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The Ethnographer as Detective: Indiciary Paradigm and Abduction

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Abstract

The paper reflects on the use of the indiciary paradigm in ethnographic research. Ethnography, and social research more broadly, must address the invisibility of action's meaning and the definitions of situation. For accessing these "internal states" — beliefs, meanings, values — a semiotic orientation toward reading traces, signs, clues, and minor details is essential. The specificity of this reading practice emerges through comparison with medical diagnosis, revealing a critical difference: unlike patients who collaborate in diagnosis, research participants deploy dissimulation and simulation as self-protection. Drawing on Becker's insight that participants orient performances toward more consequential audiences (superiors, peers) rather than ethnographers, and Anteby's analysis of resistance strategies, the paper illustrates how the indiciary paradigm addresses this opacity through attention to "expressions given off" and unwitting testimonies. The paper subsumes the indiciary paradigm under abductive logic, thereby addressing Ginzburg's ostensible resistance to this framing. Ethnographic fieldwork becomes the theatre where indiciary paradigm and abductive inference operate together. Following Peirce's classical definition, enriched by Walton and Eco's contributions, the paper adopts Eco's distinction of three abductive types: overcoded, undercoded, and creative. Each type is illustrated through Sherlock Holmes' adventures — Ginzburg's exemplar of the indiciary paradigm — and through the author's ethnographic studies on nature sacralization in Italian communities and childhood vaccine hesitancy across seven European countries. The paper concludes that the indiciary paradigm guides the ethnographer's gaze toward marginal details and unwitting testimonies that trigger abductive reasoning — the core engine of ethnographic practice.

Keywords: Indiciary paradigm; Evidential paradigm; Ethnography; Abductive reasoning; Carlo Ginzburg.

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> "Though reality may seem to be opaque, there are privileged zones — signs, clues — which allow us to penetrate it"
> – C. Ginzburg, *Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm*, 2013, p. 112

> "You know my method. It is founded upon the observation of trifles".
> – A. Conan Doyle, *Sherlock Holmes, The Boscombe Valley Mystery*, 1891

1 Introduction

In 1979, Carlo Ginzburg drew attention to an unusual epistemic approach that valorises marginal information: traces, signs, clues, and minor details that, despite their apparent insignificance, prove particularly revealing. In *Spie* — translated as *Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm* (2013) — Ginzburg reconstructs this cognitive style by juxtaposing figures such as Giovanni Morelli, Sherlock Holmes, and Sigmund Freud, all united by their attention to minutiae that escape deliberate control and yet prove diagnostically decisive. Ginzburg situates this paradigm within a long historical lineage, reaching back to hunting practices in which the reconstruction of invisible prey relied on the interpretation of minimal traces. In modern contexts, this semiotic sensitivity reappears in art attribution, criminal investigation, and psychoanalysis, all of which seek to infer hidden realities from seemingly trivial signs (Sebeok & Umiker-Sebeok, 1983, pp. 28–47).

A similar epistemic challenge characterises ethnography and, more broadly, sociological inquiry, where beliefs, meanings, and internal dispositions are not directly observable (see Cardano, 2020, chapter 1) but must be inferred from signs embedded in social interaction. The way sociologists detect these "internal states" is underpinned by a kind of semiotics based on the reading of signs and symptoms, but with a peculiarity that better emerges by considering the scene of cure.

In Hippocratic medicine, and in its developments until the late nineteenth century, before the era of hyper-technological biomedicine, diagnosis was based on the reading of the signs of the diseases appearing in the sufferers' bodies, in their gait, movements, and gestures, and on the symptoms described by the sufferers, spontaneously or through the doctor's questioning. The doctor's cognitive exercise relied on the cooperation of patients, who, within the limits of their memory, linguistic capacities, and sense of modesty, offered their full collaboration. The analogous semiotic exercise takes on a different configuration in the context of social research.

The reading of signs and symptoms by a social researcher, whether involved in a qualitative or quantitative study, shows crucial differences from the medical scene. Usually, research participants are not in front of the researcher of their own volition: they are invited to participate in the study by answering our questions or accepting the researcher as a bystander — not always inconspicuous — observing their daily activities. Unlike patients who usually adhere to the doctor's cognitive objectives and collaborate in medical diagnosis, the collaborative disposition typically attenuates or vanishes in social research settings.[1] The most important thing

1. This characterisation conflicts with significant methodological proposals. Holstein and Gubrium (1995) and Heyl (2001) emphasise the collaborative dimension of qualitative interviews, where interviewer and respondent co-construct meaning through "cooperative mutual disclosure" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 20). While recognising the value of this perspective, I maintain a more cautious stance. During in-depth interviews,

becomes, to quote Erving Goffman, to "save one's own face" (Goffman, 1959). However, this face-work is more complex than it might initially appear, as the ethnographer is not always the primary audience for participants' impression management.

Howard Becker offers crucial insight into this point in his foundational book, *Sociological Work: Method and Substance* (1970). Discussing fieldwork evidence, Becker (2017) reframes the conventional notion of reactivity — the participants' response to the field perturbation introduced by the ethnographer — in broader terms: "The general principle, then, is that research subjects respond most to the things in the research situation that seem most important to them" (p. 48). The "things" Becker refers to are embedded in a field (*sensu* Bourdieu, 1993, pp. 72–77) of power relations that shape participants' performances. In this field, the most relevant actors are superiors who control career advancement, peers whose judgment affects daily standing, and subordinates, and — when a study is underway — the ethnographer. Assuming that, in any case, the ethnographer's gaze moulds participants' performances implies excluding the possibility that "more potent forces are operating" (Becker, 2017, p. 43). This cannot always be the case, as Becker illustrates through a vivid example:

> If I observe a college student responding to a teacher in the classroom, I observe a person to whom my reactions are much less important than those of the teacher, who may give him a low grade, and even of other students, whose opinion of him has consequences long after he has seen the last of me. He may not care to have me think him stupid, naïve, or deceitful; but better I should think so than those whose opinions are more fateful than mine (Becker, 2017, p. 46).

The ethnographer's impact on participants' performances varies depending on whether s/he speaks with a single participant or with him/her, but in front of others who may influence the conversation. It also varies depending on participants' perceptions of the ethnographer's *persona* and their cognitive or political goals (Becker, 2017, p. 40; Anteby, 2024, p. 151).

In the field, as in our daily lives, we witness a composite array of performances.[2] Becker (2017) introduces a clear caveat: "We would err if we interpreted one or the other of these expressions as the 'real' one, dismissing the other as mere cover-up" (p. 48).

Ethnography, through its sustained duration, offers the chance to encounter this diversified set of context-sensitive performances, delivering a richer representation of actors in the scene. By observing specific performances with the sensitivity of the indiciary paradigm, we can glimpse others through little, marginal clues that express the residuals of alternative self-presentations.

The distinction between dissimulation and simulation is owed to Torquato Accetto (2021), who, more than three centuries earlier, anticipated the sociological treatment of these themes in a brief 1641 treatise, *On Honest Dissimulation*. Accetto defines dissimulation as the art of

respondent and interviewer may be "attuned to one another" in what Goffman terms a "working consensus" — a tacit agreement on how to conduct the interaction (Goffman, 1959, pp. 9–10). However, this working consensus — this agreement on the rules of the interview game — does not necessarily eliminate the strategic face-work discussed above. My ethnographic study of Damanhur (Cardano, 1997), an esoteric community, documented how participants engaged collaboratively in interviews while systematically concealing crucial aspects of their doctrine and practices through a "hiding strategy" (Anteby, 2024, chapter 2). This suggests that collaborative rapport and working consensus do not overcome participants' orientation toward more consequential audiences — in Damanhur's case, the community's spiritual leader. The collaborative frame facilitates dialogue without eliminating the face-work characteristic of participants' performances in the field.

2. This multiplicity of performances does not imply literally multiple selves. As Jon Elster (1986, p. 30) notes, despite this plurality, "we are dealing with exactly one person — neither more nor less".

hiding the truth to protect ourselves and the social order, while simulation substitutes truth with deliberate falsehood. As Accetto (2021) argues, dissimulation "is nothing other than a veil composed of honest shadows [...] whence the false is not formed, but some rest is given to the truth" (p. 11). This disposition protects the interaction order (Goffman, 1983) through generous inattention to others' errors and weaknesses.

Goffman's concept of "impression management" highlights how individuals protect themselves through dissimulation and simulation to maintain the character they present. Goffman's crucial contribution beyond Accetto's framework lies in recognizing that performers can lose control through unintentional communication — what he calls "expressions given off" — occurring through verbal slips and bodily comportment.

In the Introduction of the seminal book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Goffman writes:

> Knowing that the individual is likely to present himself in a light that is favorable to him, the others may divide what they witness into two parts; a part that is relatively easy for the individual to manipulate at will, being chiefly his verbal assertions, and a part in regard to which he seems to have little concern or control, being chiefly derived from the expressions he gives off. The others may then use what are considered to be the ungovernable aspects of his expressive behavior as a check upon the validity of what is conveyed by the governable aspects (Goffman, 1959, p. 7).

In the wake of Goffman, Jack Douglas suggests refining this common-sense disposition to transform it into the pivot of a genuinely investigative approach:

> People are extremely adept at constructing complex and convoluted forms of falsehood and deceptions to front out others, such as researchers, and sometimes even themselves, from the most important parts of their lives. Researchers have to use more in-depth and investigative methods to get at these private regions of life than they would to study the public realms, which are open to almost anyone (Douglas, 1976, p. 9).

Accetto, Goffman, and Douglas (probably among many others) highlight the opacity of social interaction and, in broader terms, of social phenomena, an opacity that does not appear with the same intensity in the medical curing scene from which I started my reflection on the semiotic model. To address this opacity, the indiciary paradigm appears to offer essential resources that demonstrate its potential, particularly in the ethnographic context, where the reading of "unwitting testimonies" (Ginzburg, 2023, p. 10) and the focus on infinitesimal traces can help elucidate — through abductive inference — "how things work in particular contexts" (Mason, 2002, p. 1).

In this paper, I reflect on the use of the indiciary paradigm in ethnographic research. Ginzburg himself suggests this connection in the postface to Natalie Zemon Davis' microhistorical study of the Martin Guerre case, arguing that the judicial records examined by the American historian "can be compared to the first-hand documentation collected by an anthropologist in his fieldwork" (Ginzburg, 2023, p. 355).

Microhistory, as defined by Giovanni Levi (2001), is a historiographical approach "essentially based on the reduction of the scale of observation, on a microscopic analysis and an intensive study of the documentary material" (p. 99). More broadly, microhistory and ethnography share relevant characteristics: both are committed to "intensive small-scale research" (p. 104),

focusing on daily activities, nuances, and details and both produce a "local knowledge" (Geertz, 1983), bounded by time and space, yet guided by the assumption that "minimal facts and individual cases can serve to reveal more general phenomena" (Levi, 2001, p. 113).

The following section introduces ethnographic research, defining the empirical context in which the indiciary paradigm and abduction — ethnography's core engine (Agar, 2006, §59, 66, 70, 71) — operate.[3] Section 3 examines the relationship between abductive inference and the indiciary paradigm. Section 4 returns to fieldwork to provide empirical examples of the indiciary paradigm embedded in abductive reasoning. The epilogue tentatively draws together the main findings.

2 Ethnography in a Nutshell

Ethnography is a qualitative research method that involves the researcher's immersion in a social context — a far-flung village, a high-tech company, or a hospital ward — for the duration necessary — usually a long one — to gather the information required to develop responses to their research questions (Hammersley, 2008, pp. 50 & 135). The extended duration of fieldwork, besides offering opportunities to witness a diverse range of context-sensitive performances by participants (see Section 1), presents what Howard Becker (1998, pp. 57–63) calls a "narrative account of processes and causality" — processes that the researcher can observe unfolding day by day.[4]

Ethnography's purpose is to elucidate the daily practices and the forms (*sensu* Simmel, 1950) of social interaction that animate the studied context. Borrowing Leonardo Piasere's effective locution, ethnography can be defined as an "experience experiment" (Piasere, 2002, p. 27) performed by "subjecting yourself, your own body and your own personality, and your

3. The relevance of abductive reasoning in ethnography is not unanimously recognised. While Michael Agar identifies abduction as the feature that distinguishes acceptable from unacceptable ethnographies (Agar, 2006, §70), other research traditions appear to take different positions. First, early Grounded Theory scholars embraced a radical inductivism. Glaser and Strauss (1967) defined their approach as "an inductive method of theory development" (p. 114), with theory carefully "*induced* from diverse data" (p. 239, emphasis in the original). However, more recent GT scholarship has moved decisively toward abduction. The authoritative *SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory* includes Jo Reichertz's (2007) chapter with an unambiguous title: "Abduction: The Logic of Discovery of Grounded Theory". After sharp criticism of naïve inductivism, Reichertz (2007) maintains that "the logic of later GT (Strauss from the 1980s onwards) is actually abductive" (p. 215), thus considerably enlarging the territory of Peircean abduction. Michael Burawoy's (1998) *Extended Case Method* presents a different challenge. Burawoy codifies a theory-driven ethnographic approach. As he puts it, practitioners "begin with [their] favorite theory but seek not confirmations but refutations that inspire [them] to deepen that theory. Instead of discovering grounded theory [they] elaborate existing theory" (Burawoy, 1998, p. 16). This appears as a hypothetico-deductive framework. However, Burawoy's emphasis on "anomalies" that must be absorbed through "theory reconstruction" necessarily creates space for abductive reasoning. When ethnographic observation produces genuine anomalies — surprising facts that existing theory cannot readily explain — the researcher must engage in precisely the kind of inference Peirce described: proposing new explanatory hypotheses to make sense of unexpected empirical phenomena. The Extended Case Method's commitment to "extending out" from singular cases (Burawoy, 1998, p. 6) to broader theoretical claims thus relies — though not explicitly — on abductive leaps embedded within its deductive framework. For a comprehensive critique of these two methodological approaches, see Tavory & Timmermans (2014, chapter 1).

4. Extended duration is generally preferable but does not constitute a prerequisite. Rapid ethnography is also acceptable, provided research questions are appropriate to the volume of empirical material collected (Vindrola-Padros, 2021; for critical discussion of appropriate ethnographic duration, see Cardano et al., 2023; Cardano, 2025).

own social situation, to the set of contingencies" (Goffman, 1989, p. 125) encountered in the field.

The core of ethnographic work rests on participant observation, which entails not only observing social interactions but also assuming a role in the social context being scrutinised and engaging in dialogue with participants. According to the anthropologist Dan Sperber, the observation must be integrated with dialogue:

> The project of scientific anthropology meets with a major difficulty: it is impossible to describe a cultural phenomenon, an election, a mass, or a football game, for instance, without taking into account the ideas of the participants. However, ideas cannot be observed, but only intuitively understood; they cannot be described but only interpreted (Sperber, 1985, p. 9).

In the field, the dialogue with participants assumes different forms, moving from informal conversations to backtalk, a dialogue oriented to discuss with participants the ethnographer's interpretations (Cardano, 2011, p. 110), passing through the casual interviewing (Lofland, 1971, p. 110), meant to collect information without our interlocutor being aware of it, and a formal interview with a dedicated setting and with the ubiquitous audio recorder. Observation and dialogue are usually supplemented by documentary analysis on written documents, images, and artefacts.

The centrality of texts in fieldwork shows once again the family resemblance between ethnography and microhistory. First of all, the necessity of reading texts critically. For this purpose, I find helpful — with some epistemological adjustments — the notion of "authenticity range" by Jerzy Topolski (1976, p. 434), which refers to the set of questions for which any document can offer a *plausible* answer.[5] In this reading, the investigative gaze is fundamental, as Marc Bloch clearly underlines:

> The most naïve policeman knows that a witness should not always be taken at his word, even if he does not always take full advantage of this theoretical knowledge. Similarly, it has been many a day since men first took into their heads not to accept all historical evidence blindly. An experience almost as old as mankind has taught us that more than one manuscript has falsified its date of origin, that all the account are not true, and that even the physical evidence can be faked (Bloch, 1953, p. 79).

Besides these relevant similarities, it is also essential to highlight the differences that separate ethnography and microhistory, both in their research practices and in the empirical material. Ethnographers, unlike historians, are inside the scene whose contours they sketch; they contribute to the construction of the evidence analysed, introducing a specific form of perturbation (Cardano, 2020, pp. 32–33) largely absent in historians' documentary analysis. The texts produced and analysed by ethnographers are built through the combination of the researcher's voice with those of the participants. This kind of multivocality (Cardano, 2020, pp. 31–32) can be observed either in fieldnotes written during fieldwork or in texts presenting the main findings of the ethnographic effort — such as papers, monographs, and other public communications — in which the participants' lives are represented (Geertz, 1988).

5. Topolski (1976) defines the authenticity range as the "the sum of those questions (problems) to which a given source can provide *true* answers" (p. 434, emphasis mine). In the epistemological frame here adopted (and consistently with my previous works) the notion of truth should be reframed in terms of plausibility.

These differences introduce both specific methodological challenges and distinctive analytical advantages to ethnographic inquiry. On the challenge side, the researcher's presence can trigger organised forms of resistance (Anteby, 2024), leading to dissimulation and simulation as participants react to being observed. John Van Maanen defines this specific challenge in ethnographic work as "presentational data," described as "those appearances that informants strive to maintain (or enhance) in the eyes of the fieldworker" (Van Maanen, 1979, p. 542). On the advantage side, ethnographers possess resources unavailable to historians: the privilege of interacting with participants, asking questions, repeating observations, and redefining the theoretical framework that illuminates how things work in the context they study.

The ethnographic fieldwork is the theatre of the indiciary paradigm and the abductive inferences. In what follows, I will first define abductive inference by integrating Peirce's original formulation with more recent contributions, then specify how it relates to the indiciary paradigm.

3 Traces, Clues, and Surprises: The Indiciary Paradigm and Abductive Inference

The logical contiguity between the indiciary paradigm and abductive inference, as the title of this section hints, seems controversial, at least from Carlo Ginzburg's point of view. In his foundational work, *Spie*, the author makes a marginal reference to Peirce — who is credited with the insight on this inferential mode — only in a footnote (Ginzburg, 2013, p. 94). In the interview hosted in this issue, the Turin-born historian's cautious posture is apparent. In response to a question on the relationship between these two theoretical frames, Ginzburg maintains: "I do not deny the connection between the circumstantial paradigm and the abductive approach. However, I find it more interesting to start from empirical documentation than to draw more general conclusions in an 'abductive' key" (Barbera, Catino & Ginzburg, 2026, p. 117).

Beyond this cautiousness, in other parts of the dialogue with Filippo Barbera and Maurizio Catino, Ginzburg emphasises the importance of surprise as an engine of creative thought, and surprise lies at the heart of Peircean abduction. A few years after its first publication, *Spie* was included in another edited volume, *The Sign of Three*, by Umberto Eco and Thomas A. Sebeok (1983). In this new context, the kinship between the indiciary paradigm and abductive inference seems to be taken for granted.[6] Ginzburg's ostensible resistance to framing the indiciary paradigm as abductive reasoning can be clarified by considering the two constitutive elements of this knowledge approach. I identify two main aspects: first, the empirical materials — marginal information such as traces, signs, clues, and minor details — and second, the logical structure of the reasoning that renders empirical data informative. In analysing this formula, one can focus more on one ingredient than the other. My impression is that Ginzburg pays more attention to the empirical materials, whereas I focus more on the logic of reasoning.

In what follows, I will present some reflections on the adoption of the indiciary paradigm in ethnographic work, weaving connections with Peircean abduction and drawing on the contributions of two contemporary scholars, Douglas Walton and Umberto Eco. The first clear definition of abductive inference was elaborated by Charles Sanders Peirce as follows.

6. See, for instance, in *The Sign of Three*, the chapters by Harrowitz (1983, pp. 183–185), and Eco (1983, pp. 205–206).

> The surprising fact, C, is observed;
> But if A were true, C would be a matter of course,
> Hence, there is reason to suspect that A is true (Peirce, 1931–1958, 5.189, hereafter CP).

The formal structure of this reasoning moves from the Case (the surprising fact) to the Result (suspecting that A is true), through the Rule (if A were true, C would be a matter of course). From the epistemic standpoint, it is important to underline the conjectural status of the conclusion of the abductive reasoning. Elsewhere, Peirce (1931–1958) defines the conclusion of an abductive inference as a hypothesis that must be tested against new evidence (CP 7.218, 7.202). The test of the abductive hypotheses must go through two further steps, deduction and induction.

> When this is duly recognized, the first thing that will be done, as soon as a hypothesis has been adopted, will be to trace out its necessary and probable experiential consequences. This step is deduction (CP 7.203).

> Having, then, by means of deduction, drawn from a hypothesis prediction as to what the results of experiment will be, we proceed to test the hypothesis by making the experiments and comparing those predictions with the actual results of the experiment. [...] This sort of inference is, from experiments testing predictions based on a hypothesis, that is alone properly entitled to be called induction (CP 7.206).

In other terms, Peirce seems to maintain that abduction pertains to the "context of discovery" (*sensu* Reichenbach, 1938), and to test its robustness, we need to deduce from the proposition that makes the surprising fact a matter of course a "material implication" (Popper, 2002, p. 55) to be tested empirically through observation, in Peirce terms, through induction. The conclusions emerging from the cycle of abduction, deduction, and induction retain their conjectural status in Peirce's reflection. This fallibilist posture emerges in a context close to the topic of the semiotics model, that of deciphering the cuneiform inscriptions, where Peirce (1931–1958) maintains that "even if it does find confirmations, they are only partial. It still is not standing upon the bedrock of fact. It is walking upon a bog, and can only say, this ground seems to hold for the present" (CP 5.589).

A more serviceable version of the Peircean abductive argument scheme in the context of our discourse was proposed by Douglas Walton, who articulates the Peircean argumentative scheme, reformulating both the Rule and the Result.

> C is a set of data or supposed facts in a case.[7]
> Each one of a set of accounts A_1, A_2, ..., A_n is successful in explaining C.
> A_1 is the account that explains C most successfully.
> Therefore, A_1 is the most *plausible* hypothesis in the case.
> (Walton, 2004, pp. 217–218, emphasis mine).

Walton's version of abductive inference emphasises the plausible and therefore defeasible nature of the reasoning's Result: "A_1 is the most *plausible* hypothesis in the case". Furthermore, Walton's definition highlights one of the most relevant aspects of abductive reasoning,

7. Douglas Walton uses the letter D to denote the surprising fact. To make Walton's definition directly comparable with the Peircean one, I substitute C for D in the text.

the consideration of a set of possible explanations for the surprising fact C. Walton's reformulation of the Rule (organised in a two-step reasoning) underlines the dialectical curvature of the abductive reasoning, based on the confrontation among different explicative hypotheses (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014, pp. 41, 113–114).

Old Thiess, a Livonian Werewolf, co-authored by Carlo Ginzburg and Bruce Lincoln (2020), appears inspired by the dialectical sensitivity of Walton's scheme. In 1691, a man known as old Thiess was accused of being a werewolf before the Provincial Court of Venden. Without being tortured, the old Thiess — unexpectedly — accepted the charge while redefining it: "he described how his werewolf band entered hell at certain times of the year, not to serve Satan — as the judges insisted — but to fight him, with the well-being of people, herds, and crops dependent on the outcome" (Ginzburg & Lincoln, 2020, p. 2). Ginzburg and Lincoln's book is organised as a dialectical dialogue, in which the surprising fact is interpreted, now as evidence of ancient agrarian fertility cults surviving beneath Christianity, now as resistance against the Germanic elite.

Umberto Eco reformulates the Peircean original scheme, dwelling on the mechanism that makes the surprising fact a matter of course. Eco distinguishes three types of abduction: overcoded, undercoded, and creative (Eco, 1983, pp. 206–207). In the overcoded abduction, the Rule that makes the surprising fact a matter of course emerges automatically or semi-automatically.[8] In Doyle's (1952) novel *The Sign of Four*, Holmes, observing a little reddish mould adhering to Watson's instep, automatically infers that his roommate was at the Wigmore Street post office: "It is simplicity itself" (p. 115).

> Observation tells me that you have a little reddish mould adhering to your instep. Just opposite the Wigmore Street Office they have taken up the pavement and thrown up some earth, which lies in such a way that it is difficult to avoid treading in it in entering. The earth is of this peculiar reddish tint which is found, as far as I know, nowhere else in the neighbourhood (Doyle, 1952, p. 115).

In the undercoded abduction, the Rule "must be selected from a series of equiprobable rules put at our disposal by the current world knowledge" (Eco, 1983, p. 206). In the first Sherlock Holmes adventure, *A Study in Scarlet*, Holmes faced a puzzling case of Enoch Drebber, a man whose dead body was found in an empty house (not his own), without any signs of injury, but beside a bloodstain (not his own), with a disquieting inscription on the wall: "Rache". The "rules" which could explain this murder are many, starting from the wrong explanation that "Rache" stands for the incomplete killer's name: Rachel. Holmes worked through these alternative explanations using a retroduction, an abductive reasoning from consequent to antecedent (CP 6.469), or "reasoning backwards", in Holmes' words. The dialogue between Holmes and Watson represents this reasoning as follows:

> "I have already explained to you that what is out of the common is usually a guide rather than a hindrance. In solving a problem of this sort, the grand thing is to be able to reason backwards. That is a very useful accomplishment, and a very easy one, but people do not practise it much. In the everyday affairs of life it is more useful to reason forward, and so the other comes to be neglected. There are fifty who can reason synthetically for one who can reason analytically".

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8. Eco uses the word "rule" for undercoded abduction, and "law" for the other two types of abduction. For coherence with the previous discussion, I will consistently use the term "rule" throughout.

> "I confess", said I, "that I do not quite follow you".
>
> "I hardly expected that you would. Let me see if I can make it clearer. Most people, if you describe a train of events to them, will tell you what the Result would be. They can put those events together in their minds, and argue from them that something will come to pass. There are few people, however, who, if you told them a result, would be able to evolve from their own inner consciousness what the steps were which led up to that Result. This power is what I mean when I talk of reasoning backward, or analytically" (Doyle, 1952, pp. 105–106).

The retroduction allows Holmes to recognise "Rache" as the German word for revenge and uncover its tragic origins: the killer's beloved, Lucy, was forced to marry Enoch Drebber and died of grief; her father, who had opposed the marriage, was murdered by Drebber and his fellow Mormon, Stangerson — both of whom were later killed in retaliation.

Eco's undercoded version of abductive reasoning shows an unmistakable family resemblance with the scheme proposed by Walton, and, in a broader perspective, can be considered the most common inference in ethnographic work.

In creative abduction, the Rule "must be invented *ex novo*" (Eco, 1983, p. 207, emphasis in the original). Eco (1983) recognises this type of abduction in "revolutionary discoveries that change an established paradigm" (p. 207); therefore, Eco discerns an aesthetic component in creative abduction, citing the Copernican heliocentric theory as an example triggered by the idea of elegance and harmony (p. 216).

My memories as a chemistry student at a technical high school bring to mind the benzene structure discovered by August Kekulé during a reverie, guided by the image of a snake biting its tail — the mythical Ouroboros (Rocke, 2010, Chapter 10). Though not revolutionary, such breakthroughs exemplify the creative abductions that punctuate scientific discovery.

Although Holmes tends to define his own inferences as elementary, we can find a crystal-clear example of creative abduction in *The Musgrave Ritual*. What Holmes defines as a "very singular business" (Doyle, 1952, p. 564) was prompted by the mysterious disappearance of two household servants belonging to Holmes' former university colleague, Reginald Musgrave, who solicited Holmes' assistance. One of the missing servants, the butler, was discovered by the master of the house prying into the family papers, scrutinising a strange document containing a set of questions and answers that any family member had to recite ritually upon coming of age:

> Whose was it?
> His who is gone.
> Who shall have it?
> He who will come.
> Where was the sun?
> Over the oak.
> Where was the shadow?
> Under the elm.
> How was it stepped?
> North by ten and by ten, east by five and by five, south by two and by two, west by one and by one, and so under.
> What shall we give for it?
> All that is ours.

> Why should we give it?
> For the sake of the trust (Doyle, 1952, pp. 570–571).

Holmes interprets the apparently meaningless ritual as an encrypted clue concealing topographical directions. Through abductive inference, he transforms the ritual's formula into coordinates pinpointing an underground crypt on the estate, where Holmes discovered the butler's dead body. Through observation of minute details, he concluded that the maid had killed the butler after helping him retrieve hidden treasure, exploiting the opportunity to avenge his romantic rejection.

As my selection of Sherlock Holmes' quotations shows, the Baker Street detective combines all three types of abduction: overcoded, undercoded, and creative. The same occurs in ethnographic fieldwork.

In Eco's (1983) theoretical framework, the Rule that makes the surprising fact a matter of course draws from the "semiotic encyclopedia" (p. 206), which is accessible to the detective in a crime investigation and to the ethnographer in social research. What makes it possible to use sedimented knowledge to define the Rule in abductive inference is reasoning from analogy, through which relevant family resemblances are detected.[9] In Holmes' words:

> There is a strong family resemblance about misdeeds, and if you have all the details of a thousand at your finger ends, it is odd if you can't unravel the thousand and first (Doyle, 1952, p. 21).

Eviatar Zerubavel develops a specific version of "analogical thinking" based on identifying "common formal patterns across substantively diverse contexts" (Zerubavel, 2021, p. 39). In my reading of Zerubavel's valuable short book, the juxtaposition of deeply diverse phenomena provides the source of surprise that triggers abductive reasoning — often of a particularly creative kind. Beyond formal reasoning, what makes the difference in succeeding in both crime investigation and ethnographic research is a kind of theoretical sensitivity, and this makes it rather difficult to defend the version of ethnography and, in broader terms, qualitative research based on what I elsewhere defined as *horror doctrinae* (Cardano, 2020, p. 65): the refusal, typical of the early Grounded Theory approach, of theories not strictly inductively rooted (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014, pp. 10–17).[10]

4 Back to Fieldwork

While field access may represent a thrilling experience for the ethnographer, absorbing this interloper can be decidedly problematic for participants (Anteby, 2024). To manage this challenge, participants perform a variety of resistance strategies, mainly covert (Anteby, 2024, p. 6).

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9. For a more analytical discussion of reasoning from analogy, Macagno (2017).

10. I coined the locution *horror doctrinae* in a previous work (Cardano, 2020), where I propose an analogical connection between the Aristotelian fear of the void and the aversion toward any preconceived theory typical of the first generation of Grounded Theory scholars (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Aristotle maintained that nature abhors a vacuum, namely, that a void is impossible (*horror vacui*). This belief survived until the seventeenth century, when Evangelista Torricelli's experiments contested it. In the same vein — at least in my analogical play — Glaser and Strauss feared pre-existing theory in the research process. More recent versions of Grounded Theory have moved beyond this theoretical asceticism (Charmaz, 2014, pp. 200–201; Reichertz, 2007, pp. 214–216). See footnote 3 above.

Michel Anteby (2024) distinguishes six forms of resistance: obstructing, hiding, shelving, silencing, forgetting, and denying. For the purpose of this paper, three of the six resistance strategies, or, from the participants' point of view, defence strategies (p. 7), are relevant: hiding, denying, and forgetting. Among these, I identify a common root, that of concealment, a collective orchestration of dissimulation and simulation. To subsume the forgetting strategy under my general category of concealment, a theoretical clarification is needed. Anteby (2024) presents the forgetting strategy through his PhD research in a French aircraft engine manufacturing plant, where all employees have "forgotten" the contributions made by German and US engineers and companies to the plant, to maintain "patriotic aspiration" (p. 105). This "collective amnesia" (Anteby, 2024, p. 101) had a singular cognitive profile. Current and past plant members were "constantly remembering to forget" (Anteby, 2024, p. 112). This cognitive posture — in my view — is closer to self-deception than to forgetting (Elster, 1986). Put differently, it is a kind of concealment involving both the interloper and the participants themselves. What Anteby clearly maintains is that the issue is not only to overcome their resistance, but also, and from the perspective of this paper, to read the clues emerging from these resistance practices to better understand what is occurring in the field. In a seemingly peripheral note (Anteby, 2024, p. 171), which proves central to his argument, Anteby places his reflection in the wake of this paper, highlighting the centrality of abduction in ethnographic work, as the reasoning triggered by the surprise in facing participants' resistance, citing a very pertinent contribution (Locke et al., 2008). The indiciary paradigm provides the ethnographer with tools to interpret — and sometimes overcome — participants' resistance practices, to pierce the veil of dissimulation and simulation, and to detect those unwitting testimonies and minute traces that reveal what participants seek to conceal.

If traces, signs, and clues constitute the empirical material, the reasoning through which provisional conclusions are produced is abduction, in its different forms. Surprise triggers abductive reasoning, and for this reason, preserving the ethnographer's capacity to be surprised, thereby resisting the risk of familiarisation, is a central goal of ethnographic work. Resisting familiarisation is a principal recommendation in Pierre Bourdieu, Jean-Claude Chamboredon, and Jean-Claude Passeron's dated but sound work, *The Craft of Sociology* (1968):

> For the sociologist, familiarity with his social universe is the epistemological obstacle *par excellence*, because it continuously produces fictitious conceptions or systematizations and, at the same time, the conditions of their credibility (Bourdieu et al., 1991, p. 13, emphasis in the original).

To maintain the capacity to be surprised, Howard Becker suggests a set of tricks of the trade, meant as heuristics "to see things differently, in order to create new problems for research, new possibilities for comparing cases and *inventing* categories, and the like" (Becker, 1998, p. 7, emphasis mine).[11] A paradigmatic example is Everett Hughes' concept of "deviation in two directions". Hughes observes that institutions cluster behaviour around a modal point — marriage, for instance, as the standard way of organising sex and procreation. Deviation from this modal norm can move in the direction of the devil — as in prostitution or other illegitimate arrangements — but also in the direction of the angels, when social structures require individuals to be better than they wish to be. The institutionalisation of celibacy exemplifies this

11. In my handbook on qualitative research (Cardano, 2011), I proposed a set of tricks as strategies to see what happens in the field differently. Although I did not conceptualise them as such at the time, I now see these tricks as tools to generate surprise and nurture abductive inferences (Cardano, 2011, pp. 119–129).

second form: a declared, established way of deviating from the modal norm of marriage, rationalised in terms of supreme values (Becker, 1998, pp. 106-107). This surprising recognition that deviance operates in both directions exemplifies how attending to anomalous cases triggers abductive reasoning that reconstructs existing concepts. Bearing this cognitive habitus in mind, it is time to illustrate some uses of the indiciary paradigm, embedded in abductive inference, in the ethnographic context. To do so, I will draw on my own ethnographic experiences. The main reason for this choice rests on the conviction that traces of abductive reasoning often vanish from published works, which typically present only the polished results of analysis. Abductive reasoning is ubiquitous, spanning both the discovery and justification contexts (if the distinction between them is tenable) and encompassing both the construction and analysis of data. To make this invisible labour visible, I must open the doors of my craftsman's workshop (*sensu* Mills, 2000, pp. 195–226) by reviving memories from my first and most recent ethnographic fieldwork.

My first ethnographic experience in my PhD research focused on the sacralization of nature through a comparative ethnography conducted in two small Italian communities: an esoteric spiritual community, Damanhur, and a lay rural community, The Elves of the Great Ravine (Cardano, 1997). My most recent ethnographic experience was a rapid team ethnography on childhood vaccine hesitancy conducted across seven European countries (Cardano et al., 2023). We observed interactions between parents and healthcare professionals in vaccination clinics and interviewed a sample of hesitant parents to understand the surprising fact of their vaccine refusal, given that vaccines represent one of the greatest public health successes.

To illustrate overcoded abduction, the vaccine hesitancy study offers a suitable example. In vaccination clinics, we observed brief interactions (typically <15 minutes) between parents and healthcare professionals. One of the goals of our observation was to profile parents, linking their behaviour and discourse to a presumed social context and to their stance toward childhood vaccines. Healthcare professionals also engaged in profiling activities whose outcomes functioned as "fore-understanding" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 270) that oriented their interaction with parents. To achieve this objective, we had to pay attention to numerous small details: the baby's first name (unconventional names are more common among parents with vaccine concerns), the child's age, the language spoken and parental proficiency, the parents' clothing and appearance, jewellery, tattoos, the type of bag and baby equipment they carried, and other material indicators of their background. A review of my ethnographic fieldnotes offers an eloquent example.

At the end of the morning, a father, Riccardo, shows up with his nearly six-year-old child for a remarkably late first vaccination. The father's countercultural appearance — long beard and hair, corduroy trousers, and a flannel shirt — yet combined with erudite speech, a marker of middle-class background, constituted a cluster of "expressions given off" that immediately suggested deep-seated scepticism towards childhood vaccinations.[12] This working hypothesis guided our observations of the interaction among the father, the child, and healthcare professionals. The "material implication" immediately deduced directed our gaze toward possible frictions. The inductive step of our fieldwork, in this case, confronted us with an interaction in which the exacting father met adept and flexible healthcare professionals.

To discuss the undercoded abduction, I return to my PhD fieldwork with the Elves of the Great Ravine community. The Elves of the Great Ravine was an anarchic rural community that expressed devotion to nature through a choice of voluntary simplicity and a gentle touch

12. All the names in this section are fictitious to protect the participants' anonymity.

in the agriculture they practised. While studying their ritual practices — particularly the "sweat lodge" (borrowed from Native American traditions) and the "magical beverage" (from Druidic sources) — I encountered a surprising fact. Their liturgy exhibited variation in relevant aspects: the rite's verbal accompaniment, the person performing the rite, and the degree of deference shown to them, the people admitted or excluded from the celebration. Having grown up in the highly codified ritual context of the Catholic Church and drawing on my academic knowledge of ritual studies, I faced a genuine puzzle: were these heterogeneous performances rites or something else entirely?

The "expressions given off" that fuelled my doubts emerged on several occasions; among them, two passages from my handwritten fieldnotes were particularly telling. In an informal conversation with one of the most marginalised and discredited members of the community, Rodolfo, he observed:

> Here [in the community], people confuse wild dancing with ritual. It's not *just* [beats hand on the table with a fast, obsessive rhythm], there's *also* [beats hand with a light, measured touch]. Here, you mostly see frenzied dancing.

During a sweat lodge celebration, Marco — the community member who led the ceremony on that occasion — stated emphatically, "I need values". In this brief remark, I recognised a form of nostalgia: a sense that something was missing, something not being provided by the sweat lodge celebration.

This surprise triggered an abductive process. I accessed my "semiotic encyclopedia" (Eco, 1983, p. 206), which, at the time, had recently been enriched with new information apparently unrelated. My niece was preparing a master's thesis on the contemporary composer Bruno Maderna, and she regaled me with lengthy speeches on this — to my inexpert ears — abstruse music. Maderna proposed a peculiar kind of composition, aleatory music, where each performance differs because a minimal score leaves performers considerable interpretive freedom, allowing chance to shape the sonic outcome. I recognised the analogy — a fundamental logical tool for abduction — between the Elves' rites and aleatory music. The hypothesis of deliberate aleatoriness in the Elves' rites substituted "for a complicated tangle of predicates attached to one subject, a single conception" (CP 2.643). This interpretation aligned with the community's anarchic ethos and transformed the surprising heterogeneity into a coherent pattern: ritual variation was not liturgical failure but rather the enactment of anti-authoritarian values through deliberately open ceremonial forms.

This idea of rites as an "open work" (Eco, 1989) took the form — typical in qualitative research — of a "sensitizing concept" (Blumer, 1969), "merely suggesting the directions along which to look" (p. 148). From the hypothesis "Elves' rites could be interpreted as an open work", I deduced some "material implications," which guided my new observations in the field as I sought to verify whether ritual participants indeed valued variation and improvisation, completing in this way the Peircean cycle of abduction, deduction, and induction (see above). My fieldwork confirmed this interpretation (Cardano, 1997, p. 234; 2020, pp. 46–47).

Lastly, we must consider the creative abduction. "Creative" here refers exclusively to Eco's technical definition — the *ex novo* invention of a Rule — rather than constituting a value judgment or claim of intellectual merit. Eco associates this type of abduction with revolutionary discoveries that transform established paradigms. My example is more modest: at best, it represents small-scale interpretive innovations that solved local ethnographic puzzles.

The creative abduction I have in mind occurred during the analysis phase, which was carried out with the help of a Canadian colleague, Eve Dubé (Cardano & Dubé, 2026). In defin-

ing a typology of stances toward childhood vaccines, we identified six figures expressing different forms of vaccine acceptance and refusal. Two required a special theoretical effort, both characterised by a reflective stance: one accepting, the other refusing childhood vaccinations. The standard public health reading of vaccine refusal — childhood and beyond — is the so-called "deficit model". People refuse vaccination because they are unaware of its advantages. This interpretation clearly cannot work with informed reflexive refusers. The main arguments of cautious, reflective parents focus on celebrating natural immunity, distrust of biomedicine, Big Pharma, and vaccine control systems, as well as the so-called overload thesis, which holds that babies' immune systems cannot withstand the simultaneous administration of multiple vaccines. All these topics were frequently developed through general reasoning, drawing on ethical principles, society as a whole, and the biomedical system. Among these general arguments, on some occasions, a more local and personal reflection peeped out, focusing on severe adverse events following immunisation. In the interview with Antonia and her partner Filippo, this concern surfaced plainly: "In most cases, it doesn't happen, but what if it happened to us? It could be me — the one making up the statistics. We read these personal worries breaking through the surface of general discourse as expressions given off that triggered our abductive effort".

To reconcile the general, often highly elaborated discourse that articulates these lay theories of immunisation with such particularistic references, we turned to an analysis of risk metrics. More specifically, we examined differences in how reflexive accepters and refusers construct and represent the risk of adverse events following immunisation — a concern that occupies a central place in sociological accounts of opposition to childhood vaccination. The abductive hypothesis we invented juxtaposed two "laws" to represent and manage rare events with a probability of approximately 1 in 1,000,000, as is the case with adverse events following immunisation. The two laws were formulated by the mathematicians Émile Borel and David Hand. Borel proposed the "single law of chance", which suggests that events with a sufficiently small probability are impossible, or at least should be considered impossible (Borel, 1962, pp. 2–3). Hand introduced the "truly large numbers law", which states that if there are enough opportunities for an event, although very rare, such as being struck by lightning, we should expect it to happen (Hand, 2015, p. 95). We hypothesised that while reflexive acceptors consider adverse events in the Borel perspective, reflexive refusers evaluate them after immunisation using the "truly large numbers law", overestimating the negative small probabilities and underestimating the risks and possible consequences of vaccine-avoidable diseases. From this hypothesis, we deduced, as a material implication, the presence of linguistic signs indicating the adoption of the two probability laws, with particular attention to Hand's law. Through this lens, we examined the textual corpora of the vaccine hesitancy study — the inductive step — which revealed statements confirming our hypothesis.

5 Epilogue

This examination of the indiciary paradigm in ethnographic practice highlights two main insights. First, attention to marginal details, unwitting testimonies, and minor traces responds to a central problem of social inquiry: the opacity of social interaction. As argued throughout this paper, unlike clinical settings — where patients actively collaborate in diagnosis — social research encounters systematic practices of dissimulation and simulation (in the sense described by Accetto and Goffman). In ethnography, such practices generate what Van Maanen (1979) terms "presentational data". By focusing on "expressions given off" (Goffman, 1959, p. 7)

— those aspects of behaviour that escape conscious control — the indiciary paradigm offers ethnographers a way of working through this opacity. The clues emphasised by Ginzburg are precisely those elements that actors cannot fully manage: minute traces that reveal what attempts at concealment seek to hide.

Second, the indiciary paradigm operates in ethnographic work through abductive reasoning. Like Morelli attending to earlobes or Holmes interpreting faint traces of mould, the ethnographer moves from observable signs to unobservable dimensions of social life, such as beliefs, meanings, and "internal states" (Cardano, 2020). This reasoning is necessarily provisional and revisable, requiring the Peircean interplay of abduction, deduction, and induction as hypotheses are tested against further evidence.

From this perspective, the indiciary paradigm and abduction are not simply compatible but mutually constitutive in ethnographic practice. The indiciary paradigm directs attention to what is most revealing yet difficult to control by participants, while abduction provides the logical means for interpreting these observations. Together, they form a key epistemological basis for ethnography's capacity to make social meanings and practices intelligible.

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