Open to Disruption

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Themes raised in earlier essays are amplified here, especially the themes of how during a long time spent “in the field” both appropriate methods and appropriate analytic frameworks underwent profound changes. These changes, in turn, created opportunities for the development of new concepts and new intellectual approaches to research begun within different sets of understandings.

Susan Bell traces the ways in which the “changing epistemologies in various fields of social science” are reflected in her book about the women known as “DES daughters,” a book that she wrote over a period of almost thirty years. These changes include different methodologies (resulting in the inclusion of visual and performative evidence in her manuscript), different understandings of social activism (what she refers to as an “embodied health movement”), different ways of conceptualizing the experiences of DES daughters (from “stress and coping” to narrative analysis), and different ways of being a scholar (with the emergence of feminist studies). In a later portion of her essay, Bell writes about “life’s vicissitudes,” the personal events in her own life that “disrupted”—even as they enriched—her own scholarly journey. This theme is picked up again in the final section of the collection.

In her chapter, Mary Romero writes about the two decades she spent interviewing Olivia, the daughter of a “live-in domestic worker in a gated Los Angeles community.” From the start, Olivia took control of each interview session, telling her complex narrative in her own terms for however long she felt like going on. Romero was savvy enough to allow Olivia to lead: Romero wrote up notes and asked for clarification, but mainly took a passive role. While many social scientists, especially sociologists and
anthropologists, have shifted the interviewing process from a hierarchical one to one in which the interviewer and the interviewee together craft a narrative, Romero has led the way in a new direction. In her essay, she explores how she was able to take Olivia’s narratives, with their multiple twists and turns, and understand Olivia’s story through a life stages approach. Romero locates Olivia as an individual embedded in a changing, broader social and economic milieu.

The other chapters also raise the issue of changing understandings. Will C. van den Hooaard thought he understood cartography but, when he came back to explore issues of gender in that field after a hiatus of about thirty years, he realized he could not approach it with his traditional ethnographic tools. To be sure, he found gender everywhere, including behind the markings on maps and in the spatial distribution of exhibitors at cartography conferences. He also discovered that his knowledge of cartography had to be brought up to date and that it would take both international travel and the adoption of an interdisciplinary approach to make a meaningful contribution to the field. Van den Hooaard mentions, as do others, how women’s work might be perceived as being trivial and might even be made invisible.

Linda Burton and Carol Stack offer a complex look at their relationships with each other, with the African American boys and men who constitute the focus of their essay, and with the theoretical concept of “kinscripts,” which they developed in a 1993 publication by that name. Most significantly, their essay develops the notions of changing frameworks and how the politics of science impeded their own awareness of, and ability to present data on, what it was they were observing—especially the invisible contributions of teenage boys and young men to their families—as they studied low-income, African American families. In the final section of their paper, they note that because times have changed, new scholars who have picked up the kinscripts gauntlet and applied it to studies of adolescent fathers have met with a far better reception than their own initial foray into the topic. Indeed, in a personal communication they mentioned that rather than accusing such scholars of “making up stories about deviant Black boys to make them look like they care about their families,” as a senior White male professor did with Burton in 1989, the academy now welcomes discussions of the engagement of Black males in family life.

Changing frameworks can occur at two levels: outside the academy (as shifts in political, social, and economic realities) and inside the academy (as shifts in academic or theoretical frameworks). Hunter’s essay deals with
both as he writes about a lifetime of involvement in Evanston and the changes in that community itself as well as in the intellectual concepts with which he assessed those changes.

In a way, Pamela Stone’s essay also embraces both meanings. The topic she is writing about—what is called “opting out”—achieves prominence in the national media while she is working on her own analysis; inside the academy, the issue is considered unimportant until that media attention focuses on it and Stone is able to locate it within a distinctive analytic framework. The heightened media attention is also reason for anxious concern: a careful scholar becomes a perhaps more cautious one, as she works through the complexities of a new methodological approach and reflects on the representativeness of her sample and the accuracy of her conclusions. And, as she discusses these concerns, she is open and honest about issues of self-doubt and the complexities of crafting a meaningful career.