

Master's Series on Field Research

A series of interviews with major figures in field research conducted in the early 1980s
by Peter Blanck

Transcript of an interview with William F. Whyte



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Peter Blanck: This is Professor Whyte on January 11th, 1983. And I think maybe the first question we could start with is, given that we'll talk in depth about "Street Corner Society" and what was involved with that in the film, if you were going to do it again today with the knowledge that you have now, what would you do differently about getting involved in that kind of research project?

William Whyte: I think I probably would not have made the approach through the settlement house as I did. I lucked out there because I did encounter the woman, the head of girls' work who was sensitive enough to see what I really needed and that I needed to reach beyond the settlement house and thought of Ernest Petchey whom I called Doc in the book. She had known him very well in an earlier period. He had dropped out of the house, he was not going there regularly but he hung on the street corner with the - on North Bennett Street, which I called Norton Street, with his gang and so she was still on friendly terms with him. But, as I sorted things out later in the book I came to the conclusion that the settlement house was really sort of a foreign enclave in the slum district. If I had had to approach it again, the same situation, perhaps I would have entered through the political organization. This might have had certain disadvantages because of getting involved in factional problems but I think those could have been surmounted. Of course, actually I did become very much involved in one political campaign when it just so happened that Joe Langone the state senator was running against an Irishman so there was no conflict, everybody in the North End was more or less for him although some, particularly the college boys, were kind of reluctant because they were embarrassed about his uncouth ways. But, the political organization has its tentacles throughout such a district and so might be a better launching pad than what I took.

Peter Blanck: What would you do differently in terms of design and methodology?

William Whyte: Well, I don't know that I would have done very much differently. See, you have to understand this was my first field study and in fact I had

come out of an undergraduate degree in economics at Swarthmore. I had no formal training in sociology or anthropology. I got my guidance, very valuable guidance, from Conrad Arensberg in the Society of Fellows, social anthropologist who had just come back from an important study in Ireland. I think if I were to do the story over again I would have, I would recognize, I'd have a much more clear focus than I had at the time, because as I reported in the book it was really 18 months into the study before I had much sense of what I was getting at. That is, I began with an idea of studying all the various aspects of slum life and looked upon the ties I developed with the corner boys as simply a means of getting into the community as a base for doing other things and I had to realize that my relationships with the corner boys, the opportunities I had to observe, were a key to what I needed to do, explore informal group structure and follow the development of these relationships over a period of time.

I think if I were doing it over again I would have earlier sought to make efforts to extend the study to more corner gangs than what I originally did. I did begin to extend beyond what I called the Norton Street gang when I encountered Angelo Ralph Orlandella, whom I called Sam Franco in the book. I met him through the store front recreation center that Ernest Petchey was put in charge of through my recommendation actually to the head of the North End Union and since the recreation store front was in a different part of the district from where I was familiar this gave me an entre into another set of corner gangs and I developed a very close relationship with Orlandella who became informally, and in some sense formally, my research assistant. I got \$100.00 from Harvard for him. I didn't know and Harvard didn't know just how a corner boy without any college education should be compensated but he was an invaluable research assistant. He enabled me to generalize beyond a single group. I think I would have tried to do that earlier, more systematically than I did.

Beyond that I don't know if I would have done much differently because I frequently ask myself, since my study took a long time, I was in the field more or less continuously for three and a half years and as far as I know only Bronisław Malinowski was longer in the field in one particular community, Trobriand Island study. He couldn't get away because

of World War I. I could have got away. So, I stayed longer than it's generally possible for any field worker to do and I don't regret it because this was a necessary part of my maturation, developing my methodology of theoretical ideas. If I were to do it over again and I still had the youth and vigor that I had then, could I have moved faster? Yes, but I think some of the most interesting things that developed in the book developed over a period of time with the change in the interpersonal relations, the breakup of what I called the Norton Street gang, the sociology of bowling, the insights I got into interpersonal relations and mental health with Long John's nightmare problems and the opportunity I got to really do some clinical intervention through Ernest Petchey reestablishing the social supports that Long John had had and thereby eliminating his nightmares and so on. This kind of thing takes time to get in and to see relations develop and the situations change and I think one of the merits of the study is that it is dynamic, it doesn't just give a static picture, here's a group and here is the structure and here is how it operates.

Peter Blanck: What do you tell a young doctoral students who are going out in the field for the first time - they say they want to go out in the field and do something like you did, is it feasible for them to do what you did today and what kind of problems are young researchers typically facing today in their first time in the field?

William Whyte: I think it's not feasible for a young researcher to assume that he or she will have the length of time and the generosity of support that I did with Junior Fellowship at Harvard at the time. That was, I guess, the best scholarship that was available so that I was compensated on the level of an instructor, a young assistant professor. I didn't have to worry about that aspect and I had three years initially, it was extended for one year. I applied for three more years and thought at the time I was devastated at the time when I got one, I thought I couldn't possibly finish, but now I think that's one of the most fortunate things that happened to me that if I had stayed another three years beyond the initial three, sure I would have found things to do but the study could go on forever. You have to cut it off somehow. And very few students these days will have more than a year to put in to a field study and I would also not assume that

every field worker must undertake to become a participant observer with the kind of intimate involvement that I had.

I think participant observation is very time consuming, it takes a lot of investment of your time to build up relationships and it can be very limiting in that if you really become a member of an informal group, a work group or a leisure time group you have to keep your involvement in it going to maintain your position in the group, and usually you get an extraordinarily intimate view of what's going on among those people that you're with, but you can't, it limits you in how much you can move around, how many other things you can do. On the other hand, I think there are sometimes opportunities to extend your range as a participant observer if you're wise enough or lucky enough to have to opportunity. I think, for example, of the factory studies. I've been doing some writing recently about the work of Donald Roy who is an extraordinary participant observer in a wide variety of industrial scenes. But, always he was on a particular production or processing jobs where he could get a very intimate view of what was going on right around him, but he was not free to move around in the nature of his job and so he had some tremendous insights about the dynamics of interpersonal relations and the group organizational relations on the basis of his research.

On the other hand, Melville Dalton who worked in Chicago with our group at about the same time had a job as checker on the incentive program of the steel company. Now, checker meant that he had no responsibility setting the piece rates, the incentive rates. If he had been a time-study man he would have got around all over, but would have been in a position where workers would not have opened up to him. Dalton's job was simply a clerical one of recording what each worker did on what job, the time, the number of pieces and so on and calculating the earnings. This gave him the freedom to move all around a large department of some 80 to 100 men and he also had an office with the industrial engineers, the supervisors, and so on, so that he had a rationale for being with them, spending some time with them and he just simply could tell them that he was going to school, working his way through school, actually he told them he was studying psychology because he learned that in the steel mills sociology was thought to be akin to

socialism. In other words, he could be a participant observer and yet control his movements much more than Roy did. So I think one always has to consider the sort of depth vs. breadth and Dalton did achieve considerable depth in some problem areas, at the same time having this freedom with the nature of the job, so I think it's important to size up what kind of - if you're working as a participant observer in some work organization then what is your work role? There are different work roles that are more constraining and more flexible, more open, so I think that is something that has to be taken into account.

Peter Blanck: In terms of the nature of the research problem you're trying to address and whether or not you want your study to be an exploratory study or more of a theory verification study, in your experience do you usually go in and explore, muck around a little bit first and then generate theories to test, or is it usually the other way around?

William Whyte: I have been inclined all through my career to proceed in an exploratory way at first. In the beginning, when I was very green at this and had little background actually, a great deal had been written and published in the sociological literature about slum districts, but I think I was fortunate in not having been acquainted with that literature because I came to the conclusion later that I would have been misguided by reading those earlier studies, coming in as I did, thinking of myself more as a social anthropologist, I was reading other things and taking a fresh look at the slum district. I've come to think even now that a lot of more solid knowledge is available, then it's still useful to proceed on an exploratory basis and I think particularly when one is concerned about practical applications of what one is doing.

I'm not thinking so much about Applied Sociology or Applied Anthropology but what we might call participatory research where you are studying an organization or community but at the same time you're collaborating with some key individuals in that community or organization so that you're enlisting their support and involvement in helping you - not only helping you diplomatically to make the entree and establish relations, but helping

you to define the problems and to see to it that the problems that you're interested in theoretically have some practical relevance to them. And I think this necessarily means that you approach the field exploratory way, you don't start with a blank mind but you don't go in with preformulated hypotheses.

I think the predominant approach these days suggests that the field worker begins by reading the literature and consulting fellow students and professors and then works out a research design and set of hypotheses and then looks for a target population on which to do the study, and as I've said elsewhere the target population in those terms is a term well expressed because here you have it all prefixed and you try to impose it upon people and try to make them feel that it's not really imposed on them, they have something to gain from it but that's pretty mechanical and artificial. And I think that forecloses the enormous learning opportunities that come from a more exploratory approach.

Peter Blanck: What kind of skills do you think are necessary? What kind of skills do you try to teach if you can teach them, to the field researcher - at least make them aware of the kind of things that they have to work on themselves in order to be a better field researcher, interpersonal skills or whatever?

William Whyte: Well, I used to teach regularly a field methods course and we'd spend a good deal of time on interviewing methods, taking off to some extent from the Western Electric approach of Carl Rogers, but modifying this because I object, for research purposes, to the term nondirective interviewing, because, actually I've tried it once in the restaurant study years ago to just ask waitresses to tell me what was on their minds. And, I found they got very nervous, what's this all about? And they'd say, you tell me what you want to know and maybe I'll tell you what I can. I'd prefer to think of the flexibly structured interview. That is, the interviewer has certain topics in mind and a general strategy about how to develop those topics but not in terms of a series of fixed questions. The interviewer is flexible enough when unexpected things of interest come up to either pursue them immediately or file them in the back of the head and bring the respondent back to them later.

We followed the general approach of not arguing with respondents, not expressing moral judgments on their behavior, not interrupting except - we modify this - There are some respondents that if you don't interrupt them you'll never get another question in and so you have to learn to interrupt gracefully and those people that are over-talkative tend not to be upset when they are interrupted because that's mainly the way other people communicate with them. So, you adjust from the pure nondirective and a good deal of training can be done in advance. We've had students interview each other with a tape recorder listening in and now, of course, it's easy to do with the videotape, much better and then you can critique it later, but also we can use this for memory training. You do the interview and then before seeing it back you try to write it up as close to verbatim as you can and then you can go over it later to compare what you put down with what was there on the tape and note the inaccuracies, the omissions, what you really nailed down, exactly as it was said, what you were off on to some degree, what you distorted. There can be a good deal of sort of laboratory work in this way.

I'm often asked by beginning students, "how do you remember all that stuff?" Well, you remember, you learn to train your memory I think by doing it. That is, when you start out it seems after an interview your mind is almost blank, you hardly remember anything, but as you try to write down what took place you develop more and more skill. Similarly with our observation as to the spatial positions and movements of people and so on that as you make a record from memory your memory gets better. We do something a good deal along those lines. I guess on interviewing that the one thing I'd particularly stress is that it's important to get "for instances" about whatever the respondent says because respondents frequently will make some general statement about how they felt, how somebody else felt, what somebody's motives were and they generally have some one or more incidents in the back of their minds. This happened. They want to know what was it that happened, so, I'm constantly emphasizing with students that if you're simply trying to get people's attitudes, perceptions, the survey is much more economical method, but if you want to get at the behavior that's behind those attitudes, when you hear an expression of an attitude you have to probe to see what it's based on. It's those kind of

things that we work on plus then how to organize the data that you have. How to index it so that you don't have just the one story after another or when it piles up you can't remember where you've had certain points.

Peter Blanck: It sounds like you're advocating the use of field notes rather than - a lot of people use tape recorders and then have it transcribed.

William Whyte: I generally did not use tape recorders. Of course, I was first working in the field before they existed. I have occasionally used tape recorders. And that's fine if your relationship with the respondents is such that it doesn't seem to be an intrusion, it doesn't inhibit the flow. I, in regarding note taking while the interview is going on, I rarely do it, but I feel free to do it where it's a matter of getting accurate information about particular names, dates, technical points, which are not at all sensitive issues, but it's just the factual information that I could easily miss if I didn't write it down, but when people have been talking to me about some kind of emotionally loaded situation I feel uncomfortable if I'm trying to write notes at the same time, and suspect that they do. On the other hand, I know some field workers have had success in putting respondents at ease with tape recorders and that's fine. Obviously, you get more. Of course, it's possible these days to record with a tape recorder covertly, with a little machine that the respondent doesn't know he/she is being taped, but this I think is unethical, but also I think it's impractical because if you're in the situation any length of time you're bound to be discovered and then your trust is lost. You can't ever explain why you were tricking them this way.

Peter Blanck: That brings me to the next question. In dealing with the concept of ethics in the field and the types of social contracts or social exchanges you have to make what sort of issues pop to mind for you in terms of - you try to get everything out up front first, or?

William Whyte: Well, I think you have to go in with a - giving people an explanation of what it is you're trying to do. But, in this sort of research, particularly

when you're proceeding in an exploratory fashion, you can't mechanically go after the kind of informed consent that they have been talking about recently in the Federally supported studies, to get people to sign their names that they understood what the study is all about and they agree to cooperate. Well, putting it on paper would be very inhibiting but also in my study of the North End of Boston I couldn't have told people in the beginning what I was really after. I was learning as I was going along, but I found that everybody who got to know me knew I was writing some kind of a book on the district and if they thought I was OK then the book idea seemed OK.

I think when you're getting into an organization, a more closed system, you have to think more in advance about your commitments, what you can make and what you can't and I emphasize with students that while the feedback of information and ideas from the study may be the last thing you do in the project, don't leave the planning of it to the end because it's important to establish early on what people have a right to get feedback from you and how the feedback will be handled, and by that I mean not presumably just one feedback session at the end but some kind of reporting and discussing as you go along and then you have to establish your understandings about confidentiality. That you will not tell A what B told you. And people will test you out on that. And then you have to say something about what it is you intend to publish and do you propose to show drafts of what you write to people, to what people, under what circumstances. Now I don't think, I can't think of any set of rules about how what understandings must be arrived at but I think it's important for the field worker at the very beginning of the study to have these considerations in mind because otherwise you get into practical but also ethical problems in which you violated the expectations and understanding that people had.

But, beyond that I emphasize the importance of the feedback in sort of reciprocity framework. I can think of some very bad experiences people have had who have been studied where they didn't get any feedback and where it was promised and the field worker didn't need the people any more when he or she got out of the field and the key informants never heard from the person again and this is not only unethical but from the

standpoint of the individual who does it, but tends to foul up the field for future field workers.

Peter Blanck: I think it was Ralph Orlandella in the Weekday interview that said you changed his life. And so, first question is - how did you change his life? What kind of things were you giving back to him that he couldn't have gotten through maturity otherwise? And the second question to think about is - how did they change your life? What sort of things did they do for you?

William Whyte: I think I changed Ralph's life primarily through helping him to recognize that he had very valuable skills that he hadn't thought about and that nobody else had given him credit for. And that is, he was very bright, I guess he probably knew that, but even though he dropped out of high school, and he was talented in art work, but, he was very perceptive in social relations and figuring out group structures and so on. Leadership patterns. If anybody had asked him if he could do that kind of thing he might have said that he might be able to do it but it wouldn't have occurred to him that this had any value beyond his personal satisfaction, so I think what I contributed was a realization that yes, he had these important skills, number one, and that these skills could be further developed, two, and three, that they could be applied in other situations which he did later in his military career and as superintendent of public works in the City of Burlington. So it started with his becoming conscious of these potentials and then practicing them with me that gave him a greater sense of self-worth, greater confidence in dealing with people beyond his own immediate circle. He had plenty of confidence on the street corner, but not in other areas. He's now well into an autobiography in which I guess I play a major role. He's feeding me some of this and Kathleen, my wife, and I are going over what he said with a good deal of interest.

What did the corner situation do to me? Well, I think it made me a better person. That sounds pretty vague but I came into that situation with I guess a typical young, radical or liberal orientation - concern for the underdog, but without any real sense of what life of that sort was all about. Without ever having established relations with people outside of

my immediate circle in school and community, I came from an upper middle-class background and I guess I was a young man in a hurry too. I'd always - I had done top work in high school and in college and had got academic recognition beyond that of most of my peers. I guess I was the first one, maybe the only one to get the Junior Fellowship directly out of college, so, I was I guess a high achiever from early on to achieve things in a hurry also, I worked hard at it and I learned in the North End to be more relaxed, more patient.

I learned to be at ease in an unstructured situation. That is, a situation - unstructured is a poor way of stating it because it appeared unstructured to me - it was structured to the people who were in it but I wasn't familiar with the structure. I guess psychologists talk about tolerance of ambiguity, don't they, and I learned to have patience to live with confusion in my own head about what was going on, to not be too upset if I observed things that I didn't understand, that surprising things happened that upset my preconceptions. I would frequently get frustrated that it was a big mass of confusion but then as the months went along I began to see that a process was happening maybe partly - a good deal subconsciously, that a pattern would emerge in my head as to what I'd been seeing and hearing and living through. And I guess I've learned to live with that but I'm no longer bothered greatly if I can't immediately intellectualize a problem, to sort of let it seep into me and turn around somewhere in my subconscious and then have faith that somehow a pattern will emerge. And I think in later years I like to think I've been able to do a fair amount with rather brief exploratory studies by being able to grasp the pattern fairly quickly, based not only on my own experience, but on what I've read.

Peter Blanck: Speaking of tolerance, as you were just talking about the development of tolerance, how did Kathleen and your marriage handle living in the North End for three years? I guess you just got married and you lived for a while outside of the North End.

William Whyte: No, no.

Peter Blanck: Well then maybe you moved from one place to another.

William Whyte: Yeah. I got married in the end of May 1938, which was about 18 months into the study. And Kathleen and I lived in the North End together then for an additional two years. I had lived first, when I moved into the North End from Winthrop House out here. I moved in with an Italian-American family that ran a restaurant and I became in some sense a member of the family, it was very warm supporting relationship. But then of course, getting married, we had to find an apartment, which we did in another part of the district, actually at 477 Hanover Street. The last I knew the building was still there just half a block from the waterfront. It was a major adjustment for her but she seems to be an adventurous soul. She knew what she was getting into pretty well. We had talked and she had read some of my material. She visited me in the North End. She had met the Orlandis, the people who ran the restaurant. She had met the corner boys. She jokes to say that I had to have their approval before I got married, maybe there is something in that. They liked her.

She participated to some extent in the study. I mean she got to know the corner boys that I knew. She also got to know some of the women that I hardly knew. One of the deficiencies of the Street Corner Society is that there is not very much about women in it. I picked up a lot of fragments about the role of women, young girls, but I didn't concentrate enough on it to do much in that area. Kathleen helped me to sensitize myself a bit about that. She, in the flat where we lived we were on the second floor, below us there was a family where the woman was from Naples and the top floor above us the woman was from Genoa. It was unusual, there were very few people from North Italy there. She became very close to them and they each took pride in teaching her the real Italian cooking which was their version. She became a very good Italian cook. She is a commercial artist. She got started in doing book jackets for the big New York publishers when we got married.

Today I supposed if I had been starting we would have considered whether she should stay in New York and I would work in Boston, which couples frequently do. At that time

the thought didn't cross my mind that she would stay in New York - or it didn't cross her mind either. She rationalized that there were a couple of publishers in Boston, that she might get work in Boston, which didn't turn out. New York is a much better center for book jacket work and she was started there. So, there were some frustrations but she has enjoyed the field situation with me. In her later work, a year in Venezuela, 14 months in Peru and then other briefer field trips in Peru and other parts of Latin America. We go together generally and she participates in the interviews, the observations we're discussing, what we see, what we think about it, and she has been an invaluable critic and editor of things that I write.

Up until the latest book she has done this just as - without any compensation but a book that is being published this fall by the Cornell University Press called *Higher Yielding Human Systems Participatory Approaches to Agricultural Research and Development*, which brings together chapters by plant, animal and social scientists at Cornell, in a pretty integrated way surprisingly, Kathleen played a major role in doing the editing, the copy editing and clarifying what was ambiguous or too academic and so on. And for that she was compensated by the Center for International Studies, so she has had an amateur or sometimes professional interest in what I've been doing without the formal training. Her training was at the Art Student's League.

Peter Blanck: One last question. What are some of your most satisfying moments in the field and what do you feel most personally satisfying about doing what you do?

William Whyte: I guess the most satisfying moments come when suddenly out of this confusion I see some kind of pattern. Like, say, the sociology of bowling, the connection between the interactions and the group situation and mental health or the relationship between the early background of oil field worker and the nature of the job he has and then whether or not he's interested in joining a union. When I see a pattern emerging out of my interviewing and my observations then it's sort of a eureka experience.

I started to say that the personal relationships were important, well they obviously are, but that's not a particular incident, those are relationships developed over time and I guess I take particular pride in the fact that I have in any major study developed a very close relationship with certain key people in the organization or community that have been active collaborators on the study. And in some cases we have written things, written and published things together so that I take particular pride in developing kind of a participatory approach to the field work. I find more personally satisfying and I suspect is more valuable to the people I work with than if I did it in a more detached way.

Peter Blanck: Are there going to be any more street corner societies or Margaret Meads? Where is the field going in that sense? You don't see it here certainly, I can speak for this school. A lot of the young doctoral students just don't spend the time like that or don't have that orientation. Do you see any movement in that direction?

William Whyte: Oh, I think there may be a swing back. Ten to twenty years ago it was the predominant form of - predominant research method was, in sociology, the survey. It seemed to many people the only scientific way to go. And then people talked disparagingly about qualitative research as more artistic than scientific. In the first place I object to the qualitative/quantitative dichotomy because I and my associates have been involved in a number of field studies not using questionnaires where we have gathered substantial quantitative data about which people attend what meetings and who participates and in what order and when in the village in Peru, how many head of cattle each family has and how much land and how much they make and what their crop is worth and all those kinds of things, not based on surveys. That stuff tends to be called qualitative although it's highly quantitative. I now think that a lot of people who are very good at surveys and very good at statistical analysis have come to recognize that you reach a point of diminishing returns, that you can refine, refine, refine and then you begin to wonder - are you divorced from reality all together.

I was surprised to find that in the effort that I'm making to get more sociologists interested in applied work, that Peter Rossi and I have been able to work together. Pete as you probably know is highly talented, very skillful in surveys, statistical analysis, far beyond any point I ever reached and doesn't do the kind of field work that I'm best known for. It just happened by chance that he and I succeeded each other as presidents of the American Sociological Association and so each of us was able to give some kind of emphasis to applied work and I think that helped to further development in that area where you now see department after department more and more due to the nature of the economic situation, a lack of academic jobs than any personal influence of ours, but moving into applied sociology.

When we had applied sociology conference a year ago, or I guess two years ago now, Pete suggested that he and I write together the opening paper for a book which is now going to be published. I was a little startled but I accepted the challenge and we found that we could work together, not simply on a personal basis, we've always been good friends though not very close, but I was quite prepared to accept the points that he was making about surveys and quantitative analysis and so on and not just for diplomatic reasons and he was quite prepared to say that that wasn't the only thing that students needed to be able to do the kind of field work that I had been doing, so I think that there's - the either/or mentality in sociology is fading out, maybe that's wishful thinking but I think I see greater tolerance to kind of exploratory field work that I like to do and I think also perhaps the limitations of federal support for big surveys will move more students into the field. That is, on the one hand doing field work the way I do it is expensive in terms of your own time but if you have some base of personal support you don't need a lot of technology. You don't have to spend a lot of money so that a lot can be done with very few dollars. You don't have to get a big grant to do it, so perhaps this necessity will force some of the younger people once again to get into the field.

Peter Blanck: Thanks a lot. Thank you very much.