

## Tiny Publics and Social Worlds—Toward a Sociology of the Local

*Gary Alan Fine in Conversation With Reiner Keller*

**Key words:**

collective  
memories; culture;  
ethnography;  
group; interaction;  
narrative; rumor;  
social theory;  
social worlds;  
structure

**Abstract:** Gary Alan FINE is among the most prominent figures in contemporary sociological ethnography worldwide. In this conversation, he talks about influences in his academic career and key intellectual choices. Considered to be a "serial ethnographer" who has worked in multiple settings, his work focuses on small groups and peopled ethnography, as well as on rumors, gossip, and moral story telling in tiny and larger publics. FINE describes his core theoretical interest as residing in the interplay of structure, interaction, and culture and discusses the multiple local ways society is realized by people in formal and informal social settings: ranging from baseball teams, restaurant kitchens, weather reporting to chess players—to name but a few research sites. Influenced by symbolic interactionist thinking and other important approaches to social worlds, he argues for a confident voice of ethnographic research and writing as well as the importance of conceptual work in a theory-informed empirical sociology of what people do together.

### Table of Contents

- [1. Starting Out With a Blend of Inspirations](#)
- [2. A Sociological Trinity: Structure, Interaction, Culture](#)
- [3. Morel Tales: About Peopled Ethnography](#)
- [4. The Case for a Grounded Sociology](#)
- [5. Too Much Knowledge Is a Dangerous Thing \(for a Serial Ethnographer\)](#)
- [6. Moral Tales: The Worst President in American History](#)
- [7. The Authority of an Ethnographer](#)
- [8. What's Next?](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[References](#)

[Authors](#)

[Citation](#)

### Biographical Overview<sup>1</sup>

Gary Alan FINE was born in New York in 1950. After receiving his B.A. degree in psychology at the University of Pennsylvania in 1972 and his Ph.D. in social psychology at Harvard University in 1976, he taught sociology at the University of Minnesota and the University of Georgia. In 1997 he moved to Northwestern University, working first as Professor, then John Evans Professor of Sociology (2004-2016) and James E. Johnson Professor of Sociology (2016-present) in the Department of Sociology. From early on and throughout his career he received numerous fellowships and visiting scholarships across the US and in several

---

1 The following information was compiled from Gary Alan FINE's CV as presented on his website at Northwestern University, from his interview with Italian sociologist Roberta SASSATELLI (2010) and from the recent presentation of his work by Chiara BASSETTI and Roberta SASSATELLI (2017).

European countries, including fellowships at the Russell Sage Foundation, the Rockefeller Study Center, and from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation. [1]

In 2003 he was awarded the George Herbert Mead Award for Lifetime Contributions by the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction. In 2013 he received the Cooley-Mead Award for Lifetime Achievement in Social Psychology by the Social Psychology Section of the American Sociological Association. In 2018 he became an elected member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. [2]

Throughout his career FINE has held numerous institutional positions, including the presidency of the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction and several chair positions in the American Sociological Association. In addition, he has been editor and member of editorial boards of an impressive range of academic journals. FINE has (co-)written 20 books and co-edited another ten books on social (interactionist) theory, ethnographic field studies and methodology, and moral discourses. His book "With the Boys: Little League Baseball and Preadolescent Culture" (1987) was recipient of the 1988 Opie Award for the Best Scholarly Book in the field of Children's Folklore and Culture (American Folklore Society, Children's Folklore Section). "Manufacturing Tales: Sex and Money in Contemporary Legends" (1992) was nominated for the Chicago Folklore Prize and the John Hope Franklin Publication Prize (American Studies Association). "Morel Tales: The Culture of Mushrooming" (1998) was given the 1999 Charles Horton Cooley Award of the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction. "Whispers On the Color Line: Rumor and Race in America" (FINE & TURNER, 2001) was finalist for the C. Wright Mills Award given by the Society for the Study of Social Problems in 2002. In 2008, "Authors of the Storm: Meteorology and the Culture of Prediction" (FINE, 2007) won the Charles Horton Cooley Award, Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction. "The Global Grapevine: Why Rumors of Terrorism, Immigration, and Trade Matter" (FINE & ELLIS, 2010) became first runner-up for the Katharine Briggs Award for outstanding work of folklore, The Folklore Society (Great Britain) in 2011 and finalist for the Scholarly Achievement Award given by the North Central Sociological Association in 2012. In addition, he has published a large number of journal articles, book chapters, and newspaper contributions. [3]

Today, Gary Alan FINE is among the key theorists and researchers in symbolic interactionist thinking worldwide. Influenced by his teacher Erving GOFFMAN, the interactionist work of Anselm STRAUSS, Howard BECKER and others, ethnomethodology and linguistics as well as sociological theory and conceptual thinking (e.g., Anthony GIDDENS, Jürgen HABERMAS, Pierre BOURDIEU) he has pursued, throughout his career, an interest in the interplay between structure, interaction, and culture. This is visible in a broad range of ethnographic field studies covering fantasy role gaming, baseball, chess, mushroom collectors, weather forecasting, restaurant kitchens, art students; as well as in his numerous contributions to the sociology of rumor, collective memory, and moral discourse, as well as in contributions to interactionist theory and in conceptual ideas such as idioculture, tiny publics or peopled ethnography. Throughout his work, FINE

advocates a strong ethnographic perspective with a focused theoretical interest. His own way of doing ethnography is directed to the elementary ways of group life and to the micro-ways social structures and meaning making gets real in human interaction—the basic modes of producing society. His co-written work on "Symbols, Selves and Social Reality" (SANDSTROM, LIVELY, MARTIN & FINE, 2013 [2003]) lays down a foundation for an up-to-date symbolic interactionist theory of society in the making (FINE & TAVORY, 2019). "Tiny Publics: A Theory of Group Action and Culture" (FINE, 2012a) sums up his own research-based theoretical and conceptual contribution to the symbolic interactionist legacy. [4]

The interview took place on May 13, 2019 in Gary Alan FINE's office at Northwestern University (Evanston, IL). It has been revised via e-mail exchange; this is the final, authorized version approved by Gary Alan FINE on August 1, 2020. *Italics* refer to words pronounced in a loud voice. "[Laughter]" indicates a particular kind of emotion; "..." specifies a short reflective silence in conversation; "#" points to overlapping of speakers. [5]

## 1. Starting Out With a Blend of Inspirations

Reiner KELLER: Dear Gary, thank you very much for your participation in this conversation. The basic idea for this interview is to talk about four to five topics. I like to begin with your academic career and your entry into sociology. I have to apologize in advance for my English, sometimes I might use words that [laughs] you don't know but you can just go along with that [laughs].

Gary Alan FINE: I wish that I was fluent in German. My older son is actually fluent in German, I intended to be as well, but life took a different course. [6]

Reiner KELLER: Let us talk about your academic career and then about your theoretical interests, and how they evolved from your entry into academia up until now. Then the third part would be your work in ethnography<sup>2</sup> and your particular approach to fieldwork related research interests. Later I would like to address your other empirical and theoretical domains, as visible for example in your writings about collective memory, public talk, or public and private rumors. And then, there is a fifth element we might be addressing, that is methodology and changes in methodology, and I would like to get your comments on that topic. You wrote about the moral dilemmas and ethics of ethnographical research (GARCIA & FINE, 2018) and about the "Ten Lies of Ethnography" (FINE, 1993). John VAN MAANEN (2011 [1988]) spoke of different "Tales of the Field" to tell, and so we can address that too, maybe. We might start with your personal entry into sociology, if you like.

Gary Alan FINE: Let me begin by giving some biographical background. I was born in New York City in 1950 and my father was a FREUDian psychoanalyst and very much part of the New York psychiatric scene. We lived quite comfortably. I wouldn't describe us as wealthy but we were certainly upper-middle class and my parents sent me to private schools in New York. My mother was a housewife, a

---

2 For a broader discussion of current themes in US based ethnography see KUSENBACH (2005) and NIERMANN (2020).

homemaker. She wanted to be a doctor, but in those days only one member of a couple would be a doctor and women didn't have that option. I have one brother who is a psychiatrist, who works for the Veteran's Administration. So that is a little bit of my background. [7]

I went to college at the University of Pennsylvania [Penn] in Philadelphia, and it turned out for me to be a very interesting place to be at the time because Penn was discovering itself and with a number of faculty members who were interested in issues of culture and social relations. When I was at Penn, they encouraged students to take individualized majors and I created an individualized major for myself called "Human and Social Relations," which was a blending of psychology, sociology, folklore, anthropology and some linguistics and history. These were all courses that I wanted to take. I was very fortunate to be able to do that. Eventually before I graduated, I decided on a second major and that was a major in psychology. So as an undergraduate I was not a sociologist, ... but I took a number of sociology courses at Penn and most influentially, I guess, I would say were the courses that I took with E. Digby BALTZELL<sup>3</sup>, who coined the term "White Anglo-Saxon-Protestant" (WASP) in order to identify the typical representative of US elites. He was an urban sociologist, scholar of elites and historical sociologist. And then also Erving GOFFMAN<sup>4</sup>. Those were my two mentors in sociology, and I had some mentors in folklore and in psychology but the sociologists were primarily BALTZELL and GOFFMAN. I enrolled in two graduate seminars with Erving GOFFMAN. One was a general graduate seminar open to anthropology graduate students and other graduate students on social organization. He let me take the course even though I was a junior at the time but I had enough credits to be considered a senior and I was willing to take the course. And then subsequently I took a more advanced seminar that he taught and that was a smaller seminar with six graduate students, three faculty who would sit in, and me. And then I also worked as a research assistant for Professor GOFFMAN and he wrote a letter for me for graduate school. I had a very broad training in the social sciences, for which I am very grateful. [8]

---

3 Edward Digby BALTZELL (1915-1996) was professor of sociology at the University of Philadelphia. Areas of work included studies about America's ruling elites. Note to readers: For some colleagues mentioned below during the interview, we were not able to identify a year of birth.

4 Erving GOFFMAN (1922-1982), Canadian sociologist who graduated from the University of Chicago, later became professor of sociology at University of California, Berkeley, and in 1968 moved to the University of Pennsylvania to become Benjamin Franklin Chair in Sociology and Anthropology. His numerous writings on the ordering of interaction have become famous worldwide. GOFFMAN was elected president of the American Sociological Association in 1981. See the four volume set with essays about GOFFMAN's work edited by Gary Alan FINE and Gregory W. H. SMITH (2000).

I took courses with the linguist William LABOV<sup>5</sup>, I took courses with Dell HYMES<sup>6</sup>, who is a prominent figure in linguistics and folklore, and with Roger ABRAHAMS<sup>7</sup>, who is very prominent in folklore studies. At the time that I was taking this seminar from GOFFMAN, he was writing "Frame Analysis" (1974). So he would read his notes for the book, which I found absolutely fascinating and a number of the other students found less so because he was reading from his notes in a monotone. I became focused on social psychology. Social psychology was really my core interest, and when I applied to graduate school, it was to programs in social psychology. Erving GOFFMAN, at the time, discouraged me from applying to sociology. [9]

Reiner KELLER: Why?

Gary Alan FINE: Well, he was at that particular moment—this is 1971, 1972—not enamored with sociology. He thought anthropology was much more interesting and maybe social psychology as well, but not sociology. I applied for social psychology programs and I was admitted to many of them. The one I decided to attend was Harvard's<sup>8</sup>, that was when I applied their Department of Social Relations. Social Relations had been made up of four programs: sociology, social anthropology, social psychology, and personality and development. Sociology left social relations in 1970 before I applied. In 1972 social anthropology left to go back into the anthropology program, which was a separate department. That left these two other programs and the Harvard administration felt that it was not large enough to be a department. They merged Social Relations, what was left of it, into Psychology. By the time I got to Cambridge, there was no Department of Social Relations, it was the Department of Psychology and Social Relations. But fortunately, they grandfathered us into the program as it had developed at Harvard, meaning that I didn't need to take psychology courses, at least not those that I didn't want to take. I didn't need to take biological psychology and so forth. [10]

I took social psychology courses and some anthropology and some sociology courses when I was there. And I reached out to other universities in the Boston area. Boston College, which had a program in symbolic interaction, in which David KARP<sup>9</sup> was a central person. Boston University had a program in

---

5 William LABOV (born in 1927) was professor of (socio-) linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania. Areas of work include African American English, language change, narrative analysis, etc.

6 Dell HYMES (1927-2009), US-American linguist, folklorist and anthropologist, taught as a professor at the University of Pennsylvania from 1965 to 1987. Areas of work included ethnography of communication, etc.; founding editor of the journal *Language in Society*.

7 Roger ABRAHAMS (1933-2017), US-American folklorist; Hum Rosen Professor of Humanities Emeritus at the University of Pennsylvania from 1986 up to his death (PhD at Penn in 1961). Areas of work included cultures and cultural histories of the Americas, with a focus on Afro-American cultures.

8 Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

9 David KARP (born in 1944), professor of sociology at Boston College. Areas of work include symbolic interactionism, mental illnesses, medication, and urban life.

ethnomethodology, George PSATHAS<sup>10</sup> and Jeff COULTER<sup>11</sup> were central there. But they also had a summer program, which I enrolled in one year, I think it was 1974, in which Harold GARFINKEL<sup>12</sup>, Harvey SACKS<sup>13</sup>, David SUDNOW<sup>14</sup> came to teach, so I was exposed to ethnomethodology in the 1970's and then I went out to Brandeis where Kurt WOLFF<sup>15</sup> had an evening seminar on phenomenology. I was becoming quite well-versed in the qualitative approaches in the social sciences and in sociology. And Harvard was very good about that. They were very flexible and certainly my advisor was, Robert Freed BALES<sup>16</sup>, who was a very prominent small groups researcher. He let me do what I wanted. My dissertation was on small group dynamics and the effect of a new member in a group. But one of the things I wanted to do was ethnography. My dissertation is a laboratory study of small groups (FINE, 1986) but at the same time, at the very same time, I was doing this ethnography of Little League baseball teams (FINE, 1979, 1987)<sup>17</sup>. And both Harvard and professor BALES were fine with that because the goal was, by the end of your time at Harvard, to create a name for yourself, a reputation, a niche in the field, which I did. When I was on the job market, I received two job offers: one from a psychology department, and one from a sociology department. For a number of reasons, the sociology offer was more appealing. It was at a better school, in a better location, University of Minnesota. So I accepted that position and then moved to Minnesota. That is my history up until I started as a professor. I spent fourteen years in Minnesota, then seven years at the University of Georgia, and now Northwestern University (Evanston), for twenty-two years. [11]

Reiner KELLER: Thank you. May I just ask you one question about this period? When I started sociology, I was trained to work with BALES, too, with his so-called "System for the Multiple Level Observation of Groups" (SYMLOG, BALES & COHEN, 1979), I don't know #

Gary Alan FINE: # My dissertation was a SYMLOG project #<sup>18</sup> [12]

- 10 George PSATHAS (1929-2018), professor of sociology at Boston University. Areas of work included phenomenology (Alfred SCHÜTZ), ethnomethodology, conversation analysis.
- 11 Jeff COULTER, professor of sociology and philosophy at Boston University. Areas of work include ethnomethodology, sociology of mind and cognition.
- 12 Harold GARFINKEL (1917-2011), professor of sociology at the University of California, Los Angeles, founder of the ethnomethodological approach in sociology. See for further discussion FQS 20(2), an interview issue on GARFINKEL's contribution to sociology (GERST, KRÄMER & SALOMON, 2019).
- 13 Harvey SACKS (1935-1975), lecturer in sociology, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis at the Universities of California in Los Angeles and in Irvine, founder of conversation analysis.
- 14 David SUDNOW (1938-2007), ethnomethodologist, pianist and piano teacher. Areas of work included social organization of dying, improvisation.
- 15 Kurt H. WOLFF (1912-2003), German-born American sociologist, professor of sociology at Brandeis University, Waltham, MA from 1959-1993. Areas of work included sociology of knowledge, phenomenology, developed his own "surrender and catch"-approach in sociology.
- 16 Robert Freed BALES (1916-2004), American social psychologist, professor of social relations at Harvard University from 1957 to 1986. Areas of work included analysis of interactions in small groups.
- 17 The book received the 1988 Opie Award for the Best Scholarly Book in the field of Children's Folklore and Culture (American Folklore Society, Children's Folklore Section).
- 18 Some results were published in FINE (1986).

Reiner KELLER: # So we had this kind of group observation and laboratory studies on groups. This was my sociological introduction into empirical work on group interaction and group processes, from my early studies on. These were mostly observations of artificial settings surrounding a small group which had to solve some pre-selected issue, that is, laboratory-style. But you were more interested in real life groups, so to speak?

Gary Alan FINE: I did both. My dissertation is a laboratory study of 32 groups and what we were interested in was very much the SYMLOG-BALES tradition. I examined how when a new member—a confederate—was introduced into a group the behavior of the previous group members changed. It was very much tied to the theories of Kurt LEWIN<sup>19</sup> (see FINE, 1986). It was hypothesis testing, and most of the hypotheses proved true, and a couple of them didn't. So it was very much a laboratory study. But at the same time, I was very interested in connecting that to field studies. Therefore, when I studied Little League baseball teams, I used the SYMLOG questions. I have SYMLOG diagrams for these teams that I was studying. One of the things we're going to talk about is the way my approach has changed. It has moved from being experimental research to a more ethnographic and cultural approach. [13]

Reiner KELLER: I don't know if you still can remember how these different perspectives you mentioned, ... for example, I know Kurt H. WOLFF's very special approach with "Surrender and Catch" (1976), which is very much a phenomenological approach. And I was always taught that there was a tension between Erving GOFFMAN and the others from ethnomethodology, especially with the protagonists of conversation analysis. GOFFMAN's "Forms of Talk" (1981) was some kind of critical intervention into that kind of tradition. It might have been very confusing and inspiring at the very same time, to get to know all those different approaches.

Gary Alan FINE: You are completely right. Symbolic interaction and ethnomethodology were different approaches and a number of scholars were writing about them. GOFFMAN for his part was not fully considered a symbolic interactionist. He was grounded in DURKHEIM<sup>20</sup>, in theories of effervescence, collective action, and he was a student of Lloyd WARNER<sup>21</sup> at Chicago (see FINE, 1995). So, he comes from a very diverse background as I did. You take all those influences and you come out with something new. I am *not* an ethnomethodologist. The ethnomethodologists would not see me as being part of their core group. But at the same time, I have been *influenced* by Harvey SACKS, to some considerable degree, and to a lesser degree, but *noticeably*, by Harold

---

19 Kurt LEWIN (1890-1947), German-American social psychologist, director of the Center for Group Dynamics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology MIT in Cambridge, MA. Areas of work included group dynamics, organization and management.

20 Émile DURKHEIM (1858-1917), French founder of sociology, professor of education and sociology at the Sorbonne, Paris. Areas of work included sociological methods, suicide, religious classification, social norms, and forms of solidarity.

21 William Lloyd WARNER (1898-1970), US-American anthropologist, professor of anthropology and sociology at the university of Chicago until 1959, then professor of social research at Michigan State University. Areas of work included Australian Aborigines, city and urban culture in the US, human relations, social stratification in the US.

GARFINKEL. My interest in understanding the way in which micro situations develop, why and how they are negotiated, that is very much part of GARFINKEL and Kurt WOLFF. We were reading Edmund HUSSERL<sup>22</sup> and Alfred SCHÜTZ<sup>23</sup> that is the more sociological phenomenologists. There was a group of British scholars at the time who were writing in the same way. I wouldn't describe myself as a phenomenologist either, but I am influenced by them. I wouldn't *really* describe myself as a symbolic interactionist in a pure sense. I'm probably *more* influenced by symbolic interaction than by other approaches (see SANDSTROM et al., 2013 [2003]), but certainly the fact that I worked with Robert Freed BALES and the DURKHEIMian emphasis of GOFFMAN in places ... the group-oriented approach means that I'm not a micro-sociologist as much as I am a meso-level, groups-level, sociologist. And so that is where I have over the course of more than 40 years developed what is perhaps *distinctive* about my approach. [14]

## 2. A Sociological Trinity: Structure, Interaction, Culture

Reiner KELLER: In your work, I see different major areas of interest. First, there is a longstanding and ongoing focus on research about groups, second there is a concern with conceptual work or theory, theory of groups, third, a kind of interest in what could be called local sociology or the concreteness of society, fourth, research on narrative and public issues like moral stories, rumors, etc., and a permanent interest in methodology, with special focus on ethnography. Your book "Tiny Publics" (FINE, 2012a) seems to integrate some of these different interests, at least group research and underlying theoretical concerns. It reads like a selective but nevertheless rather comprehensive account of your work. And #

Gary Alan FINE: # Correct. And ... people will ask me because they know me as an ethnographer, an ethnographer who has studied Little League baseball, restaurant kitchens (FINE, 1996a), mushroom collectors (FINE, 1998)<sup>24</sup>, meteorologists (FINE, 2007)<sup>25</sup>, art students (FINE, 2018), chess players (FINE, 2015), and many other, a dozen ethnographic projects<sup>26</sup>. And they will ask what do these have in common? *They* will see me doing all these different kinds of projects and I will say to them that I think of myself as *doing a single project*. Well, what is that single project? When I was in graduate school, I became interested in the intersection of three broad concepts. Those concepts were:

---

22 Edmund HUSSERL (1859-1938), professor of philosophy at the University of Freiburg, Germany. Areas of work include the discussion of major philosophical problems of the human subject's ways of "knowing" the world and the development of a particular approach to the epistemological problems of (scientific) knowledge production called "phenomenology," that is the analysis of the modalities of phenomena as they appear in the human consciousness.

23 Alfred SCHÜTZ (1899-1959), professor of sociology and social psychology at the New School for Social Research in New York. Areas of work included social phenomenology, knowledge and everyday action, life world analysis.

24 Recipient of the 1999 Charles Horton Cooley Award, Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction.

25 Recipient of the 2008 Charles Horton Cooley Award, Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction.

26 See the complete list of Gary Alan FINE's publications on <https://www.sociology.northwestern.edu/people/faculty/core/gary-alan-fine.html> [Accessed July 7, 2020].

*structure*, that's the core of sociology, *interaction*, that is what the symbolic interactionists did and the ethnomethodologists to some extent, but I was interested in that micro-component, and I was interested in *culture* back in the 1970s. This is very early when Howard BECKER (1974)<sup>27</sup> published his first work explicitly on culture, and Richard PETERSON<sup>28</sup> and David BERGER (1975) started to discuss such a concept in the US-context (see additionally PETERSON, 1979). So you are only beginning to get sociology to say culture is part of *our* discipline as opposed to anthropology. But it came natural to me because of my interest in folklore and my interest in anthropology. Culture, structure, interaction—that intersection was what I was going to work on for my career. You can see that throughout my career, for 40+ years. Specifically, however, I was trained as a small group researcher, and this is an interest for my academic life in the role of small group cultures. And all of my ethnographies look at small group cultures, so again and again, over the course of 40+ years I have been studying small group cultures. When I published my article back in 1979 on "Small Groups and Culture Creation" (FINE, 1979) in the *American Sociological Review*, it was a study of the culture of Little League baseball teams. It was a paper that I wrote in my first year in graduate school, a much less advanced version. In the early 1970s I wrote what was the basis for that article that was eventually published seven years later. It begins right at the start of my graduate career and probably goes back into my undergraduate career, this interest in the role of cultures in groups. That is one of the things that has motivated my career, and particularly in the past 20 years, it has become even more central as I'm thinking about what my legacy is going to be. At that point, I began to write those papers that became "Tiny Publics" (FINE, 2012a). It became the new project that I have on the Hinge—the Hinge involves looking at civil society in light of small groups, which connect the individuals and the broader society. [15]

Reiner KELLER: You used, or are still using, concepts like "interaction order," "social worlds" (see for example FINE, 1983), or sometimes it is about "doing things together," for example in the context of the art issues (see for example FINE, 2004a) #

Gary Alan FINE: # Right. So, we have Erving GOFFMAN's "The Interaction Order" (1983). We have Howard BECKER's "Doing Things Together" (1986). Those are two of the influences. Some of the writings of Anselm STRAUSS<sup>29</sup> on negotiated order (STRAUSS, SCHATZMAN, BUCHER, ERLICH & SABSHIN, 1964) is another major influence (see for example FINE, 1984). And I should not

---

27 Howard S. BECKER (born in 1928), professor of sociology at Northwestern University (1965-1991) and then at the University of Washington, Seattle. Areas of work include sociology of deviance and labeling, sociology of professions, sociology of art, sociology of music (jazz), sociology and photography, and methodology of sociological research. See the conversation between BECKER and KELLER (2016).

28 Richard PETERSON (1932-2010), professor of sociology at Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee. Areas of work included sociology of culture, sociology of music (country and western).

29 Anselm STRAUSS (1916-1996), professor of sociology at the University of California, School of Nursing, San Francisco from 1960-1987. Areas of work included medical institutions, dying and illness, social worlds and arenas, grounded theory methodology.

forget Ralph TURNER<sup>30</sup> who is another one of the interactionists of that period, the second Chicago school, about which I edited a book and about which I have written (FINE, 1995). Those references all struck me as the wellspring for a lot of the work that I wanted to do. But I'm in a different generation as these scholars. *I'm* trained in light of ethnomethodology, which hadn't developed in the 1950s, of cultural Marxism which hadn't developed either, and in light of ethnography as it was developed in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. We are always creatures of our time. I should also mention small groups research, which was so powerful in the 1950s and 1960s and fell out of favor in the 1970s. Why did it fall out of favor? Because of what was called the "cognitive revolution." Psychologists stopped being interested in collective action and they became interested in the way in which people think like information processers. And that was not something I was interested in. [16]

Reiner KELLER: It is interesting what you say because, as I see it, in Germany, social psychology, with its focus on group processes, was still present when I started my studies in sociology in the early 1980s. But today, it is hard to find it anymore. It has been replaced by very different kinds of experimental research designs.

Gary Alan FINE: Yes, exactly. One of the things I mention to my graduate students when I teach microsociology is, that in 1954, the *American Sociological Review* had a special issue on small group dynamics. And then for a long period of time there is very little of that and so you kind of have to pick and choose. I wrote an essay on that topic for the *Annual Review of Sociology* a few years ago (FINE, 2012b). And it was a case of recovering traditions and seeing the work. There *are* scholars who have the kind of interests that I do and I can mention for instance, Nina ELIASOPH<sup>31</sup> and Paul LICHTERMAN<sup>32</sup>. Their article "Culture in Interaction" (2003) is certainly influential. Michael FARRELL<sup>33</sup> on "Collaborative Circles" (2001), his wonderful book nearly twenty years ago would be an example. Francesca POLLETTA<sup>34</sup>, who has written "It Was Like a Fever" (2006), and on group dynamics (see, for example, POLLETTA, 2002). James JASPER<sup>35</sup> and his work (see, for example, JASPER, 1997). So there is a group of people that I rely upon who are interested in the same kind of group-based sociology. And you know, we are not dominant at this point, and maybe we never will be.

---

30 Ralph TURNER (1919-2014), professor of sociology at the University of California, Los Angeles from 1963-1990. Areas of work included collective behavior, social movements, self and identity, symbolic interactionism, sociology of disasters.

31 Nina ELIASOPH, professor of sociology at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles. Areas of work include volunteering, political apathy, NGOs, cultural sociology, ethnography.

32 Paul LICHTERMAN, professor of sociology and religion, University of Southern California, Los Angeles. Areas of work include culture, religion, civic organizations and social movements, politics, qualitative methodology, and theory.

33 Michael P. FARRELL, professor emeritus of sociology at The State University of New York, Buffalo. Areas of work include social psychology, sociology of the family, sociology of small groups, friendship groups, adolescence.

34 Francesca POLLETTA, professor of sociology at the University of California, Irvine. Areas of work include social movements, democracy, culture, gender, social theory.

35 James JASPER (born in 1957), professor of sociology at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Areas of work include culture, emotions, social movements, social theory.

We can talk a little bit later about how, I sometimes joke that my work was considered marginal because "we" in sociology were so structural, and now "we" as a discipline are so political, my work is still considered marginal and I have never been mainstream—my work is considered maybe passé—and that I have always been kind of a person who is a little bit of an outsider. Never quite central to the discipline, but that is alright. To say I'm not central doesn't mean that I'm ignored, it just means that the people that I'm working with are a group, but it is not a dominant group. We are not structuralists, we are not network analysts, we are not ... Marxist theorists or theorists of race or whatever. [17]

Reiner KELLER: I see. Maybe that is a perfect condition to go on with substantial work ... I would like to come back to what you just said. You mentioned the three elements of structure, interaction, and culture. Sometimes you quote authors and statements referring to, ... I think there is a kind of symbolic dimension too, and I see it in your work. You didn't focus, in difference to, for example, the ethnomethodological strand of conversation analysis, neither the very nano-details of one short moment of situated verbal interaction, nor, in a more GOFFMANian style, the interaction order, nor like STRAUSS a grounded theory of a particular social world, arena, organizational setting or subject area, at least not in the way, grounded theory has been established as a methodology (see GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967). But you are using these concepts and you are adding your own then, and you are deeply interested in the interaction processes and the outcomes of that. My question is about how you see the relation between the conceptual or theoretical elements you mentioned, and ... in addition, you often refer to Anthony GIDDENS<sup>36</sup> or to other theorists, to science studies, to some kind of more macro-sociological frameworks, which is not that common in other ways of doing ethnography. So I wonder how your ethnographical work relates to such theoretical framing and more global interests?

Gary Alan FINE: I am a social theorist, or I define myself in that way and I try to connect my work to other important works in sociology. I like to think that this is to some extent in line with GOFFMAN's orientation. Anthony GIDDENS—parts of his work contribute to a kind of meso-level cultural analysis (GIDDENS, 1984). And those are the things that I borrow from him. Same with Pierre BOURDIEU<sup>37</sup>. I'm not BOURDIEUian, I wouldn't be defined as central to that approach. But there are things that BOURDIEU talks about, the feel for the game, for instance (BOURDIEU, 1977 [1972]). The idea that habitus is not just this thing *out* there but that fields are constructed. These wonderful, important theorists, they are full-service sociologists. And I pick from them what I find to be useful. WEBERian<sup>38</sup> "Verstehen" (2019 [1922]), the part of DURKHEIM that is "collective

---

36 Anthony GIDDENS (born in 1938), professor of sociology at Cambridge University, sociologist, 1997-2003 director of the London School of Economics. Areas of work include theory of stratification and class, theory of structuration, theory of modernity.

37 Pierre BOURDIEU (1930-2002), chair of sociology at the Collège de France, Paris (1981-2002). Areas of work included theory of practice, male domination, distinction, social inequalities, analysis of social fields of practice.

38 Max WEBER (1864-1920), German sociologist, philosopher, jurist, and political economist. Areas of work included sociological theory and methodology, economic sociology, sociology of religion.

effervescence" (2008 [1912]), and Charles H. COOLEY<sup>39</sup> for group, identity and processes (1956 [1902/1922]). ... There is a lot in those works and much other work that I'm not at all interested in. That is fine. But I take what I need from as many different theorists as I can, both contemporary and classic. John Levi MARTIN (2011)<sup>40</sup>, for instance, is an inspiration to me but there is a lot of MARTIN's work on social structure that I don't need. And so, we can kind of go through the discipline. ... Another excellent example of the same process is Jürgen HABERMAS<sup>41</sup>. You wouldn't think of me as HABERMASian, *except* for his wonderful book early in his career in which he is looking at coffee houses and the role of place and group context in the creation of a public sphere (1989 [1962]). That is so relevant to me. I can ignore a lot of HABERMAS because I have that argument of his, which is now part of my argument. And we can go through other examples. My theory is very synthetic. It is taking a lot of things and putting it in my own melting pot and creating what *might* be my approach for tiny publics and local sociology (FINE, 2012a, 2012b). [18]

### 3. Morel Tales: About Peopled Ethnography

Gary Alan FINE: The other thing that's related to what you were saying is that I wrote a paper back in 2003 for the *Journal Ethnography*, which is about what I spoke of as "Peopled Ethnography" (FINE, 2003). And what I meant there is that I wanted an ethnography that was richly data-based, that there should be a lot of ethnographic detail so that you get into that scene. Maybe *in contrast* to Arlie HOCHSCHILD<sup>42</sup> and her quite wonderful book "The Managed Heart" (1983). But that wasn't a detailed ethnography of these scenes. But *also*, I wanted something that was not purely descriptive, but that had a theoretical argument behind it, an analytic argument. And so I like to think that all of my ethnographies are concerned with some sociological concept whether it be status, or ... class, or whatever. I'm looking for places in which people talk about the issues that I care about. So that is why I studied restaurants because cooks talk about aesthetics. That is why I studied high school debate (FINE, 2001a) because I wanted to learn—I was part of a reading group about DERRIDA<sup>43</sup> and French high theorists—from people who were talking about communication. I wanted to find a spot in which people talked about talk. The world of adolescent debate was that world. We could go through each of those ethnographies and you could ask me, why did

---

39 Charles H. COOLEY (1864-1929), professor of sociology at the University of Michigan. Areas of work included primary groups, identity and subjectivity, social processes.

40 John Levi MARTIN (born in 1964), professor of sociology at the University of Chicago. Areas of work include sociological theory, methodology, network analysis.

41 Jürgen HABERMAS (born in 1929), professor emeritus of philosophy at the University of Universität Frankfurt am Main, Germany. Areas of work include theory of the public sphere, theory of communicative action social philosophy, theory of law, history of philosophy.

42 Arlie Russel HOCHSCHILD (born in 1940), professor emerita of sociology at the University of California, Berkeley. Areas of work include family, market culture, global patterns of care work, social psychology with a recent focus on the relationship between culture, politics and emotion.

43 Jacques DERRIDA (1930-2004), philosopher, research director at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) in Paris and professor of the humanities at the University of California, Irvine (1986-2004). Areas of work included semiotics, phenomenology, deconstruction, post-structuralism.

I choose *that* place. These are middle-class environments for the most part, but also for each of them, there are theoretical issues involved. [19]

Reiner KELLER: There is always the basic idea of group production, and then there is, at a different level, or in addition, there is a theoretical interest in ... I remember in the mushroom book (FINE, 1998), it is about nature and culture. The doing of the future is a core focus of the weather book (FINE, 2007) #

Gary Alan FINE: # Correct. In the mushroom study, I was interested in thinking about environmental ethics and the sociology of nature, and I wanted a space in which people saw nature as problematic and as worth discussing. And mushroom collecting, for me, was precisely that space. It didn't come down to my coming in with the politics and then looking for examples, but my coming in with an interest and looking inductively at how people thought about their actions in the wild. [20]

Reiner KELLER: So there was always a special criterion for choosing the field? To have this one theoretical question, if I can name it that way?

Gary Alan FINE: Right.

Reiner KELLER: And then to see, via ethnographical work, if this fits or is part of that field, and how #

Gary Alan FINE: # Right. But always, would it fit my personal equation. I'm not an urban ethnographer in the way that term has been defined, even though my research may be in urban communities. I'm not a student of politics, and I'm not a student of race and class as such, the closest I've come to such questions is the study I'm doing now. I've spent two-and-a-half years now conducting a study of senior citizen political activists. And so that connects me to inequalities, but I am not in dangerous spaces and that is not who I am. I don't want to pretend that I am Matt DESMOND<sup>44</sup> (for example, 2016) or Mary PATTILLO<sup>45</sup> (for example, 2007), or Elijah ANDERSON<sup>46</sup> (for example, 1999), or one of the other great ethnographers of the urban street scene. I'm not. I am someone who will study middle-class environments. And I do it with the kind of GOFFMANian skepticism. I think it is hard to be an urban ethnographer and a *skeptic*. The fact that I am studying people who are not at that kind of risk or suffering, that kind of oppression, allows me to be more GOFFMANian. [21]

Reiner KELLER: I see, Okay. In your work, you are then coining your own terms or concepts like "idioculture" and others?

Gary Alan FINE: That is right. That one comes from early in my career (see FINE 1979, 2006; FINE & FANG, 2019). I think I'm not quite a coiner as much as GOFFMAN was, but there would certainly be instances in which there are

---

44 Matthew DESMOND (born in 1979), professor of sociology at Princeton University. Areas of work include urban sociology, poverty, race and ethnicity, organizations and work, social theory, and ethnography.

45 Mary PATTILLO is professor of sociology and African American studies at Northwestern University, Evanston. Areas of work include urban sociology, race and ethnicity, inequality.

46 Elijah ANDERSON (born in 1943), professor of sociology and of African American studies at Yale University, New Haven. Areas of work include urban ethnography, cultural theories.

concepts or terms that I found useful, whether it be "tiny publics" or "idioculture" or "peopled ethnography." In 40 years there are some terms that I developed. [22]

Reiner KELLER: So the title of the "Tiny Publics" book (FINE, 2012a), in fact carries both the more ethnographic work on groups as well as your work on rumors, moral tales, and collective memories, it is all about "publics" in some way or another (see for example FINE, 2010).

Gary Alan FINE: Yes, in some ways. That book was primarily ethnographically based but I'm *always* aware of the belief systems—rumors, for example. So it is all a part of the same thing. If you look at my books on rumors (FINE, 1992, 2001b, 2012c; FINE & ELLIS, 2010; FINE & TURNER, 2001; ROSNOW & FINE, 1976), they are less ethnographic. But often, I've written articles on rumor that come out of the ethnographies that I've done. And it is the same when I think about reputations. It is a different stream but it is not an entirely separate stream. So my current ethnography is a study of Civil War history buffs. People who are fascinated by the American Civil War, who are amateur historians and I go to their meetings and I go on their tours. This is a project I'm starting on and that connects to collective memory, of course. And it connects to the debates that we are having in the United States about what do we remember, how should we remember our Civil War. So it is a bridge between the collective memory and reputations research (FINE, 2012c), and ethnography. My study of chess looked at the creation of status systems and collective memory in the history of chess (FINE, 2015).

Reiner KELLER: Okay, so the hierarchy of good players or good #

Gary Alan FINE: # And the *memory* of those players #

Reiner KELLER: # of the chess games which have been played out #

Gary Alan FINE: # Right. Because in chess the history of the activity proved to be very important.

Reiner KELLER: I guess there are people who remember perfectly one particular game of chess at a given moment, which happened, I don't know 20 years ago, some big players #

Gary Alan FINE: # Or longer. Bobby FISCHER<sup>47</sup>, in the United States. [23]

Reiner KELLER: Maybe one or two questions remain for this part of our conversation. Your ethnographic field work was on quite *different* kind of groups, I would say. Some of them have been very professional settings, like in the weather reporting study (FINE, 2007), but the mushroom collectors group setting (FINE, 1998) is less formalized, isn't it?

Gary Alan FINE: I study work spaces and leisure spaces. So the work on restaurant kitchens (FINE, 1996a) and on meteorology are primarily work settings. In the new study of art students (FINE, 2018), I look at educational institutions so that the art student project and the high school debate project

---

47 Robert James FISCHER (1943-2008), world-famous chess player.

(FINE, 2001a) are school-based. And then a number of the others are leisure-based: Little League baseball (FINE, 1987) and history buffs. [24]

Reiner KELLER: But your argument about this relationship between structure and interaction and culture relates to all of this?

Gary Alan FINE: You see that in various ways in all of those projects, and you see the group culture idea in *all* of those projects. There are certain things that you can trace throughout the dozen or so ethnographies. [25]

Reiner KELLER: Is there a stronger inference of structures in the occupational settings or in the professional settings, in the workplaces? Because there is an organization, you have to get paid, etc. ... and so #

Gary Alan FINE: # Yes, when you are dealing with a government organization, such as the Weather Service or a business such as restaurants, there will be these externals. But there may be external forces to greater or lesser extent in leisure activities too, and so they can differ in various ways. I wouldn't want to say that all of these projects are the same. There are some very fine ethnographers who work on the same general topic year after year, decade after decade, I think of my dear friend William CORSARO<sup>48</sup>, who is now retired from Indiana University. We were not in the same program, but we got our degrees approximately at the same time, we are both ethnographers. Bill is the *best* ethnographer of childhood in our discipline (see for example CORSARO, 2003). I started out in doing work on children (FINE, 1987, and, for example FINE & GLASSNER, 1979), but then I moved from that and he didn't. He kept on and so people wouldn't say to him, your work is all over the place because it is *all on children*. He did research in Italy, he did work in Sweden, he did work in the United States, basically young children but slightly different ages. And for me, I'm guided by these theoretical issues. [26]

#### **4. The Case for a Grounded Sociology**

Reiner KELLER: And you argue, for example, in your article about "Sociological Miniaturism" (FINE & HALLETT, 2003), and in the "Tiny Publics" book (FINE, 2012a), very much for a kind of "grounded sociology," a sociology grounded in empirical research and interaction and the doings of people.

Gary Alan FINE: Yes. But always attempting to address the core issues of the discipline. There are some interactionists that don't want to deal with structure. That's not what they really care about, and I was never one of those. There are some symbolic interactionists who didn't want to be part of the discipline as the discipline was constructed and I always wanted to be a player in the discipline. [27]

---

48 William CORSARO, professor emeritus of sociology at Indiana University, Bloomington. Areas of work include sociology of childhood, social psychology, language development, ethnography.

Reiner KELLER: In one of your books or articles you mention BERGER<sup>49</sup> and LUCKMANN<sup>50</sup> (1966) too, as a kind of work which combined, or bridged, these traditions in the 1960s.

Gary Alan FINE: Absolutely. Peter BERGER obviously has an institutional interest in religion, and Thomas LUCKMANN has an interest in phenomenology. It is a very important book. I really wish that it had included empirical cases more than it did. That is one of the things that I try and do. *It is not like* there is theory and there is empirical research, theory should be empirical. [28]

Reiner KELLER: To pick up their idea of an intervention in the 1960s landscape of sociology, and to apply it to the current situation: for example, I read your article in the "Futures We Want" book (SCHULZ, 2016), about the "Futures We Build" (FINE, 2016) which refers to your idea of *local*, too. Would you consider your arguments about a *local* sociology as some kind of intervention into the contemporary landscape of US sociology or maybe sociology in general? Or how do you situate this current sociological work? I don't know at all if it's possible to answer such a question ...

Gary Alan FINE: Well, you know, indeed, it is difficult. Sociology in 2019 ... we have moved from a fascination with structure to a fascination with politics. But both of them are on quite high levels and what I want to do is bring structure down to people and politics down to people. So much work today is on inequality but without seeing how inequality is done. And so it is something that I miss in the discipline. It is not totally absent, there are people who are thinking about inequality and thinking about ethnography in the same way. And you always have a group of people who surround you, who you admire and you disagree with a little bit, someone like Matt DESMOND, for example, or Mitch DUNEIER<sup>51</sup>, people who are really influential and very important voices. It is not that I agree with them totally, and I *shouldn't* agree with them totally. They don't do what I do. But you should always be open to those people who are working in the same broad area. [29]

Reiner KELLER: I think it is one of the interests of the discipline to have always a kind of, I would say, a low-level conflictual landscape so this is the interest and the stimulation *to do things*. If we all always agree, it is too easy, and even maybe boring [laughs].

Gary Alan FINE: I think the wonderful thing about sociology as a discipline is that we are *fundamentally* a one-field discipline. It's not that we're necessarily interested in everything that everyone does. But we see ourselves as having a single agenda in contrast to anthropology, for instance, which has this four-field approach. If you are in archeology, you are not in cultural anthropology. Consider

---

49 Peter L. BERGER (1929-2017), professor of religion, sociology and theology; director, of the institute on culture, religion, and world affairs at Boston University. Areas of work included sociology of knowledge, sociology of religion, economic sociology.

50 Thomas LUCKMANN (1927-2016), professor of sociology at the University of Konstanz, Germany. Areas of work included sociology of knowledge, social phenomenology, sociology of language and communication, sociology of religion.

51 Mitchell DUNEIER, professor of sociology at Princeton University. Areas of work include urban ethnography.

political science. If you are in international relations, you are not interested in American politics. Or consider history, where the topics are so diverse. If you are interested in Chinese history, you are not going to be collaborating with people who are studying contemporary *American* history. I think we sociologists have the great advantage that we are all interested in *social order*. And in this department, we have colloquia each week and then some weeks there will be micro-people and some weeks, macro, and some weeks doing statistical analysis, and some weeks doing ethnography. And we should all attend as many of these sessions as we can. [30]

Reiner KELLER: My feeling is that today many neighboring disciplines have adopted large elements of sociology. At least in the German context, it seems that American studies are now interested in subject matters and perspectives I would call "sociological." At least what they are doing now is close to sociology. Twenty to 30 years ago it was different, they were about language and culture in a different way, and now today it is about #

Gary Alan FINE: # Yes.

Reiner KELLER: It is a kind of sociology all over or something like that [laughs].

Gary Alan FINE: [laughs] Right. What used to be so wonderful about American studies was that it was a mix of the humanities and the social sciences. Now it is more political. And that is fine, but I think something is lost when you ignore the general structures. You are looking at things in terms of their particularities. We need the particularities, of course, but we also need to think as *general* theorists. [31]

Reiner KELLER: I think there still are important differences between the countries and their sociological landscapes. It is still quite different in Germany, for example, and other European countries. Maybe if you allow me one last question, and then we will switch to methodological issues, to the ethnography part. My question is: These concepts you mentioned and use, of structure, interaction, and culture—how do they relate? In interaction theory and studies, is it very often about whether there is a dominance of structure, or is structure created in, via interaction, via permutations of interactions (see for example STRAUSS, 1993)? How would you see this relation?

Gary Alan FINE: I see it in terms of constraints and expectations. There is a certain obdurate reality that people operate in. And it is an obdurate reality of resources and of power, of authority and claims, and such power can be real even while it can be negotiated. To be real it has to be accepted by a group of people that has the resources to make it stick. Power consists of resources that people can mobilize for their own purposes. [32]

Reiner KELLER: And maybe change establishes new kinds of structure, structurations? I don't know #

Gary Alan FINE: # Yes. Structures can change when groups with different kinds of power, rhetorical, cultural, material, economic power, come into a scene and

make claims. And some claims are persuasive because they connect to the interests and the resources of other people in the field. I always emphasized what are the interests of people and what are the resources. [33]

Reiner KELLER: Is this related to Anthony GIDDENS idea of what he calls "the duality of structure" (1984, p.29)? He was talking about structural elements and then the performative elements, which realize but also change or transform structures, like in language use: we are talking, reproducing, and transforming.

Gary Alan FINE: Yes, bringing in the idea of practices, of performances becomes very important to make structure real within an interaction order. And it is when GIDDENS comes across GOFFMAN, and it is the GOFFMANian GIDDENS that I admire so much. [34]

## 5. Too Much Knowledge Is a Dangerous Thing (for a Serial Ethnographer)

Reiner KELLER: Yes, I see. Thank you. I suggest that we switch topics for a moment. In an interview you had with Roberta SASSATELLI<sup>52</sup> a decade ago, she calls you a "Serial Ethnographer" (2010), referring to the fact that you did many ethnographies, you entered, again and again, such different fields ... Somehow, one must find some pleasure in doing this kind of work, at least it looks very demanding, in terms of intellectual and maybe even physical effort. And you talked about your general skepticism, just a few minutes ago, and I think somewhere you said or wrote that you don't like people all that much.<sup>53</sup> So I wonder: how do you mobilize your energies? [laughs]

Gary Alan FINE: [laughs] Oh yeah, I guess I #

Reiner KELLER: # It could have been more a kind of joke, or my memory is not that solid here, so #

Gary Alan FINE: # How to respond to that? You know since my interview with Roberta was in 2008, and since that time I finished my study of chess players and then I did this next study of art students and then I did this next study of senior citizen activists and I'm now studying history buffs so I guess I have continued to be a serial ethnographer even as I am getting closer to retirement. I'm really fascinated by people. It is not that I am so outgoing. What I was trying to get at, is not that I don't like people. I don't do this work *because* I like hanging out with people. I think that would be a way of putting it. It's not easy to do this. And it is not always fun to do it. You're spending a lot of time, you're taking notes, at least

52 Roberta SASSATELLI, professor of sociology of culture at the University of Milano (Italy). Areas of work include sociology of consumer culture, sociology, and cultural studies.

53 Reiner KELLER here refers to the following paragraph from a conversation between Roberta SASSATELLI and Gary Alan FINE (GAF), in which FINE responded to a question about Erving GOFFMAN's ethnographic stance and ethnography's approach to the field in general. This is what FINE says: "GAF: There's another aspect about ethnography that maybe connects me and Goffman in a certain sense, not that I want to claim his uniqueness, which was so important. There are some scholars who do ethnography because they love people. They really love people. Then there are others—and he was one of them and I am one of them—we don't love people that much. This is our job, and we do like our job! So I'm not saying that I hate people" (SASSATELLI, 2010, p.88).

I'm always thinking about what this is saying sociologically. When you publish or when you come to your conclusions, you will find that your informants aren't entirely pleased with what you've written. That's certainly been the case in a number of instances. But it is so fascinating to see different cultures and to spend time with different people and I'm someone who, when I leave the field, I may not leave it in an *absolute* way but I'm basically done with *that* project and so I don't attend forays of the North American Mycological Association as I used to do in that work, I don't go to high school debate tournaments, I don't go to chess tournaments, that's what I did for these projects. Now I have friends whom I met there. so sometimes the friendships continue but I leave the group. [35]

Reiner KELLER: Maybe let's come back to this aspect of leaving the field later. But what about entering the field at the beginning, I don't know about your experiences. When you did the Little League baseball work, you were much younger. It was "With the Boys" (FINE, 1987) at that time, and then now you are working with seniors #

Gary Alan FINE: # Right.

Reiner KELLER: So how does this come into play, age for example, or other dimensions?

Gary Alan FINE: Well, there are not many ethnographers who, at age 69, are still doing ethnography. It tends to be a young person's methodology. I started doing ethnography, I was 24, when I started my first Little League study, I'm now 69, that's 45 years. Howie BECKER is still publishing at age 90. I have many more years to go before that and I don't know how many more ethnographic projects I will do. But I find it interesting. I may have a little less energy than I had when I was 24 but I still find it ... interesting to try to explain group cultures. And to do it in a way that's both intellectually generous, not to be too hostile, but also not to be too accepting, how to balance that. How to realize the Little League baseball players, the boys would joke about sexual assault and that is part of what you have to understand at the same time. That in many ways they were admirable but none of us are admirable in *every* way. I have no doubt that those boys back in the 1970s who would joke about girls in ways that they shouldn't have done back then but they certainly wouldn't do it now that they are older men. They are in their 50s or 60s and I'm sure they're very different kinds of people. [36]

Reiner KELLER: Have there been fields where you tried to enter but it didn't work, for some reason?

Gary Alan FINE: Oh, there have been a couple of ethnographies that *didn't* come to pass ... there are a few that I did for only a short period of time. There were some sites I tried to get access to. After I completed the Little League baseball study, I wanted to study a traveling team. A team that went around the country and I wasn't given access to that. When I was doing the art students project, I wanted to study Masters of Fine Arts (MFA) in creative writing and I wasn't given access to that. So over the years there have been some occasions in which I have been turned down. Not too many fortunately, but some. [37]

Reiner KELLER: In the ethnographies you realized, for example, on the weather forecasting (FINE, 2007), you had to learn lots of jargon or local vocabularies, and this again and again, when entering a new field. This is very demanding, I guess?

Gary Alan FINE: So, this is very interesting. This is a debate that ethnographers have. And that is the extent to which you need transactional knowledge. I am one of the people who believe that too much knowledge is a dangerous thing. When I'm studying the weather service, I don't want to be a professional meteorologist. I want their behavior to be strange so that I can see it sociologically. Now in this I have had debates, *disagreements*, with Harry COLLINS<sup>54</sup>. Harry COLLINS is one of the great ethnographers of science and he believes that you need that transactional knowledge. [38]

When he goes into a field, he wants to talk just the way that they do ... he wants to be a peer, and I am not a peer. For me, I'm a cultural sociologist. Maybe that is the difference, he is a sociologist of *science*. He really cares about the science. I don't care that much about science. I want to know enough that I can talk with meteorologists and understand a little bit about what they're doing but it's not crucial for me to understand meteorology. It's not crucial for me to understand mycology in my mushroom study. It is not crucial for me to understand all of the details of the American Civil War in my history buff study. These people can tell you the details about particular battles. That is not my interest. I needed to know enough about the Civil War that I'm understanding something about what they're saying. But, on the other hand, I don't mind being ignorant about some things. And it is a debate that we have in ethnography. [39]

Reiner KELLER: So from your point of view you wouldn't need to feel like a chess player (FINE, 2015), or to feel like the weather guys #

Gary Alan FINE: # I don't want to feel like a chess player. That is another very good example. I never tried to be a good chess player. I can play chess poorly, mediocly, but there is an anthropologist who wrote a book called "Counterplay" (DESJARLAIS, 2011), and he was a tournament level player. He was not one of the best American players, but he was quite a good player. I wasn't. And so there were things that he knew, that I didn't and things that I thought were kind of sociologically uninteresting because it was too much about the details of chess. So, we do things differently. His book is probably more widely accepted within the world of *chess* because he is in the community. I'm an outsider and I'm *happy* to be an outsider. [40]

Reiner KELLER: So, you keep on going with your own questions and people in the field, they know that?

Gary Alan FINE: Well, they may know it or they may not know it. They may be disappointed because they *think* that I'm thinking about their questions and it turns out that I'm thinking about other things ... [41]

---

54 Harry COLLINS (born in 1943), professor of social sciences at the University of Cardiff. Areas of work include public understanding of science, scientific knowledge, expertise, medical knowledge, gravitational radiation, artificial intelligence.

Reiner KELLER: One of the particular elements of your approach is to do this kind of, I don't know how to label it, maybe it's a kind of comparative ethnography? You are going along with different cases in the very same subject area, you're not just going for one place or one group #

Gary Alan FINE: # I am not a comparative ethnographer although I know what you are saying and why you are saying it. What I want to do is look at groups of the same type and find the general tendency in contrast to colleagues who *do* look comparatively and say, "I want to do a comparison of ... senior citizen activists and a group of young activists because I want to compare the way that age matters." And that's not what I do. [42]

Reiner KELLER: But in the fields you are interested in, you try to have similar groups, or different groups or #

Gary Alan FINE: In many cases #

Reiner KELLER: # in order to explore your questions in a kind of –

Gary Alan FINE: It varies a little bit project by project. but often that's the case.

Reiner KELLER: Did you ever have cases which were then so different or settings that were so different, that this became a problem, or how do you balance similarity and difference?

Gary Alan FINE: Let us take an example. I wasn't looking at the differences when I did my study of restaurants. I was looking at a steakhouse and a fine dining restaurant, they're very different in many ways but I wasn't interested in the ways they were *different*, I was interested in the ways they were *similar*. That is my approach. [43]

Reiner KELLER: Because they had the very same management issues for ... buying food, selling meals, etc.

Gary Alan FINE: Right, more kinds of structures. The restaurants were perhaps a little more different than the Little League baseball teams which were all baseball teams but the teams had different cultures and I talk a little bit about how successful teams are different than less successful. But it is not *primarily* a comparative ethnography and I tend to be a little bit skeptical of comparative ethnographies. [44]

Reiner KELLER: Why?

Gary Alan FINE: Precisely because there are so many variables that differentiate the two scenes, that it is not just one thing. It is also the kinds of people who are there, it is the environment, it is multiple elements.

Reiner KELLER: I see. In fact, if you are looking for one contrasting variable, you will never know then if it is just this one, which you have in mind, the age difference for example, which accounts for such cases, you have social structure, different people with different pasts, skills and experiences #

Gary Alan FINE: # Right. That is my concern. I mean there are very fine comparative ethnographies, but it tends to be an approach about which I am a little bit skeptical. [45]

Reiner KELLER: When do you know that you know enough? [laughs]

Gary Alan FINE: The general rule is when people come to you for advice, and that was very clearly the case in my study of "Dungeons and Dragons"<sup>55</sup> (FINE, 1983), where I started as totally a novice. I didn't know how to play the game. But by the end, after about two years, people were asking me to be the dungeon master and asking me for advice about the game. And there is a point at which you stop learning new things and everything becomes routine. It's as if now you are a full member of the group or are becoming a full member of the group. [46]

Reiner KELLER: I guess, by some kinds of constraints too. So sometimes it is the kind of feeling you experience that you go there and now you know what will happen or you know what is coming next so somehow #

Gary Alan FINE: # Yes, exactly.

Reiner KELLER: And how would you relate the time of doing ethnography in the sense of going into the field and then the time of writing it? I don't know how you, maybe it is for each person it's different.

Gary Alan FINE: I write quickly, and I need a period of time to write. So, for some of my ethnographies, I wrote 450 pages in a month, 15 pages a day. And that is how I work more or less: that is how I wrote several of the books. I would write for a month in the summer and I'd come back the next summer, do a second draft. 450 pages is too long, so I'd get it down to 350 pages, then I'd send it out to colleagues and they would give me feedback and then I would write a third draft. The third draft I would send to a publisher and they would give me feedback and then it would be published. [47]

Reiner KELLER: It is interesting to see the time span between the field work and then all the different draft versions and #

Gary Alan FINE: # So, I'm writing at the same time I'm collecting data on a different project.

Reiner KELLER: Okay. You are writing about one project and collecting data for the next one, both in parallel.

Gary Alan FINE: Exactly, that is how I work.

Reiner KELLER: Isn't it somehow confusing? Sometimes?

Gary Alan FINE: No, I find it actually helpful because what I'm learning from the new project gives me questions about the old project. In the early 1980s, I was doing the restaurant research and then I finished that, and then I was collecting data for the mushroom research, and then I was collecting data for the high school debate research. Now, so that was all in the 1980s, but the books came

---

<sup>55</sup> "Dungeons & Dragons" is popular fantasy role-playing game, created by Gary GYGAX and Dave ARNESON, Inc. It allows each player to create his or her own role character.

out in the 1990s. The restaurant book came out in 1996, the data were from 15 years before. The mushroom book came out in 1998, the data were from about 14 years before. The high school debate book came out in 2001 and the data were from 11 years before. Now there are reasons for that, but that's too long a timespan. So when the book on the MFA students came out, that came out last year, 2018, and I had stopped collecting data in 2014. So that was quicker, that was four years. And chess would have been about five years from the end of research. [48]

Reiner KELLER: I guess this is very interesting for students or for readers in sociology to see how this works in practice, doing research and writing research and publications.

Gary Alan FINE: Because you are also writing articles. That was one of the things that happened with the Little League research. I finished that research in 1977 and the book came out in 1987. The book actually came out *after* the Dungeon and Dragons book. The data for the Dungeon and Dragons book were collected *after* the Little League research so that was about four years, 1979 and the book came out in 1983. They each have their own cycles. [49]

Reiner KELLER: You really have a very impressive record of articles and books. I wondered how you can be so productive, given all the other things you have to do, as a professor, as field researcher. I guess, there must be something in the process of writing, some pleasure in writing, and maybe some technique, which results in a very efficient and good way of writing. You just spoke about an amazing number of pages per day, and the revisions #

Gary Alan FINE: # I like to write. I find that *as* interesting as being in the field.

Reiner KELLER: So it is not just something which you have to do *then*, after leaving the field?

Gary Alan FINE: No, I like writing and I think there is some humor in my writing and some style and so I like to add that in. [50]

## **6. Moral Tales: The Worst President in American History**

Reiner KELLER: I suggest that we now move to your work on collective memory, rumors, humor, or what you wrote about "sticky reputations" (see for example FINE, 1992, 2001a, 2012c; FINE & ELLIS, 2010; FINE & TURNER, 2001). I think you coined the term "Reputational Entrepreneurs" (FINE, 1996b; FINE, BLIESE & ROBERTSON, 2019), or some close concept in one of the articles?

Gary Alan FINE: Right. We probably should move to that [laughs] because we have been talking for about an hour and a half.

Reiner KELLER: I'm sorry ... but I would like to address this part of your work, except if you want to deepen something about ethnography for now?

Gary Alan FINE: I could talk for hours, so #

Reiner KELLER: # I know. We can do that maybe [laughs]

Gary Alan FINE: At dinner [laughs] [51]

Reiner KELLER: So your work on this kind of narrative, stories, moral tales, not morel tales, it is quite a different kind of data and approach, collecting and analyzing such data. So how do you proceed then? And why are you interested in this, for such a long time in your career?

Gary Alan FINE: In high school, I loved history. It was my favorite subject. History and math, actually, were my favorite subjects. In a way it is like ethnography. You go into a scene that you don't know and you are discovering all these fascinating things and it is the same when you are looking at the reputation of figures. I mean, most of my research has been on American figures. So, I don't know how much of this will be relevant for a German audience. I asked the question of how Warren HARDING<sup>56</sup> became the worst American president. I'm not sure that with our current president he is still viewed as the worst, but in the 1990s when I published this (FINE, 1996b), according to the surveys, he was considered the worst. How did that happen? That was when I presented this theory of reputational entrepreneurs, and so I'm interested in how historical memory comes about. I'm not interested in what *actually* happened so much as how we *remember* things as having happened. And so I looked for cases that I think would be interesting in terms of American history. I am an Americanist. I'm not a global sociologist. I wrote a couple of articles on rumor in South Africa (FINE, 1991) and working with students sometimes I'll collaborate on a paper on China (FINE & XU, 2011) or on Korea (KIM & FINE, 2013). But basically my interest is American history. And I am particularly interested in those instances in which the reputations are controversial, difficult, or problematic. I really began this when I moved from the University of Minnesota to the University of Georgia. One of my colleagues at the University of Georgia was Barry SCHWARTZ<sup>57</sup>. And Barry is well-known for his research on George WASHINGTON<sup>58</sup> and on Abraham LINCOLN<sup>59</sup> and the construction of their reputations (SCHWARTZ, 1987, 2000, 2008). I said, well, if Barry is going to study our great Americans, the great heroes, I want to study the other side. So, I began with a paper about a general in the revolutionary war named Benedict ARNOLD.<sup>60</sup> Benedict ARNOLD is known as the great American traitor. He gave information to the British and without going into the details, which are not important, he was kind of the *opposite* of the great figure of Washington. Barry SCHWARTZ was studying LINCOLN, who was the greatest American president. I wanted to study the worst American president, who was Warren HARDING and how did he become that way. It turns out that the issue is very interesting because it was not just on his behaviors but it was on the fact that he didn't have reputational entrepreneurs. And so I wrote about that in the *American Journal of Sociology* 20 years ago (FINE, 1996b). I am always

---

56 Warren HARDING (1865-1923), US president from 1921-1923, Republican Party.

57 Barry SCHWARTZ (born in 1938), professor emeritus of sociology at the University of Georgia. Areas of work include collective memory, sociology of knowledge and culture.

58 George WASHINGTON (1732-1799), first president of the USA (1789-1797).

59 Abraham LINCOLN (1809-1865), US president (1861-1865), Republican Party.

60 Benedict ARNOLD (1741-1801), American-born officer, defected from the Continental Army to the British Army in 1780.

looking for those kind of cases and looking throughout American history. So there is Benedict ARNOLD in the Revolutionary War and Warren HARDING in the 1920s and other figures in the 1950s. [52]

Reiner KELLER: And then you use newspaper data or documents from law cases, or what kind of data?

Gary Alan FINE: I joke that I use historians as my research assistants. So, sometimes I'll go into archives but my research is not primarily archive-based, it is based on the histories that historians published, detailed histories. I have used archives on occasion, but I am *not a historian*, I am not interested in the facts, I am interested in the reputations. And the reputations come from newspapers and they come from histories and they come from high school textbooks. [53]

Reiner KELLER: But maybe you are confronted with the argument that there are "the facts," and therefore the reputation of having been a "bad" president or "traitor" are fact-based, and that you should not ignore this? This implies that there is something in the "real world" which allows for better reputational campaigning, does it not?

Gary Alan FINE: There is an obdurate reality and Barry SCHWARTZ has argued that. I am not a complete constructionist, there is a certain reality you are writing about, for example, Adolf HITLER<sup>61</sup> #

Reiner KELLER: # Which you did!

Gary Alan FINE: Which I did (FINE, 2002). You know, there are ... realities you have to take into account. But how you take them into account, what becomes salient when I wrote about how Richard NIXON<sup>62</sup> and Bill CLINTON<sup>63</sup> (FINE, 1996c, 2004b; FINE & EISENBERG, 2002) became hated presidents. There is a reality there, you can't just say everything is made up but there is also this process of construction that goes on. [54]

Reiner KELLER: It seems at least in US politics—in Germany maybe a bit less but not that much—that kind of reputational work is one of the most, the core issues in today's public spheres. It is about "having a fact" about someone or just creating rumors #

Gary Alan FINE: It is partly based on the fact that Americans vote for president as opposed to voting for parliament. Obviously if you are voting for Willy BRANDT's party<sup>64</sup> or you're voting for Angela MERKEL's party<sup>65</sup>, you are voting for them, but you are really voting for the party list. In the United States you vote for Donald

---

61 Adolf HITLER (1889-1945), Austria-born leader of the German extreme right-wing Nazi party, 1933-1945 German chancellor and then *Führer* [dictator] of the so-called Third Reich, who ordered the Holocaust and the Second World War.

62 Richard NIXON (1913-1994), US president from 1969-1974, Republican Party.

63 Bill CLINTON (born in 1946), US president from 1993-2001, Democratic Party.

64 Willy BRANDT (1913-1992), German chancellor from 1969-1974, leader of the Social-Democratic Party SPD (1964-1987).

65 Angela MERKEL (born in 1954), German chancellor since 2005, leader of the Christian-Democratic Party CDU (2000-2018).

TRUMP<sup>66</sup> or for Hillary CLINTON<sup>67</sup>. And you can vote for them and ... let's say you vote for Hillary CLINTON as a Democratic candidate for president, and then you can vote for a Republican candidate for the Senate. There are a lot of countries where you don't have that option, you vote for a party or # [55]

Reiner KELLER: # the list of the party. Yes, I see.

Gary Alan FINE: So, the implication is that the reputation of the person becomes much more important. If you don't like Hillary CLINTON, if you say she is "Crooked Hillary"<sup>68</sup>, or she is horrible, you can vote for someone else while still being a Democrat.

Reiner KELLER: So there is in this a dense mix between emotional cultures, and a moral element, a moral order, very deep emotional impacts and implications in all that.

Gary Alan FINE: Right. The feeling that you identify with a person, that, what is called "para-social interaction" (HORTON & WOHL, 1956). [56]

Reiner KELLER: How would you explain that concept?

Gary Alan FINE: The belief that you know people that you don't know personally. So in other words, people can hate Donald TRUMP. They don't know Donald TRUMP, but they hate him as a person or they love him as a person. But they don't know him. And you know this is true for television stars, movie stars, writers, and so forth.

Reiner KELLER: And this is a very dominant feature of today's public spheres.

Gary Alan FINE: And has been for quite a while.

Reiner KELLER: Yes ... I tend too much to consider it a more recent phenomenon. [laughter]

Gary Alan FINE: Well, we go back to Anselm STRAUSS in the 1950s, that argument, some of STRAUSS' colleagues were making in the 1950s (HORTON & STRAUSS, 1957; HORTON & WOHL, 1956; STRAUSS, 1958). You begin to have television and you think that you know these figures. [57]

## 7. The Authority of an Ethnographer

Reiner KELLER: Social media adds to that a lot, I guess. Now, coming close to the end of our conversation, if you don't mind, I would like to address not all of the "Ten Lies of Ethnography" (FINE, 1993) you mentioned quite a while ago, but at least a few of them. You may have talked about that a lot, so I beg your pardon ... Picking up your ideas about "Peopled Ethnography" (FINE, 2003) ... Surely you know the small book about "Tales of the Field" by John VAN MAANEN (2011 [1988]). Those contributions deal with the problem of field research, that it's not that the *field* is out there and gives you or reveals you "its history," "its story," or

---

66 Donald TRUMP (born in 1946), US president (2017-2020), Republican Party.

67 Hillary CLINTON (born in 1947), candidate for US presidency in 2016, Democratic Party.

68 Insulting nickname for CLINTON, used by Donald TRUMP during his 2016 election campaign.

*the* story. You have to have an idea about what your interests are or which stories you're interested in and #

Gary Alan FINE: # Right. I mean *you are constructing* the story and ... you take that responsibility but you take it as an imperfect person. I'm *sure* that if you go in my ethnographies and you had a time machine and go back and be there, you know, the quotations that I have aren't exactly right. [58]

Reiner KELLER: You didn't have a tape recorder.

Gary Alan FINE: I remember back in graduate school I heard a very prominent psychiatrist named Robert COLES<sup>69</sup>. Robert COLES was wonderful man and wonderful psychiatrist. He wrote a five-volume set about "Children of Crisis" (COLES, 1967, 1971a, 1971b, 1977a, 1977b). And it was particularly the first volumes where he went to the South during the civil rights era and he talked with children, who were in these difficult situations. They were the targets of racists or they were from white families who believed in segregation. In these books, he presented long quotations from these children—*extensive* quotations, page long quotations. He was on the faculty at Harvard and at one point I was at a workshop that he was giving. I was suitably impressed by these lengthy quotations and I asked him: "Do you tape record the children?" And he said no. He didn't tape, he didn't write down. When he got home, he would write [chuckles] what he *remembered*. No wonder, these kids seemed so articulate because it was all filtered through Robert COLES. I was doing research with kids that age and they were not *at all* as articulate as his children were, those children were actually younger than mine and, you know, mine would start and stop and they'd go off on tangents and so forth. Well, he created these narratives. They're *wonderful*, they're very powerful narratives but, in a sense, they are, well let's simply call them deceptive. ... But we all do that, I mean if you have lengthy quotations and you don't have tape recordings, then you know, it is less accurate. But there are some people who are better at it than others and certainly he was someone who knew how to listen. [59]

Reiner KELLER: And then there are lots of issues of ethics of research involved in doing this kind of work, too. You have to go through several procedures now before interviewing people and #

Gary Alan FINE: # Right. Back then you didn't have to fill out a consent form.

Reiner KELLER: Oh, please pardon me [laughs].

Gary Alan FINE: So we have to figure out what the ethics in a situation will be. And we disagree. There are those who don't believe in anonymity. Colin JEROLMACK<sup>70</sup>, for instance, argues that anonymity is not so important (see for example JEROLMACK & MURPHY, 2017). I take a middle ground in that. I will name the organizations, but I won't name the people. When I did my book on the

---

69 Robert COLES (born in 1929), professor emeritus of psychiatry and medical humanities at Harvard University. Areas of work include psychiatric research, children's development.

70 Colin JEROLMACK, associate professor of sociology and environmental at City University of New York. Areas of work include ethnography, urban communities, environmental sociology, animals and society, culture, health, social theory.

arts schools, one of them is Northwestern University, one of them is University of Illinois at Chicago, but I don't provide the names of students with the exception of four artists that I asked for permission and who are a theme throughout the book. I interviewed them twice, and then anything they did I would include that with their name. But otherwise I create pseudonyms for the students and for the faculty. And for the most part I don't even create pseudonyms. I simply will say "a faculty member," "female faculty member," or "painter," "sculptor" or something like this. [60]

Reiner KELLER: And you can use the information or whatever they told you in the interviews but without direct quotes referring to a person.

Gary Alan FINE: There will be the direct quotes but without the name of the person who said it.

Reiner KELLER: So if you allow me maybe two last questions [laughs].

Gary Alan FINE: My tendency is to answer in ten-minute blocks [laughs]. [61]

Reiner KELLER: So, the first of the last ones is ... When you were writing about the history of ethnography, starting with the end of the 19th century and those very early works and then you were talking about people ethnography and others, all of them seem to have a background in anthropology ... Then there was this reflexive turn or postmodern turn in anthropological ethnography, most visible in the writing culture debate (CLIFFORD & MARCUS, 1986). But you make a strong argument for the authority of the ethnographer (FINE, 2003) and you add some more elements to that. It would be interesting to hear your comment on such discussions.

Gary Alan FINE: I was never a part of the writing ethnography approach, because I think that we ethnographers have, and should have, authority in making our claims. Not perfect authority but I am fundamentally a realist ethnographer as opposed to an interpretivist, as opposed to a CLIFFORD- and MARCUS-type.<sup>71</sup> I realized in my article "Ten Lies of Ethnography" (FINE, 1993) that it is my attempt to be modest and my attempt to recognize that what we do will be imperfect. But that at the end of it these lies will always be part of what we do—but it shouldn't stop us from making claims. We need to be brave, we need to make these claims because we **have** authority. And that authority is, I think, important for the discipline. And we need to be strangers. I have an article called "Stranger and Stranger" (FINE & HALLETT, 2014; see also FINE, 2019a), which makes the argument that we shouldn't try to be too much a part of the group. It is our external status and the distance that we have, that allows us to say things that are ethnographically important or ethnographically persuasive. And I think that even the new ethnographers, the critical ethnographers, they do the same thing.

---

71 James CLIFFORD (born in 1945), distinguished professor in the humanities and professor emeritus in the history of consciousness department at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Areas of work include history, literary analysis, anthropology and cultural studies, as well as drawing on contemporary poetics and museum studies; indigeneity, globalization, museum studies, literary and visual studies. George E. MARCUS, chancellor's professor and chair, professor of anthropology at the University of California, Irvine. Areas of work include elites, ethnography, and cultural critique.

They pretend they don't but you *can't* escape your *authority*. When James CLIFFORD writes something, *he is writing*, he is *making a claim* for us to pay attention because he is a person with expertise. [62]

Reiner KELLER: How could you call this? So, there is so much self-degradation, self-abasement. Are these the correct terms? You will know better than me, in relation to field ...

Gary Alan FINE: It is this fear that people have of being considered experts. But if we're not experts then what value do we have? When I stand up in front of my students, my class, and I lecture to them, I'm doing it because they should consider me an expert but a flawed expert. That they should look and listen to me *critically*. When I was a graduate student and even an undergraduate, it wasn't that I thought my professors were absolutely right. I *didn't*. I always listened to them in a critical mode and saying, Do I believe that? Why might this argument not be legitimate? I asked questions and I think that's the role of students. You know that your professors can be wrong, and you can call them on it. [63]

Reiner KELLER: Do you use much of your empirical work in your classes? In your teaching?

Gary Alan FINE: It depends on the class, but certainly. I teach a first-year seminar on scandals and reputations, that's based on my research in part. I teach graduate seminars on microsociology and another one on collective memory. And then I teach our field methods seminar.

Reiner KELLER: The field method seminar, it's about ethnographical work then?

Gary Alan FINE: Yes, primarily. Some interviewing, but primarily ethnography. [64]

## 8. What's Next?

Reiner KELLER: So now for my last question [laughs]—for today. It is about your current interest, what we talked about before we started recording. The performative elements ... what is your idea about this? Does this refer to current shifts in performance studies or arts? Or maybe it is something different?

Gary Alan FINE: If I can hijack the question #

Reiner KELLER: # Sure, please.

Gary Alan FINE: In part what I'm doing at this point in my career is looking at the American South—reputations in the American South. And I am conducting an ethnography of Americans who are interested in Civil War history. I'm bringing the ethnography and the collective memory research together (see, for example, FINE, 2019b; FINE & ROBERTSON, 2020; TAVORY & FINE, 2020). Now in answer to your question ... so when I go back to years and years ago ... Not quite 60, 55 years ago growing up in New York, I went to the theater a lot and I loved the theater. And so I'd go to Broadway, Off-Broadway, Off-Off-Broadway, and I went to the University of Pennsylvania where I joined the student newspaper as a theater critic. I wrote theater criticism for the newspaper for two years and then I was hired by an entertainment weekly. They *paid me* to write theater reviews.

And I would go to the theater, and at various points in my life almost every week. I loved the theater and when I came here to Northwestern, I became a member of the interdisciplinary PhD program in theater and drama. I've taught for them, I've advised students, I've served on committees. I was director of the program for a year: theater and drama. And so performance remains an interest of mine and when this opportunity came for this project, this German handbook on ethnography (POFERL & SCHROER, in prep.), I said what can I do with that? There is a point in which you don't want to keep on saying the same thing over and over again. I said, well, this is a German handbook and I have this wonderful German graduate student, Elena WEBER, who is going to do ethnography herself, who can translate this into German, who knows the German literature, and she and I can work together on this project. I guess at this point in my career it is kind of bringing things together (WEBER & FINE, in prep.). [65]

Reiner KELLER: So, the main issue then ... because I don't know that article, but I have in mind Howard BECKER's book "Telling About Society" (2007) where he compares literature and drama and different ways of doing, presenting, performing social analysis and photo-documentary, photography.<sup>72</sup> Your approach would be different on such issues then?

Gary Alan FINE: What Elena brings to the project is this deep knowledge of performance studies and how people in performance studies have used performance ethnography. And there is that tradition, we wanted to integrate that tradition into the sociological tradition.

Reiner KELLER: I'm very curious about that. Thank you very much for this interview, it's demanding, I know. [laughter]

Gary Alan FINE: Yes, it is! [laughter] You're welcome. [66]

## **Acknowledgments**

We would like to thank Courtney GILMAN for her transcription of the interview, Martin BLESSINGER for editorial support, and Matthias ROCHE for reliable language editing. We would like to give additional thanks to Günter MEY and Katja MRUCK for their very helpful comments.

---

72 See additionally the FQS issue on "Performative Social Science" (JONES et al., 2008).

## References

- Anderson, Elijah (1999). *Code of the street: Decency, violence, and the moral life of the inner city*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton.
- Bales, Robert Freed & Cohen, Stephen P. (1979). *Symlog: A system for the multiple level observation of groups*. New York, NY: The Free Press.
- Bassetti, Chiara & Sassatelli, Roberta (2017). Gary Alan Fine—from small groups to peopled ethnography. In Michael H. Jacobson (Ed.), *The interactionist imagination. Studying meaning, situation and micro-social order* (pp.409-434). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Becker, Howard S. (1974). Art as collective action. *American Sociological Review*, 39(6), 767-776.
- Becker, Howard S. (1986). *Doing things together: Selected papers*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Becker, Howard S. (2007). *Telling about society*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Becker, Howard S. & Keller, Reiner (2016). Ways of telling about society. Howard S. Becker in conversation with Reiner Keller. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 17(2), Art. 12, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-17.2.2607> [Accessed: October 20, 2020].
- Berger, Peter L. & Luckmann, Thomas (1966). *The social construction of reality. A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. New York, NY: Doubleday.
- Bourdieu, Pierre (1977 [1972]). *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Clifford, James & Marcus, George E. (Eds.) (1986). *Writing culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Coles, Robert (1967). *Children of crisis. Vol. 1: A study of courage and fear*. New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company.
- Coles, Robert (1971a). *Children of crisis. Vol. 2: Migrants, sharecroppers, mountaineers*. New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company.
- Coles, Robert (1971b). *Children of crisis. Vol. 3: The south goes north*. New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company.
- Coles, Robert (1977a). *Children of crisis. Vol. 4: Eskimos, Chicanos, Indians*. New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company.
- Coles, Robert (1977b). *Children of crisis. Vol. 5: Privileged ones: The well-off and the rich in America*. New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company.
- Cooley, Charles H. (1956 [1902/1922]). *Human nature and the social order*. Glencoe, IL.: The Free Press.
- Corsaro, William A. (2003). *We're friends, right? Inside kids' culture*. Washington, D.C.: Joseph Henry Press.
- Desjarlais, Robert R. (2011). *Counterplay: An anthropologist at the chessboard*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.
- Desmond, Matthew (2016). *Evicted: Poverty and profit in the American city*. New York, NY: Crown.
- Durkheim, Émile (2008 [1912]). *The elementary forms of religious life*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Eliasoph, Nina & Lichterman, Paul (2003). Culture in interaction. *American Journal of Sociology*, 108(4), 735-794.
- Farrell, Michael P. (2001). *Collaborative circles: Friendship dynamics and creative work*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Fine, Gary Alan (1979). Small groups and cultural creation: The idioculture of Little League baseball teams. *American Sociological Review*, 44, 733-745.
- Fine, Gary Alan (1983). *Shared fantasy: Role-playing games as social worlds*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Fine, Gary Alan (1984). Negotiated orders and organizational cultures. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 10, 239-262.

- Fine, Gary Alan (1986). Behavioral change in group space: A reintegration of Lewinian theory in small group research. In Edward Lawler (Ed.), *Advances in group process: Theory and research*, Vol. 3 (pp.23-50). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Fine, Gary Alan (1987). *With the boys: Little League baseball and preadolescent Culture*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Fine, Gary Alan (1991). The republic of rumor: Corporate targets. *Indicator South Africa*, 8(4), 80-84.
- Fine, Gary Alan (1992). *Manufacturing tales: Sex and money in contemporary legends*. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press.
- Fine, Gary Alan (1993). Ten lies of ethnography: Moral dilemmas of field research. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 22, 267-294.
- Fine, Gary Alan (Ed.) (1995). *A second Chicago school? The development of a postwar American sociology*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Fine, Gary Alan (1996a). *Kitchens: The culture of restaurant work*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Fine, Gary Alan (1996b). Reputational entrepreneurs and the memory of incompetence: Melting supporters, partisan warriors, and images of President Harding. *American Journal of Sociology*, 101(5), 1159-1193.
- Fine, Gary Alan (1996c). Hail to the crook?: Clinton, Harding, and the politics of reputation. *Reason*, 4(11), 5-7.
- Fine, Gary Alan (1998). *Morel tales: The culture of mushrooming*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Fine, Gary Alan (2001a). *Gifted tongues: High school debate and adolescent culture*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Fine, Gary Alan (2001b). *Difficult reputations: Collective memories of the evil, inept and controversial*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Fine, Gary Alan (2002). Thinking about evil: Adolf Hitler and the dilemma of the social construction of reputation. In Karen Cerulo (Ed.), *Culture in mind: Toward a sociology of culture and cognition* (pp.227-237). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Fine, Gary Alan (2003). Toward a peopled ethnography: Developing theory from group life. *Ethnography*, 4, 41-60.
- Fine, Gary Alan (2004a). *Everyday genius: Self-taught art and the politics of authenticity*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Fine, Gary Alan (2004b). Ire to the chief. *Washington Post*, August 6, A19, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/2004/08/06/ire-to-the-chief/a57014c5-0725-4066-9742-6279ac6e32cb/> [Accessed: October 20, 2020].
- Fine, Gary Alan (2006). Shopfloor cultures: The idioculture of production in operational meteorology. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 47, 1-20.
- Fine, Gary Alan (2007). *Authors of the storm: Meteorology and the culture of prediction*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Fine, Gary Alan (2010). The sociology of the local: Action and its publics. *Sociological Theory*, 28(4), 355-376.
- Fine, Gary Alan (2012a). *Tiny publics: A theory of group action and culture*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Fine, Gary Alan (2012b). Group culture and the interaction order: Local sociology on the meso-level. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 38, 159-179.
- Fine, Gary Alan (2012c). *Sticky reputations: The politics of collective memory in midcentury America*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Fine, Gary Alan (2015). *Players and pawns: How chess creates community and culture*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Fine, Gary Alan (2016). The futures we build: Local sociology and the struggles for better worlds. In Markus Schulz (Ed.), *The futures we want: Global sociology and the struggles for a better world* (pp.22-26). Berlin: epubli.

- Fine, Gary Alan (2018). *Talking art: The culture of practice and the practice of culture in MFA education*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Fine, Gary Alan (2019a). Relational distance and epistemic generosity: The power of detachment in skeptical ethnography. *Sociological Methods and Research*, 48(4), 828-849.
- Fine, Gary Alan (2019b). Moral cultures, reputation work, and the politics of scandal. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 45, 247-264.
- Fine, Gary Alan & Eisenberg, Emily (2002). Tricky Dick and slick Willie: Despised presidents and generational imprinting. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 46, 553-565.
- Fine, Gary Alan & Ellis, Bill (2010). *The global grapevine: Why rumors of terrorism, immigration, and trade matter*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Fine, Gary Alan & Fang, Jun (2019). Idioculture. In Paul Atkinson, Sara Delamont, Melissa Hardy & Malcolm Williams (Eds.), *Sage encyclopedia of research methods*. <http://methods.sagepub.com/foundations/srmpromo/elX4z5/idioculture> [Accessed October 22, 2020].
- Fine, Gary Alan & Glassner, Barry (1979). Participant observation with children: Promise and problems. *Urban Life*, 8, 153-174.
- Fine, Gary Alan & Hallett, Tim (2003). Dust: A Study in sociological miniaturism. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 44(1), 1-15.
- Fine, Gary Alan & Hallett, Tim (2014). Stranger and stranger: Creating theory through ethnographic distance and authority. *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*, 3, 188-203.
- Fine, Gary Alan & Robertson, Christopher (2020). Reputation in rupture: Broken alliances and relational politics in the Roosevelt-Taft split. *Sociological Forum*, 35(1), 73-94.
- Fine, Gary Alan & Smith, Gregory W. H. (Eds.) (2000). *Erving Goffman* (4 Vols.). London: Sage.
- Fine, Gary Alan & Tavory, Iddo (2019). Interactionism in the twenty-first century: A letter on being-in-a-meaningful-world. *Symbolic Interaction*, 42(3), 457-467.
- Fine, Gary Alan & Turner, Patricia (2001). *Whispers on the color line: Rumor and race in America*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Fine, Gary Alan & Xu, Bin (2011). Honest brokers: The politics of expertise in the 'Who Lost China?' debate. *Social Problems*, 58, 593-614.
- Fine, Gary Alan; Bliese, Stephanie & Robertson, Christopher (2019). Faith and fellowship: Reputational entrepreneurs, group cultures, and the Jesus movement. In Rafael Rodriguez (Ed.), *Social and collective memory: Critical readings* (pp.111-121). New York, NY: Bloomsbury T&T Clark.
- Garcia, Angel Escamilla & Fine, Gary Alan (2018). Fair warnings: The ethics of ethnography with children. In Ron Iphofen & Martin Tolich (Eds.), *Sage handbook of ethics in qualitative research* (pp.367-381). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- [Jones, Kip](#); [Gergen, Mary](#); Yallop, John J. Guiney; Lopez de Vallejo, Irene; Roberts, Brian & Wright, Peter (Eds.) (2008). Performative Social Science. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 9(2), <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/issue/view/10> [Accessed: October 22, 2020].
- Giddens, Anthony (1984). *The constitution of society. Outline of the theory of structuration*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- [Glaser, Barney G.](#) & Strauss, Anselm L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory. Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing Company.
- Goffman, Erving (1974). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Goffman, Erving (1981). *Forms of talk*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Goffman, Erving (1983). The interaction order: American Sociological Association, 1982 Presidential Address. *American Sociological Review*, 48(1), 1-17.
- Habermas, Jürgen (1989 [1962]). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of Bourgeois society*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Hochschild, Arlie Russell (1983). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

- Horton, Donald, & Strauss, Anselm L. (1957). Interaction in audience participation shows. *American Journal of Sociology*, 62(6), 579-587.
- Horton, Donald & Wohl, Richard R. (1956). Mass communication and para-social interaction. Observations on intimacy at a distance. *Psychiatry*, 19, 215-229.
- Jasper, James (1997). *The art of moral protest: Culture, biography, and creativity in social movements*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Jerolmack, Colin & Murphy, Alexandra (2017). The ethical dilemmas and social scientific tradeoffs of masking in ethnography. *Sociological Methods and Research*, 48(4), 801-827.
- Kim, Jeong-Chul & Fine, Gary Alan (2013). Collaborators and national memory: The creation of the encyclopedia of pro-Japanese collaborators in Korea. *Memory Studies*, 6, 130-145.
- Gerst, Dominik, Krämer, Hannes & Salomon, René (Eds.) (2019). Harold Garfinkel's "Studies in Ethnomethodology". An interview issue. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 20(2), <https://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/issue/view/64> [Accessed: October 16, 2020].
- Kusenbach, Margarethe (2005). Across the Atlantic: Current issues and debates in US ethnography. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 6(3), Art. 47, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-6.3.18> [Accessed: October 16, 2020].
- Martin, John Levi (2011). *The explanation of social action*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Niermann, Debora (2020). "Die Chicago School ist tot, lang lebe die Chicago School!" Warum die transatlantische Ethnografie Rezeption einer Aktualisierung bedarf. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 21(3), Art. 7, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-21.3.3474> [Accessed: October 16, 2020].
- Pattillo, Mary (2007). *Black on the block: The politics of race and class in the city*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Peterson, Richard A. (1979). Revitalizing the culture concept. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 5, 137-166.
- Peterson, Richard A. & Berger, David G. (1975). Cycles in symbol production: The case of popular music. *American Sociological Review*, 40(2), 158-173.
- Poferl, Angelika & Schroer, Norbert (Eds.) (in prep.). *Handbuch Soziologische Ethnographie*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.
- Polletta, Francesca (2002). *Freedom is an endless meeting: Democracy in American social movements*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Polletta, Francesca (2006). *It was like a fever: Storytelling in protest and politics*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Rosnow, Ralph L. & Fine, Gary Alan (1976). *Rumor and gossip: The social psychology of hearsay*. New York, NY: Elsevier.
- Sandstrom, Kent; Lively, Kathryn J.; Martin, Daniel D. & Fine, Gary Alan (2013 [2003]). *Symbols, selves and social reality: A symbolic interactionist approach to sociology and social psychology* (4th ed.). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Sassatelli, Roberta (2010). A serial ethnographer: An interview with Gary Alan Fine. *Qualitative Sociology*, 33, 79-96.
- Schulz, Markus (Ed.) (2016). *The futures we want: Global sociology and the struggles for a better world*. Berlin: epubli.
- Schwartz, Barry (1987). *George Washington. The making of an American symbol*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Schwartz, Barry (2000). *Abraham Lincoln and the forge of national memory*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Schwartz, Barry (2008). *Abraham Lincoln in the post-heroic era: History and memory in the late twentieth century*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Strauss, Anselm L. (1958). In memoriam: R. Richard Wohl, 1921-1957. *The American Journal of Sociology*, 63(5), 533-534.
- Strauss, Anselm L. (1993). *Continual permutations of action*. New York, NY: Aldine.

Strauss, Anselm L.; Schatzman, Leonard; Bucher, Rue; Erlich, Danuta & Sabshin, Melvin (1964). *Psychiatric ideologies and institutions*. Glencoe: The Free Press.

Tavory, Iddo & Fine, Gary Alan (2020). Disruption and the theory of the interaction order. *Theory & Society*, 49, 365-385.

Van Maanen, John (2011 [1988]). *Tales of the field. On writing ethnography*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Weber, Elena & Fine, Gary Alan (in prep.). Performance studies, sociology, and ethnography. In Angelika Pöferl & Norbert Schroer (Eds.), *Handbuch Soziologische Ethnographie*. Berlin: Springer VS.

Weber, Max (2019 [1922]). *Economy and society: An outline of interpretive sociology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wolff, Kurt H. (1976). *Surrender and catch. Experience and inquiry today*. Dordrecht: Reidel.

## Authors

**Gary Alan FINE** is James E. Johnson Professor of Sociology at the Department of Sociology of Northwestern University in Evanston, IL (USA). His research covers four distinct streams in cultural sociology: difficult reputations and problematic collective memories, group-related ethnography, the interpretation of rumor and contemporary legend, and microsociological theory, focusing on small group culture.

Contact:

Gary Alan Fine

Northwestern University  
Department of Sociology  
1810 Chicago Avenue  
Evanston, IL 60208, USA

Tel.: +1 (0)847 491-3495

E-mail: [g-fine@northwestern.edu](mailto:g-fine@northwestern.edu)

URL:

<https://sociology.northwestern.edu/people/faculty/core/gary-alan-fine.html>

**Reiner KELLER** is professor of sociology at the University of Augsburg. His areas of work include the sociology of knowledge and culture, discourse research, the sociology of human-nature relations, sociological theory, interpretive methods, French sociology.

Contact:

Reiner Keller

Universität Augsburg  
Philosophisch-Sozialwissenschaftliche Fakultät  
Lehrstuhl für Soziologie  
Universitätsstraße 10  
86159 Augsburg, Germany

Tel.: + 49 (0)821 598-4095

Fax: + 49 (0)821 598-4218

E-mail: [reiner.keller@phil.uni-augsburg.de](mailto:reiner.keller@phil.uni-augsburg.de)

URL: <http://www.uni-augsburg.de/keller>

## Citation

Fine, Gary Alan & Keller, Reiner (2021). Tiny Publics and Social Worlds—Toward a Sociology of the Local. Gary Alan Fine in *Conversation With* Reiner Keller [66 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 22(1), Art. 8, <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-22.1.3629>.