Open to Disruption

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While living on the South Side of Chicago in Hyde Park during graduate school, my wife and kids and I used to return home to the North Shore suburb of Evanston almost every weekend for Sunday dinner with my parents, who still lived in the house in which I grew up. Evanston became a “natural” place for me to turn to as I looked to make my mark as a Chicago School urban sociologist; indeed, returning home as a townie gave me a unique vantage point as a researcher. Moreover, my moves around this town at different points in my life exposed me firsthand to Evanston’s diversity: I grew up in the upper-middle-class part of town and while in high school I first met several of the people who would figure into my later research. When I returned to Evanston in midlife to assume a job at Northwestern as an associate professor, I moved around town several times, living in various neighborhoods that reflected my personal life stages. A large single-family home near the lakefront in an upper-middle-class neighborhood gave way, after a divorce, to an apartment and then a small house in a working-class, racially integrated neighborhood. Later, after my remarriage, I moved to another, larger Victorian home in a middle-class, racially integrated neighborhood where I am (still) raising my second family.

So I grew up in Evanston and then after a hiatus of more than a decade in the East I returned and reconnected with people I knew from high school. For example, the daughter of the police chief had been one of my classmates; she was now the successful owner of an upscale imported food emporium and a travel agency, and a leader in the community. Another grade school friend was now associate dean of admissions at Northwestern.
This essay focuses on how these social ties and my deep knowledge of the community both facilitated and at times impeded research on it. I also consider how over time the politics of space and place had elements of continuity and discontinuity; some things remained the same, some changed. More particularly, I reflect on disruptions in the research that emerged from different stages in my personal career coupled with shifting fads and fashions of sociological inquiry as they became refracted through different theoretical and methodological lenses of the discipline over the decades. Different questions were posed at different times although the subject, broadly construed as urban and community sociology, and the object, the City of Evanston, remained the same even as it too underwent profound changes. Throughout my research, the focus remained on the social life of the residents of my hometown at both the personal network level and the collective institutional level. The community’s social life and social ties are both the subject of these studies, and perhaps most significantly for this analysis they are the intertwined means of investigation. As a researcher I was directly tied into the social life I was studying. The result was a slowly evolving and gradually enriched understanding of a variety of different facets of the community.

I first briefly outline in chronological order the sequence of over half a century of discrete pieces of research on my hometown. I then outline the types of social ties and networks I had established in the community over the years. Finally, I show in more detail the many ways in which these research topics and social ties were interrelated.

**Research Topics**

The first research project in which Evanston figured was my MA thesis at the University of Chicago, which focused on community politics, using Evanston as a case study. I explored the question of the relationship between a community’s economic base and the nature of the community’s power structure. More specifically, I studied the building of one of the first shopping malls in a neighboring suburb and how this had led to the decimation of the retail base of Evanston as a satellite commercial city. This type of “economic base analysis” was prevalent in the ecological studies of the 1950s and 1960s (Pfouts 1960). For data, I conducted interviews with local elites such as the mayor and the city manager, the heads of corporations, and local voluntary associations; some of these were people my parents knew. I also drew
on archival and census data. The research question echoed the central question my grandfather would often pose as we drove around various local communities in the industrial mill towns of Western Pennsylvania: “What kind of works are in this town?” From the answer, he would infer various community characteristics, such as the race and ethnicity of its residents and its relative prosperity and class structure.

I began my second piece of research involving Evanston a decade later in the 1970s (after a hiatus that included a dissertation and its publication). It was a comparative study of community politics in four suburbs (one of which was Evanston), looking at how their power structures and political issues varied depending on their social class and ecological position as smaller dormitories or larger satellites within a metropolitan hierarchy of communities. This research relied on observations at council meetings, interviews, and a survey of elites to elicit through block modeling analysis the varying power structures in the suburbs. I conducted this research during the period when “community power” studies in political science and sociology focused on a central debate as to whether a single pyramidal power elite or pluralist elites best characterized local community power structures (Polsby 1980). Although in this research I clearly drew on my earlier MA thesis, I now expanded it to a more systematic comparative study of communities and used the latest quantitative analytic techniques (Hunter 1984; Hunter and Fritz 1985; White et al. 1976).

My third study of Evanston, begun in the late 1980s, was a comparative study of how three neighborhoods in Evanston (White, Black, and integrated) varied in their responses to a local gang problem. The focus on urban street crime had been a national issue in the 1970s, and after participating in a major multicity, multiyear national study of “the fear of crime” (Skogan and Maxfield 1981), I returned to the gang question in Evanston first as a neighborhood actor and then as a researcher. I was interested in exploring how the racial and class composition of neighborhoods influenced residents’ varying perceptions of the gang problem and organized collective responses to it. This research relied on participant observation, surveys, interviews, and archival and census data. This research has continued over the decades as gangs unfortunately have remained an enduring problem to the present day (Hagedorn 2008).

A fourth research project involving Evanston was a series of studies that grew out of my participatory role as chair of the Evanston Plan Commission. Like the previous research on neighborhoods and gangs, this research did not
begin as a set of academic disciplinary questions; rather, it was connected to applied planning questions that included neighborhood plans and surveys of Evanston residents’ cognitive mapping of their neighborhoods. The research gradually evolved into sociological questions about volunteer participation in local government, and it drew on participant observation through my official duties, meetings with residents of various neighborhoods, informal conversations, and the use of archives and records.

Subsequently, the research morphed into what was, at the time, my reemerging theoretical and empirical interest in “civil society” and the role of the voluntary “third sector” in social life (Ehrenberg 1999; Milofsky 1988). This research certainly had a base in my familiarity with prior research on local communities, but it grew more directly from a curiosity about the actual application and participation in the governing process itself as a “public intellectual”—a role that has been increasingly emphasized in sociology since the 1990s (Burawoy 2005; Etzioni and Bowditch, 2006). The understanding of the Evanston community and its politics gained from my prior research certainly informed my participation in this role, and perhaps equally significant data gleaned from this participant/observer role has fed back into and continued to inform all three of the prior studies, further elaborating and revising them over time. For example, the West Side neighborhood planning process in the Black community of Evanston informed me about residents’ concerns with crime and gangs, just as my prior gang research led me to understand where the neighbors were coming from in our neighborhood meetings.

A fifth (though perhaps not final) piece of research involved a historical analysis of the factors that led Evanston, after more than a century of prohibition since its founding, to become a “wet” community permitting the sale of alcohol, a project I explain more fully below. This research was based on archives, in-depth interviews, and personal recall.

Although the research projects above are listed in their sequential and linear temporal order, in reality they mutually informed one another throughout the decades. One might feed directly into another, and still another be put on hold for a time, only to be further developed by insights from a later research project that circled back and informed the prior research in a nonlinear fashion. In short, these varying projects illustrate that you can come back to the same place because it can constantly be made new, through changes in the subject itself as well as changes in the frameworks at hand.
Types of Ties

As a long-term resident of Evanston—a townie—I am embedded in a number of different types of ties and networks that have had direct implications for the progress (or lack thereof) of my research over the years. These ties and networks may be thought of as multiplex, or (in the language of Robert Merton’s [1968] older role theory) as a complex “status set” and “role set.” Briefly, the types include the dominant status of researcher—ties made doing various research projects in the community; family ties—links to both my family of origin and families of procreation; youthful ties—links to my peers and others based on having grown up in the community; professional ties—links based on my academic position as a professor at Northwestern University; neighborhood ties—links to my immediate neighbors, fellow members of “Nichols Neighbors”; and community ties—connections exemplified by those reflecting my position as a member of the city plan commission.

As I interact with this or that individual in the community, I am sometimes operating simultaneously in multiple statuses, or overlapping networks, though at any given moment the exigencies of the situation may dictate the predominance of one status over the others. For example, in one case I had to recuse myself from the plan commission’s discussion of a new development by a long-term care facility for the elderly because my mother was a resident of the facility.

In what follows, I focus on those situations where my dominant status was that of sociological researcher and I show how the complexity of the multiplex relationships affected the research, at times positively and at other times negatively. Of course, I also reflexively take into account the reverse causal impact and reflect on how my sociological research may have affected the ties as well.

Familiarity Has the Cost of Oversight

Oversights occur as a result of overfamiliarity—the “taken for granted” stance that does not see a sociological problem worthy of investigation and explanation. Being familiar has its costs. This was the case, for example, with Evanston’s long history as a dry town and its shift to a wet town when it legalized the sale of alcohol, an event I noticed early on in my research career but failed to analyze in depth. For me, the community being dry
was a taken-for-granted fact; it was, in the words of Robert Merton (1968), “noticed” but not “noted.” In my first piece of research in my MA thesis, the vote to go wet in the 1960s was simply “noticed” as one among a number of strategies pursued by the local elite to try and promote downtown economic growth in the face of declining retail sales and tax revenues due to competition from new shopping centers constructed in neighboring suburbs. When permission to sell alcohol was granted to two hotels in the community, the visible impact on the long-cultivated conservative prohibitionist image of Evanston was minimal. Evanston, after all, was the home of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union founded by Frances E. Willard. My “oversight” was not corrected until some fifty years later, when one of my students, through fresh eyes, “noted” the same phenomenon and we pursued it in greater depth. He conducted a longer-term historical analysis that looked at a sequence of votes on the question of prohibition in the community over the past century and framed the issue as a “moral” political and cultural question.

This new perspective, the shift from “noticing” to “noting,” was facilitated by the emergence of new theoretical and substantive questions in the field. I had framed the movement from dry to wet in terms of a community economic development question, an issue that was more central to the discipline at that time; my student framed the issue as a politics of “morality” question that reflects the more current cultural symbolic turn in contemporary sociology (Beisel 1997; Swidler 2003). New eyes and a new perspective meant that what was previously “taken for granted” was now the focus of analysis.¹

Continuities would usually suggest an absence of change and an acceptance of “the way things are”—for example, the fact that the intersection of Church Street and Dodge Avenue in Evanston has always been a “troubled corner” in the Black neighborhood for over more than half a century. I accepted and never interrogated this corner, already knowing its meaning from my youth.

**Familiarity Has the Benefit of Insight**

Even if occasionally I have “overlooked” issues of importance, to a great extent the ties I have developed over the years have been the source of astoundingly rich data. To take one example, as a resident of an integrated community, I was familiar with various forms of informal neighborhood
organization within that community. These included a twelve-family potluck dinner and rehearsal for Chicago’s “Do-It-Yourself Messiah” (a gathering of thousands at Orchestra Hall in the Loop); an annual Saturday alley clean-up in the spring, organized by all the neighbors whose houses back onto the common alley; and a “deck raising” where my son and I recruited about eight neighbors to collectively help raise to chest height a deck we had built on the ground in our backyard. Beers were the payment in kind.

When a flyer showed up on my doorstep calling for a neighborhood gathering to address two events—a recent drive-by gang shooting in the playground at Nichols Middle School across from my house, and an altercation between two White youth and a group of Black youth as the former walked home from the high school to their homes in the integrated neighborhood—I went as part of the neighborhood. I expected a small neighborhood gathering and was surprised to see a line forming out the front door, down the steps, and onto the sidewalk. Over one hundred neighbors had shown up, including three fellow sociologists as well as two professors of criminology. Out of the discussion, a decision was made to form an organization. Five leaders were selected to organize it, and a name was sought for the group. After a number of ideas had been considered, I suggested that since the middle school was the central institution in the neighborhood, we name the group after the school. “Nichols Neighbors” was born, and has now become a symbolic name of the community (Hunter 1974). In that case, I was acting as a full participant, and only after involvement in the organization as a resident did I turn my familiarity with this voluntary form of civil society into a research project on neighborhood responses to gangs, a project for which my insider knowledge led to both fuller understanding and deeper access.

Subjective Empathy and Objective Distance

A central concern in ethnography is the enduring dilemma of maintaining a balance between subjective empathy and objective distance. Coming into a social setting as an outsider and gaining entry is a topic that has been thoroughly discussed as a key concern in the literature (Emerson 2001). I often had the opposite problem of being an insider who had to establish distance, a task that often proved equally difficult. I was “burdened” with deep biographical knowledge of many of the people I was studying and also with their prior knowledge of me. I could observe firsthand the continuity and
Many of the people who would enter into my research as subjects were the same individuals I had known in my youth, yet they were now different people. World events had changed and shaped us. Vietnam affected one as a fighter pilot, and another as a Navy SEAL mine demolition diffuser; a third, an Annapolis grad, became a rescue helicopter pilot, and another a Navy Swift Boat captain serving alongside John Kerry. Others joined the Peace Corps in Colombia or participated in mobilizing antiwar rallies; one dropped out of Harvard to participate in civil rights voter registration drives in the South, later publishing a novel about it. Over the ensuing years, I would discuss with them political and local issues of the day, such as the civil rights movement of the 1960s and the antiwar movement of the 1970s, on up to more contemporary issues of gun violence and gangs, as well as liberal versus neoconservative issues of government versus market priorities in land use and local development.

These autobiographical and political conversations took place in such venues as a Fourth of July garden party and a local bar after meetings of the plan commission. What they did was provide not only information on general motives, attitudes, and ideologies, but a greater understanding of specific attitudes and behaviors that had to do with the subject matters I was studying. One of these “old high school buddies,” the fighter pilot, was elected to the school board for a term of six years, after which he then served on the plan commission with me. When he subsequently unsuccessfully campaigned for mayor, I served as an informal consultant to him, and during the same municipal election I organized a joint undergraduate seminar with a journalism professor titled (borrowing from former Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill) “All Politics Is Local.”

Mixed within this mélange of social ties were old high school personal ties, community actor ties, and professional ties as a teacher at the university. I have remained a participant/observer researcher of the local community’s politics, and more recently of the voluntary sector of civil society. Because I was a sociology professor, I was asked to conduct three surveys of my high school graduating class over the decades. Besides the usual mundane questions about marriages, divorces, and kids, I asked some questions about political attitudes and behaviors. I was surprised to learn that the majority of my classmates were much more conservative than myself in supporting the Vietnam War and in opposing class and racial neighborhood integration and
diversity. The research and subsequent conversations made me realize that I too had changed and that my friendship circles and personal ties in the community had shifted over time. For one, I had consciously moved into a diverse, racially integrated neighborhood with greater class heterogeneity, whereas many of those surveyed were rather steadfast supporters of class segregation and exclusion. One item also suggested a different interpretation of “commitment” to the local community, in that the men were much more likely to remain local while the women had moved away from the area. In my write-up I interpreted this finding: “The males were less adventurous and either remained or returned to the area, while the women became liberated and more cosmopolitan.” One of my female classmates responded, with perhaps even more sense, “No, Al, we were dragged away through marriage!”

C. Wright Mills ([1959] 2000) suggests that a deep knowledge of how the biographies of these individuals intersected with history heightens the sociological imagination and leads to an understanding of the forces that shaped their particular attitudes, opinions, beliefs, and behaviors, and their roles in the community as adults. In my experience, he is right. But there has been more to it than that. All of these personal insights into attitudes, motives, behaviors, and beliefs also made me particularly hypersensitive to the interpretations that I might place on my data, since I fully realized that the publication of my research would not only reflect on many of these people in my personal networks but likely be read by them. As I agonized over numerous drafts and varying ways of framing the results, I reflexively anticipated their reactions to it. Some of these data have been written up and published or presented as papers in very objectified and abstract academic formats and outlets. Much, however, remains to be analyzed and slowly integrated as I have struggled with the implications of these results on people with whom I have enduring local ties. One thinks of the aging Charles Darwin in his study at Down House, pondering for decades the mass of data gathered on his world cruise on the Beagle in his youth, slowly ordering the evidence, and crafting the argument for his theory of evolution by natural selection; some have suggested that his personal tie with his deeply religious wife delayed his publication, since he was concerned about the impact his theory would have on her cherished biblical beliefs (Quammen 2006).

These concerns with the impact of publication are not unfounded or merely hypothetical. This was pointedly brought out to me one evening when I was chairing a plan commission meeting. A local attorney representing a local developer was making his summation to the commission prior
to our final vote for approval, and in response to local citizens who had opposed the development he began quoting from an article by an “urban expert” in support of his position. By the second sentence the words began to sound familiar and I slowly realized he was quoting from one of my own published articles. As he concluded he looked up with a sly smile on his face, which I acknowledged with my own smile and a complimentary nod: he had indeed “done his homework.” He then announced the author, and all my fellow commissioners and assembled citizens turned and looked at me. I felt compelled to give a short exegesis on the distinction between “rational exchange value” of developers versus “subjective use value” of residents over contested land use for the benefit of all present to explain the basis of my quoted comments (Hunter 1979).

Personal Aspects of Local Family Ties and Local Research

Over the years, I had had other job offers and inquiries from other universities, which I turned down in large part because I had “family obligations” in the area. These included responsibility for two aging parents who still lived in the same house in which I had grown up, and after a divorce a new kind of responsibility for my two children, who remained in the town with their mother. At several points over the years my son lived with me full time and I was actively involved with both of the children. These responsibilities took their toll in disrupting the time available to devote to research—especially on weekends, which were often a prime time for participant observation and interviewing in the local communities I was studying.

For the first sixteen years of my career, my research and writing time had been privileged in the family’s time budgeting. I had been the sole breadwinner ever since my undergraduate days. With two kids and a wife to support, I had hard-charged though grad school in three years. After the divorce and subsequent related changes, I suddenly had more direct child care responsibilities as well as more everyday time commitments (such as shopping, cooking, doing laundry, and being the master of the family dog, not to mention dating). Now less routinized, smaller blocks of time for research and writing were all that was available. In addition, over the next ten years three moves took me to three separate neighborhoods.

Remarrying and establishing a second family with three children (one of whom was adopted from Guatemala in a lengthy and time-consuming process over a two-year period) required a second round of soccer and softball practices, music lessons, and band concerts; I also served as a Cub Scout den
leader, a Daisy Dad in Girl Scouts, and a chaperone on Indian Guide and Indian Princess camping trips through the local YMCA. To be sure, these activities are routine for any dutiful dad, but for me this was the second time around. While many professional peers my age were rediscovering new hours in the day and weeks and months to devote to their research and writing as their kids left the nest, I was once again engaged in nesting. A colleague who also has five children through two families once wryly observed, “I figure each kid has cost me at least one book.”

Although family ties slow research, they are not without their benefits. My parents’ networks with a number of community leaders very clearly opened some of the doors with people I interviewed for my MA thesis research. The networks of my children drew me into an entirely new set of networks and created new insights into the local community. Tales from the local high school about race relations and gang activities were relayed by my kids in informal family conversations over the dinner table. I also had more direct experiences with gang issues in Evanston. One morning my son returned within ten minutes of having departed for his walk to the high school. I asked, “What’s wrong, did you forget something?” He responded, “No, I just wore the wrong clothes—I accidentally had on gang colors and got yelled at by some older guys I don’t know. Thought I better come home and change.” On another occasion, the data literally came to my doorstep. One evening, I answered the ring of the doorbell and opened the door to an adolescent Black male who anxiously kept looking over his shoulder. He asked, “Mr. Hunter, I am a friend of your son Andy from a few years back, and I was wondering if I could come in for a few minutes?” I invited him in and explained that Andy wasn’t home. He said that was okay but wondered if he could “hang out” for a few minutes because guys from a rival gang were after him; he had seen the light on at my house and run to it for safety. As we talked about his gang involvement and the particulars of the situation he was in, he kept going to the window to peer out. After about half an hour, he thanked me politely, said to say “hi” to Andy, and left.

Family activities carried out at the neighborhood and community level helped me establish a range of network associations. My children’s soccer and camping networks connected me to members of a predominantly White middle-class neighborhood that became a focus of my research on neighborhood responses to gangs. I drew on these ties and gleaned knowledge from informal conversations with these residents of the neighborhood as they discussed, for example, the establishment of a private school that would further
remove them from the effects of racial, ethnic, and class diversity, as well as related social problems prevalent in the wider community. This additional knowledge confirmed and gave increased validity to survey and interview data previously collected in the neighborhood.

Trust, Access, and Legitimation

“Where do you live?” and “How long have you lived here?” are two central questions for establishing one’s “local community status.” Responses are often dichotomized as those of “newcomer” versus “native,” or in the case of many academic settings, member of the university community versus “townie” (Brown-Saracino 2010; Kasarda and Janowitz 1974). I often let people know how long I had lived in the community as I attempted to gain their trust and legitimate my standing. As a plan commissioner, I also heard this issue raised routinely when local residents rose to make public comments: after giving their name and address as required, they invariably added, “I am a [xx]-year resident of Evanston.” Sometimes in meetings this took an almost humorous form, with residents engaging in an escalating competitive bidding war that occasionally spilled over into multigenerational claims. Such claims of legitimacy could be linked to institutional affiliation as well when adults would mention they were members of the high school class of this or that year, local grammar schools they had attended, or youth club memberships in the “Y” or local churches.

As one might expect, being identified as a local was usually beneficial in establishing a quick rapport with subjects. However, as with many social ties there was a certain ambiguity: sometimes being identified as a local made me suspect as to possibly having a biased personal agenda. This concern by people we are studying is perhaps more readily deflected by one doing research from an “outsider” perspective—a neutral stranger who can more readily dip “in to” and “out of” of a field setting. Though the literature highlights the problematic nature of “gaining entry” and “exiting gracefully” as ethnographic issues, it gives scant attention to the problems associated with studying one’s own social milieu (Emerson 2001). Formally, concern about distinctive and potentially questionable interests is exemplified in the conflict of interest disclosure statements that I was required to fill out with the Cook County clerk as a governmental office holder on the Evanston Plan Commission. Informally, as a “known” local I had to be wary about being overidentified with this or that neighborhood or social group and set of
networks. (Interestingly, given the many town/gown issues in the community, the university was concerned as well about my foray into local politics and I had to sign the university’s own conflict of interest statements.)

At times, my professional affiliation gave me a degree of legitimation as a knowledgeable expert; equally often, it seemed to impede the research, calling into question my commitment to the subjects of the research over and against the interests of the university or my professional career interests. There was always a lingering sense that there was an ulterior motive beyond the welfare of the subjects, which indeed there was. As Sudhir Venkatesh (2008) put it in his book *Gang Leader for a Day*, as defined by one of the gang members, research is a “hustle.”

This suspicion was aroused in different neighborhoods for different reasons. In the Black community, there was a growing concern with “encroachment” of the university, especially as students expanded their search for off-campus housing into the bordering fringes of the Black community. Uneasiness was also manifest in the reaction to the instituting of patrols by the campus police and its later expansion in size and territorial jurisdiction, which came to be seen by some in the Black community as a means of controlling their movement, especially that of young Blacks in the boundary areas. The patrols seemed in part to be a response to increasing numbers of street robberies and confrontations on or near campus.

In the White neighborhood, I at times had to face a different suspicion: that I was a “liberal” sociologist likely to be advocating certain social changes, and that my research might be used as an exposé to advance policies detrimental to my subjects’ interests. This was especially true with respect to the sensitive issue of race, as well as housing and land use that might affect property values. In short, I often had to disabuse my subjects of their suspicions as to my understanding of their concerns and that I was not merely an outsider—“the professor,” an ivory tower academic—asking for cooperation but offering few direct benefits in return.

“Giving Back” and *Noblesse Oblige*

As a long-term resident, the idea that I would “give back” to the community was an especially strong normative expectation among both current neighbors and among high school peers who themselves were doing the same. Many of those I knew in high school were now very consciously “giving back” to the community in which they were raised and educated. They
occupied such positions as school board members, head of the local chamber of commerce, board members of the local “Y,” and leaders of other philanthropic and voluntary institutions in the community. To an outsider they had become part of the local community elite, but as an insider I personally felt the same sense of commitment toward volunteering time and energy for the collective good.

A vice president of the university complimented me at one point for my degree of “local engagement” and referred to my services on the plan commission as an act of “noblesse oblige.” This compliment was in spite of the fact that the plan commission was often in land use and property zoning conflicts with the university. To many of my university colleagues, time spent in such “local” activities was seen as counterproductive to one’s career and beneath their more “cosmopolitan” national and international orientations. To me, the story is not quite so simple. The small-scale, unfunded local studies of Evanston were fit in here and there over the years, interspersed between other larger projects involving grants and national comparative research, and the local and cosmopolitan research mutually informed each other. Many of these pieces of research on the local community permitted me to simultaneously help my community—and become what today is called a “public intellectual”—and engage in academic research that could in fact also further my career through publication.

Notes

1. The symbolic continuity of the prohibitionist image of Evanston is now celebrated ironically in the many cafés and bars that dot the downtown, as part of a strategic branding of Evanston’s image as a destination restaurant center promoted by research and policies of the plan commission. The full irony is seen in the name of the first boutique distillery established as part of this economic development: F. E. W.—the initials of Frances E. Willard.

References


