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Editorial Remarks

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Getting Beyond the Bitter Lessons**

Hashim Gibrill

GIVEN THE GENERALLY DESTRUCTIVE, anti-developmental character of widespread conflict, this sanguineous side of Africa's reality demands close examination. In the range of critical political and economic concerns that the continent confronts, the achievement of long-term conflict resolution and substantive post-war recovery are prominent. This paper looks at the causes of war and at recovery efforts, and argues for a fundamentally regional approach to resolution and development.

19 **How do I know what I say I know?
Thinking about Slim's Table and Qualitative
Research Design**

Paul F. Manna

THIS PAPER EXPLORES some of the methodological issues raised by Mitchell Duneier's book, *Slim's Table*. While it has been widely reviewed since its publication in 1992, few critics have considered the book from this perspective. Specifically, this paper addresses four issues: the importance of methodological transparency, the role of triangulation, the possibility of integrating elements of experimental design in an ethnographic work, and the importance of assessing uncertainty when drawing conclusions.

31 **A Preliminary Discussion on Alternative Electoral
Systems and Black Legislators:**

A National Survey

Bob Holmes

THIS ARTICLE FOCUSES on the views and attitudes of African American State Legislators towards alternatives to the single member district system of election. Data are primarily from the responses of 106 questionnaires completed from the total of 575 mailed to Black State Senators and Representatives throughout the United States. The major findings were that more than 90 percent desire additional information on various forms of proportional representation, 80 percent believe such information would

How do I know what I say I know? Thinking about *Slim's Table* and Qualitative Research Design

Paul F. Manna

University of Wisconsin-Madison

No matter what their approach or predispositions, social scientists confront an important question at nearly all stages of the research process: How do I know what I think I know about the phenomena I am studying? Consider *Slim's Table*, sociologist Mitchell Duneier's book that challenges popular and academic stereotypes about black men of the inner city. Focusing on the patrons of the Valois cafeteria on Chicago's south side, Duneier argues that contrary to the conventional wisdom, there do exist men such as Slim and his friends who not only persevere, but also thrive in otherwise difficult urban conditions. The author draws these conclusions based on interviews and observations that he conducted during a multi-year ethnographic study of the Valois regulars. During this time, Duneier dined at the cafeteria, talked with Slim and others in semi-formal but usually informal interviews or free-flowing discussions during mealtime, and observed the men as they interacted with each other both at Valois and elsewhere in the neighborhood.

Specifically, Duneier finds that Slim and his friends do indeed recognize and apply high standards to their own and others' behavior. In short, "they possess some of the most important human virtues" including "pride, civility, sincerity, and discretion."¹ However, that does not mean that the men are superhuman; rather, while they are upstanding citizens in a variety of ways, the Valois regulars embody many of the same personal weaknesses and contradictions that all people struggle with as they go about their daily lives. Thus, in his conclusion, Duneier argues that we should remember that these men do exist and to some extent thrive in a challenging urban environment, but more important perhaps, that their experiences speak to men more generally, be they urban or rural, black or white, rich or poor. Put another way, Slim and his friends are significant because they challenge popular stereotypes and they can serve as role models for others, something that the book's subtitle (*Race, Respectability, and Masculinity*) and, in particular, the last chapter both suggest.

¹Mitchell Duneier, *Slim's Table* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 45.

While *Slim's Table* has been widely reviewed few academic critics have explored in any depth the methodological considerations that the book raises.² This is unfortunate given that one of the best ways to improve the business of qualitative research in general and ethnography in particular is for scholars to confront each other directly on questions of method and interpretation.³ Furthermore, making these issues explicit can help scholars to address more deeply the question that frames this essay: How do I know what I say I know? Certainly, philosophers and scientists have puzzled over this question for centuries, and scholars of all stripes rely on a variety of working criteria to help them navigate their respective intellectual and substantive landscapes.⁴ It is important to remember, though, that as fields develop, these criteria themselves are often in flux. As Kaplan argues: "Standards governing the conduct of inquiry in any of its phases emerge from inquiry and are themselves subject to further inquiry."⁵ Thus, by sidestepping questions of method and the bases of knowledge, too frequently scholars miss important opportunities to expand their ways of knowing. However, this does not mean that every study of the social world should begin with extended discussions about the philosophy of science; some work suggests those kinds of conversations better than others. And while this paper will focus primarily on the methodological choices that Duneier made as he studied the men of Valois, one could easily imagine how *Slim's Table* could serve as a launching pad for broader discussions about theories of inquiry and knowledge.

Thus, even though Duneier's book was published almost eight years ago, its popularity in undergraduate and graduate courses across the United States begs for exploring some of the design and presentation issues that it raises. This is the case for those interested in social science research in general or the specific arguments that Duneier attempts to make.

²See: Ellis Cashmore, "Café Society," *New Statesman and Society* (18 September 1992) 37; Judith Amory, "Sociology" *Wilson Library Bulletin* (March 1992) 100; Carolyn Ellis, "Reviews" *Contemporary Sociology* (1993 vol 23) 378; Scott Heller, "Over Countless Chicken Pot Pies, A View of Working-Class Men" *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (29 July 1992): A8; Charles P. Gallmeier, "New Ethnographies" *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* (1994 vol 23) 109-113.

³Karl G. Heider, "The Rashomon effect: When ethnographers disagree" *American Anthropologist* (1988 vol 90): 73-81; Gary King et al., *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

⁴Scott Gordon, *The History and Philosophy of Social Science* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

⁵Abraham Kaplan, *The Conduct of Inquiry* (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company, 1964).

Methodological Transparency

Some academic reviewers have criticized *Slim's Table* because it lacks a methodological appendix describing how the author prosecuted his work and drew his conclusions.⁶ This is an important criticism given that the reliability and validity of the arguments that scholars make often turn on the procedures they employ; questions of substance and method are often impossible to disentangle. Having said that, however, this criticism is not quite accurate in Duneier's case. While it is true that *Slim's Table* lacks an extended methodological discussion, the author does disclose portions of his approach in a few scattered places throughout the book.

Generally speaking, readers do know that Duneier spent over four years as a participant observer at Valois, taking three meals a day with Slim and the other patrons. To his credit, the author does explain his note taking method and how he attempted to increase the reliability of his conclusions by seeking corroborating evidence from a range of informants (note 5 to chapter 1). However, even there he alludes to a distinction between "normal conversations" and "formal interviews" without explaining the difference. Two other points describe the logic he used in deciding how to handle the issue of confidentiality with his informants and certain physical locations in the city (note 6 to chapter 2; note 11 to chapter 8). Finally, in one last note he provides a vague explanation of how he drew conclusions about portrayals of black stereotypes in news stories: from a "careful, if unscientific examination" (note 3 to chapter 8). While these footnotes provide a start, they leave the reader interested in Duneier's methodology yearning for much more. Additionally, many basic questions remain unanswered: How did he decide which Valois regulars to include in his final analysis? Where were his efforts at data collection frustrated and how did he compensate? As he became close friends with some of the men, how did he wrestle with issues of "objectivity" that inevitably arise in this kind of study? In short, readers get only a small glimpse of how Duneier knew what he thought he knew when he wrote the book.

One should not infer from this criticism that Duneier's methods were necessarily sloppy or the database that he gathered inadequate. However, given what he discloses, it is impossible to say either way, which essentially is the crux of my argument. Put another way, one of the uncontroversial points in King, Keohane, and Verba's *Designing Social Inquiry* is that the procedures of social science should be made explicit and public.⁷ That is important in order for others

⁶Ellis, 378 and Gallmeier, 109-113.

⁷Robert O. Keohane and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific inference in qualitative research* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

to “judge the validity of what was done” and to “learn” from other researchers.⁸ In Duneier’s case, it is hard to either criticize or garner insights from his approach because he makes so few of his procedures transparent. That is not to say that *Slim’s Table* should be re-written as a methodological tome. Rather, a well-detailed appendix or prefatory chapter that makes explicit the procedures and database would have significantly improved the work’s substantive punch and its appeal to other academic researchers, an audience that Duneier himself claims he is attempting to reach. Even a simple map of the cafeteria’s floorplan would have helped to set the stage for the book.⁹ The general point is that scholars need not tie themselves in knots in order to fulfill this professional obligation to their colleagues. Good examples of methodological transparency are not difficult to find and include.¹⁰

The transparency critique is an obvious but important one to consider. Slim’s Table offers many more methodological points of entry, though, that few if any scholars have addressed specifically. Three in particular will follow: the role of triangulation, the possibility of integrating elements of experimental design in an ethnographic work, and the importance of assessing uncertainty when drawing conclusions.

Triangulation

A measurement can be considered reliable if over the course of multiple trials the researcher obtains the same results (within acceptable margins of error, of course). Scholars of all stripes, be they more qualitatively or quantitatively inclined, try to increase the reliability of their measurements and hence, their substantive conclusions. Duneier’s efforts to seek corroborating evidence from multiple patrons of Valois is important in this regard.¹¹ It suggests that he was sensitive to

⁸King et al., 8.

⁹See: Katherine J. Cramer “Grass-roots collective information processing: Making sense of politics through public discussion.” Paper presented at the *Midwest Political Science Association Annual Meeting* 14-17 April 1999, Chicago.

¹⁰See: Richard F. Fenno, Jr., *Home style: House members in their districts* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1978); John W. Kingdon, *Agendas, alternatives, and public policies*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper Collins College Publishers, 1995); and Robin Wagner-Pacifici et al., “The Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial: Commemorating a difficult past” *American Journal of Sociology* (1991 vol 97): 376-420.

¹¹See: Edward G. Carmines et al., “Reliability and validity assessment” Sage University paper series on quantitative applications in the social sciences, series no 07-017 (Newbury Park: Sage 1979) and Jerome Kirk et al., “Reliability and validity in qualitative research methods, series no. 1. (Newbury Park: Sage, 1986).

the reliability question and it reassures the reader that he attempted to present accurately the discussions he observed. However, by itself this approach can only carry one so far and raises the important issue of triangulation as a way to increase confidence in one's substantive conclusions.

In its common usage, triangulation refers to identifying a point of interest by observing it from a number of different angles. In social science this is sometimes taken to mean the kind of interviewing that Duneier conducted: if you want to know if a statement is true, try asking many people to confirm it. Triangulation in its most rigorous sense, however, implies much more than that; it involves bringing different sources and types of data to bear on a research question.

For example, in his study of the relationship between political participation and the receipt of different types of public assistance, Joe Soss relied on in-depth interviews with program participants that he then supplemented with statistical analyses based on data from the American National Election Studies (ANES).¹² Similarly, in a project that parallels Duneier's, Katherine Cramer supplemented her study of political talk in a neighborhood coffee shop by asking patrons to complete a questionnaire that included the same questions used in past versions of the ANES.¹³

That brief survey – conducted after lengthy fieldwork during which she gained the trust of the shop's patrons – allowed her to make interesting descriptive comparisons between the individuals she was studying and the population at large.

While both of these studies involved statistical analyses that supplemented in-depth interviews and participant observation, other methods can provide great insight as well. In Duneier's case, for example, some of his informants' recollections about past economic activity in the Hyde Park neighborhood – the “good ole' days” – could have been validated with city records that documented the number of small businesses in the area, or census information that described the nature of the population and its employment patterns. Even secondary sources such as local economic yearbooks would have been a helpful device. In fact, many of these resources are available a short trip north from Hyde Park at the Chicago Historical Society. There one can find extensive collections including books and other published materials, archives and manuscripts, and many prints and photographs.¹⁴ Specific archival collections of the Illinois Manufacturers Association from 1893-1986, and the papers of Claude A. Barnett, director of the

¹²Joe Soss, “Lessons of welfare: Policy design, political learning, and political action” *American Political Science Review* (1999 vol 93): 363-80.

¹³Cramer, 1999.

¹⁴Chicago Historical Society, <http://www.chicagohistory.org/research.html>. (Accessed on October 10, 1999).

Associated Negro Press, 1918-67, may have been especially helpful in Duneier's case. Thinking about triangulation as a search for alternative data sources germane to a research question is an important way for scholars to sharpen their conclusions¹⁵. The kind of historical evidence available at the Society not only would have served to confirm some of the recollections of the Valois patrons, but it also might have helped readers not directly familiar with Hyde Park to better understand the setting of Duneier's study.

Experimental Design

More and more scholars have begun to see the potential for using experimental designs in social research.¹⁶ When they can be run, experiments are powerful tools for helping researchers to make causal arguments about the social world. That is perhaps the main purpose of experimental designs in any field, be it medicine, psychology, or agriculture: to generate conclusions with high internal validity and to rule out rival alternative explanations of the phenomena under study. There are two key elements of experimental designs that allow researchers to establish these high claims of internal validity. First is randomization in assignment of subjects to treatment and control groups. Second is control over the explanatory variable of interest. Taken together, these two elements increase the researcher's confidence that the variation in the dependent variable of interest is the result of manipulations in the key independent variable. One other important technique to note here is the class of studies known as "quasi-experiments."¹⁷ While researchers who use this approach are also concerned with drawing conclusions with high internal validity, because they often occur in natural settings, these designs lack the degree of control that one finds in true experiments.

It may seem somewhat odd to consider the role of experimental design in the context of an ethnographic study. However, whether one ever conducts an experiment or quasi-experiment as part of a research project, those who do not use experiments can profit from becoming knowledgeable about their principles and functions.¹⁸ By simply considering experiments as a viable design option it is

¹⁵Howard S. Becker, "Problems of inference and proof in participant observation" *American Sociological Review* (1958 vol 23): 652-60; also see King et al., 1994.

¹⁶Donald R. Kinder et al., *Experimental foundations of political science* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993); Kathleen M. McGraw et al., "Experimentation in political science: Historical trends and future directions." (1994 vol 4): 3-29.

¹⁷Thomas D. Cook et al., *Quasiexperimentation: Design and analysis issues for field settings* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979).

¹⁸Kinder et al., 1993 and McGraw et al., 1994.

possible that many scholars will begin to see new ways to use them (something that I will suggest in the case of *Slim's Table* in a moment). Additionally, considering possible threats to internal validity is one of the foremost preoccupations of scholars who conduct experiments or quasi-experiments. This is something that should concern all researchers, especially those who are interested in drawing causal inferences about social phenomena. And even if one never runs an experiment, studying how experimental researchers guard against these various threats – and there are many – can help others to think more carefully about the validity issues inherent in their own designs.¹⁹

Ruling out rival explanations of social phenomena is one of the great strengths of research designs built with experimental principles in mind. In this regard, arguably one of the main weaknesses of *Slim's Table* is that Duneier spends little time presenting and then considering other plausible reasons for the behavioral patterns and attitudes that he observed at Valois. It appears that he is so committed to the argument that it is “the black man’s inner strength” that allows men like Slim to persevere and thrive in urban America that Duneier does not seriously consider and rule out other possible factors.²⁰ One plausible alternative that could help to explain Duneier’s findings is the presence of powerful local institutions. Relatively speaking, the resolve of Slim and his friends might be less related to their own personal characteristics than with the neighborhood institutions, such as Valois, that exist in this part of Hyde Park. If that is the case, then one could reasonably argue that what creates the stability that Duneier observed are not necessarily impressive individuals, but stable institutions in this borderland region of the city. Even if one was uncomfortable stating the point that strongly, at least one might concede that if institutions are not *the* dominant factor explaining the results, certainly one could argue that it is the *interaction* of the men and their institutions – Valois, work, the other groups to which they belong – that drives Duneier’s findings. However, no such explanation is entertained in any depth.

Based on the accounts in the book, it does appear that there was at least one instance where Duneier could have leveraged the principles of experimental design to address this issue. The period of time during which Valois shut down for repairs provided an excellent opportunity for the author to test the rival explanation that the effect of institutions and not personal character was the main force at work. In

¹⁹Cook and Campbell 1979

²⁰Duneier, 26.

essence, the shutdown created a sort of naturally occurring quasi-experiment: a simple interrupted time series design.²¹

Given that Duneier was deeply engaged with the Valois regulars, one would assume that this event did not take him or the patrons by surprise. If that was indeed the case, taking careful note of the discussions and feelings of the men at time points before the closing, during the time Valois was shut down (something that Duneier begins to do on pp. 87-9), and then during the “debriefs” that occurred once the men were able to reconvene at their regular meeting place would have helped him to address the role that institutions played in the results that he was observing. Had some of the men formed an ad hoc eating club during the stoppage at Valois – perhaps at another local cafeteria or restaurant – that would have provided the author with an important type of control group against which he could have compared those who dined alone in other settings. Even though the design ideas mentioned here would be far from the ideal that one finds in a laboratory or even a well-designed field experiment, that does not vitiate the main point: thinking about experimental designs as a plausible research strategy can help scholars to see how they might be introduced in settings where they initially may seem inappropriate or even detrimental.

Reporting Uncertain

One important component of addressing the “how do I know what I think I know” question is to recognize that very few propositions in social research are either absolutely known or unknown. Conclusions are usually more or less certain. There are a number of conventions available to quantitative researchers that help to convey degrees of uncertainty, the most common being the “p-value” that accompanies parameter estimates in statistical models. For example, one usually sees regression coefficients tagged with an asterisk when they achieve statistical significance at the “ninety-five percent confidence level.” In those cases, the researcher is telling the reader that one can reject the null hypothesis with ninety-five percent confidence that the effect of the independent variable of interest is equal to zero. One way to assess levels of uncertainty in qualitative work is to consider the nature of the data that one has available for making inferences about social phenomena. Becker provides one way to do this with the following seven statements that convey different levels of certainty:²²

²¹Cook and Campbell, 1979.

²²Becker, 652-60.

1. Every member of a group said in response to a direct question that X is true.
2. Every member of a group volunteered the response that X is true.
3. Some proportion of a group either answered a direct question or volunteered the information that X is true, but the other proportion could not be questioned.
4. Some proportion of the group either answered a direct question or volunteered information consistent with X, but some proportion offered answers at odds with X.
5. No members of the group were asked questions or volunteered information on X but all members were observed to engage in behavior consistent with X.
6. Some proportion of the group was observed to engage in behavior consistent with X, but the remainder of the group could not be observed.
7. Some proportion of the group was observed to engage in behavior consistent with X, while the remainder of the group engaged in behavior at odds with X.

Becker's framework suggests a few steps that qualitative researchers might consider taking in reporting their results. First, studies such as Duneier's that are based on participant observation should make explicit the criteria that were used to assess confidence. In other words, a researcher should state that if a conclusion was based on A then she is more certain than if it was based on B; and conclusions based on B were more certain than those based on C, and so on. Second, in writing up the results of one's study, either embedded in the text or in some kind of tabular form at the end of a book chapter or in the discussion section of an article, the main conclusions might be listed in clear prose (i.e.: a short declarative sentence for each conclusion) with some indication of how much confidence the researcher has in each one. Not only would that help the reader to assess where the author might be talking in a more speculative versus a more confident mode, it would also suggest possible places where other scholars could press on with future research.

This kind of framework would have been quite useful to help sort out many of Duneier's claims. Consider these two statements about Bart, a white retired file clerk and one of the Valois regulars: "Through such conversations [with Bart] the men learned very little about Bart's beliefs and values, but they began to

comprehend something about his temperament.”²³ “The moral authority embodied in Slim’s caring behavior had pushed Bart to the limits of his own potential for tolerance, friendship, and respect.”²⁴ Based on Duneier’s discussion in the book, one might reasonably infer that he is more certain about the first statement than the second. On the former, he could actually question the men about their feelings and observe them as they interacted with Bart and each other in Bart’s absence. Given that the other men suggested that Bart was such a tough nut to crack during even casual conversation, it is doubtful that the author was ever able to obtain from Bart any direct confirmation of the second statement listed above. Rather, it is likely that Duneier drew this conclusion indirectly, relying more on his own discussions with Slim and his sitting buddies as well as observing the interactions between Bart and the other men at Valois. This is not to suggest, however, that one should subject every substantive claim in a book or article to Becker’s or some other framework. The examples here are simply to illustrate the larger point that it would serve the social scientific community well if scholars devoted more time to assessing and reporting on levels of certainty in their work.

How do I know what I say I know

Almost 100 years ago W.E.B. DuBois called America’s problem of the Twentieth Century the “problem of the color line.”²⁵ Clearly that problem still exists in a variety of contexts, and Duneier should receive high marks for attempting to provide new insights about it. Equally significant is his decision to focus on a sub-population within the urban black community that journalists and researchers have tended to neglect. Even though the men of *Slim’s Table* may represent a sort of statistical outlier, unrepresentative of most black men who live in the nation’s urban areas,²⁶ Duneier’s approach helps him to challenge popular stereotypes that emerge from studies that are based solely on aggregated statistical portraits of urban life. For that he has received much deserved praise.

Hopefully, readers of *Slim’s Table*, especially those who eventually will conduct future qualitative studies of their own, will consider seriously the methodological issues that this book raises, some of which are highlighted in this essay. In many ways, it is difficult if not impossible to disentangle considerations

²³Duneier, 7.

²⁴Ibid., 21.

²⁵William E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: New American Library, 1982 [1903]).

²⁶William Julius Wilson, *When work disappears: The world of the new urban poor*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996).

of substance and method in either designing, carrying out, or evaluating a study of social phenomena. Thus, scholars should consider these issues simultaneously, and when appropriate, larger questions about the bases of knowledge and knowing as well. In the context of *Slim's Table*, then, this essay provides at least a starting point for more explicit considerations about how one might design social research with an eye on the major question with which I began: How do I know what I think I know about the phenomena I am studying? If all scholars not only forced themselves to address that question, but also considered whether their readers could answer it based on the description of methods that appear in their books or articles, everyone interested in important topics such as black men of the inner city would benefit. And even though it can be difficult for econometricians to grasp all of the elements of an effective ethnography, or for ethnographers to follow the computational logic of complicated statistical models, we need not abandon the goal of attempting to describe the trade-offs and bridge the gaps between different methods of social research. If this essay helps to foster that kind of spirit, then it has done its job well.