Open to Disruption

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The essays in this last section cover a range of topics, centered on the theme of reflections and reexaminations. In some cases these reflections and reexaminations are occasioned by particular disruptive events experienced by an author: this is the case for Abel, Nelson, and Hertz. But in other cases, these reflections and reexaminations emerge as part of the process of writing an essay for this book: this is the case for Gerstel, DeVault, and Lareau.

Emily Abel, a historian, is less interested in the issue of “slowness” (she writes that what sociologists find slow, historians consider fast) than she is with how a disruption in her own life became the occasion for reconsidering, and rewriting. She notes that the experiences of her parents’ illnesses and deaths and her own six months of grueling treatments for breast cancer were occasions for understanding the complexities of caregiving as both the provider and the recipient of care. But Abel goes beyond that observation to explain how her “brief foray into the world of religion” led to a transformation of her understanding of the role of religion in the lives of caregivers in the nineteenth century while her experiences with social support helped her understand how social networks could be of great significance to those caregivers, enabling them to make better sense of suffering.

Margaret Nelson’s chapter is a reflection on method—a reflection occasioned not by a personal event (or privately experienced disruption), but rather by the serendipitous reinterviewing of a woman after an interval of fifteen years. Nelson focuses on differences in the accounts this woman gave during the two interviews—differences she attributes to attempts to conceal unpleasant issues. But even as Nelson acknowledges these
differences, and acknowledges as well errors in her own research techniques, she emerges with a renewed confidence in hearing and understanding the stories she is told.

**Rosanna Hertz** describes both a life and a scholarly interpretation disrupted by the arrival on her doorstep (complete with backpack, duffel, and plans to stay for a year) of the son of one of her closest informants from the kibbutz in Israel she had studied over twenty years before. Whereas Nelson takes a disruption as the opportunity to reflect on issues of methodology, Hertz uses her disruption to reflect on the relationships entered into during the process of fieldwork; this process of reflection leads to a reengagement with her key research findings. More explicitly than others with long-term involvements with informants, Hertz (like Hansen) asks what scholars owe the people they study. She also, reflexively, turns back to herself and her knowledge as she asks what we learn about “ourselves when we look through their eyes” and what we “learn about our culture refracted through their experience.”

In the title of her chapter, “Rethinking Families: A Slow Journey,” **Naomi Gerstel** not only harkens back to the very first chapter (Black), but she also raises the issue of changing understandings that was at the heart of so many of the essays in the previous section. As Gerstel looks back over her own research trajectory (like Hunter) she notices both continuities and shifts in the analytic frameworks on which she can draw and the research strategies available to her. She also considers an issue raised by others that is central to this section as she muses about how her own life trajectory caused disruptions in, and led to a different understanding of, the research she was conducting. Finally, Gerstel writes about collaboration as a process through which scholars can learn from others and have company on a “slow journey,” an issue of central importance in the essay by Burton and Stack.

Words are central to our craft as social scientists. Each of the three sections of **Marjorie DeVault**’s essay deals with the issue of words as they reflect on an aspect of her lifelong love of language. Like Gerstel, DeVault reflects on a career rather than a single piece of scholarship. In the first section, DeVault discusses the complex decisions she made about words as she wrote her book and titled it *Feeding the Family*. A second section is oriented more toward issues of methodology as she writes about her fascination with conversation analysis and the lessons she carries with her as she seeks to make sense of interviews collected in a range of projects. The last section focuses even more closely on issues of understanding as DeVault describes working
with people who are culturally Deaf as they interact with health-care providers. Her own account of being misunderstood when she reported on this research in Taiwan offers one of those rich ironies that are the hidden treasures of the collection.

Annette Lareau’s account of the issues that emerged as she wrote Unequal Childhoods also reiterates themes addressed in many other essays. She acknowledges the complexities of the relationships involved in long-term ethnography as well as relationships with others involved in the research process, including but not limited to her research assistants. She describes the disruptions of “real life” as she cares for a friend who is ill and experiences the demands (and gifts) of a new partner and the children he brings into their marriage. She evokes the difficulties of finding one’s way through data, even for a seasoned researcher writing her second book. Finally, she notes the speedup in the academy that makes it ever more difficult to engage in “high-quality” scholarship, an issue that brings us back to our Introduction. We have now come full circle.