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EDITOR’S NOTE

by Dr Rosaleen Ow

This Issue of Snippet has two distinct but equally important themes that are 'must reads'.

One article is on phone/video counselling as an adaptation to the social restrictions posed by the COVID-19 pandemic on the provision of direct social services.

The other two articles focus on the challenges but importance of using ethnographic methods in developing 'ethnographic sensibility' in the process of practice and policy-making in the social service sector.

Both themes are crucial in these days of enhanced digitalisation of information and service provision.

“Hello, can you hear me?” Understanding clients’ experience with phone/video counselling in the COVID-19 pandemic

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Keywords: Phone/video counselling, pandemic, low-income clients

Introduction

The article reports on a study regarding the impact and efficacy of a digital-only (phone/video) counselling platform for casework with low-income clients during the COVID-19 pandemic in Singapore. The findings show an overall preference for a remote counselling service as it promotes privacy and convenience without compromising the therapeutic alliance. Several critical factors involved are accessibility and affordability of internet services and digital devices as well as the home environment.

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In 2020, a set of heightened safe distancing measures - known widely as a ‘circuit breaker’ (CB) - was an integral part of Singapore’s efforts to mitigate the local transmission rate of COVID-19 (Wong & Baharudin, 2020). Lasting from 7 April till 1 June 2020, only essential services that support basic needs were allowed to remain operational during the ‘circuit breaker’ (Ministry of Health, 2020).

During that period, staff and clients of social service agencies (SSAs) kept connected through remote engagement to ensure safety. This included phone conversations, regular check-ins via video-conferencing tools, online counselling or befriending, online group activities and classes/tuition (National Council of Social Services, 2020). For Kreta Ayer Family Services (KAFS) and Fei Yue Community Services (FYCS), the transition to remote engagement is a shift from the face-to-face engagement that used to be a dominant mode of contact with clients. With phone and video calls taking over as primary communication methods, this transition is a new reality that social workers and clients had to contend with.

Given that low-income families are a target population of KAFS and FYCS’ services, social workers were concerned about their vulnerability that is likely exacerbated by the movement restrictions in place. Existing research revealed key repercussions, such as higher risk of job loss and financial strain, and increased interpersonal friction caused by lack of privacy and increased time spent between family members during movement restrictions. There is also likely to be increased costs along with the higher rates of usage of technological mediums. Hence, social workers were concerned about the impact of increased use of technology with decreased in-person meetings for casework and counselling.

Literature review

Challenges for low-income families in digital migration

Singapore’s low-income families tend to face challenges in the digital migration of social services due to their lack of

ownership of electronic devices and access to quality internet service. The 2017/2018 Household Expenditure Survey found that households in 1-2 room flats consistently had lower rates of personal computer ownership and internet subscription at home as compared to households in 3-4 room flats. This suggests that many lower-income households may be relying only on mobile devices, like smartphones, in accessing online applications and services. As for those who had internet broadband, low-income families were found to face further stress from unreliable internet connection and technical glitches as they could not afford better internet access (Yip and Smalley, 2020).

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These online inequalities encompass offline consequences as it may translate to less timely and accessible platforms in catering to the needs of low-income families. With the low-income being described as 'digital outcasts' (Ong, 2020), understanding the obstacles they face in using technological platforms leads to the curiosity on the impact of online casework and counselling services.

Influences that impair online casework and counselling experiences

First, low-income clients' domestic environment - such as their limited living space - may create privacy and confidentiality issues when they engage in phone and video calls (Shaw, Wherton, Vijayaraghavan, Morris, Bhattacharya, Hanson et al., 2018). Secondly, a lack of familiarity with the proposed technology medium may also deter and fail to convince clients of its efficacy for counselling purposes (Murphy, Calugi, Cooper and Grave, 2020). Finally, prior negative experiences with technology may also result in clients' resistance towards using the platforms. Such experiences may be associated with clients' education background or age and impair their familiarity and confidence with using such platforms (Veld, 2017).

Such findings are concerning as the safe-distancing measures during circuit breaker translate to a reduced sphere of control that SSAs wield over providing clients an ideal physical environment to conduct casework and counselling in. Clients' prior experience and perception may also be a previously unexplored influence by SSAs in understanding clients' receptivity to online services offered during the circuit breaker period.

Benefits of online casework and counselling experiences

Firstly, there is shorter travelling time (Jaana & Paré, 2007) and reduced transportation costs (Piette, McPhee Weinberger, Mah & Kraemer, 1999), making it convenient for client to receive online casework and counselling (Richards & Vigano, 2013). The convenience of videoconferencing and phone calls have also been found to reduce the stigma associated with visiting a centre for mental health concerns and is likely to increase clients' adherence to regular follow up visits (Nelson & Patton, 2016).

The anonymity that may be provided through the absence of non-verbal cues can also allow clients to experience relational advantages, as it may be easier for them to talk about embarrassing issues (Leibert, Archer, Munson & York, 2006). Receiving counselling in the comfort of one's own home may also create a sense of empowerment and control (Coman, Burrows, & Evans, 2001). This can provide distance and space that encourage clients' forthright sharing (Capner, 2000) and also minimise the shame experience, thus reducing feelings of intimidation or pressure that might be caused from attending sessions in person.

While the above findings may be reassuring, there remains some unexplored influences that existing research is unable to cater for regarding clients receiving services in Singapore. For one, Singapore is geographically smaller in land size as compared to its surrounding countries or other regions beyond Southeast Asia. Local clients typically are also service users of family service centres located within their residential boundary. These make in-person sessions conventionally a

prominent aspect of casework and counselling for social workers and clients in Singapore, by virtue of the convenience and accessibility of in-person sessions. Also, clients with high-risk needs may still be assessed to require in-person engagement even with the movement and interaction restrictions posed by existing safe distancing measures. As such, it is useful for this study to examine the impact of a shift to a digital-only access for most clients, which will importantly elicit possibly differing clients' perceptions of online casework and counselling as compared to findings from international literature.

Purpose of the study

COVID-19's influence on various practices and trade will continue to be uncertain in duration and impact (Ministry of Trade and Industry, 2020). Virtual interaction is hence likely to be the encouraged mode of engagement in the foreseeable future (Tan, 2020). However, there seems to be a dearth in literature reviewing or evaluating the experience of such online services utilised by low-income service users locally.

As part of the Research Skills for Social Services mentoring programme conducted by the Social Service Research Centre at the National University of Singapore, KAFS and FYCS embarked on an exploratory research project to explore the experiences of low-income families who received casework and counselling services via phone and/or video calls during Singapore's 'circuit breaker' period. This will be achieved through eliciting the factors that influence clients' experiences, and clients' perceived benefits and challenges in utilising phone and/or video calls. As services move towards digitalisation, this study hopes to provide some insight on how SSAs can improve on client-centric service delivery as SSAs continue operations in the 'new normal'.

Methodology

A qualitative research method was employed in understanding clients' experiences with using phone and video call to receive casework and counselling services. A qualitative approach allowed us to obtain more viewpoints and elicit more nuanced perspectives.

To gain better insight into their experiences, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 8 clients: 3 from FYCS and 5 from KAFS. Interviews were chosen as a method of data collection as it gives the opportunity for in-depth and open discussion with the more informal and free interaction between researcher and interviewees (Potter, 2002; Winchester, 1999; Sarantakos, 2013). The flexibility in semi-formal research was advantageous for the study as it allowed for the exploration of the interviewee's feelings and elicit client's unique perspectives on the factors that influenced their experiences of receiving casework and counselling services via video and phone calls.

Interviewees were low-income parents and ranged from ages 20 - 40 years old. To be eligible as interviewees, they were required to be current recipients of the government ComCare assistance and have used both video and phone calls with their social workers for casework and counselling services during the circuit breaker period. Interviewees were given a choice between phone calls and in-person interviews and all participants chose phone calls interviews. The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes each and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Dominant themes from the interviews were analysed to provide more in-depth insights on how clients were experiencing their engagements with social workers through video and phone calls.

Study findings

Overall, there seems to be an existing preference for remote services as they continue to promote the privacy, convenience and therapeutic alliance that clients receive from their social workers. However, the individual case nature and client profile,

and consideration of clients' access to technology make a mixture of online and offline engagement critical factors to consider in using remote services.

Clients' sense of privacy

During circuit breaker measures, many were encouraged to stay home, and in-person interactions were minimised. Literature showed that clients may be concerned with the lack of privacy and confidentiality when services are conducted remotely (Shaw, Wherton, Vijayaraghavan, Morris, Bhattacharya, Hanson et al., 2018). Given that many clients might require a space away from others to share about issues that were deeply personal to them, residing in small rental flats with their families would be a concern for their perceived sense of privacy while engaging in casework and counselling with social workers on online platforms.

However, in our study, most interviewees shared that they were able to navigate their own living environment to find a safe space to continue engaging with their social worker. For example, they might choose a time where less family was home, or to walk away from the others at home and to step out to the corridor outside the flat during a call with the social worker. It was also useful if the social worker had checked with the clients a mutually good timing for a call. The initiative that these interviewees were able to exercise proved contrary to our literature review that low-income clients' domestic environment might necessarily impinge on their privacy and confidentiality.

However, this study remains mindful that these interviewees' methods of finding privacy within their living environment do not signal sufficiency nor acceptability of such an environment for continued casework and counselling with clients. From some interviewees, there were worries about having to care for their children while in the midst of conversing with their social worker or having their family members listening into their conversations, as one interviewee shared, "the best is talking outside of the house. I mean like I meet [SW][1] at the centre then we will talk about the anger this type of thing... not nice for (my wife) to listen to what is my anger about, this type of thing." The worries raised by interviewees serve as a reminder about the shortcomings of low-income clients' living environment in providing a long-term safe space for casework and counselling, with the provision of an alternative space unfortunately remaining at the mercy of case nature and prevailing safe distancing measures.

The convenience accorded by the use of online platforms

The economy of time is usually linked to the use of technology. With the shift from in-person sessions to online video calls and phone calls as the common mode of engagement between social workers and clients, it would be useful to understand whether the use of video calls and phone calls also bring to clients a valued convenience to their daily lives as they continue receiving casework and counselling from their social workers.

Our study shows that there is a general agreement about the comparative ease of communicating with their SW over phone/video calls as compared to attending a face-to-face session in person. First, interviewees perceived greater flexibility in using phone and video calls with their social worker amidst their busy work schedules. They are now able to commit when they have spare pockets of time or when they are on the go. Interviewees also spend less time arranging childcare for their children before being able to attend in-person sessions with their social workers, as they are now able to engage in phone or video calls with their social workers at home. One such interviewee shared that, "if [she had] to settle the children first, it is hard for [her] to come down at the exact time [SW] made an appointment with [her]." With digital means of communication, this issue can be resolved. Finally, interviewees also shared about the reduced transport costs of travelling to KAFS - this typically applies for clients who may need to travel from their workplace, or for those who stay further away.

As for what might make phone/video calls inconvenient or inconducive for them, interviewees shared a few concerns. The

[1] SW is short for social worker, henceforth used in this article to refer to social workers in general.

first was when interviewees happened to be working or be present in an unconducive place during the social worker's call. As low-income clients may be employed in noisy environments such as construction or food and beverage industries, they may not be able to hear or speak with the social worker during working hours. Interviewees shared on hindsight that this could have been easily mitigated if both clients and social workers had checked in on mutually good timings for a phone or video call. Additionally, clients who are on pre-paid lines may face difficulties. For example, one of the interviewees reflected being unable to reach his social worker via phone and was unable to walk-in to the FSC to seek immediate assistance because he had run out of phone credit. They may also be unable to have extended conversations with their social worker over the phone due to their limited finances.

Therapeutic alliance between clients and their social workers

Therapeutic alliance refers to the extent of warmth, intimacy, and sensitivity that clients feel (Coman et al., 2001), with literature suggesting that client's therapeutic alliance tended to reduce when sessions were conducted over phone and video calls.

Our interviewees expressed an unchanged quality in their interaction with their social worker despite the shift from in-person sessions to phone and video calls. They attributed their perceived lack of change to the trusting relationship that they had built with their social worker over time, which helped them to understand their social worker and to feel understood despite being on a phone or video call platform. Indeed, interviewees reminisced about how their social workers were people they had confided in in the past, and how their social worker had remained non-judgmental across the duration of the working relationship. As such, they also perceived phone and video calls as plausible avenues for them to express their emotions. Therefore, the shift to a phone and video call platform did not impact the rapport between interviewees and social workers as interviewees trusted that they could continue to receive the same degree of warmth and sensitivity that the social worker had consistently been offering.

One notable finding was interviewees' perception of the role of text messaging in contributing to the therapeutic alliance between themselves and their social worker. With the advent of phone and video calls, the frequency of text messaging between interviewees and social workers have also increased. Interviewees perceived that text messaging increased the sense of control they felt, as they could take their time to craft, edit or even delete messages. This allowed interviewees more control over the emotions and content they hoped to convey. As compared to the spontaneity of speech and emotions in an in-person session, text messaging seems to accord a new space for interviewees to reflect and regulate while engaging with their social worker.

However, this study remains aware of other influences that might eventually threaten the therapeutic alliance, such as the quality of internet connectivity and increased costs in mobile data usage.

Accessibility to technology

Responses from interviewees also revealed that the level of accessibility to technology greatly affected the experiences that they had with using technology to receive casework and counselling services. Accessibility to technology refers to the level of connectivity, meaning how stable and readily available is internet connection as well as the affordability of technology, which refers to the participant's ability to afford internet connection and digital devices. Similar to findings from literature review, findings from the research also indicate difficulties faced by low-income families in accessing technological resources.

A pertinent issue that plagued interviewees was the ability to afford stable internet connection and digital devices. Low-income families often encounter problems paying for Wi-Fi services and devices because of their income instability and limited financial resources. An interviewee shared that her husband's employment was not doing well, "so there's no income

from there and it started [their] problems arise back, [and] it's been disconnected at home all the Wi-Fi." As this happened during the circuit breaker, the family was further isolated as they were digitally cut off at a time where society was moving towards digitalisation during the lockdown.

The instability that low-income families face in having access to the Internet is also highlighted by another interviewee who shared that, "sometimes also we will say "SW we haven't top up, this type of thing, she will understand then give us some time." This reflected the struggles that low-income families faced in trying to get internet access, yet the digitalisation of casework and counselling services during the circuit breaker period meant that there was a need for them to find a way to afford internet connection to receive services from the social worker.

Study limitations

There were several challenges which the researchers encountered while conducting the research for this paper. The first challenge was the time-bound duration of 13-week mentoring program that limited the number of interviewees who could be recruited within a short time-frame. The study findings may hence be limited in generalisation due to the small sample size.

Interviewees might have also been subjected to selection bias, in view that the study was conducted after an extension of circuit breaker restrictions. Because of the extended CB restrictions, most participants who took part in the research might have become accustomed to online platforms. Hence the interviewees who took part in the research might be comfortable with digital methods of communication and chose phone and video calls over face-to-face interviews for the study.

While the results from the interviews may not be generalisable, the flexible and exploratory nature of using semi-structured interviews provided a deeper explanation and understanding of the interviewee's experiences. Further research can be carried out with a larger number of interviewees with varied profiles in the future.

Implications on Practice

As Singapore moves into a different normal where work from home becomes commonplace and use of video and phone calls are more frequently utilised there are undeniable implications on social worker's practice.

The first implication would be practice constraints on conducting casework and counselling over phone and video calls. Social workers may experience some difficulties building a therapeutic alliance with new clients as they have no existing relationships. Separately, with existing clients, social workers may face difficulties exploring other modes of engagement – such as the use of physical therapeutic tools and in-person activities. Additionally, SW's assessment may also be compromised when using video calls as they can only use visual cues to assess clients and their home environment. However, during face-to-face sessions, social workers can utilise five senses to form a holistic assessment. To address the constraints, training social workers in areas such as phone counselling may be useful in helping social workers to transit from pure face-to-face sessions to a mixed method engagement. This will provide SWs with the competency to build rapport and therapeutic alliance regardless of the mode of engagement for ideal therapeutic outcomes.

Secondly, the use of digital modes of engagement brings about questions on internet safety and professional etiquette. Since phone and video calls are hosted on 3rd party platforms, it raises concerns over data security and digital vulnerability, as such platforms are vulnerable to hack, leaking of personal information or recording of conversations without the other party's knowledge. Similarly, other modes of engagement such as text messaging also place social workers and clients in vulnerable positions as text messages are open to interpretation. As such, creating awareness and standardising professional etiquette during digital counselling sessions would be important in maintaining a level of professionalism while delivering services online.

As such, creating awareness and standardising professional etiquette during digital counselling sessions would be important in maintaining a level of professionalism while delivering services online.

Conclusion

COVID-19 had accelerated digitalisation and also raised concerns over a growing digital divide. Although the use of smartphones is increasingly commonplace, low-income families continue to be subject to poor quality of internet services, lack of access to technology and lack of digital knowledge.

As we use digital means of communication more frequently, we have to be sensitive to the structural issues that our low-income clients face in using digital means of communication. For those who can afford internet services and digital devices, issues such as network stability often plague them. For others, affording internet services and digital devices is a struggle and many do not have access to internet services. As such, it is imperative to streamline access to digital devices and knowledge for our low-income families to be equipped with technological resources such as Wi-Fi, data and computers, so as to prevent alienation of the families and level the playing field for them and bridge the divide in digital skill and access to devices.

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Is Ethnography Still Relevant Today?

by Ho Zhi Wei

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Keywords: Ethnography, ethnographic sensibility, qualitative methods, policy and practice

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Is ethnography—with its demands for qualitative, highly immersive, and often extended fieldwork—still relevant today in a rapidly advancing and digitalising society such as Singapore?

This is a question that I have asked myself as a researcher and a student of sociology, especially as someone who relies on multiple research methods to address policy and planning questions. Perhaps this is a question you have similarly asked yourself, whether as a policymaker, practitioner, or administrator in social service and related fields. Or maybe at a more fundamental level, the purpose or relevance of ethnography does not seem self-evident.

In this brief article, I invite you to consider the perspectives and sensibilities that ethnography offers social policy and practice. I suggest that these considerations remain resonant in the face of recent trends challenging social work and social policy to draw upon big data and data science (Coulton, Goerge, Putnam-Hornstein, and de Haan, 2015); augmenting existing policy, planning, and research efforts to make sense of an increasingly complex society, unpack social problems, and generate timely and effective solutions.

I unpack and illustrate these considerations over two sections. In the first section, I introduce the process and practice of ethnography. I explain what ethnography is and what it is not, and what the methods of ethnography may constitute or entail. Acknowledging that not every one of us (including myself) will be able to engage in the extended practice of ethnographic fieldwork, I consider the pertinent insights and perspectives—or more specifically, a certain sensibility—that ethnography offers for more incisive social policy and practice.

1. What is ethnography?

Stated simply, ethnography means 'writing culture'. Without getting into the vagaries and often complex history of ethnography (though they remain vital to understanding the form of contemporary ethnography as we understand and employ today), the practice of ethnography is often associated with its dominant method, participant observation.

Participant observation generally entails a long-term data collection process involving direct observation and personal engagement with a holistic emphasis on the study of culture, or "the significance of the meanings people give to objects, including themselves, in the course of their activities" (Hammersley, 2018). This usually involves an extended and immersive engagement with—and participation in—the lives of a single or a small sample of study informants or participants over several months or years.

In a seminal participant observation effort spanning more than three years (including one-and-a-half years with a local family), William Foote Whyte lived in a low-income Italian American housing neighbourhood in Boston to understand the

lives and social organisation of local communities, gangs, and politics. Documenting his observations and reflections in Street Corner Society (1943), Whyte critically challenges dominant assumptions about the urban poor, calling into question prevailing theories of social disorganisation in low-income urban environments. By tracing the social structure of low-income neighbourhoods, Whyte vividly paints a picture of a highly structured environment. With distinct orderings and practices within and across peer groups by social class, this shed light on the factors that accounted for the persistence of poverty among adolescent boys in the neighbourhood.

Imbibed with the empathy and care necessary to engage in the precarious lives of his research informants and collaborators, Whyte's efforts point to the critical process or sensibility of ethnography which undergirded his practice of extended fieldwork. This emphasis on the ethnographic *process* is pertinent. While the practice of ethnography is often associated with participant observation, ethnographers have also drawn from a range of other methods and data sources, such as archival records and visual artefacts (Hammersley, 2018). Although Whyte drew upon the practice of participant observation in this specific instance, dedicating time alone for extended fieldwork would have been insufficient to developing such a ground-breaking ethnographic account. Rather, the value of his ethnographic efforts may be seen through his painstaking efforts to care for the social lives that formed his area of inquiry, necessitating his participation in local gangs and their families. This in turn, enabled him to elucidate heretofore hidden social structures that constrained social life and mobility.

While we might not always have the necessary resources or time to undertake or chart a similar path like Whyte (though we might certainly seek or aspire to do so), the experiences of Whyte and other ethnographers offer many important lessons. It is at this juncture that we turn our focus to the process, or more specifically, the sensibility, that informs the practice of ethnography. What is an ethnographic sensibility, and how can we be better policymakers, practitioners, administrators, and researchers from cultivating such a sensibility?

What is an ethnographic sensibility?

“Ethnography is a sensibility that goes beyond face-to-face contact. It is an approach that cares—with the possible emotional engagement that implies—to glean the meanings that the people under study attribute to their social and political reality.” - Edward Schatz (2009, 5)

It would be remiss to regard ethnography in solely methodological terms. Even as anthropology, sociology, and cognate fields utilise ethnography as a means to understand the lived experiences of people and the social and cultural contexts in which they reside, the practice of ethnography goes beyond a procedural application of method. Indeed, a rote or callous application of extended, qualitative fieldwork absent the notion of an ethnographic sensibility would be to conduct no ethnography at all (McGranahan, 2018). Rather, the process and sensibility that characterises ethnography is one that demonstrates empathy and care, necessitating an “emotional engagement” (Schatz, 2009, 5) with our informants or the population groups whom we are seeking to serve.

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In other words, to imbibe the ethnographic process or an ethnographic sensibility—whether as a social worker, urban planner, or public administrator—as part of our everyday work is to acknowledge and interrogate the gaps and assumptions that we inevitably possess.

This informs how we might approach the difficult process and work of designing social policies and programmes, which are often complex, multi-layered, and laden with incomplete information, knowledge, and understanding. The ethnographic

Rather than simply viewing individuals and populations as abstract entities or a series of numerical values, the process of ethnography forces us to confront and acknowledge the limitations of our worldview, knowledge, and method.

sensibility, with its attentiveness to the variegated and subjective realities of everyday lives, beliefs, and practices as interpreted and reinterpreted by both informant and researcher, offers a “culturally-grounded way of both being in and seeing the world” (McGranahan, 2018). Rather than simply viewing individuals and populations as abstract entities or a series of numerical values, the process of ethnography forces us to confront and acknowledge the limitations of our worldview, knowledge, and method. It calls upon us—whether engaging in the important and vital work of policymaking, seeking to understand and meet the needs of clients, or designing an analytical model—to take an interest in people's lives and how they might make sense of their world (Herzog and Zacka, 2017; McGranahan, 2018; Shaw and Holland, 2014).

Take for example, the Moving-to-Opportunity experiment in the United States, a programme that distributed housing vouchers to encourage low-income households to move out of concentrated poverty. Challenging prevailing social and urban policy assumptions of residential mobility among the urban poor, sociologists Ann Owens and Susan Clampet-Lundquist drew upon ethnographic insights to sharpen their quantitative survey analyses and policy recommendations. Using in-depth interviews to throw light onto gaps in present understanding, they found that wider social and economic forces often constrained housing mobility, particularly for the urban poor. Far from being autonomous agents, factors such as insufficient economic resources to keep up with rising rent, the need to maintain close kinship ties and support, and caregiving challenges among working parents often brought the poor back into high poverty neighbourhoods, resulting in the ineffective, temporal nature of such housing mobility interventions. This suggested that social and urban policy needed to be holistic, proceeding beyond addressing housing needs through housing vouchers to account for the wider needs of these families, which ranged from supporting their caregiving needs, to ensuring the availability of—and fair access to—affordable and racially integrated housing in low-poverty neighbourhoods.

Seen together, these considerations necessitate an examination of the socioeconomic, historical, and political contexts of the urban environments in which these families are situated. In a multi-sited ethnography spanning Auckland, Singapore, and Berlin, urban geographer Steffen Wetzstein (2019) observed that proposed solutions trained at tackling contemporary housing problems are often rooted in complex and “deep-seated” historical, political, urban contexts, defying simplistic applications of global policy frameworks and ‘best practices’, despite their contemporary cachet. Instead, these authors push back against prevailing assumptions and pointed to the necessity of ethnographic insights for a closer consideration of social realities and histories to unpack the reasons that underlie wider trends, and better account for how and why people come to specific decisions and the constraints and structures they run up against.

Having broadly outlined the value of ethnography and its attendant sensibility, I now suggest three ways in which we may incorporate these considerations as part of our work.

2. Lessons from cultivating an ethnographic sensibility

First, an ethnographic sensibility offers us a way to reflect on our "otherness" over the course of our work.

In another influential ethnography, cultural anthropologist Paul Rabinow in Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco (1977) interrogates the complex, multilayered experiences he underwent as a participant observer within a culture alien from his own. Here, Rabinow documented his frustrated and at times futile attempts as a young graduate student in Morocco to connect with and understand his informants and their lives. Rabinow confronted “otherness” at every turn and questioned his

identity and persistent inability to shrug off his strangeness as an outsider to the culture that he was attempting to understand.

Over the course of his fieldwork in Morocco, Rabinow was confronted by his assumption that “basic facts” such as abstracted socioeconomic status that he had adopted as a student in the United States could “speak for themselves” (1977, 124), when such concepts did not feature in his informants' social realities. Despite his persistent attempts at forging close relationships and friendships with his informants and their apparent ease and comfort of interaction, Rabinow would conclude that their cultural and social realities remained impenetrable:

“The infuriating irrationality of [his informant's] comment threw me into a deeper depression, and made me wonder whether there had ever been any effective communication and understanding between us. I must have been deceiving myself; a vast gulf lay between us and could never be bridged” - Rabinow (1977, 47)

Rabinow would also reflect on his misguided assumptions about how he had expected his informants to think and behave, having blithely regarded them as inert and passive repositories to be mined for anthropological materials. As he cultivated relationships with his informants for the purposes of his research, he would subsequently realise that his informants had in fact cultivated *him* as a resource to be tapped on.

“What was upsetting was the realisation that I had been engaged with [my informant] for well over a month... and I had proceeded to “typify” him. But my typifications were fundamentally incorrect and ethnocentric. Basically I had been conceiving of him as a friend... But Ibrahim, a lot less confusedly, had basically conceptualised me as a resource.” - Rabinow (1977, 29)

Transcending ethnographic fieldwork, these examples point to the challenges inherent to designing policies and programmes that are often trained at social and cultural realities that stand in contrast to our own. Critically, they call for a greater appreciation and explicit recognition of the differences that lay between us and our population groups of interest. Approaching the design of social policies and programmes with an ethnographic sensibility thus presupposes an ethic of care. What do their everyday lives look like that stands apart from our own? What are the individual challenges and structural barriers that these groups face that lay outside of our own social realities? How do these differences constitute the assumptions, biases, and prejudices that we might carry as we approach the process of designing specific policies or programmes? What characterises our relationships with informants or clients, and how do they affect the process of research or social work?

For example, sociologists Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas (2005) drew upon ethnographic accounts to explicate the complex interplay of expectations, relationships, and sociocultural conditions that give rise to single motherhood among the poor. Through a series of interviews, a picture of motherhood as a means of escaping loneliness and affirming relational bonds between parents emerged, though such relationships often broke down due to issues of unemployment, drug and alcohol abuse, and other conflicts. Taken together, such an undertaking serves as an attempt to push back against prevailing stereotypes for a closer attentiveness of complex sociocultural processes at work to inform the design of more effective social policies and programmes. Critically, they illustrate the need to recognise differences in social and cultural realities that exist across social classes and groups and point to the need to close such knowledge gaps among policymakers and practitioners.

Second, an ethnographic sensibility calls for "shared symbols" that bridge differences and interpret social realities.

Cultivating an ethnographic sensibility that involves a close consideration of the self and the other also calls for the interpretation and communication of “social facts” across cultural boundaries. Here, Rabinow points to the interpretive and subjective nature of “shared symbols” between the researcher and the informant. With shared symbols, what we take for

granted as social facts in our everyday lives may instead be seen as culturally mediated twice-over. That is, not only must the informant question, reflect, and objectify their own lived experiences, they must learn to present them to the ethnographer, the outsider, who in turn interprets. In this regard, the ethnographer and the informant mutually engage in the interpretation of facts across cultural boundaries.

Examples of the process of translating and articulating social facts may be derived through a variety of sources. One novel case may be seen in Ellen Boccuzzi's (2012) study of rural-urban migration in Bangkok through the use of poems authored by migrant writers. A senior programme advisor with an international development organisation with a focus on migration, Boccuzzi observed that these migrant writers do not fit the typical or average profile of the rural-migrant worker. They often had access to education and were able to mobilise resources to publish their literature; "relative elites of the periphery" and "relatively marginalised of the centre" (17). By bridging cultures and articulating the experiences of rural-urban migration through poems, they expose the struggles of a highly marginalised population for an urban audience in Thailand. In other words, these writers functioned as articulate participant observers, allowing for the self- reflection, interpretation, and objectification of migrant lives and enabling sustained conversations and observations of migration through shared symbols and language across distinct social realities.

In seeking to inform our policies and programmes, how are we negotiating cultural and social differences? How have we taken the use of symbols and language for granted and how can we begin to interrogate or examine these assumptions? Are we cognisant of the distinct social realities and imbalanced power relations that we inhibit as a policymaker, practitioner, or researcher in contrast to the needs of the populations groups whom we serve? Conversely, are there aspects in and of our lives that allow us to negotiate between our roles as an insider and an outsider, much like the migrant writers that serve as the informants for Boccuzzi, to bridge differences that otherwise remain impenetrable or insurmountable by others?

Finally, an ethnography sensibility compels us to interrogate and problematise our presence in our work.

Building on our earlier considerations to be cognisant of our "otherness" and to develop "shared symbols" when engaging with social policies and programmes, Rabinow reminds us that our presence—with what we assume to be normative, with its attendant biases and blind spots—permeates our work, however we try to neutralise our voices. Here, Rabinow (1986, 244) critiques the tendency of anthropologists to perform the "double move," that is, to appear at the start of a text to establish one's authorial presence, only to disappear thereafter.

"An experiential "I was there" element establishes the unique authority of the anthropologist; its suppression in the text establishes the anthropologist's scientific authority… the anthropologist establishes that he was there and then disappears from the text." - Rabinow on self-referentiality in Writing Culture (1986, p. 244)

Rabinow addressed this critique through 'Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco', a volume dedicated to a sensitive and reflective evaluation of his fraught experiences and attempts at fieldwork. Whyte likewise dedicates almost one hundred pages to interrogating his experiences and assumptions as an upper-middle-class economics student conducting fieldwork in a low-income neighbourhood. In a recent ethnographic work illuminating the life-worlds of Singapore's low-income families, sociologist Teo You Yenn (2019) shared her explicit insertion of herself into the text. Despite "tremendous" discomfort, Teo persisted in this effort to move beyond a documentation of individual challenges towards a closer understanding of the lived realities and experiences of inequality; one that necessitates a realignment of our lens and worldviews over the course of our work.

Cultivating an ethnographic sensibility thus calls not only for an ethic of care, but also one of humility.

Cultivating an ethnographic sensibility thus calls not only for an ethic of care, but also one of humility. For the social scientist the process of research is often nonlinear, and usually beset with fits, false starts, and

dead ends. Rabinow points to the conflicting emotions and procedural messiness that characterise the ethnographic endeavour, and this similarly extends to our work in social policy and planning. While we may not be in a position to document our experiences in our reports, policies, or programmes, we remain present—in the selection, categorisation, and analysis of proposals, programmes, and evidence. What do we include or inadvertently leave out as we design programmes or research? How have we shifted in our positions over the course of our work? What are the ways in which our identities, backgrounds, or even the compositions of our teams and organisations influence our perspectives, and how do they detract or enrich our work processes and outcomes?

Closing Thoughts

I began this article with a simple question: Is ethnography—with its demands for qualitative, highly immersive, and often extended fieldwork—still relevant today in a rapidly advancing and digitalising society like Singapore?

At this juncture, it might be timely to observe that prominent statisticians and data scientists have recently called for greater recognition of the subjective nature of statistical and quantitative research in the light of the debates and concerns over the misuse of statistics and quantitative techniques (Baker, 2016; Gelman and Loken, 2016). Instead of regarding these critiques as invalidating or dilapidating, scholars are drawing upon these experiences as lessons to strengthen existing streams of quantitative inquiry. Reflecting the ethnographic sensibilities that we have explored in this article, these efforts are similarly seeking to bring about greater transparency and to more accurately account for and reflect the oft-unseen messiness and subjectivities of quantitative research over the course of the research process (seen for instance through the Open Science Collaboration, 2012). Critically, this includes acknowledging that the process of quantitative and statistical analysis is often nonlinear and exploratory in nature (Gelman, 2021). Far from being objective and value-free, the process of research and meaning-making—in its various guises—may thus be regarded as inherently subjective, reflecting our partial knowledge, assumptions, and biases.

Far from being objective and value-free, the process of research and meaning-making—in its various guises—may thus be regarded as inherently subjective, reflecting our partial knowledge, assumptions, and biases.

In the article to follow, my colleague and team member at NUS SSR, Cliona Yong, will draw upon concrete examples, lessons, and insights from her experience as an ethnographer and participant observer residing in a new housing estate in Singapore. In other words, what might the practice of ethnography look like? Although not all of us will have the privilege of participating in extended, qualitative, and immersive participant observation, we may still participate in the ethnographic enterprise over the course of our work, whether in policymaking and programme development, administration, or research, by reflecting and drawing upon its lessons. Even as we continue to harness technological advancements and draw upon cutting-edge techniques and methods, I hope this brief reflection allows us to consider what ethnography continues to offer: the necessary techniques and signposts to interrogate social processes and shed light on hidden social realities, the capacity to challenge prevailing assumptions and sharpen our decisions and thought processes, and to cultivate a sensibility that informs social policy and planning marked by "modesty, honesty, and analytical insight" (Mills and Morton, 2013).

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What Makes an Ethnographer? Reflections from a Participant Observer in Singapore

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Keywords: Ethnography, participant observation, qualitative research, reflexivity, reflections, insider, outsider

I am nervous – this would be my first time speaking to my neighbours as a neighbour, I don't know if she remembered me from the interviews a year before. What if they don't accept my banana bread? What if they think I was being too *friendly?*

I knock on the door, but nobody seems to be in. "They went out!" I look around and spot a boy peering from the lift landing on the floor above mine, "They're not home, but the son is with me." I shout back a thank you for the information and head back to my flat, relieved and disappointed. I decide to get on with work for now. I keep my main door open, but shut the grilled gates.

About an hour later, I hear the jingle of keys and the slap of slippers on the concrete floor outside my door. I spring up to get my keys and grab the banana bread. By the time I am out my front door, my neighbour is almost at hers, she is with her son, whom I also remember from the interview. "Hi!" I call out. She turns around and sees me approaching her. I introduce myself and pass her the banana bread. She thanks me and asks about my moving in last week.

We talk for a bit, and I ask if she remembers the research project. She seems to vaguely remember some surveys and interviews. I remind her several times about the research throughout our conversation. It is only upon the third reminder, when I mention I had sat in her living room and that her son had brought my colleague and I some Fanta grape that she seems to fully recall our actual first encounter.

She doesn't pay this much attention and we continue talking for over half an hour outside her flat about good food nearby, her children's schooling, the other neighbours on our floor, and our different flat layouts, all this while she is still holding onto the banana bread.

Near the end our conversation, my neighbour's son asks me, "Why do you speak like with a bit of accent?"

Before I could answer, his mother says, "Oh, because she from university."

Before going, I wish the boy the best for his PSLE results. They go into their flat while I head back to mine, ecstatic and relieved my neighbours were so friendly and open, as well as excited to finally have something more substantial to write about in my fieldnotes.

The vignette above captures an encounter during my first few weeks of fieldwork in a neighbourhood in Singapore. It is my field site, and where I conduct participant observation (PO) – an ethnographic method that embeds the researcher within the community or context being studied in order to experience and understand it.

This article focuses on my reflections on conducting fieldwork as a participant observer in a neighbourhood in Singapore. I have definitely gained much from this experience – from encounters that revealed to me unexpected insights on what it

I posit that even though not everyone may have the chance to conduct prolonged ethnographic fieldwork, the lessons on understanding one's positionality, uncovering one's biases, and undergirding one's ability to actively work against or address these allow for the critical and nuanced understanding necessary in social research.

means to be a neighbour to my experiencing the tensions that arose from being both "insider" and "outsider" I had read about as an undergraduate. I posit that even though not everyone may have the chance to conduct prolonged ethnographic fieldwork, the lessons on understanding one's positionality, uncovering one's biases, and undergirding one's ability to actively work against or address these allow for the critical and nuanced understanding necessary in social research.

Understanding Neighbourhood Experiences

The research project I work on seeks to understand neighbourhood experiences in HDB estates and "to explore and understand the effects of the physical environment on the everyday experiences and social interactions of residents" [1]. It takes a mixed method approach, of which one of the methods is PO. Since I was tasked to be the researcher for this component of the project, I moved out of my familial home and into a neighbourhood I had not even heard of the year before.

The research project employs mixed methods, both quantitative and qualitative, such as surveys, in-depth interviews, walking interviews (where the interview is conducted in the place of interest, and the interviewee typically brings the interviewer around while the interviewer asks questions), and focus group discussions. So with these highly informative methods, what is the value of PO to the study?

Surveys and interviews tend to capture respondents' interpretation and perception of their own behaviour and attitudes that are top-of-mind, which are important. However, the mundane, the regular, and the less-than-noteworthy, often overlooked in exercises such as surveys and interviews, are important to note as well. Neighbourhood life, I would come to see, revolves a lot around the mundane – groceries, chores, *dabao-ing*[2] meals, dog walks. This does not mean they are insignificant. Furthermore, in the thick of daily life and in their natural settings, people cannot help but be themselves, which is thus telling of behaviour and attitudes they embody and enact subconsciously.

Our study focuses on the everyday lived experience of residents, including both physical and social aspects of neighbourhood life. Moving into the neighbourhood, I get to experience the neighbourhood at all times of the day, on weekdays and weekends, to walk through and inhabit spaces as a neighbourhood local, to recognise and be recognised by other neighbourhood regulars. I gain a better understanding of the implications of neighbourhood design and events on residents' living experience.

Further, being a resident in the neighbourhood grants access to important community members and groups not captured in the other parts of the study, such as the estate cleaners, volunteer groups, and shopkeepers. These "key informants" understand the community from unique and insightful perspectives allowing for a fuller understanding of the community apart from just its residents.

[2] To *dabao* is to take away food (as opposed to eating in).

Ethics in Ethnography

A note for ethnographic research, it is standard practice for researchers to inform interlocutors they are conducting research. It is deemed unethical to proceed to engage in-depth conversation or to begin a relationship with an informant for the purposes of research without their knowledge. However, passing exchanges (e.g., someone asking for directions, or chatting briefly with someone waiting in line with you) do not typically require explanation of the research. I do not walk up to strangers at the playground and tell them about my research, though quite often in my experience, when I strike up a conversation with neighbours, my occupation comes up and it is an easy segue into the research. As a general rule if someone becomes a regular conversant, if a personal relationship is formed or is expected to be formed, I inform them of my research around the neighbourhood.

Building Rapport

Colleagues have asked how the awareness of my status as a researcher changes my interlocutors' behaviours or attitudes toward me. Do residents become wary of me or how they behave around me once they realise they are a part of my research?

In *All Our Kin*, anthropologist Carol Stack describes how she, a middle-class white woman, came to be accepted in a low-income black community. Clifford Geertz, in his *Notes on the Balinese Cockfight*, recounts how he had gained acceptance in the village community after he had joined the locals in a mad rush to escape getting caught at a police raid. He could have easily exploited his status of "researcher" and pulled out the proper documentation to avoid questioning and repercussions, but instead chose to react as locals did. In both instances, the researchers' demonstrations of their earnest engagement and solidarity with locals were crucial entry points to the community.

I experienced something similar when I had joined a neighbourhood volunteer group and contacted the person in charge via WhatsApp to inform him that I wanted to volunteer and was also a researcher studying the neighbourhood. He seemed a little apprehensive at first and told me I could come down to chat with him and stay for the morning session. When I showed up for my first volunteering event, I could sense some wariness as I explained the project to him, but eventually he told me where I could help out and continued managing the event. I was not new to volunteering at such events and followed directions from more seasoned volunteers. It seemed that throughout the event he and the other volunteers grew more comfortable with and accepting of my presence, since I had shown I was willing to put in the work as a regular volunteer would, and not just sit observing at the sidelines with pen and paper in hand. I continued to volunteer monthly and even at some ad-hoc events. Though I know my interlocutors are always conscious of my status as a researcher (they sometimes ask how my research is going), I also notice some interlocutors have grown comfortable with speaking more freely about personal subjects with me, and I was very much included in the casual conversations that arose.

In other cases, as in my opening vignette, my role as a researcher is not as salient as that of a neighbour. My neighbour recalled we had met previously under my capacity as a researcher, but she still viewed me predominantly as a neighbour and spoke to me about neighbourly things. We still occasionally exchange food and other items, and chat when we bump into each other.

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This aspect of rapport-building is particularly important for studies that deal with vulnerable, underground, or discriminated communities as they tend to be understudied for these exact reasons and oftentimes are at odds with and at the mercy of authorities, which can cause distrust towards researchers, who oftentimes appear similar to the authorities.

discriminated communities as they tend to be understudied for these exact reasons and oftentimes are at odds with and at the mercy of authorities, which can cause distrust towards researchers, who oftentimes appear similar to the authorities. Rapport and trust are built over time, and some interlocutors may be more wary about the researcher status than others. But the main tenet of it is this: I am not *pretending* to be a “neighbour” or “volunteer” *just so* I can access communities to collect data for my research. Instead, as Zhi Wei expounds in another article, the ethnographer aims to grasp the meanings of *things* (actions, events, relationships) in the ways that members of the studied community understand them, and this is done through experiencing them first-hand.

Then, what makes what I am doing different to another resident who moves into the neighbourhood and joins a volunteer group? Evidently, merely experiencing what my neighbours experience is not enough. It is the work of the researcher to sense-make. The participant is also an observer – of others’ and their own actions, interactions, interpretations, and reactions. The work of the researcher is to be conscious of and switch between these two modes of participant and observer. Switching between these roles is often possible because of the researcher’s identity as both an “insider” and an “outsider”. However this comes with a whole host of difficulties that many have written about. As there is much literature that can be found discussing this in more depth, I instead turn to understanding the implications of grappling with my insider-outsider identity in the following sections.

Power and Privilege in Ethnography

An important principle in ethnographic methods is recognising and acknowledging the power dynamics between the researcher and the researched. This is especially pertinent when researchers engage with lower-resourced communities. In his *Knowing Dil Das*, Joseph Alter contends with his role as a highly educated, white man whose parents had been Christian missionaries writing about a “low-caste, Himalayan peasant”, against the backdrop of a high-altitude hill station in India that had been set up “for elite recreation”. Even the act of writing about Dil Das, who was an illiterate basket-weaver, poses many questions about the relationship between researcher and subject. As Alter puts it, “[The book] deals directly with the moral ambiguity of writing and living in a field of power where, despite intimacy, self and other are not equal”.

I occupy multiple positions of privilege in Singapore society. I am kept wary of this fact as a participant observer who is both living life alongside my interlocutors while fully maintaining my past experiences and the privileges I embody as an English-speaking, college-educated Chinese woman with a full-time job. Though these facets of my identity are perhaps not always immediately apparent, they bleed into the things I do or say or the ways I do or say them, even what and how I think and feel. It is thus imperative that I recognise that though I may occupy the same physical spaces as my interlocutors, my experience of Singapore and the neighbourhood may differ greatly from those in the community I am studying, and my worldview is consequently different from theirs. Sometimes, I may even be unaware of how my identity and embodied privileges affect others, and it is important to also recognise the limits of my own ability to see and understand from the perspective of another. These confrontations are oftentimes uncomfortable, but necessary in work and research where the worker or researcher holds more social power than the client or the researched.

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At the end of the research, I will be returning fully to my life outside of this neighbourhood, and I am keenly aware that my interlocutors do not have this option. This means the complications, annoyances, and hardships I face during fieldwork are temporary for me but a constant reality for my neighbours. Being aware of this fact is pertinent to developing empathy when interacting with, writing about, and creating policy for lower-resourced communities in particular.

Challenging pre-conceived assumptions

"… the qualitative researcher's perspective is perhaps a paradoxical one: it is to be acutely tuned-in to the experiences and meaning systems of others—to indwell—and at the same time to be aware of how one's own biases and preconceptions may be influencing what one is trying to understand." (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994)

Reflexivity is being aware of the various pre-conceived notions and biases researchers bring into fieldwork and actively and continually working against these. I entered the field cognisant of the research objective of understanding residents' living experience in this relatively new neighbourhood. The definition of neighbourhood is a critical part of this question, and it was obvious to us, the research team, that the neighbourhood consisted of those housing blocks, shops, playgrounds, pavilions, and carparks outlined in the map of the neighbourhood. However, as I spoke to residents and observed the usage of the neighbourhood more, I realised that "the neighbourhood" is not bound by the same definitions we had assumed. I had been thinking and talking about the neighbourhood as a singular, bounded entity with the dotted lines of my mental map determining the area and scope of what I would be studying. But the invisible lines assigned to this neighbourhood had little to do with the social realities of my neighbours.

I had assumed that the interactions I would observe and be a part of would largely be those with my neighbours, other residents of the neighbourhood, and perhaps sometimes with staff members of the various shops. I assumed the social landscape of the neighbourhood would be reserved for the population we had surveyed and interviewed – residents. However, quite early on, I realised that the social landscape of the neighbourhood is not nearly as clear cut as we had initially thought. From the retirees who practice *taichi* in the pavilions in the morning, to the uncles from the blocks across the street mingling at the coffeeshop, to the students from the nearby secondary school playing in the hard court, to the labourers chatting and smoking by the trellis after a long day of work, and the youth who savour the privacy afforded them by the sky garden in the cool of the evening – they were not residents, at least not all of them. But they are as much a part of neighbourhood life as residents themselves and certainly affected the social landscape and how residents interacted with and moved around the neighbourhood.

Through this, I learned that the neighbourhood is not only unbound by the lines assigned to them on maps by city planners, but it is also organic and changing alongside its constituents (both residents and non-residents) as they begin new routines, form new relationships, and respond and adapt to new restrictions. It became clear that we had to approach our findings not just from PO, but the surveys, interviews, and other components with these contextualising insights in mind. It is the work of the ethnographer to recognise that she is herself a filter through which events, interactions, and actions are interpreted, and to be mindful of her own biases throughout all stages of the research. Though sometimes uncomfortable, challenging my previous conception of the neighbourhood brought about a much richer understanding of the lived experiences within the neighbourhood and how to situate and make sense of what I observed in context.

Concluding Remarks

So, what makes an ethnographer? We have ascertained that merely moving into a new neighbourhood does not qualify as participant observation. Surer still, calling oneself a researcher, going into a field site, and collecting data for a project with clearly defined research goals too does not an ethnographer make. Crucial to the role of the ethnographer is the openness to experience other social realities and recognise them as valid, the constant

Crucial to the role of the ethnographer is the openness to experience other social realities and recognise them as valid, the constant reflexivity to confront what it means to be both "self" and "other", and the practice of challenging previously uncontested beliefs – yours and those otherwise established.

reflexivity to confront what it means to be both "self" and "other", and the practice of challenging previously uncontested beliefs – yours and those otherwise established.

My reflections on my fieldwork and experiences conducting participant observation have shown that it is a method that requires constant re-imagining and re-calibrating. The researchers, as the research tool, must recognise and acknowledge their place in the community they study. In practicing reflexivity, we may understand better how inherent biases and power differentials could possibly affect interactions, events, reactions and can even influence their own interpretations of these. It could be valuable to consider then how these lessons from participant observation need not be confined to the realm of anthropology and applied only to projects that employ extended ethnographic fieldwork. There possibly are principles and ways of thinking about ethnographic research that can be suitably applied to community research, social policy, and social planning.

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