I found the reply that Jörg Niewöhner and Thomas Scheffer provided to my earlier commentary of the collection of papers they edited on thick ethnography and the comparison process to be very helpful in clarifying their concerns and practices. Those who examine my earlier commentary will recognize that Jörg Niewöhner and Thomas Scheffer [hereafter N&S] and I share many points of agreement on the desirability of ethnographic research for comprehending the human condition. We also share an emphasis on the importance of developing ethnographically informed theory of human group life.

Still, their statement also makes some claims about my position and the broader ethnographic research enterprise that requires some elaboration. Thus, sidestepping the issues that Niewöhner and Scheffer raise with respect to the positivist-interpretivist divide (for further considerations of this matter, see Prus 1996, 1999; Grills and Prus 2008), I focus on (a) the clarification of researcher standpoints, (b) ethnographic openness, and (c) ethnographically informed theory. These concerns have great importance for comparative analysis, especially that pertaining to ethnographic inquiry.

My first concern pertains to the matter of researchers and analysts articulating the central features of their approaches in the particular theaters of operations they are examining. Even when researchers carefully and extensively examine the life-worlds of those they encounter, they (as Niewöhner and Scheffer indicate) do not approach their subject matters as “blank slates.” Thus, if readers are better to comprehend the starting point of the
inquiries and analyses at hand, if not also to understand better subsequent developments of the projects under consideration, then it is important that researchers and analysts outline more explicitly their operating premises.

Unless ethnographers represent analytic reference points that in some way differentiate them from other participants in the setting, then, at best, ethnographers would not be able to offer readers more than what an articulate member at large may be able to share with outsiders. If ethnographers do bring something more into the setting by way of an approach, it seems fitting that they make this apparent – lest readers be led to think that a researcher’s viewpoint is essentially synonymous with that of the ethnographic other.

Clearly, researchers need not subscribe to the premises guiding interactionist inquiry. However, by establishing their frames of reference at the outset, researchers help readers (and possibly themselves) better understand the projects at hand. These may be expressed in many ways but some may find the premises I outlined useful (as points of agreement, divergence) in defining their own theoretical coordinates.

When ethnographers work more consistently in more established academic traditions, it generally is easier for readers conceptually to locate and comprehend their projects. Those adopting more mixed or eclectic frames of reference invoke more ambiguity since the base-line assumptions of two or more paradigms may contradict one another. Without some clearer specification of researcher emphases, readers will be less certain of the directions, relevancies, interpretive tendencies, and conceptual implications of these inquiries. Specifying one’s assumptions and approach to the field does not, in any way, preclude an ethnographic openness or receptivity to learning more fully about the ethnographic other.

Still, one of the most central failings in the quest for ethnographic openness (as Niewöhner and Scheffer would acknowledge) is a tendency of some ethnographers to emphasize “what should be” rather than attending to “what is” – that is, telling participants and/or readers what they should do rather than striving to comprehend and convey the life-worlds experienced by the people whose situations are under consideration.

Knowing about something (as in acknowledging concepts, categories, connections, variations, and comparisons in the literature) does not, in itself, restrict openness. It only becomes a problem when researchers impose moralistic agendas on those in the field and/or force instances of