

# The Indirect Approach: How to Discover Context When Studying Marginal Youth

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## Abstract

How do we do good guesswork at meaning if our informant lives in a secret world? Doing research often includes awkward moments, unforeseen events, and incidents. Here we name some of these “happenstances.” We suggest that happenstances may offer a solution to the problem of meaning discrepancies: The happenstance is one of those moments that allow the researcher to temporarily bridge into the meanings of his or her informant. We have carried out research on marginal youth. In both of our studies, happenstances have turned interview situations upside down. Here we identify how these unforeseen events provided us with valuable insights into our informants’ contexts. We conclude by addressing how these happenstances, though they appear to be a product of pure accident, may become part of a systematic approach in discovering contextual knowledge.

## Keywords

ethnographic design, participant observation, interviewing, happenstance, marginal youth, immigrant youth, youth culture

## Introduction

The social researcher who studies youth in settings characterized by marginality will be familiar with classical texts such as *Street Corner Society* by William Foot Whyte (1981) and *Learning to Labour* by Paul Willis (1977). Because of such works, we know how expressions of deviant behavior should not be reduced to individual idiosyncrasies, but instead be interpreted as learned social behavior shared by larger collectives. In other words, we know that to understand marginality we have to discover what makes the actions meaningful for those we study. To grasp meaning, students relying on participant observations have stressed the importance of placing “elements within their cultural contexts” (Borofsky, 1994, p. 13). Participant observation is no longer considered “the gold standard” of social research (Atkinson & Coffey, 2003). Some researchers, such as Jenny Hockey, argue that we do research in “social environment ( . . . ) unamenable to the fieldwork methods described in the classic monographs of traditional non-Western anthropology” (Hockey, 2002, p. 209). Because of this, both the ethnographers and the qualitative researchers among us rely on their ability to engage in talk those we study to discover cultural contexts. The concept “context” is being debated in qualitative studies; see, for instance, Dilley (1999) and Crapanzano (2001). Here, we follow a core tenant of ethnography since the writing culture debates (Rees, 2008) that we need to interpret social action as coached in thick descriptions

that makes the actions meaningful to the actors themselves (Geertz, 1973).

When we study the youth in marginal settings, we need to understand how marginality forms their cultural context. “Marginality” is an elusive concept. It is hard to pinpoint an exact content, and it is often used to distinguish those that are different from “us,” the deviant different from the normal (Cullen & Pretes, 2000). At the same time, marginality expresses a cultural dynamic rooted in social inequalities that results in antagonistic and sometimes even secret collective expressions (Gelder, 2005; Järvinen, 2009; Williams, 2011).

Many researchers conduct research with great success by guessing the contextual framework guiding the lives of informants living within secret worlds. However, how do they succeed? What exactly is it that allows them to do excellent guesswork? How do they make us, the readers of their texts, recognize the novelty in their interpretations, their genuine grasp at context? More importantly, how do they manage to

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bridge the cultural context of their interlocutors in ways that their interlocutors recognize and respect?

Phillipe Bourgois (1995) did extensive field research for his monograph *In Search of Respect*, a modern classic on urban marginality. What made him able to relate to street demeanor and capture how it is expressed as a plausible individual interpretation of a collective situation in a fashion understandable to both his informants and his readers? We think that it was partly due to moments where the cultural contexts of his informants stood out in antagonistic tension with the frames surrounding his own (academic) settings; and when that comes across unwittingly, we may call them a happenstance. Such as in this instant: Bourgois pulled out a newspaper clip (Bourgois, 1995, p. 19). He offered it to Ray, who owned the crack house he was studying. The situation forced Ray to read it out for the others to hear. The clip carried a photo of Bourgois together with a famous talk show host. Bourgois tells his readers that he was mimicking street skills trying to solidify his research position, bragging on about his achievements. Instead, he unwittingly exposed Ray's illiteracy for his world to see. Bourgois almost lost his own fieldwork position. Ray left in rage. However, it allowed Bourgois a glimpse into Ray's demeanor connected to deficiencies in other circumstances. Bourgois learned a lesson that what seemed as dysfunctional violence, in reality, was integral to running an illegitimate drug business. Here, we are concerned about similar surprising turns of events occurring in interview settings. Though they are hardly ever as dramatic as the experience that Bourgois had, we want to analyze how these turns of events may permit the author to go beyond the text produced in the interview, to see more of the context of the interview as the informant understands it. Could it be that through happenstance we may manage to get answers to questions we never thought to ask?

Our aim here is to pinpoint what a happenstance is in qualitative research. The argument we present is the result of a discussion between the authors, an anthropologist, and a sociologist. We premised our discussion on a shared scientific position of doing interpretative efforts of the social phenomena we study in order to do our best guesswork possible of the frames or contexts that render the phenomena meaningful. Or to paraphrase Geertz, the trick is to figure out what the devil our informants (or interlocutors) think they are up to—"by searching out and analyzing the symbolic forms (. . .) people actually represented themselves to themselves and to one another" (Geertz, 1983, p. 58). Hence, we share a methodological stance where we try to address our informants in conversation in much the same way as the approach James P. Spradley (1979) labeled "ethnographic interviews." These are conversations where both questions and answers ideally originate within the cultural meaning system of the informant (Spradley, 1979, p. 83). We would like to come away from these conversations hoping we are able to interpret the stories we learn from our interlocutors in ways that reflect both their ways of telling them and the kind of audience we make up receiving them. We do not want to brush aside the particulars of these conversations/interviews for the benefit of a general theory (Bochner, 2001). Our aim is to

produce accounts that reveal how individual lives become meaningful within mutually conflicting contexts within a larger system that includes both the informant and researcher.

Bourgois demonstrated, in the sequence quoted above, that when we do research in marginal settings, the symbolic forms or meanings we want to study are secret and to some extent antagonistic and therefore not readily available. This discrepancy in meanings remains with us, as the quote also shows, in settings and situations where we have established good rapport. The researcher and the informant approach each other from within antagonistic contexts. We want to find out what happenstances do to our way of being the audience in the encounters we have with our informants. Could the happenstance offer new ways to learn about their world? Is the happenstance, once it occurs, an occasion we should be on the lookout for because these situations will accord us a kind of audience where we may break away (however temporarily) from the limitations caused by the secrecy and antagonistic ordering of context framing going on between us? To press the matter: Does the happenstance allow us to break free of the meaning discrepancies and permit us to become new storytellers to the story unfolded in our presence (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009)?

We will present two interview situations that each of us believes were happenstances. In both interviews, the kind of rapport that we were developing with our interlocutors changed in dramatic ways by turns of events within the interview. What we want to do is to explore the sudden change around of the interview setting that we both experienced for its value to our interpretative guesswork. We end the discussion with the following question: Can we turn our experiences with happenstances into a systematic approach that we may use in future methodological designs? We hope that the discussion may contribute to our ability to get answers to questions we do not ask in research settings replete with secrecy and animosity.

## Case I

The first happenstance took place during Eide's interview with Samatar, a young Somali. He was then 19 years old. The interview was part of a study on unaccompanied refugee minors coming to Norway (Eide, 2000, 2005, 2007). The study aimed at documenting the youth's living conditions and coping strategies in the refugee situation after approximately 10 years' stay in Norway. Samatar was one of the 25 youths being interviewed in the project.<sup>1</sup> During the interview, Samatar talked about traumatic war experiences and his forced separation from his family. Samatar appeared to Eide as a young man whose childhood was influenced by extreme vulnerability and fear. His traumas continued to haunt him even after he left Somalia. He was 9 years old when he arrived in Norway, and he came without his parents. Instead, he was accompanied by his elder sister and her husband. He stayed with them upon arriving. Samatar talked about his childhood, and Eide understood that he was talking to a young man who was in the midst of severe behavioral conflicts involving him in criminal activities and

overt aggressions even toward those closest to him. His sister had a hard time with him, and Samatar had to move into foster care when he was 13. It was the first of many breakups that Samatar would suffer after departing from Somalia. He has had a long succession of foster homes, orphanages, and unsupported accommodations.

Interviewing Samatar was a challenge in many ways. As a researcher working with a number of unaccompanied refugee minors, Eide was experienced with trajectories with vulnerability and fear contextualizing the stories of childhood and adolescence similar to the one he received from Samatar. The story Samatar told made Eide deal with a mixture of depression and indifference. Eide noticed how a mood of sadness and an atmosphere of hushed voices developed.

This is when the happenstance occurred. Eide was following his questionnaire guide, and at that point in the interview, he used to ask his interlocutors about their leisure activities. The idea was to find out more about the youths' identifications and identity handling by exploring their interests and affiliations in this area. The interview was taking place where Samatar was living. Eide had noticed music albums in the shelves behind Samatar and decided to ask him about his music choices as a way to introduce leisure activities into their conversation. Samatar did not respond much as he was asked about African music as well as popular music in general. Getting hardly any response to his inquiries, Eide asked Samatar what music he would listen to. After all, the music albums told a story of their own. Here is an excerpt from the dialog that followed:

- Samatar: I listen to a kind of soul . . . R&B<sup>2</sup> and rap music.  
 Eide: You don't listen to Somali or ethnic music from other African countries?  
 Samatar: Somali music and American rap, not African music. I especially like 2Pac.  
 Eide: I have a son approximately the same age as you having a stock of several CDs of 2Pac.  
 Samatar: Do you have a son?  
 Eide: Yes, he is now 17 years. I don't like this kind of music, and I must admit that I fail to see the artistic value. 2Pac is nothing but noise I could do without. I find his senseless lyrics little more than a succession of expressions like "motherfucker" and "junk speed."

At this point, the interview setting changed abruptly. Samatar stopped answering questions in a hushed voice. Was he angry or was he just engaged by the topic that now was directing the conversation? Eide found it hard to tell and he had become engaged, as was seen in his choice to pass judgment. In a clear and firm voice, Samatar responded to Eide's derogatory comment about 2Pac, trying to explain what 2Pac really was about in the following excerpt from their interview:

- Samatar: Those gangs in California and New York were fighting, west coast against east coast . . . Sometimes I think 2Pac is swearing too much using texts like motherfucker and so on . . . but there is also some texts about human treatment, how to behave

and why they were fighting . . . Those guys were just like the B and A gangs of Oslo.<sup>3</sup> It is all about money and in the east coast they are poor, like people from Grünerløkka (Oslo), while on the west coast they have money and power . . . sometimes they shoot each other. 2Pac, he is Black power, he supports the poor.

Samatar was eagerly giving Eide an engaged view of the reality and meaning of the texts in rap music. The interview continued, but Samatar was setting the agenda and Eide no longer framed the questions.

## Case II

Aki had an immigrant background. Aki's parents came from the northwestern part of Asia. Aki arrived when he was very young and did all his schooling in Norway. Aki was 21 at the time of the interviews. Aki was a key informant in Moshuus's study of Oslo's street worlds, in which he explored the roles and relations open to participants with immigrant background in the local heroin circles (Moshuus, 2004, 2005a, 2005b, 2010). The data collection for the study took place mainly during the period from 1998 to 2001. The ethnographic focus of the study was a small heroin marketplace and shooting gallery<sup>4</sup> operating out of an abandoned house nicknamed "Olagate."<sup>5</sup> Moshuus first heard about Aki there.

At the time Moshuus met with Aki, he was in jail waiting for his second trial in relation to charges of an attempted homicide. The coming trial and the events leading up to it was the topic for the conversations. In that trial, Aki was sentenced to several years of imprisonment. The verdict stated that the attempt was bordering on premeditated murder. Aki's gang had surprised their victim outside a pizza parlor in Oslo. Other gang members spotted the victim first. The gang had been on the lookout for him for sometime. The conflict had been developing since the victim and a member of Aki's gang had been in a fistfight. Later, the victim, together with friends, had spotted Aki alone one night and given him a severe beating as retaliation. Aki carried a knife, and the gang was determined that Aki should execute the victim. However, things never went according to the plan. The gang rounded up the victim outside the pizza parlor. Before anyone had time to think about what to do next, Aki drew the knife. Several onlookers observed how Aki savagely attacked the victim. The victim was lucky. The knife did not cause severe wounds, and in the commotion, he managed to make a narrow escape. Why did the event proceed as it did? Why did Aki not wait? Why did he attack his opponent on the street with many so witnesses present? Moshuus did not get Aki's own reflections of why he deviated from the original plan. He was willing to talk about it, but the questions Moshuus asked did not come from within Aki's context (Spradley, 1979).

This was when the happenstance took place. By chance, Moshuus had asked Aki about music. Aki started talking about 2Pac Shakur. However, Moshuus had never heard of 2Pac.

Aki asked Moshuus to return with all he could find about him on the Internet. He did. Moshuus was surprised by all the hits he got while searching the web. He returned to Aki and passed on the lyrics of several of 2Pac's songs as well as an interview.

The following is the first excerpt from the first conversation after Moshuus returned with his findings. During the interview, Aki started lecturing Moshuus on the topic:

- Moshuus: It is exciting, your relation to 2Pac. Where . . . where do have that from? I mean, why?
- Aki: Well, I . . . 2Pac has, fucking hell, been around for a very long time, from 1990 he has been around, 89–90.
- Moshuus: How did you hear about him?
- Aki: I didn't know about him before 97; no, 96.
- Moshuus: How did you come across him?
- Aki: He came with . . . Together with Dr. Dre; he is a famous rapper.
- Moshuus: Where from?
- Aki: Dr. Dre, he is a known rapper.
- Moshuus: Yes.
- Aki: He is from the west, right? Westside or California. And then there was Eazy E. He was my time. I remember 2Pac wasn't that well known in Norway; he was from New York, right? And what happened in Norway, that was Westside. NWA<sup>6</sup> was the group. Niggaz with Attitude. That was like Eazy E and Ice Cube and Dr. Dre and them people there. And they were very popular in Norway. It was like this provocative music. They cursed the police. At least Eazy E; he was the boss of NWA; he did what he wanted, right? His father was a mayor or something. He did as he pleased, beating people, killing people and got away with it. In fact he is the toughest rapper I ever heard about; he is the toughest rapper. Today it is Dr. Dre, the toughest, you know? Eazy E in his time, he was the toughest there was, in concert, right?
- Moshuus: ECE?<sup>7</sup>

Aki was well rehearsed on Gangsta. He was happy for the occasion to make use of his knowledge. Moshuus showed his growing interest by what he had brought with him from his searches on the web. At the same time, he demonstrated a complete lack of knowledge. He had never heard of "Eazy E," and in his confusion, he asked Aki about "ECE," revealing how little he knew. The conversations that followed placed the trial in a new context.

## What Is a Happenstance?

It is intriguing to try to define what it is. In both the situations we present here, the conversations or interviews we were having were turned upside down. However, what exactly happened?

In Eide's case, it was the interview itself that was turned upside down, and in Moshuus's case, the change occurred from one interview to the next. We believe William Foot Whyte may

illuminate what this is about. The later editions (1981) of *Street Corner Society* include an appendix with the explicit purpose to explain Foot Whyte's methods of research. In these passages, he details his first entries into Cornerville and describes how he got to establish a relationship with his key informant "Doc." He also addresses the problems that researchers doing interviews face. Foote Whyte met Doc through a social worker. Doc showed him around. Yet, Foote Whyte was unsure if "hanging on the street corner was an active enough process to be dignified by the term 'research.' Perhaps I should be asking these men questions" (Whyte, 1981, p. 303). Therefore, he did. He followed Doc to a gambling joint. There, he listened while another man was telling Doc how he had organized his gambling activity. However, when Foote Whyte intervened to ask the gambler a question on the subject, he not only would not answer but even stopped telling his tale altogether. We benefit from hanging around, earning trust by spending time together. Foote Whyte put it this way: "When I established my position on the street corner, the data came to me without very active efforts on my part" (1981, p. 303). Neither Samatar nor Aki stopped talking. However, we both shared with Foote Whyte a situation where the questions we asked did not belong to the cultural meaning system of the informant (Spradley, 1979). Then something happened. The nature of that "something" is very important to understand. Why did the conversation change? The point of the matter is that we all need some measure of trust to establish an oral rapport, but it is fair to think that trust in itself is not always enough.

In ethnographic studies, oral rapport comes as "unsolicited" or "solicited oral accounts" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 99). The unsolicited accounts are those we do not ask for, but receive indirectly, for instance, when we happen to overhear conversations or when we make observations while being present. They are vital for our ability to produce questions that result in solicited oral accounts. Jacobs (1999) did a study on crack dealers. He used an "open-ended interview format," making "interviews flow much like a conversation, creating a comfort zone between researcher and respondent that facilitates collection of valid and reliable data" (Jacobs, 1999, p. 21). Jacobs was probably getting a better rapport because he mixed the interview with a more familiar and informal setting. Spradley (1979, p. 85) writes about the need to find ways to formulate descriptive questions rooted in the informant's settings. Doing the interview in a familiar frame may help us get closer to the daily routine of things. Eide had not talked to Samatar before, but he framed his questions in a similar fashion to Spradley's descriptive approach, using the accumulated interview experience with other youths in similar situations. Besides, Samatar had invited Eide into his dwelling for the interview, making the conversation take place in his setting. Moshuus did a string of interviews with Aki. They took place in an apparently unfriendly place: in prison. But the actual place was very private and part of a leisure area outside of the regular surveillance and control routine. More importantly perhaps, Moshuus had unsolicited reports about Aki from field research that helped their talk favorably. We should also add that we

were helped in both these cases by getting in touch through contacts whom both informants trusted (i.e., snowball sampling; Morgan, 2008). Yet, this alone did not explain the turn around, the role reversal: The nature of the something that happened.

We introduced happenstances with a reference to Bourgois's work (Bourgois, 1995) and the challenge of marginality on research.<sup>8</sup> In Bourgois's study, marginality is intertwined with the empirical presentation itself. It was in his account of how he accidentally exposed Ray's illiteracy to his world. Ray was in a good mood. He invited his followers and employers at his crack house to a round of beers. He even promised to order lobster takeout for everyone from a local restaurant. Ray invited Bourgois to the more expensive brand of beer he was having while he was treating the others present to a cheaper one (Bourgois, 1995, p. 20). He handed over the newspaper clip. Ray was exposed and left in rage. Les Back (2007) has provided an anecdote that may help us pinpoint the happenstance in this. It concerns the British Immigration and Nationality Directorate that ran a very tight security because of a number of bomb alerts following the terror attack in London on July 7, 2005. The security discovered a large number of immigration applications containing white powder. They alarmed the directorate to the possible presence of letter bombs. The alarms came to nothing; no actual letter bombs were found. In many Asian communities, it is common to add flowers to correspondence for good luck. A number of Asians sprinkled their immigration applications with flower petals. By the time the application reached the directorate, the flowers had turned to dust. It makes Back (2007, p. 30) conclude that "Prayers [were] interpreted as bombs."

Life at the margins, like immigration, which was Back's concern, is always defined from the perspective of the powerful, even to the extreme where measures done to procure a bit of a luck wind up interpreted as (potential) terrorist actions. But the anecdote also reminds us that this structural impasse or divide existing between us does not go away when we, as researchers, do studies the other way around. If we stay with the anecdote, Bourgois, similar to the Asian adding flowers to his or her application for visa, handed over the newspaper clip to Ray; he was hoping that its content would solidify his street credentials with the crack house boss. Bourgois wanted to prove that he was not a police informer or any other form of outsider; he was (almost) like them, his informants. We all engage in similar efforts to solidify our research position. Most of the time our labor is wasted as the flower petals that ended up as dust. We may accept gestures such as being served the more expensive brand of beer, hoping the exclusivity of the gesture will benefit us—in the long run. But, don't these gestures set us apart from those whom we study? This is what—in contrast—made the event that followed special. Ray fumbled with the newspaper clip, not unlike the security at the directorate did with the remains of the flowers. The incident deviated from the course of the anecdote because here the suspected bomb exploded! The paper clip revealed Ray's illiteracy; it made him leave. The incident brought out into the open the

presence of the structural divide—so that everyone present had to notice. This then is the something of the happenstance. The expensive brand of beer had been a discreet reminder of how marginality normally reproduces a divide in our everyday research situation.

Of course, we all experience our research interrupted by accidents that bring us nowhere. But when it does, the interruption works because it forces marginality into view. The happenstance, once it occurs, is one of those moments that make the marginality working at the research relation visible to us within the research situation itself. The unforeseen event, the mishap, the sudden introduction of a new topic, whatever it is, it works because it interrupts the ongoing divides and discrepancies between us in the research setting. The interruption may allow all of us some kind of reorientation of what we were doing up until the incident occurred. We know it made Bourgois's informant leave in rage, but it also set off a number of conversations with the other informants present when it happened on topics related to that which separated him from his informants in ways he might never have had opportunity to go into had the incident not occurred (Bourgois, 1995, p. 22).

The answer to what the happenstance is can therefore not be a clear-cut definition. The happenstance may be grasped in similar unfolding unforeseen events taking different shapes in different research settings, as in Bourgois's accidental exposure of Ray's illiteracy or in our two very different encounters with Samatar and Aki.<sup>9</sup> These unforeseen events may threaten to disrupt things between us, but they share an important similarity: The events allowed us a vantage point from which to produce new insights. If this is so, it seems as if these unforeseen events make the research settings very personal, and bring out in the open the larger picture that both unites and separates us.

## What Does a Happenstance Do?

The happenstance may be that unforeseen event, the incident that is both personal and bringing the big picture into view. But what can it do? The answer is simply this: While an accident is a waste of time, a detour that stops us from getting to where we want to go, a happenstance, in contrast, is a shortcut into a more complex view of meaning, a lucky path to extended contextual knowledge. That is a grand claim, of course. As Geertz pointed out, any particular guesswork at meaning can be nothing more than yet another turn of the hermeneutic circle (Geertz, 1973). In this sense, our claim is but one more interpretation. But a happenstance allows us to guess at context knowledge from a different angle compared to what we normally would do. We can compare this with the historian Alessandro Portelli's argument in the essay *The Death of Luigi Trastulli* (Portelli, 1991). Portelli recorded oral accounts of the death of a young steel worker in 1949. He discovered that his interlocutors disconnected the events from when it actually happened and retold it in relation to another 4 years later. He borrowed a distinction from Walter Benjamin (1936/1969) between an experienced event and a remembered event. The experience is limited to

the actual events that took place, whereas a remembered event is “a key to everything that happened before and after it” (Benjamin, 1936/1969 in Portelli, 1991). Portelli understood that his interlocutors provided insights into how we remember. The truth of these accounts was not in the event itself, but in “the meaning which it derived from the actors’ state of mind at the time” (Portelli, 1991, p. 15). This is what happenstance does. Happenstance allows us to catch a glimpse of our informant’s interpretative work. We are trained to discover the contexts that make what our informants say (or do) meaningful. Their individual acts are meaningful within a context in which we as researchers are visitors; we travel there, if only by auto-bus, leaving behind our home context.<sup>10</sup> Happenstance gets us to view our shared position as context travelers. We may think that these travels are our privileged effort (Sontag, 1966). This is about the, perhaps trivial, fact that we qua researchers are not the only ones to catch an autobus to change settings. But it is also about the less trivial fact that happenstance allows for glimpses into how our informants do their context travels.

The best way we may demonstrate what happenstances do is to show the reinterpretation they offered of what was going on in our two cases. Let us present our understanding of the context surrounding the two cases before and after the happenstance occurred. In the first part of the interview Eide had with Samatar, Samatar answered the questions in a voice gradually more hushed and the conversation created an atmosphere of sadness between them. Eide received an image of a trajectory full of losses and despair. Samatar’s response framed him within a context where he was a victim right from his traumatic war experiences in his country of origin up until the time of their talk, as he recounted his refugee experiences in response to the questions he received. Aki’s demeanor was sharply different. Aki was confident of his position as a leader in his milieu and this was corroborated in the accounts Moshuus had received about him at the heroin market where Aki had settled a conflict. The conversations framed off Aki as a successful gangster comparable to a well-to-do business executive.

After the happenstance, the conversations, now focusing on 2Pac, made both men appear within a very different contextualization. When Eide’s conversation with Samatar turned to 2Pac, the frame where the victim was substituted with a different one in which he qua 2Pac was retaliating, talking back, to rectify the situation. Eide quoted Samatar saying this about the institution where he used to live: “They who worked there were cheating, bending the rules, or making them up, making differential treatment. But I knew how to get back at them.” 2Pac allowed him to fight back. His resistance came at terrible costs: “Sometimes I clicked too much. I considered suicide and I thought of killing someone.” Samatar ended his narration of his institutionalization by reflecting on how close 2Pac’s life was to his own: “Sometimes I wonder if he talks about just that which happens to me . . . I don’t think I could have made it without that music.” Eide asked about Samatar’s everyday life, and the answers framed Samatar as a lonely young man disconnected and victimized. 2Pac allowed Samatar to reorganize

his past as a resistance, as him qua 2Pac fighting back at the system. 2Pac also made Aki appear within a new context, but it was not a question of a victim turned hero (or aggressor). Aki already appeared the successful executive. Aki taught Moshuus about 2Pac to provide a different framework for the attack Aki carried out on his opponent. Initially, Aki had explained the reason he was awaiting trial for charges of attempted homicide as the result of coincidence. He just happened to attack Tony in front of a large number of witnesses although the plan had been to abduct him and take him to a quiet place where they could be sure of a permanent result: the death of their opponent. Aki got into long narratives about 2Pac. 2Pac had been killed in 1996 in a drive-by shooting. This was years before our conversations. It was not Aki’s concern. On the Internet, there were persistent rumors that 2Pac was still alive. That was Aki’s concern. He was convinced that 2Pac had survived and was in hiding. First, Moshuus rubbed this off as nothing but a convenient conspiracy, kept alive by commercial interests wanting to propagate the record sales of a dead artist. Aki kept insisting on the importance of this. 2Pac was alive. 2Pac was hiding. Gradually, Moshuus understood that Aki was actively providing a different framework for their conversations. His tale of 2Pac provided a new context in which to understand his own actions. If Aki had followed his and his friends’ intentions about getting revenge, he would have become a murderer. Instead, Aki attacked in front of all his friends. Aki’s actions cost him several years in prison, but he did not lose face. Aki knew that 2Pac was dead. The rumor that he was alive was nothing but an urban legend. But the fiction about 2Pac and his resurrection was Aki’s own story. Aki did not die, but he was going away from his gang during important years of his youth; he would be in prison. At the same time, he lived on in his street world through his reputation. As the resurrected 2Pac, Aki was dead and not dead at the same time.

The happenstance provided both our cases with a complete reworking of the initial context. Samatar went from being a victim to becoming a hero, an aggressor who suffered but who also retaliated. The initial picture of Aki as someone close to being a cool business executive of the street became morally complex when he introduced 2Pac. 2Pac opened a window into how he tried to keep up a social position while not ending up as a murderer. Are these new frameworks more true or genuine than the initial ones? We do not think they are; they added complexities to the picture we were given and were valuable for our interpretations. They helped us develop cultural representations of what was going on, forming analytic concepts such as “the gangster as hero” (Moshuus, 2005a, 2005b). Other researchers used similar concepts in addressing these urban marginal settings (Lalander, 2003; Sandberg & Pedersen, 2011).

Happenstances like these help us to a more complex view of meaning; they help provide more contextual knowledge. Still, this is only half the story. To complete the picture we need to emphasize how the happenstance brought about a view of *how* Samatar and Aki, similar to Portelli’s interlocutors, were shifting elements around. Happenstances help us turn away from

mapping out the contexts that would render the conduct of our informants meaningful, to focus on how *they* construct and reconstruct these frames as they go about with their business. Samatar was both a victim (especially when talking to a social worker) and an aggressor (defending his turf on the street). Aki got a daytime job. It reduced police surveillance. His boss at work pressed him to do what he thought were denigrating tasks. He started taking a Mercedes to work. He parked it right next to the boss's car. His work tasks improved after that. Aki happily appeared the victim when it served his interests, but he knew when to show strength. When we map out and sort between contexts that render the conduct of those we study meaningful, we risk reifying cultural representations. This kind of critique has been leveled at arguments trying to establish causal connections between historical honor concepts and current day street alliances (Wacquant, 2002, critique of Anderson, 1999). Happenstance, in contrast, allows us to pursue analytically every informant as a unique context traveler with travels on par with the travels we make ourselves.

Bourgois (1995, p. 41) felt embarrassed when one of his key informants, Primo, told him that he felt good talking to Bourgois because "he thought it was [good] for the development of his mind to be talking to [him]." And once Ray, the crack house owner, got over the embarrassment of having his illiteracy exposed publicly, he kept pushing Bourgois to get advice how to reallocate his illicit narcotics earnings into legitimate business operations (1995, p. 28). Bourgois, of course, declined to help on ethical grounds, but both instances demonstrate how we enter into research situations in which we are not the only context travelers. Once we acknowledge this, we may take the interpretative efforts of those whom we study as our primary concern. To paraphrase Walter Benjamin (1936/2009) in a vein he surely never anticipated, the happenstance allows us to grasp our informants not so much for the story they tell, but to grasp how they do as storytellers. Because as Benjamin so eloquently puts it "traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel" (Benjamin, 1936/2009, p. 367).

Our task then should be about discovering the similarities in the ways our informants do their storytelling. They tend to leave their handprints in more or less the same places, if we keep to Benjamin's analogy. All of Portelli's interlocutors positioned the death of the industrial worker within the same event. The storytelling also reveals the constraints of the marginal position. Bourgois's informants failed to succeed in their pursuits of crossing into the affluent world from which he himself originated. Samatar and Aki both were able to tell some stories but not others; none of their tales seemed to permit them to relocate into the world we start out from. We look for the context of street realities in the cultural trappings of upbringing and family life, whereas we dismiss, or put aside, our interlocutors' own identifications with movie and music stars. Perhaps if we did mind their storytelling, we would be better prepared to understand why young people who used to be involved in street crime and gang activities now turn to new

storytelling in which religious zealots and insurgent politics play a part.

### **The Indirect Approach: Can Happenstances Be Made Part of a Systematic Approach?**

How do we do good guesswork at meaning if our informant lives in a secret world? The answer is that we need some kind of an indirect approach, some way that will get us to a position where we may actually get answers to questions we do not ask. There are a number of ways to achieve this. Narrative approaches that allow participants in conversations to fully occupy the position of storytellers promise to abridge meaning discrepancies in the best possible way. These approaches allow the researcher and the informant to partake in the reproduction of cultural truths in ways that make both the stories and their telling open to interpretations both parties to the research may corroborate. We need a good measure of trust and confidence to get to this position. Secret worlds are secret, after all. Some secrets have the complexity added to them that they are made secret in response to antagonizing effects of the world from which we, the researchers, come from. Youths living at the margins are, as Howard Becker (1963) wrote about deviance generally, being labeled as outsiders not by their being marginal but by the society ruling out anyone who infringes on the rules that makes us a member of society. Marginal youths are made out marginal by society at large and not by their own making. This opens up for all kinds of complexities when we want to breach the divide to study meaning.

How do we produce good cultural representations when our academic project is entrenched in contextual bindings that rub against those of your informants? We build up trust that may in the long run provide us with some kind of "honorary insider" positions as Bourgois (1995) managed in his fieldwork. Yet, we are never genuine insiders; we are only "as-if" indicated by the "honorary" appendage to the insider status. We visit. We travel. They do, too. But, we also leave. They can't do that—if the right labeling practice is in place. This is where happenstance comes in, as the unforeseen event that interrupts the ongoing divides in the research setting. Happenstance is both personal and brings the big picture into view, working as a shortcut into a more complex view of meaning. Happenstances help us turn away from mapping out the contexts that would render the conduct of our informants meaningful, to focus on how *they* construct and reconstruct these frames as they go about with their business. Happenstances allow us to pursue any informant as a unique context traveler. Our task will be discovering the similarities in the ways our informants do their storytelling rather than to map out and sort between contexts that render the conduct of those we study meaningful. We acknowledge that there are a number of ways to do this; we only want to add happenstance to our toolbox.

The crux of the matter remains: Can we turn happenstances into a systematic approach? At first, this seems absurd. We cannot plan for accidents. However, of course, we do! We need to emphasize what in our discussion distinguishes a

happenstance from an accident. Samatar must have felt that living on social welfare and talking about it, responding to questions, increased his sense of victimization. Aki was preparing for the upcoming trial and was using the interviews to process what was awaiting him. Our agenda was to get a better view of their contextual framework by getting to know their particular unique stories. However, our academic efforts brought both of us closer to their personal losses. The accidental introduction of 2Pac blew up our research agenda only to allow us to observe what the agenda kept us from seeing. 2Pac was a strong personal identification. 2Pac turned both into storytellers. The interview had transformed us into reporters. The storytelling turned us into an audience. Paraphrasing Portelli (1991), we may interpret what Samatar and Aki told us about 2Pac as turning what they told us about their trajectories into remembered events, or rather, as simulacra of their street lives where we body double as audience.

The two happenstances we experienced were unforeseen. Can we make them systematic? We think so, but to succeed the approach has to be indirect. We have to make the approach provide us with the means to get answers to questions we don't ask. We can't plan for accidents, but we can plan for happenstances. We have to design the approach to facilitate for the happenstance to occur, yet the happenstance itself will remain a possibility actualized only in the analytical retrospective gaze.<sup>11</sup> The design has to provide sequences intended to mimic events such as those we experienced with Samatar and Aki. The approach needs to reproduce happenstance within the research design when the research wants to explore and understand a world that is (a) secret and (b) made secret in response to antagonizing effects of the world from which we, the researchers, come from. We suggest the three bullet points to be included in the following order to facilitate the conditions for the occurrence of happenstance—in a research situation in which trust and rapport are already established:

- A design directed at the uniquely personal experience of each informant.
- A design that manages to address the relationship between all involved.
- An answering position to be substituted by a storytelling position.

The three bullet points in isolation are innocuous. But, if we manage to pull them off in sequence, they may afford us with something, at least bordering on happenstance that will benefit both researchers and informants alike; we get to substitute almost unavoidable research banter with real dialogue. In the best of cases, the researcher already has gained a position of “honorary” insider position. It is still an as-if position of looking from the outside in. This is where it is important to find an entrance to bullet point one. The best way to do this is to search for clues and signs that would allow entry into already ongoing conversations and debates in which the informant engages also in other settings. Hockey (2002) has provided an excellent example of how to do this. Doing fieldwork in an old people's

home, she sometimes worked as a befriender/counselor talking to widowed clients and got their permission to take notes as they talked. As Hockey explains,

In these encounters the chair occupied by the bereaved person and the chair offered to the befriender are often those in which a couple once sat together to talk or watch television. As the researcher animates these spaces of remembered intimacy, performances can be stimulated, the incomer being used as a kind of body double for the lost person. (2002, p. 212)

Here, Hockey shows us how the befriender role allowed the research situation parallel “real life;” the researcher almost literally became a “body double.” Even if we manage something remotely approximating Hockey's body doubling, we are still in the as-if position of visiting insiders. To achieve bullet point two, we need to bring into view the contextual conflict existing between us. From the researcher position, we need to search for those dialogues and topics that allow our informants to address the existing contextual imbalance and undo some of the effect. In both our cases, 2Pac served that purpose for the informants. Once we manage to identify these dialogues, we need to pursue them in order to achieve bullet point three. With some measure of success, we may become audience to a reality being unfolded in our presence. We then face informants who abandon an answering position for one of storytelling. We emphasize that this is not a research script to manipulate secrets into the open. If it works, it should be an emancipating experience for everyone involved. Because if it works, the happenstance allows everyone a retrospective view of the structural divides from which some of us may travel while others cannot.

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### Notes

1. The project also included statistical analyses of living conditions of all the unaccompanied refugee children ( $n = 511$ ) who came to Norway in the same period as Samatar did.
2. RnB is a music style called Rhythm and Blues, a genre of popular African American music that originated in the 1940s.
3. The A gang and the B gang are street gangs in the Oslo area. The members are predominantly of immigrant origins and most have Pakistani backgrounds.
4. That is a confined place where heroin users may stay and inject their drug.
5. It was known in the street worlds with reference to the name of the street (i.e., “gate”) where it was located. “Ola” is a common Norwegian name and an appropriate denominator for the place at that time when the street worlds were becoming multicultural



and the heroin users frequenting the place were increasingly defining themselves and their friends as “Norwegians,” in contrast to the “utlending” (i.e., foreigner) who was either seen as an outsider (the immigrant turned dealer pictured as immensely rich and most likely very dangerous) or as an out-cast (the immigrant turned user pictured as filthy, contagious, and very dangerous).

6. N.W.A (Niggaz Wit Attitudes) was an American hip-hop group from Compton, CA.
7. ECE was Moshuus’s mispronunciation of “Eazy E.”
8. The impact of marginality on the research situation itself has been subject to academic scrutiny; see, for instance, Loic Wacquant (2002, 2008).
9. A valuable comment from one of our anonymous reviewers helped clarify this point for us.
10. See, for instance, Zulaika (1988) for a critical view of our interpretative steps in his study of political violence.
11. A valuable comment by an anonymous reviewer pointed out this for us.

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