

Remembering Egon Bittner¹

Aaron V. Cicourel

University of California, San Diego

In the spring of 1955, while a graduate student in the Department of Sociology at UCLA shortly before completing my M.A., Harold Garfinkel asked me to participate in a modest set of research ‘demonstrations’ which were intended to simulate quasi-controlled experimental conditions. A few weeks later, Egon Bittner joined the small group. Egon had come to UCLA from the fairly new Los Angeles State College (now called Los Angeles State University). I soon learned that Egon (and his wife Jean and her two sisters) had (independently) all been Holocaust survivors. I learned, for example, that he had been a (cub?) reporter for a small newspaper in Krakow, Poland in 1939 when the Nazi’s invaded. Egon was arrested and incarcerated for all of World War II.

As we became better acquainted, he gradually revealed some of the details of his concentration camp life, especially what it was like to exist in a constrained and often brutal bureaucracy. From the descriptive accounts Egon recalled, I inferred that the SS Officers under whom he worked recognised his intelligence and that he possessed both intellectual as well as practical skills. It was the latter skills that apparently were valued and enabled him to survive. The descriptive accounts were always given in a kind of ‘low-keyed’, matter-of-fact manner, without much emotional variation. An especially poignant aspect of his recall was the remark about the guilt he had experienced for having been a survivor.

After spending some time in Bonn, Germany (if memory serves me correctly), Egon was able to immigrate to the United States and eventually ended up in Los Angeles. He noted having worked on the railroad doing (I believe) manual labor. He also worked for a biological laboratory in Culver City, California.

Egon’s career at UCLA was distinguished. He immediately impressed his teachers with the breadth and depth of his quietly expressed knowledge. At the end of the spring semester, 1955, I went off to Cornell for my doctorate and Egon continued his graduate studies. We corresponded only occasionally. After receiving my doctorate in 1957, I returned to UCLA as a Russell Sage post-doctoral fellow in the Medical Centre. We immediately renewed our friendship. I worked with Harold Garfinkel the entire year, beginning in the summer of 1957. In the spring semester of 1958, Garfinkel asked me to join him in teaching a graduate seminar.

The students, Egon, Milton Bloombaum, Troy Duster, Peter McHugh, Gerald Platt, Kenneth Polk, and Fred Thalheimer were all exceptional students. Egon was the senior member of the seminar and his presence was always marked by often brief, highly cogent remarks.

After my post-doc, I went to Northwestern University for two years and then to the newly created campus of the University of California, Riverside (UCR). After one year at UCR, I was asked to recommend someone for a temporary position in sociology. I immediately urged the Dean to hire Egon. At the time, he was completing his dissertation with Don Cressey at UCLA. While we were at UCR, we had many discussions about his doctoral dissertation, which I was reading at that time. A particularly difficult event for my family was the arrival of our third child at a time when I was ill. Egon's wife, Jean, was especially dear, and would come to our home to help my wife while I was somewhat incapacitated.

Egon and I kept in touch after he left UCR and UCLA, especially during his research at the Langley Porter Psychiatric Clinic at UCSF. I also visited the Bittner family after they moved to Brandeis. After this last visit, we seldom had face-to-face meetings except at an occasional professional conference. Our subsequent contact consisted primarily of corresponding and exchanging publications.

Bittner's field research always seemed to be guided by following a well-known perspective which can be linked to (among others) Alfred Schütz's (1944) essay 'The Stranger'. Assuming the role of a stranger helped an observer sustain a sense of attending a world his subjects viewed as self-evident, or as Alfred Schütz noted, a world known in common and taken for granted, but which the stranger perceived as 'exotic' in the sense of a western anthropologist observing a strikingly different culture.

I have often thought that Egon's research was especially influenced by his experience as a 'stranger' while growing up in Poland as part of a minority group perceived as highly marginal by 'indigenous natives'.

In his descriptions of a policeman's expectations at work, and how they may be suddenly called into question, Bittner (1967: 705-709) reveals some of the benefits of taking the role of a 'stranger'. The policeman, in turn, also acts like a 'stranger' when questioning events, which at first glance might be perceived as unremarkable. For example, when noting something 'different' about a neighbourhood with which he has become familiar after many months of patrol duty; observing lights in a residence where a single, quite elderly woman lived and whom he saw occasionally. In this fictitious account, the woman normally went to bed before 9.00 pm.

Policemen do not keep a written diary of their daily rounds. Instead, they acquire a set of expectations as part of the routine circumstances embedded in daily work activities. The patrolman's experiences, in Bittner's view, were part of

what can be called implicit memory which would be activated when a state of affairs appeared to be intuitively 'strange' and which suddenly emerged during routine activity.

Bittner continues by showing how the police recognise the expectation of different descriptive accounts when speaking with colleagues in contrast to being questioned by a research analyst or interrogated in a courtroom. This contrast, for Bittner, reveals the centrality of practical circumstances in our everyday lives despite our frequent reference to rules or norms or laws. We take for granted many details absorbed in the course of daily exchanges and negotiating various physical settings not attended by our conscious working or explicit memory while performing a familiar task.

Bittner's (1973) understanding of field research reflects the penetrating, theoretical roots of his thinking. For example, the paradox of participating in events as a 'stranger' in order to be 'objective' and thus protect oneself from 'going native' while simultaneously depriving the analyst from experiencing meanings embedded in taking the role of the 'natives' to approximate her or his subjects' experience of social reality. Perhaps these skills helped him survive the concentration camp, but he also possessed a calm demeanour and a remarkable intellect that certainly enriched the lives of those who came to know him as colleagues, friends and students.

NOTES

1. I am grateful to Troy Duster for his helpful comments and useful suggestions.

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