Open to Disruption

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From a Study to a Journey

Holding an Ethnographic Gaze on
Urban Poverty for Two Decades

Timothy Black

In 1990, when my research began in Springfield, Massachusetts, I had no reason to expect that twenty-four years later I would still be recording fieldnotes and tracking the lives of the boys I met then—in particular, three Puerto Rican brothers: Julio, Fausto, and Sammy, one year apart in age. The trajectories of their lives extended my work into different social spaces (schools, streets, job training, workplaces, courtrooms, prisons, drug treatment facilities, and churches) and across a range of social contacts (family members, friends, neighbors, girlfriends, street associates, teachers, counselors, attorneys, and some city leaders). These spaces and faces transformed a study into a journey.

Much of what I have learned is due to the breadth of my study—time situates analysis. First, it allows for new directions to emerge in the course of the research. Emergent themes and the flexibility of field research are commonly valued qualities of ethnographic research, but when practiced over a lengthy period of time, multiple themes emerge that can provide fresh insights and broader analytical connections, and push beyond balkanized divisions within the discipline. Second, thick sociological description is written from within and through webs of relationships. When thick description is sustained over a long period of time, the positioning within relationships changes, the duality of researcher-respondent is transmuted, and knowledge claims become relationally, or interpersonally, grounded. Third, long-term
ethnography helps us document the intersections of macrosociological, institutional, and individual dynamics, illustrating the interconnections between social and individual changes, which are rarely apparent immediately but take shape over longer periods of time.

Pivotal Moments

Ethnographic study is shaped by relationships in the field, inspired and uninspired observation and documentation, imaginative sociological construction, and serendipity. It becomes a journey, however, through a series of pivotal moments over long periods of time. Urban ethnographies typically focus on place—a social space in which external forces shape local conditions, while internal cultural strategies and routines negotiate these forces. Across time, these ethnographic studies see a community in motion, shaped for instance by housing and educational initiatives, economic and employment trends, policing tactics, and health strategies, and lived through the hierarchies of race, ethnicity, social class, gender, and/or sexuality. Time in the field allows for emergent directions of study that can augment our understandings of place and its related complexities, but longer time in the field provides the opportunity to move our gaze beyond the confines of place, as relationships take us beyond a singular social space and require that we make sense of the intersections between these varying social spaces.

Pivotal moments are junctures in the course of research that lead to new directions of inquiry. I distinguish these junctures from what we may refer to as emergent themes. Emergent themes suggest a bounded study in which the unexpected occurs and theses are modified, or else an unstructured study in which our observations and predispositions “find” a topic or issue to study. Pivotal moments convey movement, or eruptions, that foster new directions of inquiry, new social spaces to comprehend, and definitive departures from the familiar. There have been many pivotal moments in the course of my journey—too many to document here—but I will describe a few to illustrate.

My study began in a high school where I developed relationships with a few boys who were considered likely to drop out of school. I documented their school and job experiences, their family and neighborhood dynamics, their relationships with institutional authorities, and their social networks,
which became the basis of my doctoral dissertation. Shortly after I defended my dissertation, Fausto, the middle Rivera brother, went on a ten-week robbing spree that ended in a failed bank heist. Little did I know at the time that his incarceration would become the first pivotal moment in a twenty-four-year research journey.

I began making visits regularly to the prisons where Fausto was incarcerated, as my research remained in motion. These Sunday trips to the prisons were all-day affairs. I picked up Fausto’s older brother, Julio, early in the morning, drove to the eastern part of Massachusetts, and spent long days in waiting rooms and visiting areas before returning to Springfield. During this time, my relationship with Julio developed. Julio was a high school graduate who had lost his job in 1993. Unable to find another one, he turned to Jorge, a childhood friend and a drug dealer, to fill the gap. In 1996, Julio introduced me to Jorge and other men who hung out regularly at “the block,” an open-air, Puerto Rican enclave in Springfield, where mostly men gathered each evening to socialize. The block was also a staging ground for the night’s drug dealing activities that Jorge organized. I spent two years, from 1996–1998, learning from men on the block.

I had continued to track Fausto’s prison experiences during the seven years he was incarcerated. This was not only a period of prison expansion, largely attributable to the War on Drugs, but also an era of getting tough on prisoners. William Weld, the governor of Massachusetts from 1991 to 1997, was a leading public figure in the movement to punish criminals more harshly, and Fausto’s story illustrated this. When Fausto was released, he moved to Hartford, Connecticut, to live with his mother. I recorded his efforts to reintegrate into civilian life—particularly his experiences in off-the-books jobs, as well as emerging problems in his family and neighborhood—to document the struggles of community reentry among former prisoners. When reintegration efforts failed, Fausto’s life spiraled into crime and drug addiction—another pivotal moment. Fausto moved from robbing drug dealers to counterfeiting money to “boosting” merchandise from large retail stores. He was arrested for shoplifting (larceny) and, with my intervention, ended up in a Salvation Army drug treatment facility—yet another pivotal moment.

After Fausto completed the Salvation Army treatment program, he returned to the streets and alternated between periods of drug relapse and recovery. Meanwhile, his younger brother, Sammy, was living in Hartford, working mostly temporary jobs, living with Maria (his partner and the
mother of his youngest child), and managing his drug addiction to heroin. Working a second job, he was driving home late one snowy night when his car slid off the exit ramp and was totaled. Lacking the resources to secure a loan to buy another car, and dependent on the car to get his children to school and himself to work, he returned to Springfield to “double up” his paycheck by selling cocaine. That night, however, he sprinkled cocaine in a marked dollar bill in the bar’s bathroom and was arrested. I followed Sammy through the court process, tape-recorded ten hours of his life story, and tracked his life until he was led away in handcuffs for three years of incarceration. At this juncture, my study of the War on Drugs deepened.

If pivotal moments, however, give a study its vitality and its sustenance, then how do we know when it is time to end a study, or to write? There is, of course, no single answer to this question. In my case, my tenure or promotional clock did not bind the study. I saw a narrative running through my fieldwork toward the end of my tenure period and took a sabbatical in 2001, soon after acquiring tenure, to begin writing. However, shortly thereafter, I was pulled back into the field. As I continued writing, the circular processes of writing and doing fieldwork deepened, and both became more focused. The last third of the book was written from this fieldwork, while the fieldwork reorganized and reconceptualized the first two-thirds of the book (Black 2009).

My journey did not end with the publication of *When a Heart Turns Rock Solid*—the relationships continued, especially with the three brothers, as did the occurrence of pivotal moments. In the first few years after the book’s release, Julio quit drinking, while he and his wife, Clara, became regular members of a Pentecostal church. Julio ended a seven-year extramarital affair in his efforts to reform his life and devote himself to God and family. Fausto also became a member of the church, although he continued to cycle through drug relapse and recovery. Sammy split up with Maria, quit his job, and returned to the streets, where he made more money and was more highly regarded for his knowledge and skills.

More recently, the matrix changed again. Nearly $100,000 in debt, Julio explored bankruptcy. He owed $46,000 to the company he worked for because of an unpaid lease on a truck he had driven as an “independent operator” for two years, as well as over $50,000 in unpaid federal and state taxes. Blame moved in different directions. Julio blamed himself; his father blamed Julio’s wife, while I blamed the trucking company. Financial
problems increased pressure on the fault lines in his marriage, which erupted after their daughter moved out of the house into her own apartment.

Meanwhile, Fausto completed a government-funded culinary arts program. As the chef’s star pupil, Fausto embraced a new identity. However, his criminal record preempted finding a job, and only through my own networks were we able to secure him an entry-level job at a chain restaurant. In the fifteen months that followed, Fausto made the transition from the streets to sobriety and precarious work. Searching for a new set of routines, identity, and status, Fausto received emotional support from his former street partners; in fact, one asserted how impressed he was by Fausto’s courage, a statement reflecting deep divisions that articulate social marginalization.

Finally, Sammy’s street activities resulted in his arrest and incarceration. He was videotaped twice selling to a Puerto Rican undercover police officer, who in the second exchange purchased a .45 caliber handgun from Sammy. The district attorney attempted to give Sammy a fifteen-year sentence for the offense, but his attorney threatened to argue an entrapment case at trial that even the DA had to admit had some validity. When Sammy’s attorney threatened to subpoena the informant in the case, the DA lowered the plea offer to a four- to seven-year sentence and Sammy was sent upstate to prison.

As I close in on the twenty-fourth year of my relationships with the three Rivera brothers, the journey is hardly complete, and pivotal moments continue to shape the study. My study became a journey as the men I was tracking took me into different social and institutional spaces that were intersecting with their biographies, including bilingual education, street life and the drug trade, the trucking industry, the housing market and predatory lending, prisons and the War on Drugs, drug treatment, and now the Pentecostal church, the food industry, and prison gangs.

The interconnections of these lived spaces, however, tell a larger story. The demise of bilingual education, the changing constellation of the informal and formal labor forces, the growth of the precarious workforce, the increasing role of the criminal justice system in managing the lives of the dispossessed, and the struggle to establish and sustain community, family, and intimacy amid depleted resources, personal vulnerability, social insecurity, and endemic uncertainty provide us with the profile of an era—the era of neoliberalism. Longitudinal ethnography allows us to see these patterns and interconnections over time, and to bear witness to the lived experiences.
Thick Sociological Description and Long-term Relationships

In qualitative research, writing is the medium through which we explore our relationships and record our observations, experiences, feelings, and insights. The relationships are not separable from the field—there is no subject-object curtain that provides us with clarity or purity of observation. Nor is the time in the field linear, any more than the experience of aging is linear. Birthdays mark time in scientific increments, but life itself defies the simplicity of the measurement; instead, personal change and lived biography are rooted in experience, and experiences mark time as memories, turning points, pivotal life events, and epiphanies (Denzin 1987, 1997; Erdmans 2007). Writing occurs within relationships, which, in a sense, make their own time, as connections and disconnections are defined and redefined in the movement of closeness and distance, and recorded as shared experiences. This becomes the medium of understanding—naked, vulnerable, ambivalent, and shorn of grounded certainties.

“We Were So Much Older Then, We’re Younger Than That Now”

It is true that if I had written my book soon after I completed my dissertation in 1993, it would have been a very different book. And it is true that I know more now about the men and women in my book than I did then, which gives depth to the relationships and to the writing. Even here, however, I would warn against imposing linear criteria. The book I would have written in 1993 would not have been “wrong,” “misguided,” “shallow,” or “premature.” It would have been different—no less engaged, no less co-created through the medium or the intensity of relationships, and no less right or wrong—just different. For instance, the scope of the book would have been shorter and more focused on the processes that lead adolescent boys to remain in school or to leave prematurely, and would have examined the immediate consequences of those decisions. It was a period characterized by much angst, doubt, and confusion for these boys, and the intensity of my relationships with these adolescents was grounded in an effort to see the organization of the school, the ways in which school authorities perceived and responded to these boys, and the multiple, and often contradictory, influences that these adolescents were negotiating. In retrospect—after twenty-four years—this may appear truncated, and even premature,
but it would have been no less rich in detail, emotion, and insight, capturing a moment in time in which an understanding of the social world was co-created through relationships developed in school classrooms and counselors’ offices, on basketball courts, and around family dinner tables.

So what then marks the benefits of longitudinal ethnography in the contexts of relationships and understanding? I would suggest that it provides an expanded horizon of possibilities. Slow sociology allows us to write through the webs of relationships as they emerge within varying social and interpersonal contexts. The journey that I sketch above gives us some flavor of the changing contexts of experience, while the interpersonal horizons that are created through a history of shared experiences allow for the material of understanding. Relationships are deeper and thicker, and with more shared history, we can experience the world together through a longer horizon of conversations, memories, and stories, from which our understanding of the present, or the moment, becomes more textured, co-created, biographically interpreted, and hermeneutical (Denzin 1989; Denzin and Lincoln 2008b; Schwandt 2003; Gadamer 1975; Guba and Lincoln 2008; Probyn 1993; Gearing 1995; Lather 2001; Adler and Adler 1987). In fact, it is this process that challenges the idea that understanding is a linear practice—question asked, question answered, analytical construct examined—but is instead a more circular process in which memories, experiences, prior conversations, interpretations, and emotions are woven through a conversation in which meaning is co-created.

A recent example illustrates this point. In the summer of 2012, I drove Fausto to a job interview. He had completed two years of sobriety and had worked at a restaurant for over a year, and was searching for full-time work. Afterward, we walked through a park, sat for more than an hour on a park bench, walked some more, and discussed a range of topics: the complexities of his relationships with both his father and with his live-in partner; the haunting, recurring memories about the tragedies in his past, particularly the deaths of friends, and the guilt he feels for surviving while others did not; the many times that we walked through this same park in the past and how different our conversations were at those times; the ways in which he currently negotiates relationships with former street friends; his work experiences and his strategies for dealing with authority, coworkers who use drugs, and attractions to coworkers; the extreme anxiety and triumph he felt when he planned and drove two hours to a beach for the first time in his life; my
move to Cleveland and how the move would affect our relationship; and my fears about moving away from the familiar and how the anxieties of the move were affecting my moods and relationships.

Our conversation illuminated the issue that was preoccupying both of us at the time—transition—and was woven through a tapestry of past conversations, shared histories and memories, intimacy, and trust. These are the benefits of longitudinal ethnography, in which an understanding of the world is acquired through relationships and through the circles of conversations, experiences, memories, and meaning-making. These are the expanded horizons where complexity dwells and sociological insight awaits.

**Intimacy or Closeness Is Rooted in Shared Stories**

There are of course many shared stories over twenty-four years. Like in any relationship, stories become the emotional glue of the relationship—its articulation, its spoken history. Longitudinal ethnography provides for a history of shared stories through which our relationship is told and is reconstructed to experience the future together. It fosters an “us,” and it is through this “us” that similarities and differences are explored and new horizons become possible.

Often the shared stories express humor. They include Julio and Clara’s wedding, where the brothers and I wore top hats and tuxedos, rode in a limousine, and participated in the ceremony. There was also the time Julio mistakenly climbed into bed with me after a night of drinking, slapping me on my butt and telling me to move over, thinking I was his wife.

Shared stories articulate special moments of closeness, such as riding in the middle of a small pick-up truck through the mountains of Puerto Rico, sandwiched between Julio and his father, Juan; sitting one evening on the pier in Ponce, watching the sunset and sipping rum; and spending other evenings on Juan’s front porch, listening to men from the community tell their stories. There are also the stories of getting drunk together—an age-old remedy for breaking down male emotional dams—and recording the escapades and the moments of embarrassment that ensued, as well as adding to the long list (and photos) of victims of the family’s homemade rum recipe.

Shared stories record moments of tragedy and vulnerability (and the support shown during such moments), such as deaths in the family, deaths of friends, arrests, incarcerations, lost jobs, failed opportunities, failed health, victimizations caused by violence, and evictions, to name just some of the
types of painful events that dot the landscape and become sewn into the shared history. Perhaps no event is more illustrative of this than when I answered the phone at 4:30 in the morning and heard Julio’s trembling voice say that his mother had suffered an aneurysm and was dying; later that day, I sat in a hospital room with Julio, Fausto, Sammy, and Juan as we together made the decision to end her life support.

Long-term ethnography extends a history of shared stories that becomes the articulation of relationships and the ground for intimacy, exploration, and an understanding of human experience.

Managing Closeness and Distance

Longitudinal ethnography may deepen relationships and expand our knowledge of study participants’ lives, but is there a risk of becoming too close and thereby sacrificing analytical distance or, in the more antiquated scientific vein, objectivity? Or do closeness and intimacy increase concerns about betrayal that result in a stricter censorship of the material that gets publicly presented?

Regarding the former, it is important to remember that all relationships require the management of closeness and distance—even our most intimate relationships. The strong desire for human connection is tempered by deep-seated fears of self-annihilation, which sets into motion the vicissitudes of closeness and distance within intimate relationships. In the field, our work as ethnographers is to document the processes of closeness and distance—our credibility depends on this. The nature of our closeness with study participants and how this becomes the basis for understanding is a fundamental part of ethnographic description and understanding (Van Maanen 1988). There are obvious benefits—we can examine the internal and external worlds of individuals and ourselves, explore similarities and differences as well as points of connection and disconnection, provide thick description, tell intimate stories, and expose others to worlds with which they may be unfamiliar.

There are obvious benefits to distance as well—it allows us to develop analytical and conceptual frames for understanding, to challenge reified social science categories, and to enhance our critical consciousness about the intersections of individual lives and structural processes. The problem with this formulation really hinges on our positions concerning objectivity. Epistemological and methodological critiques of postpositivism in the last
forty years, however, have demonstrated well that it is impossible to observe and write outside of our own historically and culturally situated perspectives, social locations or positions, or interpretive predispositions, let alone stand above and beyond the webs of relationships through which we acquire our understandings of the world (Schwandt 2003; Lather and Smithies 1997; Kamberelis and Dimitridis 2008; Clifford 1988). Even practices of Verstehen that promised more objective descriptions of lifeworlds through self-understanding and self-management have been properly disposed of, leaving us with no alternatives but to write within and through relationships rather than outside and above them (Schwandt 2003; Denzin 1997).

The more important issue may concern the ethics of exposure and disclosure of the intimate details of our study participants’ lives—or, by extension, our own inclination to censor material in order to protect participants (Fine 1998; Fine et al. 2003; Benmajor 1991). What are our motives for exposing intimate details: To understand the social world? To advance a political agenda? To change public policy? To acquire professional status and prestige? These are difficult questions that affect all ethnography, not just longitudinal ethnography, although they may become more apparent in long-term studies, or in studies in which relationships between the researcher and the researched become more intimate. Authorial power and the power of representation is an important responsibility that cannot be easily dismissed or diminished once we accept the premise that we are writing from within and through relationships—in other words, when the emperor (researcher) no longer has any clothes and is therefore shorn of his or her scientific protocols, we are forced to deal with ourselves as emotional, political, and sentient beings who have a responsibility to those we have become close to in the field (Black 2009; Angrosino 2008). If we have more power via our social locations than those we are studying, this responsibility becomes even greater. Our critical and selective consciousness is central to the processes of constructing knowledge claims, but closeness in the field reminds us of the ethical importance of transparency and requires us to come to terms with our own motives and purposes for doing research.²

Very often, distance is not difficult to create in ethnographic relationships—it is structured into the relationship. The researcher is typically different from the study participants. Ethnography attempts to bridge cultural distance, a process that facilitates understanding. Part of the craft of managing closeness and distance is articulating both in the relationship—making (and
articulating) connection, while recognizing (and articulating) distance. In my case, maintaining distance was never difficult—I am not Puerto Rican, not street smart, not a fighter, not a drug dealer, not a truck driver, not a prison inmate, and so on. I was never like them—and never tried to act like I was, which would have been pretentious, comical, and unproductive. They are as aware of our differences as I am. There were similarities—gender (male) and sexual identity (heterosexual) with the men in my study—but even these identities are located within intersecting identities of race, ethnicity, class, and age that reconfigure our experiences and understandings of gender and sexual identity, shifting the familiar ground we thought we were standing on. We navigated closeness in a sea of difference. So while getting backstage and betraying intimacy was indeed a risk that I needed to confront honestly, I was more at risk of thinking I knew something that perhaps I didn’t, because I wasn’t close enough. Long-term ethnography helps us to gain more confidence in what we know, but it doesn’t produce certainty—uncertainty remains endemic to the craft. But this brings me to my last point concerning the ethnographic relationship and what we learn.

**Exploring Disruptions**

The greatest risk to relationships developed in the field occurs when the study is published. The power imbalance is apparent at this point—the authorial voice determines what gets said and how. The longer we know our participants and the more the lines between researcher and participant have been abridged, the more we may feel trepidation as we peck away at the keyboard. Will we offend? Will our perspective, when fully realized, feel like betrayal? Can we rely on sociological jargon to hide our critical, and perhaps personal, observations? Or will sociological language itself offend? There are no easy answers. Julio read a few drafted chapters and commented on them. But he was not on his own turf—the language was mine and he seemed uncomfortable responding to it. He objected to one of my observations. It was not central to my argument so I took it out. But neither Fausto nor Sammy has good reading skills, and neither was interested in reading an advance draft. None of the other men and women in the book saw anything before publication. I wrote with their “presence” in the room and held my breath as the book went to press. In fact, after I made my final comments on the galleys and sent it off, I panicked. Had I revealed too much about the drug trade? Could any of them be traceable? Had I revealed something one
of them said to me in confidence about someone else that might result in retribution? I called the people that I had relied on for support through the writing process, and fortunately they reassured me.

Clearly, if study participants are presented in unfavorable ways, strains and tensions may emerge that will have to be managed for the relationships to continue (Lareau 2011). While long-term ethnography may increase our apprehensions as we write, it also makes the restorative work easier: because the relationships have been sustained over time, differences are already more apparent and have been managed with some degree of mutual tolerance—in other words, there’s already enough grit in the relationships to absorb tension. Of course, there’s no guarantee, and both parties have to be willing to invest the time to work through the tensions. The structured differences in the relationships, along with the end of the study that publication defines, make it easier to part ways at this moment. Nonetheless, long-term ethnography producing long-term relationships provides more incentive to resolve the differences.

One example concerns Julio. Sitting at the table with Julio and his wife, Clara, about five months after the publication of the book, I asked Clara if she had read the book. She said that she had read parts of it and smiled coyly at Julio. Julio had read the book, but at this moment was engrossed in his plate of rice and beans, or so it appeared. After a brief silence, Julio dropped his fork and turned to me and said, “You described me as a *machista* [a male chauvinist].” Clara responded, pointing to the book, “That’s because you are, Julio, you are. The book says it, and the book is fact, and that is what it says.” Julio look chagrined, but the moment provided an opening for us to talk about his family and others in Villalba, Puerto Rico, where he was born. It allowed us to talk about the role of men and women in their culture and in their families, and how both he and Clara participated in—but were also changing—these roles and traditions. In other words, it allowed us to talk about patriarchy without personalizing it or demonizing Julio. The disruption, in this case, provided an opening for exploration.

Another landscape for eruption was traversed with Sammy. When Sammy was in jail awaiting trial for a drug dealing charge, the book was receiving a lot of press in Springfield—a front-page review in the Sunday paper, a review in a smaller paper, and a series of public talks. Sammy’s attorney was aware of the book and Sammy decided to divulge his identity in the book to him. A week or so later, the attorney asked Sammy if he thought that
sending a copy of the book to the district attorney might be useful to him in a plea bargain. Sammy asked me about it and I urged caution. “Sammy, the book is about your life. It describes your time in Greenfield and on Franklin Street and on the block [as a drug dealer]. It describes other times in your life too, like when you were working in [a suburb in Hartford], living with Maria, and taking care of children. I want to be helpful, Sam, but I don’t want the book to be used against you.” I did not mention at the time that I also feared that others might be put in jeopardy if his identity was exposed. Sammy was under a lot of stress, had not read the book, and I could tell was disturbed by my response that the book could work against him. No disruption occurred and Sammy struck a favorable plea agreement.

After Sammy was sent to a state prison, I sent him a copy of the book, and he began reading it. When I visited, Sammy pointed out parts of his story on the streets that I had left out, or, in his perspective, I was unaware of. He did not finish the book, but read enough to develop a critique. Interestingly, while he was awaiting trial, he had worried that the book was not sanitized enough, that I didn’t present him in a publicly favorable way, and that it might not be useful to him. However, sitting inside a state prison, he embraced his street identity and identified my incomplete understanding of who he was on the streets.

In both cases, with Julio and Sammy, the book became a medium through which our conversation continued and our relationships deepened. Julio and I ventured into the arena of gender, turning it into an integral part of our conversation and relationship. Sammy and I compared our notes and memories, filled in gaps, discussed my representation of him in the book and how I saw him more generally, and explored different ways of thinking about the streets. In other words, disruptions were absorbed and changed our relationships, deepened our understandings of one another, and provided new horizons through which to move forward together . . . a process attributable to and indicative of longitudinal ethnography.

**Macrosocial Forces, Institutional Dynamics, and Individual Lives**

One of the strengths of slow sociology is that it allows time to see the interconnections of social and individual changes. That is, both the social world and individuals change over time; the task of the ethnographer is
to document the intersections of these changes. Building on the insights of C. Wright Mills, I adopt a narrative strategy, or sociological storytelling (Berger and Quinney 2005; Polletta et al. 2011), to illustrate the connections between the inner lives of individuals and larger social-historical structures. As Mills (1959, 158) wrote: “The biographies of men and women, the kinds of individuals they variously become, cannot be understood without reference to the historical structures in which the milieux of the everyday life are organized.”

After twenty-four years, there are numerous examples of this in my study. The period of my ethnography is defined by the early 1990s recession, the longest recovery in U.S. history, the 2001 recession, the subsequent jobless recovery, and now the Great Recession and its aftermath. The era of neoliberalism and mass incarceration is also apparent in the lives of the men and women I have known, illuminating the reductions in public assistance, the privatization of job training, the assault on labor unions, the predominance of precarious work, the use of the criminal justice system to manage the lives of the economically redundant, and the wholly inadequate public efforts to address the health needs of drug addicts among more marginalized populations. These structural forces can be seen running through the lives of the men and women in my study like historical and social streams.

From the Streets to the Workplace

It was not until after a decade of tracking the men in my study that I realized the significance of the 1990s in their lives. The two most prominent social forces of this decade affecting their lives were jobs and prison—jobs because of the tight labor market in the late 1990s, which was associated with a ten-year economic expansion, and prison because of the hyped-up War on Drugs. Looking at this from the streets, some of the men in my study were getting jobs in the late 1990s and leaving the streets, while others were going to prison.

These changing social conditions allowed me to watch men change. A chapter in my book is devoted to transitions men made as they were coming off of the streets and into the workplace, focusing particularly on the barriers to these transitions. Perhaps more important, there were men who left the streets for employment who were immersed in street life—who had adopted dominant street identities. Not only did they take advantage of new opportunities in the late 1990s, but as they did, their identities changed and their perceptions of the streets changed as well.
Mundo is a good example. Mundo was often the center of attention on the block, telling stories and keeping many of us in stitches of laughter well into the wee hours of the morning. He snorted copious amounts of cocaine through the night and shared his brother Jorge’s opposition to formal work. Nonetheless, Mundo left the streets in the late 1990s and his identity became organized around fatherhood. Moreover, his perception of the streets changed, as the following quote illustrates:

Drug money, it ain’t shit. Sometimes you got it, other times it’s dry out there. . . . You know, you may look good out there, you got clothes and shit, but it don’t mean shit, Tim. . . . Who cares? Now that I have a job and a paycheck, I know what’s important, and it ain’t clothes. But when you out on the streets that’s all you care about, looking good and shit. The money comes and it goes. You look good, but inside you feel like shit.

Mundo was also fortunate that he was never arrested under drug statutes and given a lengthy prison sentence. He did short bids for small crimes, like driving violations, alcohol-related crimes, failing to show up for court, and failing to comply with probation—crimes of resistance in which he refused to abide by rules about licenses, drinking, and reporting to court and probation. Unlike other men, however, who were apprehended doing the same things that Mundo was doing on the streets, he was able to take advantage of the tight labor market in the 1990s and to become, in his words, the father that his father was not.

**Consequences of Prison**

I knew several of the men before they went to prison, and then followed them while they were in prison and after their release. Longitudinal ethnography allowed me to see how prison changed them. Two of the Rivera brothers stand out here.

Fausto spent seven years in prison, from ages nineteen to twenty-six. He entered during the era of “getting tough on criminals” and the governor of Massachusetts, William Weld, was a leading proponent of this charge. Fausto was part of a sweep inside the prisons that focused on Latino gangs and was intended to weaken the gangs and break the will of gang leaders. He spent fourteen months in solitary confinement. Fausto was also exposed to and participated in several incidences of brutal violence in prison. Shortly after his release, he was again involved in a crime that was inseparable from his heroin addiction. He was later diagnosed with post-traumatic stress...
disorder, and was unemployed most of the ten years after his release. Despite periods of immersion in drug dealing and street violence during the ten-year interim, Fausto avoided a second long prison sentence, which gave him the time to make the slow, grinding transition from prison to sobriety and precarious work.

His younger brother, Sammy, is another example of a young man who surprisingly left the streets for the workplace in 1998. Sammy was working for temp agencies, living with the mother of his son, and reorganizing his identity around working and being a father. As described earlier, when he wrecked his car and turned to his resource networks to buy another one, he was arrested and sentenced to three years in prison for dealing cocaine in a bathroom at a local bar. At a time in which Sammy’s life appeared to be moving in a different direction, he was incarcerated, and again his street identity became dominant within the prison. He attempted to reclaim his life with his partner, her children, and their son when he was released, but this failed, largely because of the strain that his incarceration had placed on his relationship with his partner. He returned to the streets, and like many former prisoners was again arrested. He is now doing a state bid of four to seven years, has become part of the leadership in one of the prison gangs, and has participated in a series of violent incidents, landing him in the highest-security prison in Massachusetts.

In short, in the process of longitudinal ethnography, I have documented several effects of prison on the lives of Fausto and Sammy, including the effects of violence inside prisons; the hardening of street identities in reaction to prison conditions; the collateral punishment that continues after release, especially in the form of employment discrimination; and the effects that incarceration has on relationships with intimate partners and children.

**The Limits to Success**

Some of the men who left the streets for the workplace in the 1990s fit Katherine Newman’s (2006) description of the “high flyer.” They obtained good paying jobs and experienced social mobility, with a few reaching middle-income status. Julio, the oldest Rivera brother, and his wife, Clara, are the best examples. In 2005, Julio had been driving a tractor-trailer truck for ten years, and Clara took a job as a bank teller. The following year, they bought a house that symbolized their success.

As they moved from the streets to middle-income status, their struggles associated with poverty changed to struggles associated with the working
class in the new millennium. Several structural constraints on their success and prosperity became apparent. The first was their purchase of a home in Springfield, which has the highest Latino neighborhood segregation of any city in the state. Their neighborhood was a stable West Indian neighborhood (with mostly Jamaican and Puerto Rican residents), but its location on the edge of a poorer neighborhood limited their capacity for building equity in their home over time. A few years after they bought the home, there were several incidents of violence in the adjacent neighborhood that sent their property values spiraling downward. During the 2008 recession, the value of their property bottomed out at what one realtor estimated was half of what they had paid for it.

Second, and related, despite their high income, they were considered high-risk homebuyers because they lacked a credit history, had accumulated debt, and had no savings. The booming but overvalued housing market expanded home-buying opportunities for families like that of Julio and Clara. Take out a subprime loan, they were told, and in five years refinance to a loan with better terms. In three years, the mortgage market imploded and their mortgage interest rate reached 12.9 percent. This, combined with the falling value of their home, pushed them to join the millions of homeowners who were walking away from their mortgages and renting apartments.

Third, the company that Julio works for has engaged in several union-busting practices that have limited Julio’s wages. Encouraged to leave the union to become an owner-operator, Julio relinquished this status two years later, returned to the company, and was placed in its nonunion division; the company charged Julio $46,000 for his lease of the truck during the time he was an owner-operator. In addition, the company has closed down the terminal where its union division was housed and moved its operations to a new location, where it is increasing the size of its nonunion divisions.

Looking through one lens, we see that Julio is one of the most successful men from the 1990s block; through another, he is a victim of an overwrought housing market and capitalist duplicity.

**OGs and a New Generation of Street Kids**

The block looks much different today than it did in the 1990s, when the easy flow of cocaine dominated the trade. Since then, the demand for cocaine has declined, trade connections have been severed, and dealers have gone to prison. However, there is both continuity and discontinuity. Continuity has
been maintained through family involvement and control of the drug trade in the area (Duck and Rawls 2012) as well as by old social networks that have persevered despite being reorganized. But discontinuity has also occurred as a new generational cohort reached the streets, as market changes diversified the drug trade, and as the use of armed robbery to secure investment capital increased (Contreras 2013).

One of the markers of both continuity and discontinuity is the presence of OGs. In street parlance, OGs refers to “old gangsters”—men who made money and acquired status from the streets and often were gang involved, but who are part of an aging cohort. Most men age out of the drug trade; they are in it for only short periods of time, and make very little money or acquire little status. Increasingly, however, it has become difficult to age out. With limited job opportunities, increased drug arrests and incarceration, longer prison sentences, and varying forms of collateral punishment, aging street men find themselves in a liminal state. At a point in their life courses in which aging out might be expected, street life provides their only access to revenue and to status and dignity.

There are different ways of responding to these conditions, usually depending on the individual’s location within drug and community networks. One OG, for instance, is a member of a family with a long history in the drug trade bridging the island and the mainland. As an aging elder in the family, he is provided for economically but remains largely in the background, occasionally making public appearances to give legitimacy to decisions or changing networks. More commonly, OGs attempt to assert themselves as role models or to teach a new generation “the ropes.” They try to create a moral order on the streets, sanctioning violence, facilitating connections, teaching skills and street smarts, and articulating the boundaries of the street code. These efforts are sometimes welcomed and encouraged but at other times rejected by the new generation, who are themselves attempting to establish their own place on the streets.

Finally, some OGs remain in the drug business, adopting a ruthless disposition for staying on top. This has become difficult, however, as the demand for cocaine has declined, trade connections have been lost, and competition has increased (Contreras 2013). One OG who has remained dominant in the drug trade increasingly relies on gun violence to acquire investment capital and to project a reputation that intimidates competitors. On several occasions, he has wooed large buyers (drug dealers) into business exchanges, and then at some point in the relationship robbed them
of substantial amounts of money and drugs. This has increased the risk of deadly violence on the block, as well as the presence of guns.

The longevity of my study has allowed me to document these generational changes. Drug raids are now resulting in a new cohort of men and women being led away in handcuffs—men and women whom I recognize as some of the young boys and girls I saw on the block in the 1990s. The drugs being confiscated have changed to a more diverse selection of drugs that includes not only cocaine and heroin but also ecstasy, angel dust, Ritalin, and Percocet. The faces have changed, although several of the OGs are still to be found as well. What has not changed, however, are thwarted job opportunities, a high Puerto Rican school dropout rate, high rates of Puerto Rican residential segregation, and the reliance on the criminal justice system to manage an economically and socially dislocated population. In other words, with longitudinal ethnography, we can see the mechanisms through which social inequality is reproduced.

Conclusion

Longitudinal data sets are highly valued in the social sciences, where a cohort is followed and data collected at regular intervals across time. These data sets comprise the bones from which much meat is cut and theoretically developed in sociology and other disciplines. Longitudinal ethnography is a different animal. Here, the fluidity of self, located within the vagaries of structural conditions, provides the material for a deeper understanding of human experience, the subtle and at times transformative character of personal change, and the mechanisms and dynamics of larger institutional and structural changes.

Not only does longitudinal ethnography pry open spaces for theoretical imagination, it encourages us to get beyond the imposed categories of sociologists that squeeze human experience into oversimplified and static conceptions of human life. For instance, in the study of urban poverty, longitudinal ethnographic description and interpretation exposes monolithic (underclass) or binary (street and decent) characterizations of socially and economically marginalized groups as reductive and vacuous. In contrast, longitudinal ethnography demonstrates that individuals are a complex swirl of tendencies, dispositions, and sensibilities derived from a variety of experiences and influences, often contradictory in meaning, that are located within the spatial configurations of structural dynamics. As such, identities change as different parts
of our selves are nourished, shaped, and validated within the social conditions that contextualize our lives, and as these social conditions change, so do we—albeit in often unpredictable ways that defy one-to-one correspondence or, in more standard parlance, co-variation.

This strategy for understanding also requires that we get beyond researcher-respondent duality and postpositivist methodological presumptions. Writing from within and through relationships recognizes that we affect the object of our inquiry the moment that our historically and socially situated selves enter the interpretive field. It places more, not less, responsibility on the researcher to engage himself or herself in the processes of understanding, and to characterize our interpretations within the intersections of relationships, which are themselves historically and socially situated.

Finally, there is much to be said for “taking your time” or, dare I say, committing to a lifetime of relationships. Time adds an invaluable dimension to understanding, and one that is not simply additive or linear, but is also circular, textured, and evocative. Good ethnographic description provides a snapshot of a slice in time, and like a photograph it captures a moment and invites memory, interpretation, and emotional engagement. But a series of snapshots across time allows for different types of analyses. It may be organized as a montage that fractures and splinters while we seek patterns of meaning and coherence. Or it may become a representation of time through which we see not only social and historical change, but also individual change within social and historical streams.

Notes

1. The names used in this paper are the same pseudonyms used in my book (Black 2009).
2. This is a succinct treatment of an issue that needs more elaboration but is outside the scope of this paper.
3. Neighborhood segregation mirrors school segregation. A report issued by Northwestern University’s Institute on Urban Health Research in 2010 found that Springfield’s primary public schools had the second-highest rate of Hispanic segregation among the one hundred largest metropolitan areas in the United States. Springfield was sandwiched between Los Angeles and New York in the rankings. See McArdle et al. 2010.
4. “OG” refers to other things as well—“old goat,” “old moneyman,” “old game,” or “old generation.”
References


