Open to Disruption

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The essays in the first section talk about what happened when scholars spent a long time engaged in collecting data about—and thereby interacting with—the people who, and the places that, constituted the focus of their research.

**Timothy Black** begins his chapter by expressing his own surprise that the research he began in 1990 was still his major focus—that he was still, in some sense, “in the field”—twenty-four years later. As he continues, he explains how during those two decades he (i.e., Black) changed, his relationships with the three brothers changed, and the world in which they all were attempting to make lives for themselves changed as well. Black thus describes a long time in an ever-changing field with ever-changing participants. His essay introduces three key thematic issues. One is that in long-term ethnography there are pivotal moments, or “junctures in the course of research that lead to new directions of inquiry.” A second theme is that intense, ongoing relationships create multiple opportunities for rich, thick description. Finally, Black demonstrates the intersections of macrosocial forces, institutional dynamics, and individual lives as he considers how much has changed as his study transmuted into a “journey.”

**Burke Rochford**’s essay also describes a long time in the field: for three and a half decades, the Hare Krishna movement, known formally as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKON), has been at the center of his scholarship. During those thirty-five years, he was not
“simply” in the field, collecting information for one major manuscript: he wrote two books and numerous articles. In his essay, in partial contrast to Black, Rochford focuses less on how the world and the participants of his study changed and more on his status as both an insider and a researcher whose writings were perceived as being critical of ISKON, which thus threatened to disrupt the relationships with many people he had come to consider friends. He muses, in his conclusion, about the nature of the relationships formed through long-term ethnography, dwelling especially on the issues of perceived trust and perceived betrayal.

Joanna Dreby’s chapter describes how she gained trust with a new generation of immigrants when she returned to a former research site after a hiatus of over a decade. Her chapter also echoes back to the last theme raised by Black as she describes the changing context of immigration, reporting that in her current work she recognizes greater fear and anxiety over the possibility of deportation. In an interesting comparison to both Black and Rochford, Dreby writes about comings and goings—what she calls “returns”—rather than ongoing relationships, and how these returns allow her new insights into herself, her relationships, and her scholarly understanding. We could think about these issues in terms of photography: Leaving the field freezes one’s respondents in time. Upon returning, one has to catch up and acknowledge that the snapshot no longer holds. Returns thus “disrupt” earlier visions of the lives of respondents.

In his review of his many studies of Evanston, his hometown, Albert Hunter demonstrates concretely a changing world and changing analytic frameworks with which to assess that world. A key focus of his essay is his varied types of ties within the community—ties that both allow him access to behind-the-scenes events and, from time to time, undermine his legitimacy as an “objective” scholar. Another key focus is how changes in his personal life left him in different locations within the community and provided access to different types of knowledge. In the end, he reflects on how “local engagement” has been both “giving back” and a way to advance his career, even if these two goals are sometimes in dynamic tension.

Although she is more focused on a single study (rather than on a new one, like Dreby, or repeated ones, like Hunter), as she too comes and goes from her research site in an initially foreign culture, Karen Hansen finds that repeated visits to the Spirit Lake Reservation, extending over a decade, transform her from a stranger to someone familiar. She thereby gains the
trust that so many other essays in this section raise as an issue of concern. And, like Rochford, she comes to realize that good scholarship means gaining trust in one’s own voice as well as gaining the trust of those one studies. Finally, Hansen introduces a theme that becomes more prominent in the next section, as she writes about searching for and articulating a new research frame.