

Looking Closely: Toward a Natural History of Human Ingenuity

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INTRODUCTION

Traditional social thought and recent decades of social interaction analysis agree: that no matter how difficult it can be to navigate or describe, the social world is always well organized. Participants in the social world constantly struggle to figure out what to do next, and they use their ongoing contact with others to guide them to usually regular outcomes. People figuring out what to do next are a boon for researchers. In the work people do to make their versions of the world available to each other, researchers can find the ordering principles of social life.

Even surprising outcomes are systematic. If the social world seems driven by an invisible hand, as if people were stars in the sky, this is a result of what people have done and are doing with each other – with their eyes and ears open¹ (Adam Smith, 1776).

Even if the underlying dynamics of the social world are obscured, this condition, too, is a systematic result of people distorting

their vision and repressing their interpretations of each other under difficult circumstances (Karl Marx, 1867).

Even if unaware of the full implications of their activities, people are usually ingenious, both locally in their most personal circumstances and collectively in their most distributed consequences. In coordinating with each other, people show themselves, to those who would look carefully, to be orderly, knowledgeable, and precise. Given the demands of necessity, they do well what has to be done even if under limiting, or worse, pathological conditions (Gregory Bateson, 1936/1958). We agree (McDermott and Raley, 2009; McDermott, 2010).

Analytic attention to the visual has had its moments. This chapter highlights visible behavior because looking carefully at the world has not been nurtured by current articulations of knowledge and expertise. We do not mean that looking is more important than listening, smelling, or touching. That the visible is a good source for inquiry should

not obscure the larger point that the world is more available to all our senses than received categories can allow. W. J. T. Mitchell has identified historical periods when inquiries into the world have run more through a people's eyes than the other senses: 'the invention of artificial perspective, the arrival of easel painting, and the invention of photography were all greeted as "pictorial turns"' (2008: 16). While this makes the 20th century – driven by cinema, television, and views from outer space – fundamentally visual, one must wonder how the same century's social sciences have insisted on learning about the world mostly with their eyes closed. Strangely, in the name of objectivity, the visual has not fared well in accounts of contemporary production, consumption, social structure, politics, religion, and education. Even personal developments and events – even desire – get described and managed as if intelligible to a cold and calculating eye that looks on activities not as they are performed, but by their symptoms – their droppings – lined up in patterns only after they have run their course.

Proxies, measures, factors, variables, and controlled results – all honored too easily by the word data – are treated as available for the asking, as if on our own terms, strewn conveniently across our conceptual grounds and needing only to be picked up, put in order, and correlated with other debris.

To make the visual even more endangered, when social analysts do look at what people are doing, they privilege what is heard over what can be seen, touched, smelled, tasted, or otherwise sensed (for exceptions, see Howes, 1991). Even speech is often understood as nothing more than what people say, and treated as just discourse, as culturally mandated and prescribed talk intelligible to anyone who might listen in without regard to all else that people are doing with each other.

This chapter tells of a small, but alternative visual tradition that has developed on the edges of mainstream social sciences. The tradition has no single name, but for the last half-century, it has drawn heavily from

ethnography, interaction and conversation analysis, sociolinguistics, and kinesics. To describe the approach, we call on (and impose) the term: natural history. Now thousands of years old and still mostly respectable, and even enlightened,² the term is usually associated with what can be found in Museums of Natural History: the 'exhaustive catalogue of nature' tradition (Healy, 2004: xii). From Pliny the Elder in 79 CE, to the many volumes of Buffon (starting in 1744) almost 1700 years later, we acknowledge this dustbin of mystery – what 17th-century collectors of tidbits from around the world used to call their 'fardle of façions' (Hodgen, 1964) – but we also claim (briefly, without adequate justification) more recent traditions of natural history inquiry that focus directly on the production of organism/environment relations in human cultures. As we use it, *a natural history analysis examines organisms and environments interwoven in real time in situations consequential to their participants and beyond*. A natural history of human ingenuity studies the ways people create environments for each other. Situation is conceived as neither a variable, nor an environment, but as a playground for adaptation, rearrangement, and ingenuity.

The work we cite represents a natural history approach by either self- or other-attribution. We include examples to the extent they clear a ground for looking carefully at human behavior as ingenuity at work, for better and for worse, on the specifics of emerging environments, but our enthusiasm could be shared with a diverse lot of authors. Take, for example, the American poster-boy for inarticulate wisdom, Yogi Berra, 'You can observe a lot by watching'; or better, the master sleuth, Sherlock Holmes, 'It is, of course, a trifle, but there is nothing so important as trifles' (Doyle, 2009: 116); or best, Franz Kafka, 'Now the world is known, however, to be uncommonly various, which can be verified at any time by taking a handful of world and looking at it closely' (Kafka, 1935/1961: 41).³ We rely primarily on two traditions: one more visionary and one more precise.

AQ2:
please
give
details
or delete
citation

For visionary, we point to a rich background (much ignored by social theory) of almost two centuries of American naturalism, starting with Ralph Waldo Emerson's call for a 'Natural History of Intellect' (1894; 1833–1835), and later developed by William James, John Dewey, G. H. Mead, and Arthur Bentley.⁴ The tradition has been relentless in its appreciation of how people continually construct their most immediate conditions with and for each other. It is a 'half-way empiricism,' said James (1912/1976), that collects facts as if there were only one world just waiting to be described, the one world allowed by received categories 'with which all experience has got to square.' James recommended instead 'a more radical empiricism' that seeks things in the full variety of their connections in experience (1897/1956: viii). Bentley used the same point to address social relations, where it is 'not the point of view of one toward the other' that we seek, but 'the very processing itself of the ones-with-others' (457). A natural history documents how people together create their worlds with each other in real time. People enact and enforce the contexts in which and by which they reflexively organize their next behavior.

AQ3: Which Reference?

For precision, we celebrate and foreground about 70 years of cross-disciplinary detailed analyses of visual records of social – including conversational – interaction.⁵ And, because the words *detailed*, *slow*, and *careful* are easy to misuse, we offer arbitrary but approximately realistic measures. An initial *detailed* transcript of people interacting with each other should take a minimum of 1 hour of analysis for every second of behavior transcribed. The best work has been done more *slowly* – months on a few seconds of transcript – although we should not exclude work that achieved a suggestive empirical focus without transcripts (like the first of the two examples we present in this chapter). A *carefully* developed transcript should display all the noisy movements participants make with their oral cavity – utterances and mutterances: 'uhhm', 'nyem', coughs, sniffs, teeth-sucks, laughs, and so on – as well as

more visible movements performed outside the mouth (we are struggling to avoid the misnomer, non-verbal, that allows communication to be divided into two autonomous channels – verbal and non-verbal – even though people in interaction are rarely allowed the simplification). Such a transcript marks the onsets and endings of all units of behavior at whatever level of duration they can be discerned.

We proceed in four sections. The first distinguishes what we are doing from mainstream social science. The second unpacks a telling moment, from the late 1930s, in the analysis of gesture as a tie between race and intelligence. The third presents a more recent moment in which children and their teacher establish (and disrupt) a tie between the labor of learning to read and the ritual display of intelligence demanded by a kindergarten. In the conclusion, we return to why it is politically, as well as methodologically, important to square the results of social science inquiries with what happens in front of our eyes.

LOOK BEFORE ASKING

To fashion a natural history approach, we state a *problem*, make a *claim*, and *promise* a better way to proceed.

The *problem* is that the world is not easily available for the asking. The categories by which we inquire into the world are reflexively and relentlessly part of the problems that have caught our attention. Our categories have been shaped by others, to their ends, not ours. Laurence Sterne said that 'A man cannot dress but his ideas get clothed at the same time' (1759–67/1996: 502).⁶ He thought the world hidden away, dressed in old clothes. To fit ideas to new ends, to appropriate them for new tasks, is hard work. Good research begins when people change their easy categories into the very stuff, or focus, of new inquiry.

The *claim* adds good news to the bad: that the world is more available – more intelligible

and more malleable – for the looking, listening, and doing, than for the asking. ‘We lie in the lap of a great intelligence,’ said Emerson⁷ (1842/2000: 141), but it takes vigilance and sacrifice to gain access to that intelligence and hard work to articulate it (see Dewey, 1927). There is great know-how in the world we get paid to ignore. Think, for example, of employers underestimating workers, men ruling over women, teachers degrading students, and politicians manipulating the facts of public life. Inattention to the intelligence of the people is so institutionalized that it now takes hard work to uncover it. No great lap of intelligence can be found in responses to standard, and standardized, questions. No immense intelligence can be found in response, that is, to the questions imposed by those in a position to profit from not looking more carefully.

The promise hinges on looking slowly and carefully at people’s activities. If we can stop overriding each other with privileged categories, we might instead see accomplishments, critiques, and frustrations where others have seen only disorder and stupidity. The complexities of the world are more available – not easily available, but more so – to those willing to look again and again at the varied ways people put their lives together. Assembled by human ingenuity, and drawing on an immense intelligence, the social world is there to be seen, operated on, and reassembled. To proceed with preset ideas – i.e. to ask before looking, to insist that current categories are prescient enough to identify what must be changed, to probe with interviews and questionnaires before knowing what and how to ask, and all that without identifying grounds for appreciating answers – may be exactly the wrong order.⁸ Visibility and consequentiality should set the approximate order of available categories ahead of any vocabulary-driven diagnosis and explanation.

The distorting lens of scientific research done from a distance has been perhaps most invidious in the attribution of intelligence. Americans in particular push themselves around by calling each other smart and

dumb; they even have tests for measuring and quiz shows for highlighting its importance. In this chapter, we use examples of intelligence politics to illustrate how people at varying levels of analysis, perform, ignore, degrade, and, when pressed, rediscover the intelligence and wisdom in human affairs. We deliver two cases – one of whole groups of people in interaction, the other of a few children in school with their teacher. Both scenes turn on the accusation of a seeming scarcity of intelligence despite the complexity of what the participants are doing.

Both examples play out in the context of tensions between named racial/ethnic groups, in competition under conditions where looking smart might turn out to be useful and not looking smart, or being accused of not looking smart, can turn out to be disastrous. We use a narrow lens to make our point, that small events are the playhouse for large-scale social forces. *Ab uno disce omnes*: from one thing, everything can be said – and must be said. Ludwig Wittgenstein (1980) noted that ‘a curious analogy could be based on the fact that even the hugest telescope has to have an eye-piece no larger than the eye’ (17). Everything must be accounted for in terms of what the lens (both eyepiece and I-piece) makes available and obscures. The *promise* in this position: that even if not on their own terms, even if not under conditions of their own making,⁹ people build their world with great regularity and ingenuity that can be observed, studied, recorded, and reorganized for the better.

RACE, GESTURE, AND INTELLIGENCE

David Efron did the world a great favor in 1941. He published a detailed study of gestures among Italian and Jewish conversationalists in New York City. Efron was a student of the anthropologist Franz Boas.¹⁰ Both were driven by two passions: first to show the foolishness in racial stereotypes; secondly, to demonstrate a cultural organization

and intelligence in people's behavior. The first was particularly of the moment: Nazi scientists and other pro-Aryan commentators had been making claims about the ties between a people's gestural range and their intelligence and capacity for civility and civilization.¹¹ Eastern European Jews and Southern Italians came off badly in the comparisons. They talk with their hands, went the story, and the reason was that they could not think without resorting to manual gestures. The narrow gestural range of the English or Germans was taken as a sign of intelligence and deep culture (for an early example, see Addison, 1712/1970). The pseudo-science and racism in the German texts are startling. One from the 1930s claimed that a hereditary disposition is 'common to all Jewish groups' and that in "'half-Jews" whose bodily traits, as a result of racial miscegenation, appear to us as "non-Jewish", their Jewishness.... is recognizable in their gestures' (Efron, 1972: 22). Another text (from decades before, but moved forward as legitimate) argued that

the ideas of the Graeco-Latins are 'simple and unencumbered by a multitude of side thoughts' which makes them flow over easily into words and movements. In contrast to this, the Teutonic is 'habitually filled with a multitude of opposing impulses and thoughts...thought translates itself into motor results but slowly...Germanic taciturnity is due to wealth and complexity of thought (31).

The arguments devolve quickly from biological types, to gestural types, and on to personality types, including each group's capacity for rational thought.

Efron made three moves of his own.

First, he showed how the fascist texts were corrupt: that the 'scientific' descriptions relied more on stereotype than behavior and reveal more about the racism of their authors than about gestural patterns. Efron's case was convincing.

Secondly, he showed a variability over centuries in how high-profile gestures for preaching and oratory were performed and interpreted. He documented how, in England and France, styles of high- and low-emotional display and gesticulation could

follow on each other – on the same pulpit or soapbox – with a rapidity that might mark fashion shifts in clothing or political rhetoric. Three versions of French relations between gesture, culture, and politics tell Efron's story:

(a) the French courtiers before the arrival of Catherine de Medici, gesturing little and considering gesticulation a vulgar form of demeanor, but soon viewing it as a token of high civility when the Florentine nobility brings it to France, (b) the 'hon-nête gens' (those French Victorians of the first half of the 17th century, showing considerable restraint in their expressive bodily motions, and (c) the 'âmes sensibles' of the restoration indulging rather freely in gesticulation.¹² (Efron, 1972: 59–60)

From many examples like this, Efron was able to move easily against any theory that would tie race to an inherent style of gesticulation, or either of these to intelligence. Even better, he used the materials to question the very category of race as just so much selective inattention to detail: 'The common observation of outstanding morphological differences between certain so-called racial groups is likely to make us disregard the existence of marked differences within each of the chosen groups' (39).¹³

Thirdly, and this took detailed empirical analysis, Efron used drawings, movies, and interviews to document the gestural habits of Eastern European Jews and Southern Italian immigrants around New York City. The drawings are central to the analysis.¹⁴ Efron found both extensive regularities within each group and considerable differences across the two groups. More importantly, he found a striking variability by generation and even by situation. We present the regularities in the two immigrant groups, and then the variability that develops with continued assimilation to life in New York. Both are necessary to his conclusion that assimilated Jewish and Italian young men moved more like each other, and more like long-term New Yorkers, than they moved like their parent's generation.¹⁵

The regularities are easy to see (actors isolate them willy-nilly for imitation). Efron went deeper. His first contribution was to

show the gestures as a detailed system of nuanced differences and similarities in the hand, arm, and head movements that are likely consequential to ongoing communication. Table 20.1 lists the salient details, but with the proviso that every item listed has only a variable status and that, as with any list of communicative devices (alphabets, dictionaries, phonemic charts), how the characteristic elements are woven into social interaction is always more lively and complex than a list can reveal.

Efron also showed a variability in gestural performance by generation and situation. As young Jewish and Italian men adjusted to the communicative demands of their new situation, they reigned in their gestures to fit more closely the form and tempo of the mainstream groups around them. Of particular interest were what Efron called the hybrid gestures that inhabited a space between immigrant and assimilated inventories. The hybrid styles were called on in mix-and-match ways by situations. Efron's portrait of then NYC Mayor LaGuardia showed a high-style combination of Italian (his father), Jewish (his mother), and American (early schooling in Arizona) gestures. The Mayor's

major constituencies were embodied in his behavioral routines (Figure 20.5).

Other examples showed assimilated Jewish and Italian men devoid of gesture.

The well-structured variability in gestural style across and within kinds of people in Efron's data left no room for tying gestural inventories to either racial groups or imagined measures of intelligence. Words for races or psychological complexities like intelligence promise more coherence than a careful look at the facts can deliver. Whether in 1941 or in 2010, Efron's dual message remains relevant: that racism is a way of not looking carefully at others and that, as Kafka promised, it can be confronted 'by taking a handful of world and looking at it closely.'¹⁶

LEARNING AND INTELLIGENCE

Jump ahead 70 years from Boas and Efron's New York to today's California, and the intelligence wars are still on, but in a different format. The single measure IQ tests that dominated the lives of schoolchildren in the first half of the 20th century have been on the

Table 20.1 Gesticulation styles

	<i>Traditional Eastern European Jewish</i>	<i>Traditional Southern Italian</i>
Movement from:	The elbow (upper arms to the side) [Figure 20.1]	The shoulder [Figure 20.2]
Direction:	Frontal, in 'the immediate area of his chest and face' (p. 68) and 'towards the interlocutor' (p. 89)	Off to both sides of the body and up and down the vertical plane
Touch:	Frequent to constant, but 'rarely comes into contact with his own body' (p. 90)	Rare, but a speaker 'manipulates quite frequently ... the other parts of his own physique' (p. 90)
Spacing:	Crowded, close enough for touching	Enough room for a wide gestural range for each speaker
Head movement:	Frequent	Rare
Tempo:	Choppy, with the three parts of the arm used independently; staccato	Smooth, with a 'synergy in the use of the three parts of his arm' (p. 81)
Symmetry:	One hand or arm at a time	Both hands and/or arms used together
Gesture form:	Ideographic, 'tracing a line of thought' (p. 107); logico-pictorial [Figure 20.3]	Physiographic, 'illustrating the very things referred to by the accompanying words' (p. 122); emblematic [Figure 20.4]

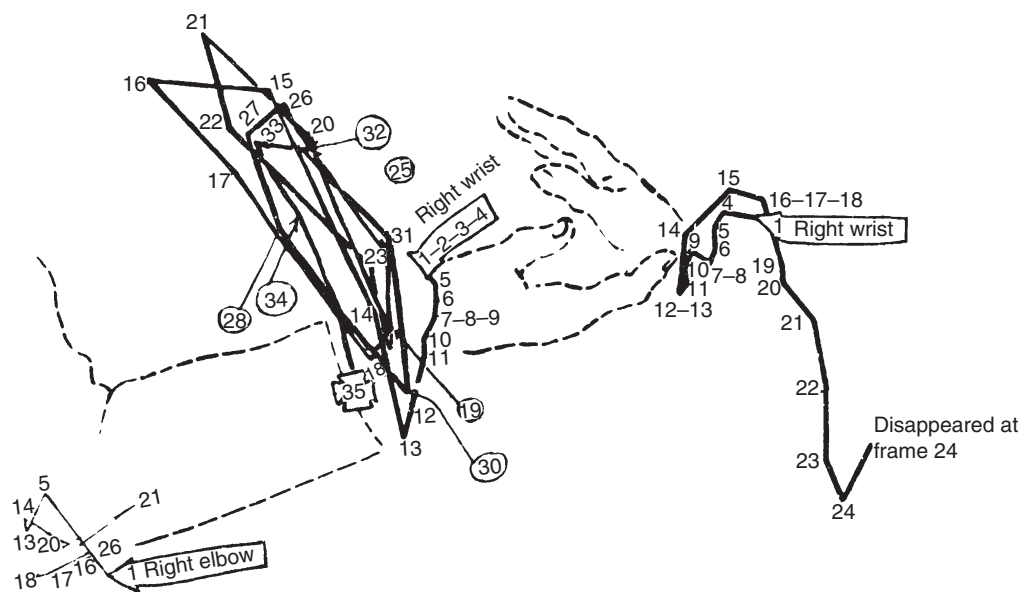


Figure 20.1 Traditional Jewish: 'confined gestural radius, movement from elbow' (Efron, 1941, Fig. 8)

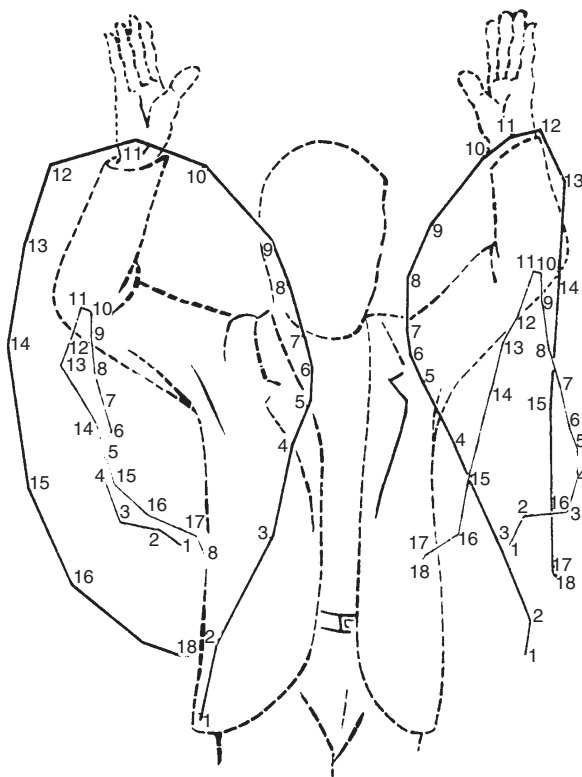


Figure 20.2 Traditional Italian: 'wide gestural radius, movement from shoulder' (Efron, 1941, Fig. 37)

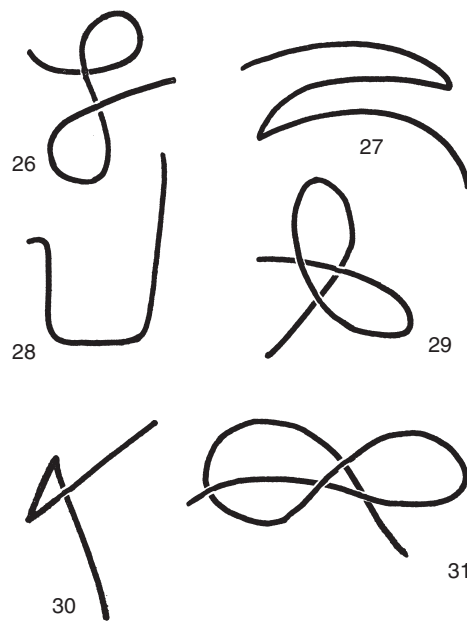


Figure 20.3 Traditional Jewish: 'logico-topographical gestures (gestures = syllogisms)' (Efron, 1941, Fig. 26)



Figure 20.4 Traditional Italian: 'the placing of the hands together' (Efron, 1941, Fig. 65)



Figure 20.5 Mayor LaGuardia: '(1) Entirely Italian in form ... ; (2)a...Italian type of gesture, chiefly because of tempo, and b...typical American gesture...;(3)...a rejective type gesture, typical of both Italian and Jew, made fleetingly; (4)...there is some Italian in this gesture' (Efron, 1972, Fig. 77)

run, and high stereotype characterizations of the intelligence of various groups now sound more like hate crimes than science. To that good news – make that mostly good news, as the stereotypes still make public appearances and have a rich life-in-waiting and baiting under the surface – we can add the bad news that schools are active in carving children at ever-earlier ages into ability piles. The language is softer and kinder, a language of disability and disadvantage over a language of stupidity and race, but the results are amazingly the same. Race and class biases operate convincingly under the new linguistic constraints (McDermott and Raley, 2009; McDermott et al., 2009).

It is easy to make assumptions about how children from the bottom of the social

structure wind up at the bottom of their class, but most everyone who has looked carefully, that is slowly, and in detail, at classrooms comes away with stories more about what children can do than about what they cannot do. Gradually a new story, with new assumptions, has been taking shape. Classrooms – even kindergarten classrooms – are the places where American social structure stages try-outs for success and failure based on intelligence measures with a preset number of winner and losers. The key is that the games often have no relation – no more than daytime quiz shows and nighttime survivor specials on television – to what the children can do eventually or what they might have to do in life beyond the classroom. As long as there are winners and losers, or at least as long as

the American dream that winning is possibly within everyone's hardworking reach is at play, everyone goes home happy, or if not happy, then at least knowing where they stand. From the child's point of view, the day is spent arranging to not get caught not knowing something and/or getting caught knowing something at just the right time. From the teacher's point of view, the day is spent finding failure while, at the same time, preaching the availability of success for all and trying not to degrade those who look less able. No child is left behind, goes the cant, but if some are – and some always are – the rule seems to be that everyone must not feel terrible about it. While this system of games beats handing out rewards on the basis of race, national origin, or gestural habits, it makes little sense as a way to set apart 4 and 5 year olds learning how to read. Let's take a careful look at how it works on the ground, and wonder if we can imagine how to change it.

The findings are presented below in three versions – three perspectives on an ever-emerging reality. First, we offer a narrative description of a few minutes of life in kindergarten that produces a celebration of a young girl's success at reading. Neither the Spanish-language-dominant girl nor her classroom group is known for easy reading. Secondly, we offer a close analysis of a few seconds within that episode, and notice that the episode seems to be actively organized for displays of who can or cannot read and celebrations about being able to read. Finally, we present an argument for a different celebration and a new set of worries.

The narrative

Five kindergartners sit at a kidney-shaped table, coloring outlined illustrations of objects on a photocopied half-page they will later add to a stapled, illustrated book on parts of speech. The camera focuses on one half of the table. Three children are in the visible frame, talking to each other as they work: Jared is nearest the table's left end; Alexis is

sitting at the midpoint of the table's curve; and Giordano is between them. The teacher enters from behind the students and reaches over them to put something on the table. As the teacher withdraws her hand and begins to turn away, Alexis, facing away from the camera, leans across Giordano and points to something posted on a bulletin board. As she does, she announces, 'Mrs. Pomeroy, I have one of those.'

The object is nearly within reach. Jared, closest, and Giordano, at Jared's left, leave their coloring aside to consider the object more closely. It is a list of kindergartners in the other language arts group, all native speakers of English. Working together to decode the names, Jared and Giordano quickly focus on what the list, with some names crossed out and others not, can tell them. In particular, they worry about who finished the last assignment. They also consider what it might mean for those students who did not finish, particularly about how they might feel sad.

Alexis meanwhile explains that she got her own copy of the list out of the trashcan. Mrs. Pomeroy offers 'a clean one,' an offer Alexis enthusiastically accepts. The teacher's aide, Miss Sonia, enters the scene. Mrs. Pomeroy explains to Miss Sonia that she gave Alexis the list because Alexis 'took one from the trash and it was dirty.'

Miss Sonia turns to Alexis and asks, 'You wanted a list from the English group?' 'Yes,' Alexis says, and then, 'I can read it!' Miss Sonia replies with a question, 'You wanna read it?' Alexis leans back, holds the paper away from her, and begins to read. Three minutes later, as she finishes sounding out the last name on the list, Miss Sonia stands, applauds, and celebrates, 'Yeah! Very good, Alexis!' Alexis smiles, puts the paper down, and resumes coloring. End of story.

Well, maybe the end, but not quite the whole story, even in this narrative version. Interesting things happen between 'I can read it!' and 'Yeah! Very good, Alexis!' Most of the time, Alexis is not able to decode the names, at least not by herself. Giordano

points, leans in, leans over, corrects, and proceeds where Alexis pauses. He does variations of this more than once, but at least once does so while reading the name in reverse through the back of the paper. Jared stops reading the posted list and announces that he, too, can read. Again, and again, but no one pays him much attention. About midway, and in the face of it all, in the face of them all, Alexis waves her hand in the air and declares, 'I can do it myself!' All the while, Miss Sonia prods and praises. At one point, she turns to Mrs. Pomeroy, who is now engaged in other things, and declares, 'She's reading the names!'

Interesting things happen after Miss Sonia leaves, too. Without looking up and in a voice almost a whisper, Giordano tells Alexis (in Spanish) that he helped her with (at least) one of the names, although he does not say anything about reading backwards and through the paper. Alexis insists: 'Lo hice solita' (I did it myself). Just after this exchange, Jared recruits Giordano and Alexis as witnesses to his attempts at reading. Giordano turns, but Alexis challenges: 'A ver?' (Let's see!). Despite his earlier successes, Jared stumbles. And finally, just before recess and just visible in the background of the recording, Alexis waves the list in front of Giordano and Jared. At best, she's sharing her joy. More likely, she's flaunting her victory, the clean list of names her trophy.

The detail

It takes visible work for participants to take each other from 'You want a list?' through 'I can read it!' to 'Yeah! Very good, Alexis!' In the 22 seconds that follow Alexis' receipt of the list, we can see a version of the story that will get replayed over the next two and a half minutes, and likely over the next 12 or more years of schooling. For Alexis to 'read it' means that she must do it alone and in a way that the teacher – any teacher – can see it. This is the achievement, if not the aim of the work. It takes arranging bodies and materials

and talk to keep people in their respective positions. It does not require being able to read. The funny thing here is that successfully arranging for Alexis to 'read it' involves Alexis first declaring, 'I can read it,' and then, at the right time, *not* actually reading it. Giordano does plenty of the reading, backwards and forwards, but his 'successful' decoding is effectively erased by not being included in the arrangement for Alexis' reading (Figures 20.6–20.9).

On this day, 'I can read it' gives the children and their adults something to work on. It recruits their bodies and words to do the work. This may be the easiest part. Between Alexis saying, 'I can read it,' and Miss Sonia's applauding, laughing, 'Yeah! Very good, Alexis!', Alexis keeps the right people doing the right things at the right times. The most effective strategy seems to be the one most likely to undermine her initial claim of being able to read. She reads wrongly, hesitatingly, mistakenly. Ironically, she achieves Miss Sonia's praise by requiring her assistance. For Alexis, being seen being able to read at the end means being unable to read at just the right times along the way. Risky, but in this case, with a nice payoff.

And the story retold

Who 'can read it' might be the question of moment for these people over these several minutes. Or not! Alexis 'can read it' might not be what is going on any more than that Jared can read with less guidance or that Giordano seems to be able to read in two directions and through paper. Focusing on race, Efron warned, is dangerous because it narrows the field of vision and leaves no trace of what else might be going on: so, too, is a focus on reading, ability, or linguistic competence. The first revelation of a natural history approach is that 'can read it' is much less a property of individual minds – it's not personal property at all – and more the systematic product of real people pointing at, gathering around, interrupting, and tugging

1
Jared and Giordano decode a list of names posted to the right of their worktable.

2
Ms. Sonia puts her left hand on Alexis' left shoulder. Alexis begins to lift her right hand from the sheet of paper she is coloring. Alexis holds a copy of the list of student names under her chin. Walking behind the table, Danielle turns her head to the right and directs her gaze downward toward Alexis' hand or paper.

1:44:02.10

49 Jared //Kelly's sa:d Ms.Sonia [you wanted
50 a list//from the-
51 Jared //(Alec is) sa:d Alexis? for the English group] Alexis?
52 Mrs.Pom [(1.0)
53 Ms.Sonia yes //[I ;can read it]]
Mrs.Pom [()] want the list
Ms.Sonia from the (English group)
you wanna read it?
okay go ahead mi'ja

3
Jared and Giordano continue decoding the list of names to determine which students have not completed an assignment.

4
Alexis leans back, holds the list with both hands, moves this list away from her body, declaring, "I can read it!" Ms. Sonia removes her hand from Alexis' shoulder. Danielle's gaze moves up to the list.

1:44:04.03

Figure 20.6 'I can read it!'

1
Jared reads the list aloud. Mrs. Pomeroy has just moved behind Jared and pointed to the list Jared is reading. Mrs. Pomeroy's body faces the room. Though not visible, her head and arm appear to be in slight torque.

2
Alexis inclines her head toward Ms. Sonia and indicates a spot on the list with her left hand. With her talk, it appears to be a request for assistance. Danielle begins to sound out a name on the list. Carolina stands behind Alexis. Giordano directs his gaze to the paper in Alexis' hands.

1:44:11.19

53
54 Jared //Kh- eh- l
56 Mrs. Pom {(what?)
57 Jared [Kel//ly
58
59
60 (?) see:
61
62
63 Mrs. Pom you read (all) the
name?
64 Mrs. Pom //yeh good ↑job!
66 Mrs. Pom //m: : :[a: y-

Ms. Sonia you wanna read it?
okay go ahead mi'ja
Alexis //I don know this name
Ms. Sonia //read it-
Danielle [(that's candy class)]
Ms. Sonia [oh that's a spanish name]
(0.8)
Ms. Sonia name in Spani- ah:
Danielle ah- eh- ah-
Giordano Gabri://g: [: l:
Ms. Sonia : mira°
Alexis //Ga-

3
Jared leans toward the posted list as Mrs. Pomeroy praises his reading.

4
Giordano begins to point to the back of the paper with his left hand as he reads from the right-hand column of names on the paper in Alexis' hands. The name is only visible in reverse, through the back of the paper. Giordano starts to move his body out of torque. At the same time, Ms. Sonia begins to move her hand toward the paper.

1:44:15.20

Figure 20.7 'You wanna read it?'

1

Giordano completes the rotation of his body out of torque to face the paper in **Alexis'** hands. He moves his left hand down and reaches toward the back of the paper with his right index finger. He continues to read the name "Gabriel." He stretches the name and reads in an animated voice.

2

Alexis shifts her gaze to the right, toward the column of names that **Giordano** is reading (through the back of the paper). **Ms. Sonia** grasps the top of the paper and says (in Spanish), "mira" ("look").

1:44:16:04

63	Mrs. Pom	you read (all) the name?	Giordano	Gabri://e:	l:
64	Mrs. Pom	//yeh good :job!	Ms. Sonia	//Ga-	°mira°
65			Alexis	°mira°	
66	Mrs. Pom	//m: : :[a: y-	Ms. Sonia	(0.2)	
67			Ms. Sonia	//a:h:?	
68			Ms. Sonia	(1.8)	
69	Jared	[Ma//ya	Ms. Sonia	deh-	
70	Mrs. Pom	yes:	Ms. Sonia	(0.2)	
71			Ms. Sonia	dri:?	
72		(2.8)	Ms. Sonia	//ahdri:?	
73	Jared	Mi//guel,	Alexis	ahn. (0.2) Adrian? Alec.	
74	Mrs. Pom	ye:s,	Giordano	ira. °(Chris dich fin-)°	
75		(3.2)		look	
76	Jared	Charl:			
77					
78					

3

Ms. Sonia pulls the paper slightly away from **Alexis** with her left hand, points to a place on the paper with her right hand, and begins to bend down toward **Alexis**. **Ms. Sonia's** body opens slightly toward the paper.

4

Giordano moves his face closer to the back of the paper and angles his head to follow the paper's now slightly angled position. He continues to sound out the name "Gabriel."

1:44:17:03

Figure 20.8 Decoding, in reverse and through the paper

1

Jared continues decoding the posted list of student names. Mrs. Pomeroy stands behind and to the right of Jared.

2

Ms. Sonia holds the upper corner of the paper with her left hand and points to the first name on the list with her right hand. She sounds out the name one syllable at a time. Alexis puts her own right hand on or near the same word. Carolina stands to the right of Alexis, looking at the paper. Just visible between Alexis and Ms. Sonia, Iliana gazes at the paper. She is smiling.

3

Giordano leans away from the paper and appears to be looking at the spot indicated by Alexis and Ms. Sonia. He brings his left hand to his mouth; his right hand is suspended.

1:44:21:19

63 Mrs.Pom you read (all) the name?
 64 Mrs.Pom //yeh good ↑job!
 65
 66 Mrs.Pom //m: : :[a: y-
 67
 68
 69 Jared [Ma//ya
 70 Mrs.Pom yes:
 71
 72 (2.8)
 73
 74 Jared Mi//guel,
 75 Mrs.Pom ye:s,
 76 (3.2)
 77 Jared Charl:
 78

Giordano Gabri+//e: {:_l:
 Ms.Sonia {°mira°
 Alexis //Ga-
 Ms.Sonia °mira°
 (0.2)
 Ms.Sonia //a:h:?
 (1.8)
 Ms.Sonia deh-
 (0.2)
 Ms.Sonia dri:?
 Ms.Sonia //ahdri:?
 (0.2)
 Alexis ahn. (0.2) Adrian? Alec.
 Giordano ira. °(Chris didn fin-)°
 look

4

Giordano sits erect. The fingers of his left hand are poised in front of his mouth; his right hand remains suspended. His eyes are directed up, toward Ms. Sonia, in slight torque relative to his body and face.

5

Alexis successfully decodes the name "Adrian." She smiles. Carolina and Iliana remain looking at the paper. Ms. Sonia removes her hands from the paper and begins to straighten her torso.

1:44:24:29

Figure 20.9 Reading (with others)

on other real people and real objects in real time – sometimes with and sometimes without regard for who really can or cannot read. It's all in the sometimes and in the work of the people who put them together. The first revelation disrupts our thinking, revealing both our subjects' and our own habits in a new light (or for the first time).

A second revelation follows: that the obsession – *our* obsession – with figuring out who can read and what (and especially compared to whom) is likewise a product of our collusion. We are not dopes, but the best proof is that we can sometimes find ourselves duped.

Taken together, the analyses reveal what is routinely proclaimed but too rarely held up for contemplation or argument.

First, children in school are knowledgeable, curious, imaginative, and resourceful. They are more ingenious than their adults seem to notice, even when they are taking pictures of them (see Margolis and Fram, 2007).

Secondly, ingenuity is a distributed phenomenon, less the property of individual persons than a way to express our aesthetic appreciation for what a person does inside, across, and along unfolding environments of materials and other persons. We consider the children's performance to be a kind of jazz (Klemp et al., 2008). A performance can be called 'swinging' or described as 'got swing', and a jazz musician can be described as someone who 'can swing'. What makes us call a given act – or a given person – ingenious? Given the materials and persons and moments at hand, what a person does is 'ingenious' if it transforms those materials into something interesting, fun, or new.

Thirdly, official school environments either make ingenuity appear scarce, make ingenuity a refugee phenomenon, or bend the purposes of ingenuity toward the pursuit of being seen being able. It takes ingenuity to make reading what it must be for it to count in school: it has to be precisely timed; used to recruit others; and made available to be seen, noticed, and commented on, as an example of what individuals can do, by

virtue of their inherent ability and intelligence.

A natural history of ingenuity reveals ingenuity, but also the systematic narrowing of what ingenuity means. In the present case, everyone is visibly ingenious, but Alexis' ingenuity matters the most for everyone. Her announcement 'I can read it,' said at the right time, in the right way, with the right materials, recruits people into a new arrangement where what she cannot do well by herself gets turned into something she *can* do with a little adult help and a lot of adult noticing. Together the children and their adults put on a play: *The Precise Timing of Ability in School*. Whether she intends her announcement to rearrange the environment is not important. That the environment is arranged, and rearranged – now *this* is important.

ASKING BETTER QUESTIONS

With two examples in hand, we return now to the *problem*, *claim*, and *promise* that urged us to look before asking. Now that we have seen gestures in New York in the 1930s and children learning how to read in California in 2005, can we ask better questions of the situations?

The *problem* we identified is that language is a great invention for helping people to recreate yesterday's world today, but a biased resource for making today and tomorrow different from yesterday. Ordinary language delivers Jews and Italians, Learning Disabled and English Language Learners (LD and ELL, respectively) children, intelligence, and illiteracy, all as if they were simply and only what they are called. Artists, writers, and an eyes-open social science each mount assaults on the common lexicon in favor of a more evocative and precise language. Careful looking turns all these apparent things into contingent events. Jewish and Italian gestures are not determined, nor do they determine next events; they are better seen as resources sequenced with, and fitted into, the behavior

of others as circumstances invite and make relevant. LD and ELL children are not brain types as much as they are students spotlighted in a system of negative categories built for the purpose, and often disguised as helping the needy, of sorting out and putting down children who are not doing as well as other children (Varenne and McDermott, 1998; McDermott and Raley, 2009). 'Intelligent' and 'literate' become words applicable to systems of people doing things rather than names for kinds of persons.

The *claim* we made is that the social world is built by people working together, and by their work we can know them. The world may be easier to see and perform than it is to describe, and the best way to study it is on its own terms: i.e. with an eye to how it is organized. After looking at how gesturing immigrants and kids make sense, we can seek new procedures of analysis. For the dozens of terms available for describing what is wrong with individual schoolchildren (or migrating adults, why not) there is a literature that counts, correlates, and explains them – more than it helps anyone to examine the role of our institutions in organizing their problems, the same institutions that have us in the cushy position of explaining them. The misfit between the simplistic terms of diagnosis, and the complex terms of productive engagements in situations not dominated by min-max intelligence games, demands that we ask who is being served by a system of labeling and disabling children, unguided by careful observation and self-examination. Our new effort is to imagine solutions better fitted to their experiences with the constraints we place on their lives.

And then we *promised* that reform is more possible if we approach problems where they are organized, on the ground, as they come at and get enacted by people mixing and matching the constraints and possibilities of the systems in which they, and the people profiting from the problems, are immersed. Mainstream social and psychological research has generally studied received problems with analytic distance and without careful

observation, and each research community has looked away when their descriptions of communicative gestures in one political nexus, or of children learning to read in another, have made things worse. Immigrant Jews and Italians used their full intelligence to pass the 'gesture tests' of New York and take their place in the middle class. In a system designed to make them look bad, children's attempts at intellectual growth run into roadblocks of injustices and eyes-closed research that describes them without a serious look at what they can do in the classroom. The last point is perhaps the most pressing. The cumulative effect of research into social problems continues to be negative, in phrasing and consequence, for those studied. Run for your lives! The social scientists are coming, and things are about to get worse. Beware becoming a named social problem! Keep your eyes open.

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NOTES

1 W. J. T. Mitchell warns that 'the first lesson in any course in visual culture should be to dispel it—"visual media" are mixed or hybrid formations, combining sound and sight, text and image; they are often more attached to anxiety than to insight and lead more to idolatry than to clarity' (2008: 16–17; see also Ungar, 2003).

2 Since the 18th century, natural history has been associated with an 'egalitarian ideology' (Drouin and Bensuade-Vincent, 1996: 408; Secord, 1996). We exclude the effort of Louis Agassiz, the influential 19th-century Harvard biologist, to commandeer the term for the study of the differential development and potential of human races (see Irmscher, 1999).

3 Kafka's line appeared as the last footnote in an early paper by Harvey Sacks (1963).

4 For Emerson, see his early essay on 'The uses of natural history' (1833–1835/2005; for more on which, see Brown, 1992) as well as the posthumously published lectures of 1870–181 (1894, on which, see Bosco, 1997). James' sense of activity is methodologically central to a natural history approach: 'an activity-series is defined by its whence and whither... each activity-situation is a segment in a longer experience-chain...' (1905: 255; see also Siegfried, 1992). Dewey called for a psychology as 'the natural history of the various attitudes and structures through which experiencing passes, as an account of the conditions under which this or that attitude emerges' (1916/2007: 95). Mead's (1938) situated, temporal and perspectival approach to thoughts and things also resonates with a natural history of organism–environment relations: 'The reflective experience, the world, and the things within it exist in the form of situations.... The peculiarities of the different situations are not those of appearances or phenomena which inadequately reflect an absolute reality. These situations are the reality' (215). To complete the circle, there is now a *Natural History of Pragmatism* (Richardson, 2007).

5 Some self-ascribe to natural history or encourage reading those who do. See Birdwhistell (1970); Goffman (1971, 1976); McQuown (1971); Bateson (1972); Schefflen (1973); W. J. Smith (1977); Kendon (1990, 2004); for a summary of the best-known set of efforts, see Leeds-Hurwitz (1987); from history, see Bremner and Roodenburg (1992); from literature, a paper by K. Burke (1964) is remarkably on point. For other-ascription, conversation analysis is most relevant: See Sacks (1990); Schegloff (2007); C. Goodwin (1994, in press); M. Goodwin (2006). And for a visual strain in conversation analysis, see C. Goodwin (1981); and Schegloff (1984, 1996). How these traditions have stayed disconnected from American pragmatism is an ongoing mystery.

6 Goethe and Marx were fans of Sterne, and we should not be surprised to find Goethe's claim in *Faust* quoted approximately in Marx, 'When thoughts are absent, words are brought in as convenient replacements' (1867/1976: 161).

7 So too John Dewey: 'We lie, as Emerson said, in the lap of an immense intelligence. But that intelligence is dormant and its communications are broken, inarticulate and faint until it possesses the local community as its medium' (1927: 219).

8 Questions are essential to ethnographic inquiry, but not without an appreciation of how questions build on observation and participation. On mid-century definitions of ethnography as the search for right questions asked in right ways at right times, see Goodenough (1956), Radin (1957), and Frake (1964).

9 Marx: 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please in circumstances they choose for themselves; rather they make it in present circumstances given and inherited. Tradition from all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living' (1852/2002: 19).

10 Boas (1940); on Boas and natural history, see M. Smith (1959).

11 The stereotypes were everywhere. When McDermott attended school in Brooklyn in the 1960s, the gestural range of Italian students was an occasion for repression by teachers, humor among kids, and conflict for crowded subway riders.

12 There are three English language editions of Efron's work. The dissertation of 1940 is the most extensive; the published edition of 1941 is least so; the Mouton edition of 1972 (with a new title) restores 14 figures mostly showing hybrid gestures and a 'Dictionary' of 151 gestures Southern Italians can use to communicate without words. We have not seen the Spanish language edition of 1970. On the drama of etiquette and gesture in the corporal politics of European court society, see Elias (1969/1983).

13 This was Boas' (1940; also see Stocking, 1993) point, across 40 years of research measuring variation in the body parts of immigrant and Native American populations: that there is always more physical variability within a population, however defined, than across to a next category, and that racial groupings are held together primarily by the interests and biases of the observers.

14 Comments by Efron's artist and collaborator, Stuyvesant Van Veen, are particularly insightful. Drawings are not the same as analysis, but they train one's eye for analysis.

15 That Efron's use of 'ghetto' sounds negative now does not mean he was using it pejoratively. The term has an interesting history: from the Italian word for 'foundry,' it referred to the quarters for ironworks where Jews and, ironically, Germans were sequestered by Venetian authorities in 1516. A contemporary back-translation of ghettoblaster into Italian as 'maxistereo portatile' shows new tendencies, with neither an ironworks nor an Iron Cross in sight.

16 Two more reasons for recovering Efron: first, gesture studies have come of age with Adam Kendon's (2004) foundational volume; and secondly, also due to Kendon, Efron forms a midpoint in a long history of studies of Italian gesture – from de Jorio's (1832/2000) account of gesture in both the potsherds of ancient Naples and the living 19th-century city, through Efron a century later, to Kendon's restudy (2000, 2004). Italian gesture stands out for its comparative elaborateness, in contrast to, say, Japanese gesture, remarkable for its subtlety (Befu, 1974). The contrast works well, but should not imply that Italian gesture is not subtle, nor that Japanese

gesture, even in Noh drama, is not elaborate (Bethe and Brazell, 1978).

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