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Rent, Out, and After – Examining the Process of Eviction in Urban America

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Abstract

In his ethnography, *Evicted: Poverty and profit in the American city*, sociologist Matthew Desmond examines the process of eviction for a group of people who he came to know in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Desmond painstakingly chronicles what happens when individuals and families cannot “make rent,” and are subsequently evicted from their homes. The stories presented in this book call on readers to deeply consider the interconnections between the rich and poor in urban areas in the U.S.A, and how policies might be revised with a view to ensuring affordable housing for all. An example of realist ethnography, Desmond also challenges qualitative researchers to consider the place of the “I” in contemporary qualitative studies.

Keywords

Ethnography, Eviction

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Rent, Out, and After – Examining the Process of Eviction in Urban America

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*In his ethnography, *Evicted: Poverty and profit in the American city*, sociologist Matthew Desmond examines the process of eviction for a group of people who he came to know in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Desmond painstakingly chronicles what happens when individuals and families cannot “make rent,” and are subsequently evicted from their homes. The stories presented in this book call on readers to deeply consider the interconnections between the rich and poor in urban areas in the U.S.A, and how policies might be revised with a view to ensuring affordable housing for all. An example of realist ethnography, Desmond also challenges qualitative researchers to consider the place of the “I” in contemporary qualitative studies. Keywords: Ethnography, Eviction*

The global financial crisis in 2008 brought to the fore of public attention the personal tragedies involved in thousands of families’ loss of affordable housing across the United States. Almost a decade later, the private agonies involved in losing the family home have mostly faded from public view. In his ethnography *Evicted: Poverty and profit in the American city*, sociologist Matthew Desmond refocuses readers’ attention on the centrality of affordable housing to the functioning of democratic society. He does this through looking at a process that has been little researched — eviction. Rather than examining poverty through looking at “poor people or poor places,” Desmond chose to examine eviction as a process that binds “poor and rich people together in mutual dependence and struggle” (p. 317). In his book, Desmond argues that eviction is a *cause*, rather than consequence of poverty.

Desmond began his study in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 2008 when he moved into a trailer park from which residents were facing mass eviction. There he met the residents and owner of the trailer park, Tobin Charney, and learned about the challenges that many residents face “making rent.” Readers learn about Scott, a former nurse struggling with addiction, as well as other residents: Lorraine, and Pam and Ned and their daughters. Later in the year, via a security guard whom he had met at the trailer park, Desmond moved into a boarding house on the north side of the city, where he met landlords, Sherrena and Quentin, owners of 36 inner-city units. Through shadowing Sherrena and Quentin as they went about the daily tasks involved in managing their properties, Desmond met Arleen and her sons, Lamar and his sons, and the three-generation Hinkston family. Via these families, Desmond also meets other characters whose stories are featured later in the book.

The book is organized in three eight-chapter parts: “Rent”: provides the backgrounds and contexts for the odysseys of each of the book’s protagonists; “Out”: describes the eviction process as it occurs for the study’s participants; and “After”: details what happens to the individuals and families once they have been evicted. The book concludes with an epilogue in which Desmond outlines his vision for policies that might be enacted to stem the enormous damage inflicted on the poor, for whom affordable housing is not available. The book concludes with a detailed methodological overview of how this qualitative study was conducted and an explanation for how the author chose to represent the findings of the study.

Desmond used ethnographic methods to conduct his study: findings are based primarily on being there. These are supplemented by findings from detailed analysis of documents and countless interviews with others relevant to the study. Not only did Desmond live in close

vicinity to his participants as a full-time ethnographer, he digitally recorded numerous conversations that were later transcribed. Desmond's methodological afterword details the painstaking and systematic process he used to confirm the details of what participants told him. Not typical for reports from social science research, Desmond employed a fact-checker prior to publishing the book. Desmond also provides an overview of the documents he analyzed and the survey studies he has conducted that lend understanding to how representative the participants' experiences are. Informed by the findings of this qualitative study, these quantitative studies were specifically designed to capture data not easily gained via surveys. Findings from these additional studies and academic sources are meticulously cataloged in over 60 pages of comprehensive endnotes.

The stories of Arleen, Scott, Lorraine, Pam and Ned, Lamar, the Hinkston family, and later additions, Crystal and Vanetta, are vividly portrayed through narrative descriptions and dialogue. The stories of these individuals and their families make for compelling reading – variously leaving the reader frustrated, angry, and inevitably heart-broken to learn of the devastating consequences of eviction for these people. Desmond presents compelling evidence to show how the eviction process disproportionately impacts black women (pp. 360-361). The author chronicles tenants' problems with plumbing that is persistently not fixed, dilapidated housing that is poorly maintained, if at all; how job loss and employment problems interact with keeping up with the rent; how the eviction process takes place; how families lose all of their possessions; what happens to children destabilized by frequent moves; and how the cumulative stress involved in eviction leads to depression and anxiety, troubled interactions and flawed decision-making. Desmond goes to pains to explain some of the actions that are likely to be little understood, if not misunderstood by those of us surrounded by the affluence of middle-class comfort. Why, for example, does Lorraine spend a month's worth of food stamps on one lobster dinner? How is it that Arleen and Crystal move in with people whom they have just met? What part do emergency calls about domestic abuse play in the eviction process?

The findings presented by Desmond are disheartening, discouraging, and disturbing. And it is not only poor families who are in crisis –the author asserts that middle-income families are also threatened by the rising cost of housing. Desmond claims that: “over 1 in 5 of *all* renting families in the country spends half of its income on housing” (italics in original) (p. 303). Desmond, himself, confesses to having experienced profound depression during and after completing the study. Thus, it is encouraging to read Desmond's recommendations for policy change in his epilogue of “Home and Hope.” Desmond argues cogently for “powerful solutions” (p. 299). These include establishment of: (1) a “publicly funded legal services for low-income families in housing court would prevent homelessness, decrease evictions, and give poor families a fair shake” (p. 303); and (2) a universal housing voucher program in which “every family below a certain income level would be eligible for a housing voucher” (p. 308).

The book is written in everyday language, and reads more like a novel than the findings from a research study. It would be a mistake to read this text as a novel, though. The people, contexts, and events depicted are real. In his methodological note, Desmond defends his “fly-on-the-wall” realist representation (Van Maanen, 2011) in which he has omitted the “I.” Desmond argues that the “‘I’ don't matter. I hope that when you talk about this book, you talk about [the participants] — and the fact that somewhere in your city, a family has just been evicted from their home, their things piled high on the sidewalk” (p. 335). Although I sympathize with Desmond's argument that omission of the “I” of the researcher in the telling of this ethnography will refocus readers' attention on the participants' stories, I remain less than convinced. It was not until I read Desmond's own story in the methodological afterword — of how he came to the project, as well as the messiness of his own responses and entangled interactions with participants, that I became more convinced of his findings. Throughout my

reading of the text, I was constantly wondering where Matthew Desmond *was*. Although the endnotes meticulously account for moments in which he was *not* present, I was troubled when I read, for example, Sherrena's actions as the plane in which she was a passenger touched down on the return from a vacation in Jamaica with her husband, Quentin (pp. 144-145). What does it mean when an ethnographer describes what occurs when he was absent from the setting?

Given the numerous characters depicted in the book, I sometimes lost track of the participants mentioned and their relationships to one another. It would have been helpful for readers to have access to a list of participants featured in the book at the outset, since chapters focus on different individuals and families. For example, Laurence Ralph (2014) provides a list of participants at the beginning of his ethnography which is helpful in following the events that occur in the lives of the characters described.

In spite of these critiques, there is no doubt that Desmond's book is remarkably well-researched, and provides a credible, convincing, and powerful argument for what is wrong in the private housing market in the United States today. Clearly, Desmond aims the text for a wide and general audience. The book is a call for action in the way we think about affordable housing, and Desmond advocates for bold changes. Desmond's work has received many accolades and much attention in mainstream media, and he was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship in 2015. An associate professor at Harvard University, Desmond is on track to becoming a household name in the United States. It is to be hoped that as a sociologist his work will have great impact in policy circles to enact the changes that make affordable housing possible for all. Along with many who have already lauded this book, I concur that the book is deserving of a wide readership. It will aid anyone wanting to understand life in the United States of America in the early part of the 21st Century. For all those concerned for the future of this country, this book is a definite must-read. More importantly, the book maps out approaches that we as citizens must take to ensure that we live in a fair and equitable society.

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Author Note

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