Feigning Incompetence in the Field

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Abstract: A basic feature of professions is specialized competence. Indeed, expertise grants professions and their members privileged, prestigious, and protected statuses. Members of professions thus face interactional pressure to appear competent in encounters with colleagues, clients, and lay publics, demonstrating that they, indeed, have the particular competencies expected of and associated with their position. For example, in a classic study of professionalization, Jack Haas and William Shaffir examine how medical students adopt a cloak of competence—presenting more-than-fully-able selves—in their training and work to convince gatekeepers, each other, and patients that they have the ability to do medicine. Similar competence-enhancing presentations are evident in other professions. However, a related dramaturgical phenomenon remains neglected: adopting a cloak of incompetence—presenting less-than-fully-able selves—in performing the professional role. Using the ethnographer's work as an illustrative case, the following paper examines this other side of managing professional competence.

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All professions trade in competence. Lawyers offer their clients advice on legal processes, access to legal protections, and resolutions to legal problems (Granfield 1992). Ministers offer their parishioners counsel on godly concerns, on the one hand, and worldly concerns, on the other (Kleinman 1984), comprising a suite of salvation services. Doctors offer their patients knowledge, abilities, and experience in body matters—diagnoses, prognoses, preventions, interventions, and so on (Haas and Shaffir 1987). Social scientists offer their audiences explanations for, critiques of, even interventions

into, patterns and problems of human group life (Buroway 2005).

The distinction between occupations and professions is "a social, historical, and political accomplishment" (Shaffir and Pawluch 2003:901), taken for granted and objectified over time (Berger and Luckmann 1967), offering professions comparatively privileged place as a consequence (Becker 1962). Credible claims to specialized knowledge and ability are essential to establishing and defending a profession's honorific status (Shaffir and Pawluch 2003). Regulating the cluster of competencies that define the profession is an exercise in boundary maintenance—distinguishing insiders from outsiders and claiming expertise in and ownership over particular areas of work:

> All social groups create boundaries and differences, view themselves in the most favorable ways. All individuals and groups strive to protect themselves from ridicule and charges of incompetence…Professional behavior is, or can be, understood as performance… The process of making some expert and more competent separates professionals from those they are presumed to help. [Haas and Shaffir 1977:85-86]

Prospective members who fail tests of competence are denied access to the profession and its attendant privileges. Established members who fail to fulfill the profession's expectations of ability may face discipline and expulsion. Indeed, one of the most serious offenses with which colleagues may charge one of their own is professional incompetence, challenging fitness for the role. More than individual failures of performance, instances of professional incompetence threaten the collective reputation of the profession, blurring the lines that distinguish insiders from outsiders and keep the lay at bay. Part

of the profession-making process is establishing safeguards against these professional deviants: standardizing competence assessments (Claiborn 1982), developing peer reporting and review processes (Doyal and Cannell 1993), categorizing cases (Menuey 2005), and disciplining poor performers (Morrow 1982; Overholser and Fine 1990). Maintaining the profession involves, in part, assurances that it comprises members with distinctive competencies that are in good standing.

There is thus pressure on professionals to demonstrate that they have the specialized competencies to stake a rightful claim to their honorific status. One of the responses to exaggerated expectations of ability is to adopt a "cloak of competence" (Edgerton 1967), presenting more-than-fully-able selves—more knowledgeable, informed, aware, skilled, experienced, accomplished, and so on. For example, in their study of the professionalization of medical students, Haas and Shaffir (1977:86; see also 1982; 1987) found "Expectations of competence are dealt with by strategies of impression management, specifically, manipulation and concealment. Interactional competencies depend on convincing presentations and much of professionalism requires the masking of insecurity and incompetence with the symbolic-interactional cloak of competence."

The "cloak of incompetence," presenting less-than-fully-able selves—less knowledgeable, informed, aware, skilled, experienced, accomplished, and so on—is also evident in work, occupations, and professions, though comparatively neglected and understudied (McLuhan et al. 2014). Routine practices of feigning lesser selves in professions tend to be guarded—known by insiders, but hidden from outsiders—for if these competence-concealing deceptions were to transpire, become evident, and de-

velop a "known-about-ness" (Goffman 1963), they may threaten the honorific status of the profession or otherwise make the work of its members more difficult: "Each job has techniques of doing things—standard operating procedures—of which it would be impolitic for those outside the guild to know. Illusions are essential to maintain an occupational reputation. Such actions are typically hidden in the backstage region from which outsiders are excluded" (Fine 1993:267). Maintaining the profession as a "going concern" depends on information control, disguising the "dirty work" involved in accomplishing activities and managing clients (Hughes 1971). Notwithstanding setting-specific dramaturgical strategies and interactional contingencies, feigning incompetence may be a feature of the tradecraft of all work, occupations, and professions, from the humble to the proud (see: Hughes 1970). Still, focused empirical cases of professionals displaying less-than-fully-able selves are needed to establish a comparative-analytical base from which to assess the cloak of incompetence as a generic self-presentational strategy.

Taking up this task, this paper examines the cloak of incompetence phenomenon in one particular form of work: ethnography. Experienced ethnographers tell us that field entries and relations hinge more "on the personal judgments made of the researcher" (Shaffir and Stebbins 1991:30) than on the scientific merits made of the research (Shaffir 1991). Impression management is essential to fieldwork: "Impressions of the researcher that pose an obstacle to access must be avoided or countered as far as possible, while those that facilitate it must be encouraged" (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983:78). At different points in the research process, the display of particular competencies can create problems for ethnographers. In these situations, ethnographers may adopt a cloak of incompetence to pursue their professional objectives. In what follows, I consider some examples of feigning lesser selves in the field, organized around the "natural history of fieldwork" (Shaffir and Stebbins 1991)—getting in, learning the ropes, maintaining relations, and leaving the field. The analytical focus is on the various ways that ethnographers deliberately disregard, disguise, downplay, or diminish their competence—knowledge, abilities, experience, accomplishments, and so on—in doing fieldwork.

Getting In

"Getting in" involves gaining access to research settings. Entry to any field site is best envisioned as an ongoing interactive process that researchers and subjects negotiate and renegotiate throughout the study, reaching a series of tentative, working agreements regarding the research relationship. These informal or formal bargains can delimit the scope of data collection in ways that can either enhance or nullify the breadth, depth, and import of the study (Shaffir and Stebbins 1991:28). Fieldworkers must be flexible and creative in their attempts to secure and maintain access, for "the situations and circumstances in which field observation of human behavior is done are so various that no manual of detailed rules would serve" (Hughes 1960:xii). Still, in ethnography, as in chess, there are standard opening moves: present our research and ourselves, informing prospective subjects of research purposes, methods, and risks.

The principle of informed consent, however, is a lofty one for those contending with the practical constraints of the research encounter. Roth (1962:283-284) identifies three obdurate conditions that tend to produce less-than-fully-informed research subjects: researchers do not know the precise direction or

shape their studies will take at the outset; researchers often do not want their subjects to know their more specific research questions or techniques; and researchers' training and experience prevent their subjects from knowing the research process as they do. For these reasons, "Secrecy in research is not something to be avoided or that can be avoided. It is rather a problem to be faced as an integral part of one's work" (Roth 1962:284).

How should one deal with the problem of secrecy, lies, and deception in gaining ethnographic access? The problem is not eliminated in further commitments to overt research or ethical mandates. Fieldworkers know that the assurances of informed consent they make to research ethics boards and prospective research participants are only partial truths, for "deception is, nonetheless, inherent in participant observation" (Shaffir 1991:77), endemic to ethnographic work. A more pragmatic professional response to the "problem of secrecy" is the call for ethnographers "to be cognizant of the choices that we make and to share these choices with readers" (Fine 1993:268), to lay bare our lies. In practice, however, these disclosures tend to be offered from the distant perch of graduate seminars, journal articles, and methodological appendices rather than the fateful grounds of the research setting. The moratorium on "confessional tales" (Van Maanen 1988) until retiring from the worlds we visit suggests a methodological utility in secrecy—deception is a valued implement of those who labor in the field. Fieldwork involves sales work: ethnographers trade carefully constructed images of themselves and their projects in exchange for access to subject worlds, and presenting less-than-fully-able selves can help close the deal.

In crafting our research letters and recruitment pitches, we take the role of our audience, for whom "the best accounts are brief, straightforward, and devoid of academic jargon" (Shaffir and Stebbins 1991:26). For the lay subject, ethnography is enveloped in mystique. We dull our theoretical, methodological, and substantive knowledge when seeking access to their worlds (Bogdan and Taylor 1975:34), aiming to enhance their apprehension by losing our precision. Similarly, to manage subject reservations, ethnographers benevolently work under "shallow cover" (Fine 1980), announcing their general, mostly benign intentions, but withholding their specific, potentially concerning purposes. An effective fieldside manner, then, can involve presenting uncomfortable knowns as lesser-knowns or unknowns. Performing "dirty work" (Hughes 1971), but claiming clean motives, researchers attempt to achieve virtue by engaging in dishonesty. This is the moral, rather than the manipulative, purpose for adopting a cloak of incompetence when pitching our projects.

The manipulative purpose is self-interest: we must gain access to do *our* work and pursue *our* research agendas, so "ethnographers shade what they do know to increase the likelihood of acceptance" (Fine 1993:275). Researchers downplay their academic status (Shaffir 1991:78) and "any expertise…on the subject" (Schatzman and Strauss 1973:25) because their intellectual authority can "make the gatekeeper uneasy as to the likely consequences of the research, and the effects of its conduct" (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983:75). We align our research interests with those of our subjects (Shaffir and Stebbins 1991:26) when we know our studies will be of little to no practical benefit, perhaps even carrying risks of harm. We are vague about the detail and focus with which we intend to make observations and take notes (Bogdan and Taylor 1975:33-34), for less attentive observers can be disarming, appearing unable to uncover the "underside" (Hughes 1971) of the group

and therefore posing little threat (Douglas 1976:169-170). For fear of rejection and reactivity (Shaffir 1991:77-78; Fine 1993:274-275), fieldworkers obfuscate their methods and cultivate pretenses.

Learning the Ropes

"Learning the ropes" involves "hanging around" and getting to know a social world. In many ways, ethnographers are similar to any novice member in their attempts to make sense of and become familiar with the language, perspectives, identities, relationships, emotions, and commitments characteristic of the group's way of life (Prus 2007), engaging in an interpretive role-taking process as they strive for intersubjectivity with the other (Blumer 1969). The warrant for the ethnographic endeavor, however, is not becoming a well-socialized, contributing member of the group, but rather to grasp "the distinctive concerns and ways of behaving in the world" (Shaffir and Stebbins 1991:83) in order to generate analytic insights about human knowing and acting (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Blumer 1969; Lofland 1995; Prus 1996; Katz 1997). The road to theory in ethnography is paved with long and winding descriptions.

Satisfying the "so what?" of ethnography requires making observations and eliciting information, documenting the habits of action and thought natural to the world. One of the commandments of ethnography is the fieldworker shall not disrupt—to mitigate the effects of reactivity, the social order of the research setting must be more or less maintained. In making a scene, we move further from studying the other, closer to absorbing our selves. The nature of fieldwork is often foreign and thus potentially disruptive to those we study, for whom ethnographers are strangers—if not as persons, then at least as practitioners—taking up temporary residence.

People confront an ambiguous situation in becoming research subjects, unsure of what to expect from their interested visitors.

Herein lies the value of research roles, which provide behavioral expectations, placement and announcement of our motives and methods (Stone 1962). When roles are unclear, interaction is interrupted and data collection is delayed (Shaffir and Stebbins 1991:85). Successful adoption of a research role restores the smooth flow of subject worlds, incorporating ethnographers into everyday routines. The particular roles researchers assume in settings cannot be determined in advance, but are rather interactional products of the research encounter and subject to the contingencies of the research setting (Shaffir 1991)—roles are creatively made, not mechanically played. As "tentative offerings, possible forms of self" (Mitchell 1991:101), research roles are subject to negotiation, rejection, and replacement. Still, observers can attempt to influence the roles into which they are cast.

The "initial information" one intentionally gives and unintentionally gives off (Goffman 1959) can establish a researcher identity that serves to frame (Goffman 1974) the researcher and research throughout the study (Shaffir 1991). We see, for instance, ethnographers present lesser selves—disguising and downplaying their abilities—in approaching research subjects, for one of the most productive roles researchers can assume is that of "acceptable incompetent" (Lofland 1971). Approximating the qualities of the student role, being identified as an acceptable incompetent offers advantages in learning the ropes: "Such persons have to be told and will not take offense at being instructed about 'obvious' things or at being 'lectured to.' That is, such persons are in a good position to keep the flow of information co-

ming smoothly" (Lofland and Lofland 1984:26, 38, emphasis in original). Not only is the student role well known—and therefore a generic role adaptable across manifold situations and settings—but so too is its complement, the instructor role. By adopting the student role, ethnographers encourage reciprocal role-taking on the part of their subjects. Student-instructor roles provide definitions of the situation that allow joint action. In this way, time in the field can be more productive of data.

Although "the ethnographer enters the field with an open mind, but not an empty head" (Fetterman 1991:90), in interviews, ethnographers "pretend to know less about the topic than [they] actually do" (Shaffir 1991:80). Fieldworkers stake claims to selves that are less informed and skilled than they are, encouraging their subjects to spell out the details of what would otherwise be left unsaid: "The more that subjects think that the observer knows about a certain area, the less free they are to offer their own opinions. For this reason, the researcher should not show off his or her competence or knowledge. Let your subjects speak freely and say what's on their minds" (Bogdan and Taylor 1975:46). In diminishing our selves, we elevate theirs—subjects are "somebodies" in the interview encounter. Interviewees can remain similarly silent when they think the details are too basic to be relevant (Zerubavel 2015), but when instructing incompetents, irrelevancies become relevancies, allowing the ethnographer to find analytical novelty in the mundane. Subjects, of course, also feign incompetence, deliberately glossing over what they know (Douglas 1976:59-82) when they deem some information too unpleasant to the ear or too dangerous to the status quo. Researchers who are wise to reticent subjects may press for candor by playing dumb—pretending not to understand veiled and varnished references—forcing sub-

jects to explain what has been implied and "present a coherent description" (Becker 1954:32) that fills in the fieldworker's feigned blanks.

Participant observers may also benefit in carrying out their work under the cover of incompetence. Polsky's (1967:121) injunction to "Keep your eyes and ears open, but keep your mouth shut" reminds us that ethnographers learn more when they speak less. Observers who have successfully adopted the role of acceptable incompetent allow others to point things out, to be shown plainly the whats, hows, whens, and whys of everyday life in the setting, matters in which observers are ostensibly uninformed. There are also moments in the field when observers wish to remain unnoticed. Field researchers thus feign inattention, not hearing when they actually hear, not seeing when they actually see, not noting when they actually note the goings-on in the settings they study. The observer's senses appear most blunted when they are most acute, "worked at by displays of a studied lack of interest in one's fellows, minimal eye contact, [and] careful management of physical proximity" (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983:56). In this way, the ethnographer remains less visible, less evident, and therefore becomes less obtrusive (Goffman 1963). We can be paid no mind, taken for granted (Berger and Luckmann 1967), ignored as harmless (Zerubavel 2015), as participants carry on with their everyday lives and we carry on documenting them. Pretending not to be attending, the ethnographer's observational abilities lay quiescent, hidden and out of the way.

But, it is imprudent to feign incompetence in the field indiscriminately. To do so would decontextualize deception, ignoring that the credibility and utility of presenting less-than-fully-able selves is situational. For example, some "ascriptive characte-

ristics," such as age, can contribute to the acceptability and effectiveness of performed incompetence. Their ignorance having yet to be supplanted by the wisdom of experience, young researchers may be more readily cast as those with much to learn (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983:87)—the follies of youth mask the abilities of young researchers. Conversely, there may also be situations in which lesser selves are liabilities. Spector (1980), for example, suggests that in some settings, such as the study of public officials, researchers are better served in emphasizing their knowledge of and facility with the area under investigation, for authorities are loath to endure ignorant performances—we should be wary of playing down when studying up. Competence covering in the field requires selective shading of knowledge and abilities (Vail 2001).

Maintaining Relations

"Maintaining relations" in the field involves the related processes of fitting in, getting along, and developing trust (Shaffir and Stebbins 1991:143). Far from being a peripheral matter, maintaining relations is the sine qua non of the ethnographic enterprise:

> At first, the problems of getting along with the people in the field may appear to be of little scientific interest. Such an outlook, however, is hardly correct. The validity of the data hinges in part on achieving that delicate balance of distance and closeness that characterizes effective research-subject interaction. [Shaffir and Stebbins 1991:143-144]

A common problem for fieldworkers, then, is to develop and manage relationships throughout the study. But, the fieldworker's hanging around, digging for details, and discovering dirt pose standard subject risks: routine disruption, interactional

discomfort, and reputational harm. Who would ever tolerate an ethnographer in their midst? Adopting a cloak of incompetence can be an effective self-presentational approach to fitting in, getting along, and developing trust (McLuhan et al. 2014:368).

Whenever researcher-subject status differences are great, fitting in is often a challenge (Shaffir and Stebbins 1991:26). In some settings, for example, particular competencies are conspicuous, abilities out of place. Research suggests there can often be a stigma in academic achievement (Coleman 1959; Albas and Albas 1988; Tyson, Darity, and Castellino 2005; Shoenberger, Heckert, and Heckert 2012). Over--conforming to social standards, high achievers are "positive deviants" (Shoenberger et al. 2012). By virtue of their graduate degrees and institutional affiliations, researchers are often intellectual outsiders in the field, their competencies creating relational distance, perhaps even discomfort. Strong identification with their academic statuses will tend to position researchers in the role of "expert" or "critic," which can make subjects "uneasy as to the likely consequences of the research" (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983:75). Subjects suspect participant-observation will become "participant-intervention" (Fine 1993:287), finding the errors in their ways. Fieldworkers, then, downplay their academic statuses when they expect them to interfere in field relations (Shaffir 1991). Some ethnographers go even further in their cloaking efforts, approximating the appearance and speech of their subjects (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983:78-79), concealing their abilities in attempting to fit in (Liebow 1967:255-56; Shaffir and Stebbins 1991:26).

What we know can also present problems in getting along with others. Ethnographers "avoid

words that are comfortable for them but that their subjects are likely to misunderstand or to find pretentious" (Bogdan and Taylor 1975:57) and do not challenge subjects' clearly false but dearly held beliefs because such displays of ability would likely make subjects self-conscious and uncomfortable (Schatzman and Strauss 1973:72-73; Bogdan and Taylor 1975:46). Similarly, as is customary among trial lawyers, ethnographers may ask questions to which they already have answers, only to encounter subject deception via feigned ignorance or forgetfulness (Douglas 1976). To get along with some subjects, we go along with their deceits. We feign ignorance of interpersonal (Haas and Shaffir 1987:124) and even ethical (Bogdan and Taylor 1975:53) issues to avoid confrontation because the study must go on. Interaction rituals of exercising tact, engaging in civil inattention, and performing deference and demeanor (Goffman 1967) are exaggerated in the field because "one cannot choose one's informants on the same basis one chooses friends" (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983:84). To protect the selves of their subjects and preserve the smooth flow of field relations, ethnographers hold their tongues when they know better.

Trust is essential to field relations. Subjects cooperate more when they sense fieldworkers can be counted on to handle sensitive information with appropriate discretion (Shaffir and Stebbins 1991:143-144). However, researchers also encounter pressure to reveal what they have learned, and they "cannot readily ignore or rudely refuse requests for information" if they wish to maintain good relations in the field (Schatzman and Strauss 1973:88-89). Adopting a cloak of incompetence may be useful, then, in maintaining confidences and managing information. Ethnographers present themselves as less informed than they actually are when dealing with various inquisitive publics, "pretending not to know information that we, in fact, did know" (Adler and Adler 1991:180) and practicing "a degree of self-censorship, avoiding discussing potentially discrediting aspects of the setting" (Adler and Adler 1991:179). When subjects witness researchers tactfully deflect requests for troublesome information (Jacobs 1998:171), not only is trust enhanced but so too is the sense of reciprocity, of mutual obligation (Shaffir and Stebbins 1991:144). In claiming to know less than we do or be able to share less than we can, we attempt to walk the relational line between over-rapport and under-rapport, both of which threaten field relations and "destroy the delicate balance of external and internal considerations" (Shaffir and Stebbins 1991:145) essential to the ethnographer's insider-outsider status and its attendant advantages in achieving both proximity to and distance from the worlds they study and the subjects who inhabit them.

Presenting lesser selves, however, can incur personal costs. Some view "outright dissimulation both morally distasteful and difficult to execute" (Shaffir 1991:77). Others find avoiding competitions for esteem a challenge (Bogdan and Taylor 1975). Still others feel demeaned in assuming the diminished statuses their subjects expect (Evans 1991). The ethnographer, "as does everyone, has a self-concept to defend" (Bogdan and Taylor 1975:52). In doing ethnography, "You have to open yourself up to being snubbed. You have to stop making points to show how 'smart assed' you are…you have to be willing to be a horse's ass" (Goffman 1989:128), but there can be "personal and emotional difficulties of coming to terms with such estrangement" (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983:90). Field relations involve not only being with others, but also living with ourselves.

Leaving the Field

"Leaving the field" involves disengaging from the research site and disseminating the findings. Getting out is a comparatively neglected topic in discussions of fieldwork relative to the nuanced treatments of getting in, getting along, and getting results. The researcher's decision to leave can be based on a number of practical criteria: the information obtained, analytical insights generated, available research time and funding, as well as a variety of external considerations to the project (e.g., institutional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal commitments and contingencies) (Snow 1980). Still, because successful fieldwork is contingent on establishing and sustaining relationships with a variety of subcultural members, leaving the field is complicated by the matters of relational distancing and disentanglement: "the leaving process is an aspect of an ongoing interplay between field circumstances and the way in which the researcher negotiates social relationships and a workable identity" (Maines, Shaffir, and Turowetz 1980:273).

Although ethnographers may never leave the field completely, as they may maintain relationships and connect various projects (Stebbins 1991), some relational distancing must occur, lest the field researcher be left with too many friends and too few publications. Relatedly, while disengaging from some relationships and settings is straightforward, "over-rapport" (Miller 1952)—getting too close to others—presents difficulties of disentanglement. Just as ethnographers "gauge how much rapport is necessary to get the cooperation required to continue the study" (Miller 1952:98), they also assess how little rapport is required to leave the field, attempting to "prevent relationships from becoming more personal than is desirable for the development of insight" (Miller 1952:99). Here, ethnographers can adopt a cloak of incompetence to "inhibit, distance or sever relationships with others…a way of putting existing or potential associates off" (McLuhan et al. 2014:369), claiming to have less ability—time, funds, institutional support, and so on—to carry on with their research and related relationships than they actually do. Getting along fine in the research moment, but then retreating to their institutional homes, many fieldworkers are "temporarily friendly" (Fine 1993:272).

As students of the interaction order, field researchers are well aware of the centrality of impression management in achieving desirable selves and smooth affairs. Perhaps more than any other form of social research, ethnography adds a human element, dissolving the personal into the scientific throughout the research process (Fine 1993:283). The scientists' creed is clear: no truth left behind. Full truths, however, are casualties of writing the worlds we examine. Readers are "betrayed by not having revealed to them all that one knows to be the truth" (Douglas 1976:43). Not only must we leave some data out to develop readable and publishable accounts, but we also may "shade some truths, ignore others, and create fictive personages" to protect the reputations of our subjects and ourselves (Fine 1993:287). In this way, the ethnographer withholds information that would spoil subject identities, "as do all the professions which deal with the problems of people" (Hughes 1971:436), and conceals the "dirty work" (Hughes 1971) required to meet professional demands. Sometimes the truth will beset you with obstacles and constraints. And so, in leaving the field, we bury discreditable bodies of knowledge, presenting ourselves as less informed than we actually are.

Conclusion

We associate professions with specialized knowledge and ability—expertise and authority in areas that the community deems necessary and valuable. The rarefied place and collective reputation of professions rests on credible claims to a distinctive set of competencies and qualifications. Becoming and being a professional involves manifesting these abilities before colleagues, clients, and lay publics: "Ultimately, professional credibility depends on giving a convincing performance before an expectant legitimating audience" (Haas and Shaffir 1982:192). Members experience a performative pinch when their actual abilities fall short of audience expectations, challenging their personal fitness for the professional role. To protect against elements of doubt and disqualification, professionals envelop themselves in cloaks of competence, concealing deficiencies and exaggerating abilities (Haas and Shaffir 1977; 1982; 1987).

The other—analytically neglected—side of the problem of competence in professions is the burden of ability. Here audience awareness of specific competencies may present professional action problems, disrupting interactions, frustrating efforts, thwarting objectives, and complicating work. The practical demands of the profession, then, may also require members to selectively present less-than-fully-able selves—adopting a cloak of incompetence (McLuhan et al. 2014)—to perform the professional role. The ethnographer's work, considered herein, offers an illustrative case. At particular points in each phase of the "natural history of fieldwork" (Shaffir and Stebbins 1991)—getting in, learning the ropes, maintaining relations, and leaving the field—ethnographers have found the deliberate concealment and diminishment of various abilities to be advantageous, if not essential, to accomplishing their work.

There are, of course, more examples of feigning incompetence in the field than I have considered here. Of those I identified, I provided only a sketch of competence-concealing situations and strategies that merit much more focused and detailed treatment. Future research on feigning incompetence in the field could reveal the panoply of impression management techniques ethnographers employ in dealing with problematic abilities. Research should also attend to the cloak of incompetence as an interactional accomplishment, identifying the researcher-subject dynamics, contingencies, and consequences of creditable and discreditable performances. A related matter concerns instances of research subjects feigning incompetence—not only when and how, but also with what implications for doing field research.

Though I present the particular case of feigning incompetence in the field, I claim more general analytic returns, for "the essential problems of men [sic] at work are the same whether they do their work in some famous laboratory or in the messiest vat room of a pickle factory" (Hughes 1958:48). If we find the problem of inconvenient, undesirable, or otherwise troublesome competence in one profession, we will also find it in others. The cloak of incompetence phenomenon is apt to be found in various manifestations in most work and occupations. We learn more about the generic features of social phenomena when we consider cases across manifold contexts (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Prus 1996; Zerubavel 2007; McLuhan and Puddephatt 2019; Puddephatt and McLuhan 2019). More research is therefore needed to not only identify specific cases of feigning incompetence at work, but also to leverage these individual cases for their formal theoretical insights through comparative analysis (Hughes 1970).

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