Book Review/Compte rendu

Charles L. Bosk, *What Would you Do? Juggling Bioethics and Ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008, 288 pp. $US 20.00 (978-0-226-06677-6), $US 50.00 hardcover 9978-0-226-06676-9).

Charles Bosk, a sociologist also appointed to University of Pennsylvania's Center for Bioethics, brings to bear on a host of ethical concerns over 30 years' experience in medical ethnography, in a text both thought-provoking and engaging. He examines both the social organization of bioethics as a growing occupational domain in health care, and the everyday ethical dilemmas of sociologists who conduct ethnography in health care settings, including studying medical ethics.

Bosk argues that bioethics as a field solidifies notions that what can go wrong in medicine concerns moral values, rather than structural arrangements, power, privilege, and authority. In a sense, the rise of bioethics, a field operating largely *within* medicine, displaced more fundamentally confrontational challenges. He also notes that there is no way to assess the work of bioethicists, inasmuch as it is not clear what effectiveness would mean: fewer legal complaints? quicker resolution of conflicts? greatly expanded discussion of ethical issues, by health professionals and patients? Without measures of success, not to mention agreed upon goals, means, procedures, qualifications, and realms of authority, it is not clear what makes bioethics a distinct field.

In the late 1970s, Bosk studied surgical training, focusing on how surgeons and residents came to define what counted as blameworthy and blameless errors (i.e., those that warrant censure or dismissal *versus* those that are good for learning). The essay "Margin of Error" constitutes one of the strengths of this book, as he applies the same kind of analysis to bioethics, arguing that bioethicists cannot make blameworthy errors when there is no consensus in the field about what constitutes a mistake.

In my view, the most interesting sections of the book occur when the human side of medical ethnography is explored. Bosk describes grappling to impose order on years of fieldnotes, trying to juggle analysis with the need for confidentiality and anonymity. He details the responses of some study participants, highlighting the particular issues that arise when doing ethnography in settings where locals will access and read your work: have you sufficiently masked identities to prevent readers

figuring out what their friends and colleagues said about them? The need for participant anonymity must be balanced with the need for good analysis, an issue he foregrounds with two instances in which he chose to change the gender of participants at the cost of analyzing gender politics that directly affected events. Bosk's own self-reflexive analysis of what he did and did not do, and why, would make educational and engaging reading for anyone embarking on ethnographic study.

More broadly, Bosk argues that research ethics, with its myopic focus on informed consent, fails to capture the ethical reality of ethnography. He questions why ethnographers continue to mask their field sites, knowing full well locals (and often others) will figure out the identities of places and people; yet he argues such masking is essential not only to convey an important commitment to participants, but also to encourage ethnographers to reach beyond journalistic thick description of people, places, and events to *use* such detail in the service of sociological analysis and theorizing. At the same time, he suggests we better specify the limitations and perhaps impossibility of truly informed consent in ethnography. People cannot really understand what we intend to do with their words and our observations, as we use their data for analysis and theorizing that may threaten agreed-upon definitions of reality. The tendency to employ member-checking in qualitative research — which is becoming normative among REBs — is an attempt to address this concern. At the same time, of course, it entrenches notions of objective truth, and heightens the difficulty of doing critical analysis that may make people — or at least the social structures that shape their everyday lives — look bad.

A chapter on institutionalized research ethics review seems almost an aside and despite potential, it remains disappointing. Bosk takes issue with social scientists' frequently knee-jerk resistance to REBs (or IRBs) conducting prospective ethical review of their research. He believes that such review is here to stay, and we simply need to make it more effective and appropriate. Yet the suggestions he offers do little to address fundamental concerns about the value of informed consent, the expansion of ethics bureaucracy with little proven effectiveness, or the importance of balancing potential risk with degree of scrutiny. He has advocated studying the social organization of bioethics, but fails to contribute that perspective here, neglecting to examine the prolific social science response to research ethics expansion.

The text largely consists of previously published articles, which gives the reader an intriguing sense of issues unfolding through time. It includes several chapters originally published in 1998–2004, two chapters from his book *All God's Mistakes: Genetic Counselling in a Pediatric*

Hospital (1992), one chapter from *Forgive and Remember: Managing Medical Failure* (1979), and an added appendix from the second edition (2003). One apparently new chapter, in which Bosk reflects on the ethical implications of a field site publicly disclosing its identity, is revealed in the acknowledgements to have been drafted at the same time as two other chapters originally published in 2001 and 2003. The Introduction is new, but the Conclusion seems to be the text of a talk previously delivered at a conference on medical ethics.

While the sense of historical change embedded in the text is intriguing, the result is also frequent repetition. Good editing would have benefitted the volume. Although the attention to classics in medical sociology is laudable, the failure to engage with more recent writing is disappointing. The resulting text also lacks coherence. Given Bosk's chosen device of pulling together reflections on ethics and ethnography from a 30 year span, the book needs a concluding chapter that pulls together their lessons more explicitly and informatively. His thinking must have developed after many years in the field; we are robbed of much of the benefit of that learning because of his chosen format.

Bosk suggests in the introduction that one criterion for judging the worth of his "personal recycling" project is that it produce essays that are "good to think with." This aim has been accomplished, though I cannot help thinking they could have been even better to think with had Bosk i) engaged with more recent literature especially in the area of reflexive ethnography; ii) pushed beyond the original formulations, "thinking with" his own earlier essays to help us all move further in our thinking; iii) devoted considerably more thought to the concluding chapter, to weave together an emerging analysis of the social organization of bioethics and the social organization of ethnography in medicine.

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