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History of Clinical Sociology

The Whyte Line

Jan M. Fritz
National Cancer Institute

William Foote Whyte, Professor Emeritus with the School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University, has been President of the American Sociological Association, the Society for Applied Anthropology, and the Industrial Relations Research Association. He currently is Research Director for Cornell University's Programs for Employment and Workplace Systems, an organization that undertakes participatory action research for labor-management groups in order to save jobs, cut costs, and help companies become competitive.

Whyte began his sociological and anthropological fieldwork long before he knew what those terms meant. As a high school student he wrote a weekly column about school activities for the community paper, the *Bronxville Press*. "The Whyte Line," as the column was called, gave the results of his first field interviews conducted in the local elementary schools.

Whyte has continued his work as a participant observer for 50 years and is well known for his studies of street corner society in Boston, oil companies in Oklahoma and Venezuela, restaurants and steel and plastics fabrication plants in Chicago, the Mondragon worker cooperative in Spain, factories in New York, and villages in Peru.

The three articles reprinted here—"Solving the Hotel's Human Problems," "The Parable of the Spindle," and "Social Inventions for Solving Human Problems"—allow us to focus on the clinical aspects of Whyte's work. After graduating from the University of Chicago in 1942, Whyte returned to Chicago to work with the Committee on Human Relations in Industry in 1944. Through the Committee, he began his work with the Hotel Radisson in Minneapolis, and in 1947 he published "Solving the Hotel's Human Problems" in *The Hotel Monthly*.

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The article is an excellent introduction to Whyte's earliest clinical work. Whyte served as a consultant both to the staff members involved in human relations research at the hotel and to hotel executives to help them with change initiatives. The editor of *The Hotel Monthly* (1947:37) indicated at the time Whyte's article appeared that labor turnover at the Hotel Radisson was now down as low as 7% a month. He continued:

It is reasonable to assume that the policies and practices instituted through the human relations activities headed by Professor Whyte is largely responsible for reducing labor turnover by 66% and is an impressive demonstration of the value of the work that was done at the Radisson.

This action research project in a large hotel was a direct outgrowth of the restaurant studies Whyte had recently completed. Those studies were done in the mid-1940s under the sponsorship of the National Restaurant Association and were discussed in *Human Relations in the Restaurant Industry* as well as in what Whyte (1984:258) has described as "one of the best articles I've ever written," "The Social Structure of the Restaurant."

The second article in this section, "The Parable of the Spindle,"¹ was not written by Whyte and, in fact, only mentions him in the author's note at the bottom of the first page. The writer, Elias Porter, a psychologist, wrote the piece for the *Harvard Business Review* in 1962. Porter (1987) used the parable to show the value of a social systems approach. He specifically developed the story to use with potential employees of the System Development Corporation who would be dealing with classified materials in air defense. He wanted a concrete example which would discuss the systems approach he used but would not deal in any way with defense matters.

Porter had heard of Whyte's work in the restaurant industry through a colleague and then talked with Whyte about the spindle when he came to speak at the System Development Corporation. Porter thought Whyte had invented the spindle, the spike on which food service personnel place order slips for the kitchen. This simple device helps eliminate arguments in restaurants about which order was placed first and eliminates some possible friction between cooks and servers who have status differences within a restaurant. The spindle already was in use in some restaurants when Whyte conducted his restaurant research in 1944 and 1945. Whyte did not invent the spindle, but it was his associate, Edith Lentz Hamilton, who pointed out the utility of the spindle in the restaurants that were studied. Whyte (1984:258) credits her with this discovery in his *Learning from the Field*,² a book which is largely autobiographical and provides a great deal of background information about Whyte's field research projects.

The last article included in this series, "Social Inventions for Solving Human Problems," is Whyte's 1981 presidential address to the American Sociological Association. Whyte (1982:1) said that this was "a time for rethinking sociology" and that we need to do a better job of showing the practical relevance of the field. Whyte thinks this can be done, in part, by giving special attention to the "discovery, description and analysis of social inventions for solving human problems."

Whyte was a consultant on research issues during the 1950s in Venezuela and then in the 1960s for Prudential Insurance Company. For six years, until 1984, he worked with an interdisciplinary group of professors at Cornell to extend the benefits of science and technology to limited resource farmers in developing countries and to design a new model for research and development in agricultural settings.

In the 1980s Whyte again moved beyond the roles of field researcher and research consultant. In 1982 he was one of the founders of Programs for Employment and Workplace Systems. As in 1947, he was a researcher as well as a consultant on change initiatives. Now, though, he was a participant-consultant on workplace democracy issues for Rath Packing Company and Hyatt Clark Industries. Whyte's recent work involves both participatory intervention and innovation.

When Whyte (1984:19-20) was a research fellow at Harvard from 1936-1940, he says he "was conditioned to believe that if research was to be truly scientific, researchers' values must be set aside." Throughout his career he gradually began to abandon the idea that there must be a strict separation between scientific research and action projects. He "began exploring how research can be integrated with action in ways that will advance science and enhance human progress at the same time."

A study of the development of William Foote Whyte's professional career demonstrates his early and recent activity in what has come to be known as clinical sociology. "The Whyte Line," shows how science and action can be combined to improve the human condition.

NOTES

1. I am indebted to John Glass for first calling this article to my attention.
2. I am indebted to Ray Kirshak for reminding me of the wealth of information in this book which would be useful in this project.

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