



OCCUPATION BEDBUGS: Or, the Urgency and Agency of Professional Pragmatism

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It is hard for man to understand [that he and the external sign are identical], because he persists in identifying himself with his will, his power over the animal organism, with brute force. Now the organism is only an instrument of thought. But the identity of a man consists in the consistency of what he does and thinks . . .

—Charles Sanders Peirce, *Some Consequences of Four Incapacities*

Peter is a case manager at a Supportive Community Housing program dedicated to the principles of harm reduction. In practice, this means that Peter and his colleagues are charged with providing an array of easily accessible, or “low-threshold,” services to active drug users, many of whom also have chronic physical and mental health problems, as well as histories of unemployment, incarceration, and/or homelessness. Peter’s program—an arm of a large, urban social service agency I call “U-Haven”—provides state-subsidized apartments to residents who are required to contribute thirty percent of their income to housing, which is almost invariably some form of public aid (Supplemental Security Income [SSI], Veterans Benefits, etc.). His office sits at the end of a hallway of apartments where program “participants” live, though unlike some of the other residential programs U-Haven runs, Peter’s is not staffed twenty-four hours a day. Although his participants are considered high-functioning relative to others on U-Haven’s

social service landscape, Peter is nevertheless charged with administering psychotropic medications, accompanying clients to court or medical appointments, and assisting with tasks of daily living. Furthermore, Peter devotes significant time learning new techniques of engagement, including participating in U-Haven's yearlong training program in motivational interviewing,¹ where I first encountered him.

Prior to his arrival at U-Haven, Peter traveled extensively and taught English overseas, before establishing himself as a salesman at a high-end bicycle shop in one of the city's affluent neighborhoods. With a master's degree in sociology, focusing on social theory, Peter differentiated himself from his coworkers with graduate degrees in social work (MSWs)—and not because he valued theory more than practice. Rather, Peter thought that his new job required a kind of flexibility that any single professional moniker simply failed to capture. During a sit-down interview, he explained: "I mean, we are doing everything [in this job]. I'm a secretary, technician, exterminator—all of these things. I just believe it is completely unprofessional to go beyond one's role." In other words, at U-Haven, preserving the boundaries of a professional role means occupying any number of others. After all, at U-Haven, there is no discrete or stable object—like the titanium-framed, single-speed bicycle or its consuming hipster-rider—on which to focus. To inhabit a professional role at U-Haven, Peter had to learn to diligently recognize and fluidly respond to an ever-evolving and only semi-predictable set of circumstances.

Furthermore, as both Peter and I eventually realized, learning "to do everything" at U-Haven not only requires the acquisition of an expansive set of technical and practical skills so as to *act* in appropriate ways; it also means embracing a certain way of *thinking about acting*, with a special attention to the limits of any one act's or actor's efficacy. Proper action—in the conceptual ambit of U-Haven—is *reaction*: the ability to respond in the myriad ways that the dynamic environment requires. For Peter's more seasoned coworkers, the parameters of professional practice are indeed demarcated by the observable demands of the residence and of the diverse residents they oversee. And while Peter eventually grew accustomed to this professional way of thinking about acting, responding to matters that may have initially seemed far afield from his job description, he frequently found himself sidetracked by one party's incessant demands. Perhaps in part because they are barely detectable to the naked eye, and yet are seemingly always and everywhere lurking, the bedbugs that infested the residential program where he works became, at least for a time, Peter's *preoccupation*.

Given U-Haven's estimate that three-quarters of their human caseload lives with bedbugs, it is little wonder that these non-human residents are so potentially distracting—extending professionals' attention from their already elaborate professional charge. After dousing their bodies with chemical sprays, only some of which promise non-toxicity, Peter and his colleagues engage in daily "room checks," flipping mattresses and rifling through boxes and bags filled with private, and sometimes unsavory, belongings. They set up bedbug traps in every room, precautionary devices that betray their inefficacy each time staff are forced to spray or bomb. They discard donated couches and haul in new ones. With infested clients in tow, they marshal endless streams of laundry and industrial-strength detergent through the hot cycle of tired washing machines.

Consider that these already unforgiving frontline engagements are to be implemented in accordance with the latest bedbug policies and protocols. According to one such protocol, workers are not only to escort infested clients through a fifteen-part compulsory procedure; they are also to document each bedbug-busting action, the date of its completion, and its discernable outcome (figure 1). On the one hand, "Bed Bug Checklists" are an example of the end-driven, solution-focused charge of contemporary American social work, a field increasingly faced with administrative mandates, backed by state audits, that compel workers to document even the most chaos-prone and reactionary aspects of their daily practice as clear, unfettered professional trajectories toward specifically articulated results. Indicating that the frontline worker is the primary agent responsible for bedbugs' ends, a professional signature is required next to each "outcome."

On the other hand, the checklists reveal a dissemination of responsibility among frontline workers *and* their affected clients whose room numbers—and, by extension, identities—are recorded at the top of the forms. Furthermore, the fact that clients are identified by room number rather than by name suggests that domestic space, as well as the human who dwells there, is a responsible host and therefore a proper target of intervention.² Bedbugs eventually implicate program managers, as well, as they collect and file what is meant to be evidence of extermination in an ever-growing dossier that reveals instead that bedbugs are thriving. Almost as if carried away by bedbugs' furtive scurrying, even formal efforts to definitely locate responsibility with single, goal-driven agents are troubled, if not ultimately defied.

Consider, too, the tensions inherent in *bedbug pedagogy*: U-Haven professionals devote chunks of their workweeks explaining to program participants what

Bed Bug Checklist for Room # _____ New Room # _____

Action	Result	Date Completed	Signature
Thorough inspection of room and bed for signs of bedbugs			
All clothing bagged into trash bags (or laundry bags)	# of Bags		
Bags taken immediately to laundry			
Clothes washed on hot water setting (not for dry clean only items) (Intake)	# of loads		
Clothes dried on high heat			
Change trash bags, dispose old bags			
No items left in room that have not been washed			
Treat coats, leather items and shoes with enzyme			
Dry Cleaned clothing—In tied plastic			
Room # added to tracking sheet			
Room taken off line by resident manager			
Room treatment #1 (Maintenance)			
Room treatment #2 (Maintenance)			
Room treatment #3 (Maintenance)			
Room back on-line (Maintenance)			

Form revised 8/25/11

Figure 1. Tracking responsibilities.

kind of creatures bedbugs are, how to identify signs of their presence, and how to reduce the possibility of infestation. In line with a familiar liberal logic, they emphasize the importance of each individual taking specific actions to bring about bedbugs' ends. Invariably, these lessons emphasize that bedbugs are commonly

introduced by friends, neighbors, and other visitors, and may therefore serve the double purpose of enlisting participants in the patrol of the residence at large. Yet precisely in light of the recognition that no one (human) party can ever fully control these non-human invaders, these lessons also spawn anxiety, paranoia, and stigma, causing tensions among residents that workers must help manage. At U-Haven, the collective imagination is as infested as the old, often decaying structures where the social workers toil, with community meetings frequently overtaken by talk of the specter—if not the detectable presence—of bedbugs. No wonder that in one of the staff rooms, alongside the takeout menus from local restaurants, fliers detailing Medicaid updates, and notices of community meetings, a plush red and pink bedbug hangs as a humorous reminder that even when evading immediate professional detection, bedbugs nevertheless loom.

If Peter and his coworkers at U-Haven are preoccupied with bedbugs, they are certainly not the only ones. During the past ten years, bedbug infestations in Chicago, Los Angeles, and especially New York have drawn national attention. The critters also frequently make local news in smaller cities like Denver, Houston, Grand Rapids, San Francisco, and Cincinnati—which recently held the dubious title of Bedbug Capital of America. Throughout the country, bedbugs reportedly frequent hotels, department stores, movie theaters, dorms, airplanes, and university libraries, where they either settle down and in, or select human travelers who might provide them with an even cozier home.

American bedbugs are just about everywhere, at least *in potentia*. They have even given rise to a new American genre, with which a widening range of urbanites is familiar. The Bedbug Narrative typically begins abruptly with a well-rehearsed, first-person account of shock and horror: the discovery of blood-speckled sheets or patterned welts on a young child's arms. It transitions into a keen, almost clinical analysis of the bugs' arrival, which almost invariably implicates now distant companions—whether human or otherwise. Then, there is the breathless account of the frantic, initially fruitless attempts at extermination. Yet the most distinguishing characteristic of the American Bedbug Narrative is its troubled denouement. For even as the narrator assures her audience that she has finally emerged from the ordeal bug-free, signs that she is haunted are nevertheless palpable: the vague scratching of a long-healed welt on her hand, a deep shudder at key moments of the story, a gaze searching for reassurance that the bugs are *really, at last, gone . . .?*³

As notoriously evasive as they are pervasive, bedbugs trouble the institutional integrity of the places they inhabit and the quotidian affairs of their fellow inhab-

itants. Even those who have not yet themselves directly encountered the critters are nevertheless haunted by the prospect of infestation. Mass-mediated stories of bedbugs abound, projecting the scale of the problem and every viewer's proximity to it, by dramatically magnified imagery of the insects (figure 2). Frequently, these images portray bedbugs as having distinctly human habits—smoking in bed after a potentially reproductive romp (<http://archives.newyorker.com/?i=2010-09-27> [Blitt 2010]), or chatting at cocktail parties (<http://empirewire.com/images/bedbug.jpg> [Marquil 2006]) —suggesting that bedbugs have plans, desires, and behaviors that mirror our own. For instance, the *New Yorker's* Mark Singer (2005) writes, “when they're not feeding or dozing, adult bedbugs evidently enjoy having sex.” Similarly, one Chicago-based commentator warns, “As you slumber, the bug feasts, treating your body like an all-you-can-eat buffet” (*Chicago Tribune* 2013). And, as if bedbugs digest the democratic sensibilities of the public on which they feast, the journalist Jennifer Lee (2009) dryly notes: “the pests do not discriminate.”

One particularly prominent theme in the media coverage revolves around how the new generation of bedbugs crosses otherwise well-fortified class bound-



Figure 2. The scaling of the bedbug crisis. “Bed Bug Cases in Big Apple Decrease, BedBugSprayReviews Offers Help to Continue Abatement.” BedBugsSprayReviews press release, January 5, 2012. <http://www.prlog.org/11764767>.

aries, from the tenements they were once imagined to favor to the well-appointed co-ops of the Upper East Side (<http://nymag.com/news/features/65733/> [Sella 2010]). Setting up shop at the flagship Bloomingdale's and enjoying staycations at the Waldorf Astoria, bedbugs threaten to stain the reputations of the places where they squat and the people they encounter there. These human-like, human-defying actors destabilize social structure, (re)distributing stigma wherever they roam. Even Mayor Bloomberg once reportedly confided to a New York City councilwoman: "All my friends have bedbugs; what am I going to do?" (Hernández 2010). American bedbugs are a question without an answer, even for those whose authority hinges on the rhetorical crafting of definitive solutions. Indeed, bedbugs prove especially challenging for the legions of American political actors who emphasize that social problems can be definitely resolved by way of individual responsibility.

To be sure, American bedbugs have become a distinctly *political* problem, infesting debate about the conditions of urban living and spawning dozens of municipal- and state-level ordinances now adopted or under formal consideration across the United States and Canada. Arguably, some politicians are building their careers on the backs of bedbugs. For instance, the New York City Council speaker and recent mayoral candidate Christine C. Quinn took to the front steps of City Hall in July of 2010, armed with the city's freshly penned bedbug "Battle Plan," and shouted: "To bedbugs in the city of New York. . . . Drop dead. Your days are over, they're numbered, we're not going to take it anymore, we're sick and tired" (quoted in Hernández 2010). What is most striking is not that Quinn employs distinctly militaristic terms—declaring the War on Bedbugs much as her predecessors launched the War on Drugs and the War on Terrorism—but rather how she addresses the bedbugs themselves as if they are right there to respond. In figuring bedbugs as the immediate addressees of her declaration, Quinn indicates a respect not commonly afforded non-human actors, suggesting that while the critters' end is in (political) sight, the battle will play out on a strikingly level field.

THINKING WITH BEDBUGS AND THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF AGENCY

During the past decade, a growing group of anthropologists have fruitfully engaged in multispecies ethnography, an approach especially well equipped to take bedbugs seriously as actors in their own right. This literature has bemoaned anthropology's persistent centering of the human amid the "lively knottings that

tie together the world [we] inhabit” (Haraway 2008, vii) and has demonstrated how organisms “co-evolve” and “become with” each other as they come into and act within the world. A number of compelling and especially beautiful ethnographies have emerged from the attempt to both recognize the human’s entanglements with other organisms and to decenter the human as the point and perspective from which to understand various systems. For instance, Eduardo Kohn (2007, 2013) proposes a theory of semiosis that does not begin and end with the human through his ethnographies of “how dogs dream” and “how forests think.”

An increasing number of Americans, including the social workers in focus here, have no choice but to take bedbugs as their “companion-species” (Haraway 2003, 2008). Those who have lived and worked with bedbugs are also quick to acknowledge that human agency is neither innately superior nor more efficacious than that of their six-legged companions. As every professional effort at elimination is met with bedbugs’ seeming multiplication, U-Haven workers quickly recognize the practical impossibilities built into their charge. It is not simply that they regard bedbugs’ presence as “ongoing” and “everywhere”—the most common descriptors of U-Haven’s infestation—it is also that bedbugs apparently defy even the most scrupulous attempts to banish them. As one of Peter’s coworkers succinctly put it, “You can do everything right and still have bedbugs. You know? It’s a problem.” U-Haven’s bedbugs symbolize that the sheer magnitude of some problems exceeds social workers’ abilities to resolve them.

However, in recognizing *no end* to the bedbug problem, Peter’s coworkers neither succumb to horror nor sustain a sense of futility. Rather, the bedbug infestation provides especially fertile grounds to formulate ideas about the nature, limits, and possibilities of human agency and responsibility, in ways that ultimately bolster their professional practice. As we will see, this formulation diverges from the familiar portrait of the sovereign actor, at the heart of American liberalism, who stands before, envisions, and plans for certain ends. After all, U-Haven professionals work in a world in which human intentions and plans—whether those of professionals or program participants—rarely seem to find coordinate ends and goals, despite the ubiquity of state and agency mandates.

Faced with these practical dilemmas, U-Haven professionals develop alternative philosophical framings of how and why things happen. And while their formulations of agency resonate with American Pragmatism, intersect with American systems theories, and are particularly well developed in some circles of American social work, they are revived and sharpened in interaction with bedbugs. At U-Haven, one works as if the world is an *ecology* comprising a wide

variety of human and non-human actors whose actions are fundamentally reactions to others' (re)actions in the system. Accordingly, U-Haven professionals invest in the means rather than in the ends of their work, and acknowledge bedbugs as part of a world in which *agency*—or the capacity to act effectively or meaningfully—is infinitely distributed, not only between professionals and participants but also between human actors, non-human actors, and various elements of the system (that are themselves endowed with the ability to act). It follows, normatively speaking, that any one actor's intentions have little to do with whatever actually happens, since action is always necessarily a product of a system of interaction. Thus, to be an ethical professional working within such an ecology is not to be a more *intentional* actor. It is rather to be a more *attentive* one.

That said, counter to the urgings of some multispecies ethnographers, attentive social workers rarely wonder about what bedbugs think, how they see the world, or how they interpret human stratagems. They retain their human perspective as the central point from which to view the multispecies system in which they work. And, as it turns out, bedbugs are good for people to think with.⁴ Specifically, and as I argue below, bedbugs help U-Haven social workers understand the possibilities and limits of their own actions, and to refine their operating theories of agency. In other words, bedbugs infest not only the spaces where these people physically work but also their symbolic labor, ultimately showing how other species mediate human reflection.

To develop these points, I follow Peter as he is habituated—with some evident ambivalence—to this way of thinking about acting. Peter makes for an especially interesting actor on whom to focus, for whereas many of his coworkers were formally trained to think ecologically during their academic training in social work, Peter received on-the-job training from bedbugs. As we will see, Peter vacillates between trying to conquer invading bedbugs (with the pugnacious determination of an ambitious mayoral candidate) and accepting that he must learn to live and effectively work *with* the critters. This suggests that people's ideas about agency shift as they are offered up different possibilities for effective and meaningful action, in part because they are always interacting and reacting to a whole host of other agents and agencies, some of which initially surprise them.

Some might argue that Peter's (pre)occupation with bedbugs reveals a felt tension between a liberal and an ecological conception of agency in the contemporary United States. This resonates with Claudia Strauss's (2007) claims that contemporary Americans have multiple models of human agency, aside from the much commented (neo)liberal one, and that alternative conceptualizations tend

to be more evident in times of collective crisis. Such models may be particularly prominent in professional life, as American and non-American professionals alike not only have disciplined habits of action but also specific ways of conceiving of and portraying these habits, which are crucial to the establishment of their expertise (Carr 2010). This essay aims to elaborate one such working theory of agency revealed during U-Haven's bedbug outbreak—that is, the orientation of some frontline American social workers—suggesting that those who work in the vein of harm reduction, in particular, construe logics of agency and responsibility that have clear, if easily overlooked, historical roots.

Yet my argument has significance far beyond the claim that ideas about agency in the United States are far more heterogeneous in their genealogies and contemporary expressions than commonly recognized. The broader point is that although people's operating ideas about agency may have specifiable historical roots, these ideas *emerge* in social interaction with a wide variety of actors, including non-human ones, and shift as individuals learn how they can effectively and meaningfully (re)act in their evolving circumstances—as Peter will show us below. In other words, there exist not so much *models* of agency, which are indelibly mapped onto cultural milieus or cognitive schemas (cf. D'Andrade and Strauss 1992), but rather ways of thinking about action that continuously derive from actors' reflections on why and how things happen. While these ways of thinking are commonly institutionalized by professional, political, or intellectual projects, there is fluidity, and indeed some functionality, to how people take them up so as to orient themselves in their worlds. Thus, in chronicling Peter's interaction with bedbugs, I am not simply, nor even primarily, interested in identifying popular formulations of agency in the contemporary United States and tracing their relative genealogies. Instead, I work to contribute to the anthropology of agency (e.g., D'Andrade and Strauss 1992; Keane 2007; Latour 2005; Jackson 2005; Johnson 1988; Mahmood 2005; Rosaldo 1982; Strathern 1988) by shedding light on the relationship between the conditions of action, as people experience and make sense of them, and the way that they formulate—or *practically* model—working theories of agency.

THE ECOLOGICAL INVITATION AND INFESTATION OF FRONTLINE SOCIAL WORK

Early in our acquaintance, Peter frequently likened his former sales position at the bicycle shop to his new job at U-Haven. Persuasion—he insisted—was key to success in both settings. There are so many reasons why one might forgo

buying that long-coveted bicycle, he once explained, just as there are multiple reasons why one might not take prescribed medications or blow an SSI check on drugs. Peter's assumed task, in both cases, was to say or do something that made a difference in his clients' ongoing calculations. In our first interview together, soon after he transitioned to his new job at U-Haven, Peter articulated what many Americans would recognize and themselves espouse as a choice-driven formulation of human agency, commonly associated with American liberalism: "I don't think we've talked about it much, but I also come from a sales background, and I think there's—I mean there are *a lot* of similarities [to my job here]. Um, you, you can make certain choices about how you interact with people, and that has a lot to do with outcome, in my opinion." Although he vehemently opposed "telling other people what to do"—as he later underscored in the very same interview—he was ever on the lookout for what he saw as less violent means of persuasion that could coordinate his professional intentions with program participants' outcomes.

Yet in acclimating himself to the world of social work, Peter was exposed to a new way of framing his professional actions in relation to his clients' actions, and to what happens more generally. It was not simply the recognition that, whether professional or participant, the unfolding of one's plans, intentions, or desires into actions proved far more constrained at U-Haven than at the bicycle shop. After all, many of what we might call "structural impediments" to effective action were immediately obvious: his participants had spotty-at-best employment and educational histories, unreliable kin networks, prison records, histories of severe trauma, and any number of chronic physical and mental health conditions. Moreover, he and his coworkers had not nearly enough resources, including sheer time, to meet participants' resulting wants and needs. At U-Haven, people seldom did what they wanted, at least according to plan.

Yet rather than viewing agency as a property and potentiality of human individuals more or less constrained by "structure," as a crass version of practice theory would have it, seasoned U-Haven professionals tended to see agency—or, the capacity to effectively act—as the sum total of complex, non-linear transactions among program participants, staff, drugs, monthly checks, visitors, medications, policy mandates, psychotic symptoms, aspects of the built and crumbling environment and, of course, bedbugs. And while they sometimes bemoaned their inability to manage the bedbug problem, they rarely pinned responsibility on the program participants who happened to host them. To do so, they reasoned, would

fail to recognize the *systemic* reasons why—not to mention the dynamics of how—things actually happen.

An understanding of social life as ecological has long characterized American social work; it is the way the field distinguishes itself from psychology, on the one hand, and political science, on the other. In fact, several strains of ecological thinking—all of which stress the dynamic reciprocity between human actors and their environments, and conceive of action as adaptations to a complex set of social stimuli—have found a welcome home in American social work, particularly with the rise of systems theories in the 1960s. For instance, cybernetics, especially as developed by Gregory Bateson, laid the intellectual foundation of Family Systems Therapy, a therapeutic modality that offered a generation of social workers a conception of the families they treated as an ensemble of events, in which “behavior of [one actor] is determined . . . by behavior of other parts of the system, and indirectly by its own behavior at a previous time” (Bateson 1972, 317). According to this way of thinking, any human being is part of a larger trial-and-error system that does the thinking, acting, and deciding in concert.

A particularly prominent theme in the 1990s version of ecological social work is the idea—adopted from developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979)—that individuals are products of their “meso” and “macro” environments, and that their behavior should be understood accordingly (see, for instance, Hepworth, Larson, and Rooney 2002). In contrast to Bateson’s cybernetics, which not only recognizes a whole host of agencies (not all of which are humanly housed) but also attacks the epistemological privileging of the human perspective on the system, Bronfenbrenner’s ecological perspective is concertedly anthropocentric. Although he and his interlocutors in academic social work are keen to point out that the relationship between person and environment is reciprocal, “the aspects of the environment that are most powerful in shaping the course of psychological growth are overwhelmingly those that have meaning to the person in a given situation” (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 21). That is to say, the ecology is always viewed from the perspective of the developing person putatively shaped by it.

While Peter was studying Hegel and Horkheimer, many of his coworkers had been exposed to ecological perspectives in textbook form, having earned master’s and bachelor’s degrees in social work. New to ecological thinking, Peter was initially prone to cite characteristics that supposedly rendered program participants more susceptible and less cognizant hosts. For instance, during one recorded exchange with his coworkers, Peter once haltingly offered: “Getting rid of bedbugs is difficult anyway. And with the people that we work with, um . . .

with the symptoms of schizophrenia and such and . . . hygiene, they can make it . . . difficult and frustrating from their perspective and our perspective.” Here, though Peter acknowledges the inherent difficulty of bedbugs, he seemingly pins responsibility on the symptomatic and unhygienic participant “they” who frustrate his anti-bedbug efforts.

However sympathetic with his plight, Peter’s coworkers were swift to correct his framing, which stubbornly locates a (human) source of the problem and suggests that the problem persists because some people fail to work toward rational ends. They insisted instead that even the “cleanest people” can host bedbugs; that—moreover and “in fact”—“*anyone* can get bedbugs”; and, that it can be perfectly reasonable to overlook a bedbug infestation because “some people, physiologically, simply don’t react to bedbug bites.” Such rejoinders are more than just defenses against casting bed-bugged participants as types of people. They are also expressions of a conception of the world of work as an ecology wherein what happens is conceived as the outcome of interconnected (re)actions, distributed among many kinds of actors—and not just human ones. For instance, in this formulation of agency, objects (like bug traps and mattresses) and settings (like urban single room occupancy units [SROs] and shelters) are endowed with the ability to effectively act (cf. Johnson 1988; Latour 2005).⁵ Furthermore, U-Haven workers dismiss the assumption that, among all these actors, humans are sovereign.

So when Peter’s coworker, Libby—who had practiced social work for ten years after receiving an MSW from a top-ten school—was asked about “what sorts of conversations” she has with participants who have bedbugs, she replied without hesitation: “In my experience, it’s something that is beyond their control. They live in a shelter, you know, and they just have to deal with it.” According to Libby, participants are not failed actors who have passively allowed bedbugs to run amok. Rather, participants interact in an environment—and not just in terms of their literal shelter—in which matters simply exceed individual control. By extension, Libby suggests that when there are problems untethered to discrete sources of responsibility, staff “just have to deal with it” too.

Understandably, at first, Peter found it difficult to accept these lessons, and not primarily because they were offered up by bedbugs rather than Bronfenbrenner. Indeed, recall Peter’s operating theory of agency, carried over from his sales training and articulated during his first interview with me, that people make choices, including choices about interaction, and that these choices “ha[ve] a lot to do with outcome.” In the philosophical vein of American liberalism, where the

individual mind theoretically precedes and conquers all other matter, he initially believed that he could persuade his participants to take certain steps to rid themselves of bugs. (Recall that Peter once characterized himself as an exterminator, one who could achieve certain ends.) But over time, Peter acclimated himself to the ecological imaginary of U-Haven, recognizing that since there was no end to the bedbug crisis, it made sense to invest in the dynamic circuit of (re)action that his colleagues envisioned. For instance, consider this exchange between Peter and Karl, a well-traveled case manager who visited his clients in SRO apartments and nursing homes scattered across the city. Karl prided himself as a “doer,” and more particularly, as a “do[er of] things no one else will do”—a characterization borne out in my travels with him. In reference to the bedbug infestation, Karl offered Peter some sympathetic but direct advice:

Karl: It’s tough. I mean, some [participants] will work with you on it (long pause) and some won’t. You have to start with laundry. You’ve got to do the, the bed and all that stuff. It’s hard. And then . . . a month later they’ve got ‘em.

Peter: They’ve got ‘em again. Right.

Karl: ‘Cause even if they’re clean, someone comes in their apartment.

Peter: Well, and the building that we’re in, they, uh . . . their neighbors are rarely participants from our program. And so they may be infested. And so we go through this whole thing. It’s just this idea of talking to somebody about something that affects everyone. . . . And with some people it’s somewhat effective, but and that’s why the time thing comes back in. [Voicing a participant] “Well, we sprayed my room. Now everything’s fine.” Well, it’s not. We have to keep on the laundry thing. We have to keep on, (long pause) you know, all these other . . . other aspects.

Karl begins with a typification of participant-actors as those who are more or less willing to “work with” professionals. However, quickly thereafter, he dutifully lists the tasks that the bedbugs precipitate *regardless of the human agents involved* and states, unequivocally, that the effects of such actions are inevitably short-lived.

Peter then joins Karl in scaffolding together a social work vision of a bedbug ecology wherein the professional persuasion of human conduct is clearly insufficient. Now, there are neighbors, the building itself, bug spray, talk of bug spray, more laundry, and “all these other . . . other aspects.” Later in the very same

conversation, Peter indicated a growing sympathy with participants who “say, well, I did everything that I was supposed to do and now I’ve got them again anyway.” Acknowledging that even the most “motivated” participant cannot reign supreme in a bedbug ecology, Peter volunteered: “It’s not just *their* motivation. It also becomes, in a sense, the *community’s* motivation. ‘Cause they’re not isolated. You know?”

U-Haven’s ecology was conceived in part as a spatial configuration, like a mapped web of connections between actors and “aspects.” Consider, too, the *temporality* of the bedbug ecology that Karl and Peter envision—a system of action where, inevitably, “the time thing comes back in.” When asked how they respond to the frustration of participants who repeatedly find themselves living with bedbugs after taking all prescribed steps to evict them, they noted in concert:

Karl: You start all over again.

Peter: Just keep the conversation going.

Karl: Yeah, it’s an ongoing battle, you know.

As such comments make clear, acquiring an ecological sensibility required U-Haven workers to reset their conceptual clocks from a linear temporality that connects means to ends, intentions to outcomes, and problems to solutions. To work well at U-Haven meant to envision oneself as participating in a circuit of action that was, itself, ever evolving. Following in Jane Addams’s footsteps, Peter’s coworkers operationalized [John Dewey’s \(1998\)](#) idea of “a universe whose evolution is not finished.”⁶ Accordingly, they abandoned the fantasy of finding final solutions to static problems. The ecological vision of social work provided a way to temporalize professional transactions, projecting—among other things—that social work is never done.

As I show below, as Peter began to realize that there was no foreseeable end to the bedbug battle, he focused far less on his powers of persuasion and far more on cultivating provisionally useful ways of knowing and acting. And although Peter’s coworkers, like Karl and Libby, offered informal tutelage in this mode of analysis, we should not underestimate the efficacious pedagogy of the bedbugs themselves. Bedbugs not only helped teach Peter that any one of his acts is always already a reaction to many other acts in an ever-unfolding ecology of action; they also eventually trained him in a style of analysis that has roots in American Pragmatism.

HARM REDUCTION AND BEDBUG ABDUCTION: From Intention to Attention

Early one Friday morning, my research assistant, Marianne, visited Peter as he was initiating his daily routine. That day, he had eighteen residents to visit in their respective single-occupancy rooms, spread across a twelve-story, one hundred-plus unit building. Typically, during these rounds, Peter checks to see if there is enough food to eat in refrigerators, if the rooms are dangerously hot or cold, if gas pilots and running water have been turned off, and if troublesome visitors have been turned away. Aside from these indicators of serious harm, and perhaps most intently, Peter checks for bedbugs.

Peter likes to conduct these sweeping room checks before he begins daily “med checks,” which involve participants filing into his office and filling their pillboxes with prescribed medications. On the Friday in question, dressed in khaki shorts and a button-down shirt, Peter moves fast while Marianne trails behind him. (“Like a man on a mission, he lugs his bedbug sprayers from room to room, jogging up and down the stairs,” Marianne wrote in her field notes.) Peter’s “mission” is to hunt bedbugs, less, it seems, to kill them than to determine where they are currently lurking. In Vern’s room, he lifts a mattress, exposing about twenty pairs of shoes underneath. As soon as the lights hit them, small German cockroaches emerge from the shoes. Peter is not fazed. The building sprays for them, Peter tells Marianne, if apparently unsuccessfully on this occasion. And besides, he adds, in the food-chain hierarchy, roaches eat bedbugs. Cockroaches, for Peter, are agents that have certain ends.

Aside from pointing out the “nefarious” reputation of the building as they travel its stairs, Peter plies Marianne with lessons about bedbugs. He shows her what they look like, teaches her to discern the difference between a mild and a serious outbreak, and explains various ways to kill them. In each room, he quizzes participants: “Seen any more?” . . . “What does ‘not really’ mean: One or two, or none?” He slips into Socratic mode, prompting participants to recite the steps they should take when encountering the critters. As Marianne and Peter head back to his office, he casually mentions that, aside from bedbugs, he looks for everything from “dead cockroaches to dead bodies” during such room checks. Finding a participant dead from an overdose or an untreated medical condition is not unusual at U-Haven. It is, some workers confided, the dark side of the harm-reduction modality in which they work.

If social work training generally constitutes an effort to inculcate an ecological way of thinking, the harm-reduction model arguably requires an even deeper

commitment to it. Most frequently associated with needle-exchange programs that originated in northern Europe, harm reduction is an increasingly prominent model of social-service delivery to active drug users in major U.S. cities. In contrast to contingency-based programs, which require drug users to abstain from drugs and attend drug treatment while receiving case management, shelter, or ancillary services, harm-reduction programs focus on providing such resources to all clients in need of them, regardless of whether or not they abstain from drugs. This means that U-Haven professionals regularly interact with clients who are high, inebriated, hung over, in withdrawal, or otherwise suffering the effects of drug and alcohol use. And while U-Haven offers a number of treatment options—including individual counseling, group therapy, and referrals to inpatient and detox programs—Peter’s coworkers have little leverage in utilizing these services. Rather, charged with reducing harm, they work to assure that participants have a safe place to live, receive monthly SSI or VA benefits, stay out of prison, visit doctors, and take their prescribed medications, thereby reducing the risk of harm associated with homelessness, untreated health conditions, and so-called open-air drug use.

In practice, harm reduction challenges and facilitates the relinquishing of two ideas fundamental to a classic liberal construal of human agency. First, in acknowledging that people sometimes act in ways counter to their self-interest, harm reduction radically questions the idea that individual behavior is internally guided, at least in any straightforward way. Drugs, for example, sometimes lead people to do things that are against their will, at least as many theories of addiction propound. Second, rather than construing externally motivated action as an aberration, harm reductionists accept and adopt it as a professional principle. So rather than trying to control what their clients do, U-Haven professionals position themselves to effectively react to what happens. If they are to continue working at U-Haven, they eventually come to accept that this is all they can (and *should*) do.

To the extent that it demonstrated the limits of professional control, the bedbug crisis proved symbolically productive, providing an opportunity for U-Haven workers to resolve the ambivalence they felt toward harm reduction and the implications about human agency embedded within it. After all, professionals’ inability to control bedbugs resonates with their inability to control other residents’ behavior, and new workers periodically complained that they were simply “along for the ride,” unable to fulfill what they initially saw as their professional charge. Yet, over time, most make peace with harm reduction through a Prag-

matist focus on means rather than ends. As they relinquish the fantasy of sovereign control, they become all the more invested in the real-time dynamics of their (inter)actions, rigorously attending to the effects of what they and others do, rather than evaluating the inherent integrity or efficacy of any one action.

This eventually held true for Peter as well. Although U-Haven's harm-reduction model was a large part of what attracted him to the agency in the first place, it was because he initially aligned harm reduction with a classically liberal formulation of *self-determination*. "It is not my job to tell other people what to do," he told me during our first interview, suggesting that his participants should be free to pursue their own chosen ends. Yet as time went on, Peter became acutely aware of how his participants' intentions rarely unfolded into self-determined action (i.e., participants generally didn't do what *they* wanted, wished, or planned). He was also continually confronted with the omnipresence of bugs that *he* desperately wanted to exterminate—and by extension, the limits of his own self-determination. Having worked so hard only to have bedbugs reappear, he came to fully accept his colleagues' maxim that "you can do everything right and still have bedbugs."

Indeed, Peter critically refocused on his participants' and coworkers' seeming *lack of curiosity* about bedbugs' whereabouts, indicting those who did not share his preoccupation. For instance, after flipping one newly purchased mattress to find a whole colony of bedbugs, he proclaimed in the form of a maxim and to no particular addressee: "What you don't look for you don't see." And as he continued his work, Peter came to believe that the presence of bedbugs at U-Haven called for a mode of investigation, akin to what the American Pragmatist Charles Sanders Peirce (1997) called *abduction*. If induction is inference from a sample to a whole, abduction is inference from an observed body of data to an explanatory mid-level hypothesis, which need not be true, nor even verifiable, but merely provide promising guidelines for further action and investigation. Like a good Pragmatist, Peter began to undertake these rigorous bedbug searches not so much to come to definitive conclusions but rather to inform his ongoing conduct, for as Peirce (1966, 7.562) put it: "To act intelligently and to see intelligently become at bottom one." In this sense, abduction was an exercise in analytical control at precisely the time Peter was ceding the idea that he could control other aspects of his practice.

Indeed, as Peter began to accept the limits of what he (and others) could effectively do, he grew ever more invested in what he (and others) could provisionally know. His encounters with bedbugs in the past helped him generate

instinct-driven, tentative theories about where bedbugs could now be lurking (cf. Haraway 2008, 38). He soon learned that bedbug abduction offered no guarantees, but simply a promise that one guess was probably better than another in terms of where he should look and what he should do next. After all, abduction is a process of knowledge seeking that, while ever attentive, has no definitive end (cf. Helmreich 2007).⁷

In search of economical explanations that can serve as the basis of future professional reactions, Peter's daily work was shot through with bedbug abduction, which employed verbal techniques to collect the data that he could not observe firsthand. Although participants tolerated, or at least found it difficult to avoid Peter's morning visits, there were tacitly agreed-upon limits as to how often he could enter their rooms and what he might look for/in once there. Thus, in addition to his direct observation of bedsheets, box springs, cardboard boxes, electrical switch plates, unlaundered undershirts, floorboards, area rugs, closets, or plastic bags of winter clothing, Peter tried to cultivate bedbug awareness in his participants and elicit verbal reports of any sightings. So when Peter's participants filed into his office for med checks, they came to expect a line of questions that focused not only on side effects or psychotic symptoms but also on encounters with bedbugs.

Bedbug inquiries sometimes began as soon as a participant took a seat next to Peter's med cart, where all residents' medications were stored. Legally unable to handle the medications himself—a fascinating dispersal of responsibility in its own right—Peter shook, opened, resealed, and called out the name on the label of each prescription bottle before handing it over to participants to fill their plastic pillboxes under his watch. For some, this task was straightforward, having already committed to memory their weekly medication routines, however byzantine. For others, whose hands chronically trembled and whose memories regularly failed, med checks required considerable concentration. Yet multitasking was a must as Peter plied participants with questions about bedbugs, all the while monitoring whether they correctly dropped the right number of the variously sized capsules and tablets into pillbox compartments labeled with days of the week.

Impressive indeed was Peter's smooth management of these practically challenging encounters, which required both careful observation of the complex transactions of hand-bottle-pill-pill box (and sometimes floor, pocket, and mouth) and simultaneous inquiry into an entirely different, if similarly conceived, state of

affairs. Still, these hybrid med-bug checks were unsettling to witness. To be sure, Peter capitalized on the conditions of his inquiry: his respondents' dependence on him for necessary medications, the markers of professional authority that adorned the office, and the conventions of the clinical interview, which facilitated Peter's inquiry into matters that most Americans would consider private. Yet if Peter's bedbug inquiries were ritualized exercises in professional power, they were also expressions of one professional struggling to accept and cope with the limits of what he could see, know, and do.

Consider, for instance, Eileen's encounter with Peter as he begins a familiar line of questioning. Standing over her, he asks: "So . . . [Chuck, a case manager] was down there spraying—any more problems? Do we need to spray again?" Eileen responds affirmatively, adding that she thinks the bugs may be coming through the floorboards and woodwork. Peter, however, suspects the unpacked boxes in Eileen's room are the most likely host, asking, as he has many times before: "What about the boxes? Do you want me to look in them?" Clearly uninterested in further discussing the issue, Eileen retrieves her room keys from the table, a sign she is ready to go. Grabbing hold of her pillbox, ostensibly to assure she has filled it correctly, Peter persists: "What about a bomb? How about I spray again on Friday?" Eileen refuses, saying she will buy a bomb herself when she has the money to do so. Peter is still inquiring about bedbugs as Eileen and her repatriated pillbox disappear through the door.

A bit later, Sandy—an older woman who reportedly lived a relatively normal life until her husband hit her in the head with a baseball bat, causing severe brain damage—arrives for her meds. Weeks before, Peter had turned over Sandy's mattress while searching for bedbugs, causing Sandy evident distress. Now, Sandy sits down at the med table, with Peter still seated at his desk, facing her. As if upping the ante on the encounter with Eileen, Peter begins his inquiry with particular ferocity.

Peter: Have you seen any more?

Sandy: Not really.

Peter: What does "not really" *mean*? Do you need me to come and look?

Sandy: No, no. [They're] just baby roaches.

Peter: I don't care about those. Have you seen any bedbugs?

Sandy: No. No.

Peter: You want me to check? Do we need to spray again?

Sandy: [Silence]

Peter: It's OK, it's OK, I believe you. You'll let me know if you see any.

Peter helps a now clearly rattled Sandy close her pillbox, and hands her a plastic drawer filled with equipment to self-check her blood sugar. He ends the interaction where he began, asking, "So . . . if you see any more bugs, what do you do?" Sandy dutifully assures, "I'll call you," eliciting knowing laughter from Peter's more seasoned coworker.

As a sympathetic, if sometimes amused, witness to his bedbug inquiries, Peter's coworker watched as he teetered between the fantasy that he might indeed one day glean enough information about the bugs' insidious habits to exterminate them and the realization that since there was no end to the U-Haven's bedbug problem, it was his responsibility to fastidiously trace—or abduct—their current whereabouts. All the while, of course, Peter worked to attend to the human participants in his program, many of whom were also remarkably recalcitrant to his directives. To work at U-Haven without succumbing to burnout, which surprisingly few of Peter's coworkers did, one had to resist tethering professional intention to professional action and instead calibrate a careful way of seeing with a provisional way of knowing. And while his inclinations were clearly frustrated by his various residents, they eventually helped cultivate Peter as a more attentive, if less intentional, actor.

At the end of one long Friday, Peter noticed pieces of paper tucked partially under every door of the building where he worked and his participants lived. Without his or his coworkers' knowledge, the building manager had scheduled exterminators to spray the following Tuesday. The freshly delivered notices to this effect listed all the actions required of the tenants to prepare during the weekend: sealing belongings in tight containers, taking everything off the floor, removing all infested furniture (without mentioning where people were to sleep and sit in the meantime). Peter was furious. "How are our people going to do this?!" he exclaimed, "How is anyone?!" Incensed at the impossibility of it all, he turned to his coworker and clipped: "We can't be responsible for this; they have to pack up their own stuff."

Yet soon Peter calmed down and into the recognition that his job was precisely to do the impossible. As he reflected, it was not the Herculean effort that the notices required that he found so infuriating, though he rightly anticipated

a harrowing weekend for all involved. Rather, Peter repelled the now-foreign mode of professionalism that he read into the lines of the notice's text. The building manager, according to the reflective Peter, did not understand the limits of what his residents could effectively do, in part because he had never taken the time interact with or carefully observe them. Invested only in the fantastical ends of their labor, the exterminators would sweep in and spray, as they do in any other place and with no special attention. On top of it all, neither party seemed to have any specific interest in or working knowledge of the bedbugs they pretended to target, actors that Peter now understood as having particular habits and haunts. In reference to both sets of professionals, Peter remarked with disdain, "They will do this so they can say they have done their duty," knowing full well that the bedbugs would be back and *his* duty would be to continuously attend to them.

CONCLUSION: Doing Good as Good Enough

For anthropologists, the theorization of agency as "difference that makes a difference" harkens to Gregory Bateson. In active alcoholics who believe they can "handle their liquor," Bateson claimed to have identified a particularly virulent variety of what he considered the fundamental "epistemological error" in Occidental thinking—that is, the fallacy of *mind over matter*. Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Bateson further argued, offered a corrective in its insistence that the alcoholic surrender to a "Higher Power," which Bateson glossed as "the system." Indeed, AA provided a convenient articulation of Bateson's theoretical program, cybernetics. Taking from a well-known AA maxim, he wrote:

There is a Power greater than the self. Cybernetics would go somewhat further and recognize that the "self" as ordinarily understood is only a small part of a much larger trial-and-error system which does the thinking, acting, and deciding. This system includes all the informational path-ways which are relevant at any given moment to any given decision. The "self" is a false reification of an improperly delimited part of this much larger field of interlocking processes. Cybernetics also recognizes that two or more persons—any group of persons— may together form such a thinking-and-acting system. (Bateson 1972, 331)

Elsewhere in his writings, including the very same essay, Bateson acknowledges the equally important role that non-human actors, like axes, bottles, and canes—if not bedbugs—contribute to the continual (re)generation of the system.

In their interaction with bedbugs, U-Haven social workers revive these principles of American systems theories as they strive to make sense of how and why things happen, and react accordingly. As detailed above, they also take up, if quite implicitly, American Pragmatist ideas about the possibilities of effective, meaningful, and ethical (re)action given the circumstances of their work. To be sure, there is more than one model of agency that has been institutionalized and made historically available for American actors to think with. Yet my larger point is that rather than being mapped onto cultural milieus, occupational ethics, or cognitive schemas—or being adopted whole cloth—ideas about agency evolve in the course of people’s everyday practice, as they interact with a whole host of other agents and agencies. We see this as Peter shifts his thinking about agency and responsibility as he engages with bedbugs.

Indeed, if Peter felt ambivalent about his acclimation to U-Haven and social work more generally, he eventually appreciated his engagement with bedbugs, eventually likening himself to a close relative. “As a worker bee,” Peter once said, “I see my job as just reducing suffering. There is no magic bullet. . . . And people do not make it long in the field who are all uptight about particular methods of practice. Because they get upset, then, when their magic intervention doesn’t do the trick; when people do not improve quickly.” Stubbornly defying professional intentions and interventions, bedbugs help workers like Peter cultivate a rigorous, sustained attention to the means of their labor. Specifically, they come to appreciate that every action of every actor makes a difference in what actually happens, if always in indefinite ways.

In chronicling Peter’s encounters with bedbugs, I have worked to make several interrelated points about folk theories of agency. First, contemporary Americans—including American professionals—are hardly bound to the liberal vision of the actor who stands before, envisions, and plans for certain ends, as many analysts commonly charge or assume. This familiar formulation of agency is difficult, if not impossible, to sustain in the practice of social work considering its infestation by problems that can only be managed but never resolved. There are likely many other social arenas in the contemporary United States, aside from academic circles, where (neo)liberal formulations of agency are subjected to sophisticated critique and revision, and where a host of actors and agencies are seen as contributing to what happens.

Although they certainly acknowledge bedbugs’ agency, U-Haven workers hardly take their companions as intellectual equals. In this, [Haraway \(2008, 20\)](#) may charge that they “failed a simple obligation . . . to become curious about

what the [bedbugs] might actually be doing, feeling, thinking, or making available to [them].” Yet Peter’s (co-)evolution suggests that one thing that bedbugs do make available is a heightened curiosity, an attentiveness to the actions of other actors in the system, even while retaining a resolutely anthropocentric perspective on it. At U-Haven, bedbugs are good for people to think with: they inspire habits of human reflection and reasoning, as well as reformulations of (human) agency.

More particularly and quite significantly, the infestation of bedbugs allows workers—on an itchy and uncomfortable, but relatively less dire conceptual terrain—to relinquish the fantasy of controlling the life-and-death matters that characterize their professional charge. Consider that on the first day I shadowed Karl, I watched as he witnessed a longtime participant draw his last breaths, on a bare mattress in a spare nursing home, with no other companions, let alone family around. “I did all I could,” said a shaken Karl on the train ride back to the office. Consider too that on the last Friday of every month, a good portion of U-Haven workers, who serve as “representative payees,” hold their breath as they hand over SSI checks, waiting to see if the recipients make it back to U-Haven having avoided serious harm to themselves or others. Bedbugs remind U-Haven staff that they work in an ecology and that there is only so much they can do. This may be why it is not uncommon to find professionals at U-Haven who have worked at the agency for well over ten years, all the while facing trenchant, chronic, and practically irresolvable problems. Although unionization, the relatively good work conditions it helps secure, and an investment in the human-rights mission of the organization are certainly factors in the equation, U-Haven professionals’ formulation of agency, cultivated in their engagement with bedbugs, allows them to stay productively focused on the here-and-now of their daily work, holding at conceptual bay the possible outcomes of their labor and thereby avoiding the enervation that comes with work directed toward impossible ends (cf. [Brodwin 2011, 2013](#)).

Indeed, in Peter’s and his coworkers’ formulations of agency, one finds a reworked temporality of action alongside a redistribution of responsibility, derived from the experience of encountering the limits and possibilities of acting effectively. As a veteran social worker named Hector once counseled Peter, coping with bedbug infestations resembles “fighting the tides” only from an ends-driven perspective. Rather than futilely working to eliminate bedbugs, Hector advised, one should *react* to them, just as one does in relation to the other actors and agencies in the ecology of harm-reduction social work. Almost as if setting an example, Hector then recited the continuous circuit of action one must follow

when encountering bedbugs, almost as if reading it off a bedbug checklist that had been purged of a column for definitive “outcomes”(see figure 1). With no expectation that their ongoing action and inquiry would lead to such conclusions and without evident hint of futility, Hector helped convince Peter that bedbugs are “just part of life now.”

In this way, U-Haven workers refocus on the means rather than the ends of their work, and measure their responsibility in terms of attention rather than intention. So, rather than doing *good*, with good understood as a discrete goal to which meaningful action is intentionally directed, U-Haven social workers invest in *doing* good and thereby operationalize a professional ethic in which *doing* itself is *good* and certainly *good enough*. Thus, in their intensive engagements with bedbugs, Peter and his colleagues demonstrate the ethical as well as practical benefits of abdicating the cultural imperative of intention-driven agency by instead abiding by what Peirce (1997) called the *pragmatic maxim*. This means sustaining a reflexive attention to one’s own sensory reactions, carefully observing the reactions of a wide range of relevant actors, and responding in accordance to what is provisionally learned, without regard to how many legs interactants may have.

ABSTRACT

This essay draws on fieldwork with American social workers, whose primary charge is to engage what they view as particularly recalcitrant human problems and populations. All the while, these workers find themselves in intensive engagements with bedbugs, which have recently infested the American imaginary, as well as the destitute sites of American social work. As every professional effort at elimination is met with bedbugs’ seeming multiplication, eradicating bedbugs comes to be understood as both professional responsibility and practical impossibility—yet another example that the magnitude of the problems with which social workers are charged exceeds their abilities to resolve them. And yet these professionals neither succumb to burnout nor suffer a sustained sense of futility. Rather, bedbugs help them cultivate a sustaining occupational ethic, one that resonates with American systems theories and American Pragmatism. More specifically, human-bedbug engagements inspire a working formulation of agency that acknowledges the efficacies of non-human actors, understands human intention as the framing of, rather than fuel for what actually happens, and privileges the means over the ends of (professional) labor. With a focus on how human-bedbug engagements contribute to the development of folk theories of agency, this article demonstrates the fluidity with which social actors think about the possibilities for effective, meaningful (re)action and thereby contributes to the anthropology of agency. [agency; bugs; pragmatism; professionalism; responsibility; social work; systems theories; United States]

NOTES

Acknowledgments Many agents populate this essay, though I assign them no responsibility for its remaining flaws. Julie Chu, Jennifer Cole, Kimberly Cole, Ilana Gershon, Constantine Nakassis, and Patricia Round are here, as are members of the U.S. Locations workshop at the University of Chicago, especially Emily Bock, who served as discussant. Faculty and students of the Anthropology Department at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, especially Paul Brodwin, helped grow the ideas here when presented with an earlier, oral iteration. The editorial team at *Cultural Anthropology*, as well as the three anonymous reviewers they selected, proved invaluable in clarifying the article's arguments and contributions. I extend special thanks Marianne Brennan, whose astute participant observations are folded into this essay. And to "Peter," his coworkers, and cohabitants I owe my endless gratitude for demonstrating a wonderful and brave mode of engagement.

1. This article draws on fifteen months of fieldwork at U-Haven, which began with participant observation of a yearlong training initiative in motivational interviewing (MI) and continued as my two field assistants and I shadowed twelve training participants, including Peter, observing their daily work. During the course of this work, we encountered many other actors at U-Haven, including—of course—the bedbugs that occupied our key interlocutors.
2. One of the most interesting things about this version of the bedbug tracking protocol—which was regularly revised as the date at the bottom of the sheet indicates—is the offloading of human responsibility onto the built environment. This is a definitive shift from other institutional documentation, which lists clients' full names when evidence of their bedbug companions has been found.
3. As a particularly eloquent bedbugged acquaintance once noted, "When you have had bedbugs, you can't imagine the world without them."
4. Responding to Jacques Derrida's account of his naked encounter with his cat, Donna Haraway (2008, 20) writes that "Derrida failed a simple obligation of companion species; he did not become curious about what the cat might actually be doing, feeling, thinking or perhaps making available to him in looking back at him that morning." This is the epistemological variant of the human exceptionalism that multispecies thinkers and ethnographers tend to bemoan. Yet, as I suggest below, Haraway also advocates a kind of human curiosity, consistent with what Peirce called abduction, which focuses on how we humans might think with and what we might learn from our engagements with non-human critters. And it is in this somewhat narrow sense that this essay interacts with multispecies ethnography, as it shows people "standing naked" before bedbugs and, in seeing their own reflections, engaging in a process of learning.
5. Much like Gregory Bateson's famous example of the lumberjack—who overlooks the distributed agency at work in felling a tree and erroneously proclaims: "I did it!"—animated his program of cybernetics, Bruno Latour's "sociology of a door closer" illustrates what he would later call Actor Network Theory (ANT). Writing under the pseudonym Jim Johnson (1988), Latour walks readers through the different agencies involved in a door closing, suggesting that "the most liberal sociologist . . . discriminates against non-humans" and that social analysis must recognize the thick associations between the human and the non-human. In this case, the hydraulic door closer is moral not only because it has been humanly crafted to serve as delegate for the doorman, and does it effectively if in sometimes unpredictable ways, but moreover because it prescribes certain types of behaviors back to humans.
6. Well before social work's eager uptake of systems theories in the 1960s and 1970s, ecological ideas influenced the profession—by way of American Pragmatism. Consider the ethnographic portrait of Halstead Street in Jane Addams's *Forty Years at Hull House* (Addams and Wald 1910), which attends to the complex transactions between people and urban environment. As some scholars have argued (see in particular Greenstone 1979), this sensibility was derived from her Pragmatism—and, indeed, Addams and

John Dewey had a significant mutual influence on each other. For more on the role of Pragmatism in contemporary social work, see [Borden 2013](#).

7. In his commentary on [Stephan Palmié's \(2007\)](#) discussion of race, divination, and personalized genomic histories, [Stefan Helmreich \(2007\)](#) reads Peirce's definition of abduction—a mode of justification that is the “only possible hope of regulating our future conduct rationally” ([Peirce 1998](#), 299)—as more end-driven than I do. Though abduction seeks to resolve the question, “what shall I do next?,” the answers it arrives at are never definitive, with next steps initiating the question again in an ongoing loop of action and inquisition. To be sure, this very process can abduct the actor, in the more colloquial meaning of the term, which Helmreich usefully puts into dialogue with Peirce. In clinical terms, Peter was obsessed. In Peircean terms, he was inspired and preoccupied by a pragmatic method of reason.

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