to be fragile and naked. Just as, in the life cycle, adolescents are relatively naked, via a heightened self-consciousness, and over time their 'skins' thicken. To get at collective emotions, I think we need to describe embodiment. By that I mean not just how people represent their bodies in symbols but close up studies of how people make things outside of themselves eventually part of themselves. That's phenomenology to me: making something usefully part of your body, breaking down or transcending what from the outside looks like a divide between individual and world.

## **Falling, and provoking into being**

*You just mentioned nakedness. Can you say more about it? Is it related to your idea of 'falling out of the landscape' (Katz, 1999: 312–332), the moments when your ability to navigate social life is interrupted by overwhelming bodily sensations, which generate a temporarily sense of directionlessness?*

JK: I wrote a paper called 'The social psychology of Adam and Eve' (Katz, 1996) where I note that the fall part of the Genesis story has such broad and continuous appeal because it's a kind of narrative summation of what we experience every day, repeatedly. That we fall out of being embraced by the world, or anticipate that we might and act to avoid falling. That we are going along and all of a sudden, for one reason or another, we are thrown out. We are thrown out of the unselfconscious, on-going practical utility of this kind of paradise in a sense, and then we are out there naked.

We all go through instances of this experience. In some sense our personalities are different in that our responses are different. When you fall you can cry; or get angry at a person whom you think pushed you; or laugh at yourself; or become ashamed, stunned, and not know what to do. So, you can develop different ways of responding. The anticipation of the fall comes in where the shaping of our behaviour and experiences in many different ways goes beyond the emotions that happen when there is a fall. I mean, all the anticipatory ways we conduct ourselves, like: 'I won't go there, because I anticipate I might not know how to act'. Or, I won't complain about getting screwed in a commercial transaction because I'd have to abandon my cool demeanour to do that, and that could be shameful (a reticence I find much more common in Europe than in the U.S.). Or, for example, 'I'll stay angry all the time, so they can't knock me off, because I'm always going

aggressively for it' (which is how many people in L.A. drive cars). Or: 'I'm always kind of bad-talking myself so I'm always kind of crying, I'm always diminishing myself'.

There are all sorts of ways of exploring being thrown out of the world. We are in the world, but then we are always shifting to, and changing our embodiment. One essay I've been working on is called 'Provocations of Self', which is about how you set things up so that the world will provoke you to be who you want to be. Well, we do that all the time when we put clothes on, when we start interactions in certain ways that invite others to be who we need them to be for us to be who we want to be. A tremendous amount of what we are doing throughout the day is done so that we don't have to, at the moment, invent ourselves, so it comes to us that the generalized other is there to be questioning us, to be provoking us, to be complementing us.

Another essay I'm working on is called 'Urban Alchemy' and this one is about how people appreciate and see identities that others don't see are there, but that are like hollow shells they can fill. And as such, the shell, if embodied and animated, overcomes one's nakedness. As an example, I start with a mime, like Marcel Marceau, who plays for people who stand in line to go to a movie theatre. The mime follows a pedestrian and mimics how the pedestrian walks. And then the people on the line start to attend to it and he gets them to work for him basically. He creates an audience, or he has them create the audience. The mime sees the people on queue as an audience that will be seeing him as a performer. That is like seeing that there is a role outline for you. And so, a provocation, a way of allowing yourself to be provoked into being. Off stage, the mime may be an embarrassingly vacuous individual. (In Hollywood, where I live, you can meet many performers who, in everyday life, are pretty boring, naked in the sense of devoid of personality. They need the setting of performance to find a role and an interaction setting that will provoke them to become a colourful being). The mime is like the kid who sees that the emperor is naked, in that the mime mocks others' pretensions. But of more interest, the mime sees clothes he can inhabit where others do not. Thinking about existential nakedness leads to sociological understanding.

### **On methodology: Going beyond categories, realizing evidence, and finding the absurd**

*The phenomenological approach, focusing on how people navigate their social environment, their falling and provoking into being, and their accounting of these experiences as part of larger narrative projects, requires a specific methodological approach. To put it shortly, your favourite way of doing research seems to be to work intensively and up close with the material, keeping the three-dimensional ontology in front, and then come up with how and why through analytical induction. Can you say more about how you go about, doing research that fits the flow of social life?*

JK: I was doing this tripartite social ontology when I did studies of crime and studies of emotions. And I was very self-conscious about that. When I would get to another set of materials, I would ask myself explicitly: where is the interaction here? Where is the sequence? And where is the embodiment? And all of the explanations I come up with are about people trying to get transcendent embodied meanings out of a line of action; a sequence of action.

Like 'sneaky thrills' (in Katz, 1988) is about trying to get something that you can't quite even say what it is, why people are stealing this stuff. But there is some sort of thrill about it, some sort of revelation about who you are in life, relative to other people, what you think you can get away with.

I've always been aware, at least since I started the crime studies, that what I can come up with wouldn't fit smoothly into what other social sciences were doing. Because the categories and things that I was trying to explain would be, not like robbery, not like burglary, not like the sorts of categories used by the police, and that most social scientists feel they have to use. But rather something like 'sneaky thrills', or 'ways of the badass' (also in Katz, 1988), which aren't any particular crime, and some of it isn't criminal at all. I knew the reality of that stuff, that's what these guys are into. And crime is what the police call crime.

So, the things that I would be explaining, if I were to follow what people are understanding themselves to be doing as interactants trying to develop a narrative that compels them, would not fit these categories. And so, it would be hard to fit in with what other social sciences are doing.

*Indeed, the phenomenological approach is not a dominant form of doing social science. So how can we make the move towards more theorizing that fits the flow of social life?*

JK: Part of the problem, and this is a systematic problem, is that the categories, the definitions of the phenomena you are studying, that are around colloquially, are all about things that don't exist. You have to resist studying them in the terms that are conventionally known.

The example I have always liked is one where somebody who steals a hubcap gets caught. Somebody might steal it to sell to a hubcap market, but the next guy might steal because a thief stole from his car, and he needs to replace it. And then a third guy might steal because he's got a hubcap collection, he's got the Mercedes, now he wants to get a Porsche, now he wants to get a Toyota. And then a fourth guy might steal because he's got a hole in the roof and the water is coming in, and he needs something to cover it. And then so on for the fifth guy and the sixth guy. And if you take the data on hubcap theft, or any kind of theft, and you think, 'let me see if I can find the causes of this', that's a fool's errand. You need one explanation for the guy's stealing for a collection, you need another explanation for the guy stealing because his friends dared him to steal, you need another explanation for the guy stealing because it's his father's car, you need another explanation for the guy stealing because somebody stole from his car and he just wants to replace it. And when you get into how people are understanding what they are doing, you realize you need multiple different explanations. But then, it won't be a study of

hubcap theft. Instead you shall have to define the thing you are trying to explain in ways that start to depart from the interests that motivate the conventional, official, police or victim's definition of the problem.

The whole purpose of the criminal law in defining crimes is to put the victim's experience as primary, and say: 'This is what this action means, it means harm to us, and I don't care about these differences in your subjectivity. If you did it, I want to penalise you because it hurts us this way'. The absurdity of crime studies has been to misunderstand, or fail to come to grips with why the criminal law exists in the first place, which is to resist the egocentrism of the criminal and substitute the narcissism of the victim. The law, the police, the courts in effect say: 'Well, your action means this to me (the victim), I don't care what it means to you'.

When I studied crime as the first big series of research studies I did, it was in part because this could show in extreme the importance of taking the perspective of the person doing the act: the interaction, what it meant to them, the sequences they go through, the emotions and embodiments of the process. This would, in a sense, make the biggest clash with prevailing studies.

Unfortunately, the things that we are asked to study come out of official understandings of what problems are. It's like the selfishness of the victim, saying: 'I want you to go study these things because they bother me this way'. But our topics should be about the phenomenon as experienced by the people we are studying. Not by the outsiders who want it to be this or that, or because they want to do this or that punishment, or want to have government provide this or that type of subsidy or remedy. Instead we need to ask, what is it to those people whose behaviour we want to explain?

*This raises the question of how we can be sure that our interpretation of other people's lived experiences is valid. At some point, we say like 'This is extremely plausible, I'm going to write this up'. Does it matter if the people we study agree with our interpretations of their behaviour, is that proof?*

JK: There are two ways of looking at proof or questions of evidence. We are trained to look at proof against standards of perfect evidence: methods enable us to determine a correlation somewhere between +1 and -1; significance at more or less than 5%, or 1%, or wherever you want to set the standard; and the experimental effect either appears among none in the control group and all in the experimental group, or gives a quantifiable difference between the people who are and are not subject to the experimental variable. If you look at qualitative work from that lens, you will undermine yourself.

The other way to look, which makes more sense for ethnographers, especially, and it's important that we think about it, is: 'What progress have I made since I started'. When you're doing your work, now understanding things that you didn't when you started, and you're well-read as to the prior research, you should embrace the fact that you have learned something that other people will also learn from. The useful question for us (ethnographers, qualitative researchers) is not: 'How far am I from achieving perfect knowledge' (which even the quantitative researchers know they will never achieve; the sophisticated ones understand that

tools defining perfect knowledge are useful as a measuring rod). Rather, it's 'How far have I come' in the sense of 'How many steps have I gone through, how many revisions in my description or explanation have I gone through'.

Now if you never read anybody else, and you think because you have learned something, everybody else is going to learn something from reading you, that's a problem. If you read widely you will still see things that surprise you. That surprise, that's luminous data, the way to begin the progression from how to why (Katz, 2001, 2002a), that's your key that you've learned something.

Do we need our subjects to agree with our analyses? No. Not as a practical matter. Our analyses must agree with our descriptions of subjects' behaviour and lives. But the process of eliciting a response to an analysis puts subjects in a novel social position. They are not social scientists. Their focus and concern is not on producing generalizable knowledge but on what a response will mean to the others in their social world. It often is and often it should be unnerving to 'take it (your findings) back to the field' because if subjects readily agreed with your generalizations, who needed you to do the work? On the other hand, if your work allows you to talk specifics, rather than generalizations, in a more productive way with subjects, so that when you discuss given events you find out more with subjects about their lives than you could before you did the research, then that's meaningful evidence of having made progress. You've developed an investigative tool with some power.

*As you mention the 'From how to why' papers, there you write about finding the absurd in your data (Katz, 2001: 449–453). How to pursue this? How to get at absurdities?*

JK: As a practical matter, you should watch a lot of Groucho Marx and Woody Allen movies. You know, people who write or perform the absurd often present the ritualized parts of social life as if they are far from inevitable, authentic. Quite seriously, expose yourself to the culture of the absurd; it's like training yourself to do interaction analysis. So, you go to Ionesco and Beckett plays and, of course, read phenomenology which trains you to appreciate the absurd.

I suppose some of it is personality, the taste for a culture of the absurd. Some of it is available as readings in sociology, for example in Berger & Luckmann. You can just be attentive to the reversals in meaning that go on in people's life. For example, in my chapter on being pissed off in LA (Katz, 1999), drivers were all fired up and angry, and then a moment later they wondered 'Why did I do that? I could have killed myself?'. They even had a recognition that it was absurd of them, saying 'I can't explain why I did that' and they could laugh the next moment at something which could have been devastatingly negative. And think about Harvey Sacks' research on 'doing being ordinary'. He drew on news reports of how passengers in the early years of airplane hijacks experienced the moment and how they would normalize it initially. Someone would say: 'What I first thought was "Oh look they are filming a crime movie on the plane"'. Or: 'Oh, look at that man showing the nice stewardess a pretty gun'. And then instantly they would shift to

something else. In other words, there is a naturally occurring, subject-recognized absurdity about our sense making processes.

## **Finding your audience**

*Let us conclude by discussing for whom we write. In 'Hot potato criminology' (Katz, 2019) you note that modern ethnographers are afraid of being burned by their peer audiences. But at the same time, you write about appealing to your audience, writing it up in a certain way to establish an audience. How to manoeuvre between these two sides of the spectrum? How to find the receptive audience?*

JK: As a general matter, ethnographers today have the potential of appealing to broad mass audiences, and some do receive astonishing support. Which should be great, because it should allow you to do things that academics, in their divisions, aren't seeing as important to do, and they don't see a way to do it.

One way you could do it is by tapping into new technologies, or new social patterns, that don't yet have people in command in social science ruling (and blocking) the way forward. Then you have an open field.

Harold Garfinkel got funded by the Air Force at one point. My neighbourhood study was funded by money for control of crime. Right now, medicine is getting tremendous amounts of funding, one of my colleagues, a great ethnographer, Stefan Timmermans, is interested in medical matters, in death, hospitals, and medical practices, and in that well-funded area you can make important findings. And if you have a perspective on social ontology and a comparative sensibility, in whatever substantive area you are working, you will find things that potentially have broader, universal applications.

Making comparative analyses is a good way to go, because you break out of the already, kind of fixed, constituted borders. Goffman's strategy was in part comparative, studying con men to understand how employers fire people and other examples of 'the management of failure', studying not prisons or mental hospitals but a wide variety of 'asylums', studying gambling, sex, and crime under the rubric of 'action'. Another way is to focus on areas that are apolitical, at least currently, and make progress with those. Study how people relate to pigeons (Jerolmack, 2013), which will seem ridiculously self-indulgent and politically irrelevant to many 'progressive' academics unless and until they realize it's an effective way to draw support for a programme of research on ecology.

## **Author's Note**

Except for the first mentioned author, the names of the authors appear in alphabetical order.

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**Don Weenink** is Sociologist at the Department of Sociology, University of Amsterdam. He is PI of the Group Violence research program, funded by an ERC Consolidator Grant ([www.group-violence.com](http://www.group-violence.com)). Don has published on violence, practice theory, and on inequalities in judicial sentencing and in education in, a.o. *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, *British Journal of Sociology*, *British Journal of Criminology*, *European Journal of Criminology*, *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, *Social & Legal Studies and Sociology*. In his current research, he analyses video footage to understand violent encounters in public space.

**David van der Duin** is Researcher at the University of Amsterdam. Since finishing his master's degree in 2019 he has been involved in multiple projects spanning a broad range of subjects: 'High Dosage Tutoring' learning interventions in secondary education, survey experiments and analyses of attitudes toward European Union regulation (a.o. pesticide regulation regime, European unemployment schemes), and quantitative and qualitative video analyses of violent encounters. Lastly, but with equal enjoyment, he is an amateur musician and producer attempting to compose minimal and ambient arrangements.

**Laura Keesman** is PhD candidate in the Group Violence research program at the University of Amsterdam. She published on social workers' experiences of violent situations in homeless shelters in *Journal of Social Work* (with Don Weenink). Currently, she examines how police officers understand one another situationally, and how they *collectively* attempt to gain control of tense, threatening and violent interactions. To arrive at police officers' experiences and their embodied know-how of coping with antagonistic situations, she combines visual and narrative methods. In general, her goal is to understand how violent interactions (de)escalate, and how people (notably professionals), deal with such intense and acute situations.

**Rozalie Lekkerkerk** is PhD candidate in the Group Violence research program at the University of Amsterdam. Her prime research interest is in the interactional and emotional processes underpinning violent confrontations. In her PhD research, Rozalie asks how and under what conditions violent (hooligan) encounters become more or less regulated, and how various forms of violent confrontations are related to different self- and external regulatory balances. Drawing on more than three years of ethnographic fieldwork, she aims to advance micro-sociological understanding of violence by demonstrating how violent behaviour is often regulated (and ritualized), and that the degree of regulation differs between forms of violent confrontation.

**Floris Mosselman** obtained his master's degree in cultural sociology at the University of Amsterdam. He published his master thesis, a video analysis of how robbers attempt to gain dominance through body posturing in the *Journal of Research of Crime and Delinquency* (with Don Weenink and Marie Rozenkrantz Lindegaard). Floris is currently PhD candidate at the University of Amsterdam in the Group Violence research program. He studies the group dynamics of conflict among adolescents in rural and urban settings in the Netherlands. Using participatory observation, in-depth interviews with video-elicitation techniques he aims to understand how embodied experiences of conflict influence conflict situations.

**Phie van Rompu** is PhD candidate in the Group Violence research programme at the University of Amsterdam. She holds a Bachelor in Law (University of

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Amsterdam) and a Master of Arts in Global Criminology (Utrecht University). Her research interests are group dynamics, emotion-regulation, (group) violence and (private) security. Phie published on the impact of local and international stigmatization of favela residents in Rio de Janeiro in *Entropia* and *Apuntes*. Living in one of Rio's favelas during fieldwork, she developed a fascination for group dynamics in antagonistic situations. In her PhD project, Phie focuses on how night-life security use their bodies and teamwork to de-escalate antagonistic interactions.