

Structural Epiphenomenon

Introduction:

The introspective nature displayed through the structure of writing in Philippe Bourgois' work *In Search of Respect Selling Crack in El Barrio* is a crucial component to the success achieved regarding the authors overarching goal "to humanize the public enemies of the United States without sanitizing or glamorizing them." (Bourgois, 325) Bourgois' immersion into El Barrio in East Harlem, his commitment and time spent to understanding reasoning, resulting in his vulnerably written ethnography allows the reader a sense of comfort in the emotional reactions that this work elicits. This honesty of personal reaction by Bourgois allows the audience a better chance in gaining deeper insight while being guided through the previously repressed details of the resulting dynamics of systematic structural components that deepen inequalities of race, class, and gender in the United States.

Part One:

Bourgois states in his acknowledgements that he is sure he was "deeply shaped" by the influences of his parents. He attributes his commitment to documenting institutionalized racism in his lifetime especially in his hometown due to witnessing his mother violate apartheid weekly during the 1980s through the 1990s along with accounts his father exposed him to a bicultural household growing up in New York City. (Bourgois, xv-xvi) He believes these details sensitized him pushing his curiosity to question the causes of apartheid and violence. Bourgois takes the introduction of his work stating his desire "to write a book on the experience of poverty and ethnic segregation in the heart of one of the most expensive cities in the world." His research begins in the spring of 1985 when he and his wife move into East Harlem "El Barrio".

His initial focus was the entire underground (untaxed) economy. Bourgois reveals his initial ignorance to the emerging drug crack cocaine that later came to encompass the underlying theme to his research. During what can be understood as an initial stage of participant observation (WEF, 21-28) Bourgois recounts over the whole of his first year living in El Barrio that he observed friends, neighbors, and acquaintances all fall victim to a varying array of involvement in the multibillion-dollar crack- cocaine enterprise concurrently while murder rates hit an all time high in the projects across the street from him. (Bourgois, 1) According to various qualitative findings he states that well over half of the residents of El Barrio should not have been able to meet their subsistence needs.

Yet he observed that people although visibly in poverty were not starving and had adequate clothes. This disjointed statistical information was what Bourgois was motivated by to dig into the “alternative income-generating strategies that were consuming so much of the time and energy of the young men and women sitting on the stoops and parked cars in front of my [his] tenet.” (Bourgois, 3) Bourgois does not elaborate on how he designed or strategized a plan to make contact with the characters that later came to be key components to his insight. One can surmise his obtaining residency within the environment he wished to study may be enough explanation in his view.

His opening few pages begin by showing us the high level of comfort he has already achieved within the group while still exposing his lack of what he later explains as *cultural capital* that almost costs him his acceptance into the world of crack dealers and their family's. (Bourgois, 19-20) Bourgois on a number of times self-reflects on his own misconceptions when entering the scene early on attributing this to possibly his success in being welcomed in while shedding some insight to his audience into his approaches during those early stages of contact.

(Bourgois, 41-44) One of the largest ethical issues Bourgois faced was his approach and decision to include the excruciatingly painful realities of adolescent gang rape, and pregnant crack users.

(Bourgois, 198-209) He throughout his accounts makes small statements acknowledging his own position on the events before him. In using his own personal reactions while respecting the “truth” of the situation the audience gains valuable perspectives. (WEF, 24-25)

In gathering information by immersing himself into the daily lives of the crack dealers of El Barrio Bourgois makes use of tape recordings and in-depth, open-ended interviewing as his prime source of data gathering, which he makes ample use of when later writing his text. These methods allowed Bourgois the flexibility in navigating a foreign environment. (Schensul et. al) He does not share what his methods for keeping such a large amount of field data organized and how he went about over the years building his conclusions.

Part Two:

The major strengths in Bourgois’ work are his display with regards to the narration choices about perspective and the variety with whom he includes. “Recruiting appropriate and inspirational participants is critical. Attention to gender, ethnicity, and class balance is crucial for research.” (Step 3 Identify People to Speak With, 40) This method is strengthened by his firm commitment to representing members’ meaning. Bourgois through his ability to shift between aspects of multiple voices, focused third-person, omniscient, and first and third person variations allows for an exciting narrative. (WEF, 93-109) More importantly however it provides insight into multiple angles of a complex and at certain points harsh dynamics to understand let alone accept. The extensive usage of direct quotes along with detailed mannerisms sets the stage for a better picture for the reader. The sections often times are written in a way where a question or situation is introduced in the beginning of a chapter, a dialog is set in place showing Bourgois’

probes and common question of “how did that make you feel?” leading to explanation, and reaction follow to end with, a reasoning for the dynamics at hand. (Bourgois, 175-212) In including sections that cover sensitive topics that Bourgois admits to his own outrage and dismay allows the reader to feel an assurance that even though the goal is not to “villainize the victim” that this behavior is still upsetting and wrong. His representation of his own disapproving reactions in conversing with Primo and Candy allow for a side of reasoning to be explained that opens the readers accessibility to a relatable mindset. His strategic positionality of Primo’s dialog compared to Caesars (Bourgois, 289-291) is another way he uses the dialog to show that this “inner street culture” is “not a coherent, conscious universe of political opposition but, rather, a spontaneous set of rebellious practices that in the long term have emerged as an oppositional style” in the attempts to survive. (Bourgois, 8)

Bourgois also importantly approaches his work in a way where he sets the practical problem, which was to address the implications of inner-city street culture, his motivation was statistical evidence as well as the on going issues regarding how to handle to poverty-stricken areas. His research questions formed into the clear issue of evidence showing that if drugs were a more viable income for these populations why where so many seeking legal employment, which takes the next step into understanding the dynamics that cause this phenomenon, the research problem. His various studies conclude the structural constrictions on race, class, and gender, which he then proposes long and short-term solutions to. This structure provides the audience not with just an issue but also ways to go about new ways of implementing change. (Booth et. al)

Ethically although I believe his ability to live in his environment was necessary to the way he was able to obtain his access and information, I question the impacts it had on his own family and psychological health. I am left with the question of how he dealt with the impact of

such explicit recounts of violence. Due to his expansive time in the field I would have also liked to understand his methods on transcribing and storing his data.

Conclusion:

The structure of this ethnographic work through its thematic narrative is a large component of the bridge that currently is being fashioned to lessen the gap between the academic world of anthropology and the public. If the social sciences and the issues we study cannot be translated in an affective manner than it has failed in its reason for existence. In Bourgois dedication to avoiding the sanitation of poverty while still maintaining these perceived “perpetrators” as victims the current idea of who is at fault for poverty is being contested. Although he notes he is the person who has the final say in how this work is constructed, his use of direct quotes and the personal level he achieved as they display, gives weight to the importance of Goffman’s statements insisting the field researcher subjects themselves, in complete totality to the environment that is being studied in order to “penetrate their circle of response to their social situation, or their work situation, or their ethnic situation.” (WEF, 3)

Works Cited

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Step 3 Identify People to Speak With – Class Article (Cannot find information for source)