

Clinical Sociology Review

Volume 14 | Issue 1

Article 14

1-1-1996

On Backtracking My Path to Applied Sociology: An Exercise in Lesson-Seeking Autobiography

Arthur B. Shostak

Drexel University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/csr>

Recommended Citation

Shostak, Arthur B. (1996) "On Backtracking My Path to Applied Sociology: An Exercise in Lesson-Seeking Autobiography," *Clinical Sociology Review*: Vol. 14: Iss. 1, Article 14.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/csr/vol14/iss1/14>

This Self-Portraits of Practicing Sociologists is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@WayneState. It has been accepted for inclusion in Clinical Sociology Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@WayneState.

On Backtracking My Path to Applied Sociology: An Exercise in Lesson-Seeking Autobiography

*Arthur B. Shostak
Drexel University
Department of Psychology and Sociology
Philadelphia, PA*

Like you, I have tried to make a difference, tried to do some good with my sociological imagination, theories, and tools (Straus 1994). What I haven't done, at least up until writing this essay, is given much thought to two underlying questions—what in my background drew me into applied sociology? And what related lessons are worth passing along?

I have been a full-time academic and practitioner for the past 35 years. This has enabled me to work, in turn, on a pioneering parole preparation project. On OEO anti-poverty programs. On civilian personnel problems at the Philadelphia Navy Yard. On the efficacy of a computer-aided K-12 classroom. On the social design, and the assessment of innovations in HUD-aided New Towns. On the social impact of HUD-aided energy innovations. On the role of males in abortions. On the use of surveys by labor unions. And on the upgrading of the K-12 school curriculum, the role of unions in a post-industrial world, and the uses we can make of long-range forecasts (“Futuristics”).

Long ago convinced sociology's well-being hinged in part on its demonstrated usefulness, I have introduced courses on my campus in Social Change and Social Planning, Industrial Sociology, and Futuristics. Privileged to know some of the nation's best practitioners, I have solic-

ited essays from them for *Sociology in Action* (1966) and *Putting Sociology to Work* (1974a). Briefly persuaded years ago that a single-source of reform ideas might be useful, I wrote (to no one's particular notice, alas), *Modern Social Problems: Solving Today's Social Problems* (1974c).

The better to maximize any contribution I might make, I chose from the outset to concentrate on one particular social class—blue-collarites, one special agent of change—trade unionism, and one overlooked social problem—males in the abortion paradigm (Shostak, 1962-1996). At the same time, however, I enjoy the challenge of a wide range in clients for my forecasting services (I give about 30 commissioned forecast talks a year for corporations, school systems, professional societies, etc., all of whom have to prepare six prioritized questions to guide a custom-tailored, sociology-based, multi-media presentation I prepare for them).

Asking What It's All Been About

Most recently, having challenged myself to create a Home page on the Net, I have had to ask what from my years as a practitioner warrants mention? What linked writings of mine might reward a visit to my Web site? And, in the spirit of my latest book which urges the study of "that which we hesitate to tell," what should or should not be self-censored? (Shostak 1996).

Invited now by this journal to initiate a series of short autobiographical essays, I have revisited my Home page quandaries. This time, however, I have chosen to focus on two inter-related questions not a part of my Web site material: Namely, what sociological aspects of my pre-Ph.D life help explain why I became a practitioner? And, what have I learned along the way worth sharing?

Marginality and Survival

Even as a child I was immersed in a world shaped by untutored sociological practice, though none of the practitioners, neither my parents nor I, really understood this at the time.

In the early 1940s my folks were the naive Jewish owners of a small marginal grocery in a colorful Italian "urban village" in Brooklyn, New York (Gans 1982). As such, they relied on their own creative (if also

unschooled) mix of cultural anthropology, “from-the-gut” psychology, Machievellian politics, and, above all, applied intuitive sociology.

From my vantage point as a grocery clerk and delivery boy, I watched as my folks learned to deal with urban Italian folkways. With the shadowy presence of old world/new world anti-semitism. And with the less shadowy significance of the local branch of the Costra Nostra (bench-warming old men rose, lowered their eyes, and doffed their caps when the local Don passed by).

With precious little room for making mistakes, my parents learned to accommodate mobster-led area labor unions. And the savagery of “nothing-to-lose” teen-age gangs. And whispered gossip about incest, adultery, and the other sins of our neighbors too dangerous often to know about, better yet cautiously pass along.

Shorn quickly of my innocence, I got a lasting lesson in what we now call the First Law of Sociology—“Things are seldom what they seem to be.” (Berger 1963:23) I learned not to trust outward appearances, to respect my intuition, and to keep my guard up—all lessons I’d urge on applied sociologists anywhere.

Living in the Enemy Camp

My father was a bright personable high-school dropout whose store-keeping day began at 5am and stretched late into the night seven days a week. My mother was a bright energetic nurse who often worked the 4pm to midnight hospital shift, this after helping all day in the grocery. When, years later, a theory instructor labored to explain to a graduate course I was taking, the Work Ethic, Calvinism, and the survival-of-the-fittest, I often thought back on our taken-for-granted Brooklyn existence and sighed with recognition.

A close-knit team, my parents strove to relate diplomatically to our gentile neighbors (ours was one of only two Jewish families in the area). They operated out of an intuitively scientific mode, one that had us endlessly studying the environs for clues to assure our survival. We were “field researchers” gingerly trying to get along with a surrounding village of potential assailants—a village with which we preferred to have amiable relations, but on which we never turned our backs.

Ordinary stressors, like making an inadvertent mistake with change at the cash register, could suddenly become fierce incidents when a customer loudly charged us with “jewling” them out of their due. Simi-

larly, for my two younger brothers and me the route home on afternoons from religious school a mile away was fraught with danger, as small groups of gentile boys along the route occasionally tossed rocks at us and sought to beat us up—a fate we took delight in almost always out-maneuvering.

Choosing Sides

Perhaps the greatest threat to my well-being, however, came from an invisible and subtle source.

Our zany imitation of Manhattan's Little Italy had much to recommend it: Life was laid-back, the streets were safe, and the mood was congenial. Once you were accepted, people looked out for your welfare, watched after your kids, and met your smile with a genuine one of their own. The neighborhood's famous Italian church festivals were uproarious, complete with a pig on top of a greased pole, and city police who looked the other way when illegal gambling began. It was quite possible even for a young Jewish outsider like me to imagine settling into this Italian version of "Brigadoon." (Not that I had an invitation).

But our working-class neighbors also had certain attributes at odds with those much valued at home and in Synagogue. Holders of high-school diplomas, if even that, most of our customers were deeply suspicious of education and educated people. Many relied for daily news only on sneering tabloids or the popular new magazine, *Confidential*, which featured sensational exposes of their alleged "betters" (as in the outing of gay celebrities or politicians, and the castigating of fallen heroes, etc.) Racist, sexist, homophobic, and nationalistic attitudes were commonplace, albeit back then little opposition was apparent inside the village or elsewhere. In 1,000 and one ways, many of our neighbors made the least-best of life chances, and feared to dare. (Shostak 1964).

With very little effort I might have adopted the neighborhood's passive acceptance of "fate" and its very limited horizon (though hopefully not its various venal "isms").

What kept me from doing so was our marginality, and a nagging suspicion, grounded in large part in the diverse library reading I so loved, that there was more to life than allowed for by the constricting village formula. My mother also helped by fiercely insisting her sons make more of their lives than she saw about her. Village culture became a negative model for me, and I resolved to somehow get out and live quite differently.

On especially stressful occasions since I have sometimes thought how much easier life would be had I only surrendered back then to the cynicism of the “wise guys” and the fatalism of most villagers (Kornblum 1974). Happily, this mood soon passes—and I return to trying to make a difference, something many of my old Brooklyn neighbors would find quite puzzling: “Why bother? It’s all rigged, you know, and you can’t win.” But I have, I sometimes still do, and I am resolute about trying.

Working it Out

Over the course of 35 years of running their grocery, my folks deciphered much of neighborhood’s hidden text, and gained considerable acceptance—albeit they always privately regarded their role as that of outsiders, as Simmel’s classic “strangers” (Wolff 1950).

My father, in particular, capitalized on his affability to help run a local Boy Scout troop, sell our catering services for neighborhood social events, serve as an Air Raid Warden, and in other quixotic ways, make a bit of a difference. He especially enjoyed writing a sprightly “persons-and-places” social column for a free neighborhood weekly paper. Certain customers enjoyed finding themselves mentioned in flattering ways, though my mother always feared he might earn the wrath of other volatile neighbors somehow upset by the column.

Watching him at this I learned techniques of participant-observer research I later studied more formally in graduate school. Dad also gathered a circle of local male gentile friends (“gumbas”) with whom he nightly processed unsavory events of relevance (the day’s political scandals, economic vagaries, juicy gossip, etc.). Discretely listening in, I learned much about data and content analysis (“crap-detecting”) that has stood me in good stead ever since.

My mother, in turn, learned enough “pidgin” Italian to converse haltingly with ancient non-English speaking black-garbed men and women who would wander in looking for this or that. As a nurse she also gave solicited medical advice that discretely respected the poverty of many of our working-class customers. I watched, listened, and learned about respect, caring, and empathy.

On Making Enemies and Friends

A sociological lesson I owe to my father possibly saved my life, and certainly spared me severe beatings. One careless morning at school I made the mistake of insulting a local 15-year old sociopath, for which I paid heavily later that afternoon with a severe beating from him and two allies. He promised, as well, to find me on future days and wreck even more damage.

My black eye, split lip, and bruised ribs outraged my father, and he called in a marker he held on a local teen gang leader (months earlier my father had been instrumental in getting the gang head released from jail, this earning him a pledge of unlimited favors).

My surly antagonist was hustled into the back of our store the next day by several buoyant gang members who gleefully offered to immediately break or otherwise abuse various parts of his body. Over-ruled by my always-cautious mother, the gang took my assailant off elsewhere to "talk" things over, and I never saw him again, in or outside of school. (Two months later the surly one showed up dead from bullet wounds in a nearby canal often used for dumping bodies; no tears were shed or arrests ever made).

I realized even then that my father's cultivation of alliances with stigmatized and unconventional people was an astute survival tactic. From that time forward I have sought alliances in my sociological practice with relevant individuals possibly scorned by more conventional others, making clear thereby my right to compacts with whomever I chose.

Learning to X-Ray Society

If my father's sociological lessons were primarily inter-personal in nature, my mother's were more structural in character, and just as valuable in reinforcing the (anti-village) notion that change-making was desirable and possible.

For example, when I was a year away from being transferred to a nearby junior high school, she determined to win the re-designation of the public school across the street as a new junior high. This would assure two more years of a walk rather than a school bus ride for me (and thereafter, my two younger brothers).

Having no experience with this sort of fight, Mom took over the school's Parent-Teachers Association, and enlisted a score of similarly

concerned mothers to strategize and join the struggle. They studied related PTA fights with the Board of Education. They discussed their options with local politicians (some of whom were their adult sons, on whom they held markers). And they painfully deciphered the esoteric structure of power relations at the Board, no mean feat for rank amateurs at organizational analysis!

In due course, though only after much drama and struggle, they won . . . and I was left dazzled by the ability of aroused citizens to learn the game and play it through to (occasional) success. From that time forward I have never doubted the ability of ordinary folk to carry the (occasional) day, albeit I have since come to believe it somewhat easier and far more likely with the explicit aid of applied sociology.

Summer “School”

Lest I leave the misimpression that my folks required me to clerk for room and board the year around I hasten to note that summers—when business would fall off so much that Dad might sometimes nap at the counter—I was freed up to serve as an unpaid (or poorly paid) counselor at a variety of mountain camps for poverty-stricken youngsters (much like, but much younger than myself).

While the camps varied over the years, one in particular made an especially strong impression. Unknown to the parents of campers and counselors alike, the camp’s administration had been taken over by Soviet-admiring young American communists. Bright, energetic, and “liberated,” they saw and took a golden opportunity to expose us to ideologies, practices, and values many of us found very appealing . . . and out from under the shadow of which I shall probably never entirely escape.

I learned, for example, a class warfare and revolutionary interpretation of American and world history at odds with the standard pabulum fed us at school. I learned to sing the International and salute the U.N. flag at morning flag raising ceremonies. I learned about scores of national and global problems I was challenged to help redress, and I learned the strategic importance for helping working-class Americans of forward-looking (communist-led) labor unions.

When we played “Cowboys and Indians” we substituted the language of “White” and “Red” Russians. And when we asked we were told the identity of the enemy (property-stealing bourgeoisie, their Wall Street allies, and the forces of Joe McCarthy).

Best of all, on certain nights in the dark of our cabin we were encouraged to ask aloud all the questions about sex, love, and girls we were otherwise too embarrassed to raise . . . and our counselors would sensitively answer us: this practice earned camp leaders more goodwill than any of their other tactics.

Even at the time, however, some hard-nosed aspects of this novel scene troubled me. As a counselor, for example, I was required to restrict campers to writing postcards (no sealed letters). I was expected to turn in any that alerted parents to the odd ways of camp leaders, though I never did so. Similarly, on the weekend when parents were allowed to visit I had to patrol a pathway set up to keep them and campers apart (a polio scare in New York was used as an excuse). I was told to listen in on family conversations shouted across the pathway, and rush to favorably explain things to puzzled parents . . . something I always side-stepped.

Before the summer's end, returning campers told enough at home to lead to a purge of many camp leaders. Their indoctrination program was abandoned, and while I had been only an onlooker I came to miss the camp's earlier pizzazz, though not its "Stalag 17" aspects.

I took away from the experience lasting appreciation for our sex education sessions and for my introduction to the hair-raising perspective of the revolutionary left. I also harbor lasting resentment over feeling worked on and worked over, resentment over feeling manipulated and used . . . these, empowering sentiments that I value to this day.

Group Membership as Shield

In the early 1950s my high school in Queens, New York, mixed about 10% worth of college-bound youngsters like myself with many others eager only to get the hell out of there. Once or twice every year the building was cordoned off in response to rumors Black and Italian teen-age gangs were going to "rumble" unless enough heavily-armed police first intervened. With over 4,500 teens on the roll books, there was seldom a dull day at school . . . and often a dangerous one.

Incipient sociologist that I was, I practiced a sort of defensive group-membership existence . . . and deliberately employed three student activity clubs as a buffer against the school's gangland hazards.

A rather poor violin player, I nevertheless joined the school orchestra, knowing it would serve thereafter as my homeroom section. This

assured a start to my school day among relatively civilized peers, albeit a heterogeneous melange of rival lovers of either classical, or pop, or jazz, or country and western music.

Then I volunteered to write a column for the school newspaper, as its student club was a welcomed source of intellectual stimulation. This made up for my not being in a college-bound homeroom section, something I had wanted to avoid as I did not want to carry the related “nerd” stigma.

Finally, I somehow managed to qualify for the school’s well-regarded track team. I proudly wore a track team jacket throughout my high school years, a status-enhancing garment that commanded respect (and assured no hassles) from Black and Italian gang members alike.

This successful experiment with using group memberships further weakened any hold of urban village passivity on me. I tentatively concluded that any of us might knit together memberships that could help protect and even empower us, a life-enhancing lesson I have urged on clients ever since.

Testing and Tweaking Reality

Encouraged by my father (himself a proud Mason), I joined a nearby chapter of the Order of DeMolay, an international fraternal group linked to the Masonic Order. For many teen-age months thereafter I reveled in the novelty of my seeming acceptance by 30 or so young Protestant peers. Only the second Jewish male to seek and gain admission to the Brooklyn chapter, I bowled, partied, and officiated much as one of the gang.

All the more exciting was the opportunity I was offered to join a small number of chapter members in the first serious extended prank of my life, one which served to disabuse me forever after of inappropriate reverence for high-level politicians.

Led by a high-spirited older member (perhaps 21 years old), we had stationary printed suggesting we were the advance guard of a large (fictitious) organization of teens opposed to drug use. Focusing on Washington, D.C., we used this stationary to snooker GM into lending us a new car for our use in the District. We got a major hotel to provide free rooms, and we sent roses to the secretaries of various senators we thought it would be fun to visit with—all of whom saw us, told us how much good they had heard about our (fictitious) organization, and urged us to invite them to speak at our forthcoming national (fictitious) meeting.

The high point of the prank came when we crossed paths in Congress with Vice-President Nixon, who graciously posed for pictures as if receiving from us our (fictitious) Report on Youth Efforts to End Drug Use.

Delighted with our ability to carry off this harmless prank, we left D.C. convinced far too many office-holders were far too gullible and susceptible to flattery—all assessments that have served me well ever since.

On Being Black-Balled

Not all of my teen-age experiments with groups worked out as intended. Misled by the bonhomie of DeMolay chapter life, I casually proposed a Jewish friend of mine for membership, and was abruptly taught a searing lesson about a concept we sociologists call the “tipping point.”

After the first blackball showed up in the election box our adult chapter adviser took to the floor, and talked movingly about the death in war of his only son at Iwo Jima. With tears streaming down his face, and his hand on a nearby chapter American flag, he urged a second vote, this time in favor of the tolerance his son had fought to preserve. He was visually crushed when, some minutes later, the candidate was again secretly rejected.

I waited a few weeks to serve as an honor guard member at the bedside of the adviser’s hospital bed (cancer took him a few days later), and then I quietly resigned all further DeMolay affiliation. I have tried ever since in my sociological practice to never under-estimate the hold prejudice has on some of us, nor the toll it continues to take on all of us.

College Expectations—Mine and Theirs

Eager by now to get away from the grocery and the urban village alike, I applied to a new near-free upstate public college—the New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations (ILR), located on the campus at Cornell University.

My father had been part of an unsuccessful effort to organize his employer (a large Brooklyn bakery) just before being becoming a grocer, and his example had long intrigued me. As well, many neighbors were unionists, and talk of strikes, dues, grievances, union politics, labor rackets, and

bad employers was common across the store counter (Halle 1984). I hoped to become either a union lawyer or a union staffer, and thereby somehow help working-class folk . . . or so it seemed to me at 17.

My very first day in my very first class resulted in a life-altering experience I am tempted to call an epiphany, something I have still not left behind . . . and hope never to.

As we 75 freshmen sat nervously awaiting the arrival of our professor he startled us by bursting through the classroom's swinging doors absorbed in something he was holding out in front and reading. Without missing a step he mounted a platform to a podium where he continued to read to himself. We waited silently while he read intently on.

Finally, the professor looked up at us and waved the papers in his hand in our direction: In a loud voice I can hear to this day he asked—"Have you seen what they are saying in this week's issue of *Izvestia*?" No, we murmured, wondering whatever he was referring to. Without missing a beat he began to sight-translate his airmail edition of the Russian newspaper to us, and we knew for certain then that we were no longer in high school (or Kansas, Toto), but had arrived at some place very different.

That this professor, this erudite credentialed stranger, thought it reasonable to ask if we had caught up yet with the current edition of a leading overseas paper, and a Russian one to boot, was an incredible jolt to my self-definition and self-esteem: Wow!, I thought, what a remarkably high expectation to have of us, to have of *me*! And on the spot, or so I now like to think, I resolved to try and live up to it.

The task was not made any easier by my lack of funds: While tuition was negligible for state residents, it took all my folks had to pay the dorm rent. I washed pots and pans for 18 hours a week to secure 21 meals, and put in another 10 hours a week as a student librarian to earn some pin money (Mom sent a \$1 a week, which in the mid-50s went a reasonable way).

As a grade school student I had once brought home a B grade, the first ever among the A's routinely expected in my household. I remember nervously handing the card to my father who stared at it incredulously, and then asked plaintively—"How could you do this to your mother?" With this in my background, and the *Izvestia* challenge ringing in my ears, I managed to earn the highest course average in my class throughout the rest of my college stay.

I gained a keen appreciation from the *Izvestia* challenge for what we sociologists call the Pygmalion Effect, or the power of expectations

to help decisively shape outcomes—this an operating principle pivotal ever since in much of my consulting.

Somber Classmates

Perhaps the second biggest impact on me of my ILR years involved the sheer accident of matriculating during the arrival on campus of many former G.I.'s.

A very bloody and difficult Korean War was still raging, and the first contingent of young "G.I.Bill" veterans began to trickle into my college classes. Many were married, and lived off-campus in trailers with working wives and babies or toddlers. They had no time for or interest in standard college antics, and insisted instead on a serious classroom demeanor and a no-nonsense approach to learning.

Discovering that our taboo-honoring fraternities were segregated by religion and were closed to blacks or Asians, certain Korean War vets opened the first non-discriminatory frat and coffee house on campus (they named it "Watermargin," after the place at the bottom of a waterfall where all the animals are at peace with one another). To the astonishment of campus sexists, it even accepted co-eds as equal members!

Discovering that campus banter was commonly light-weight, narcissistic, and adolescent, certain vets could and did transform coffee-house conversations with unsparing accounts of what it had meant to hold a young dying army buddy in one's arms when both of you were freezing to death somewhere below the Yalu River.

I owe much to the presence on campus of these too old-too soon battle-scarred young men, as they modeled taboo-shattering ways. They redefined college as transitional, rather than as an Animal House playground. And they demonstrated what fraternity could and should mean. Above all, they reminded us of our mortality, of the unpredictability of life, and of the need to make the most of it—sobering, bracing lessons.

Classroom Gains

Another campus influence of lasting significance was fore-shadowed by my first contact with college instructors, by the prof who thought it reasonable to ask if we freshmen knew what "they" were saying in the current airmail edition of a major Russian newspaper. Classes were rich in having many such teachers, and we learned from their lives as well as from their lectures. Professor Milton Konvitz, for example, helped

Liberia write its Constitution and Bill of Rights, even while teaching a required course for us in the 2000-year background of our own Bill of Rights. Visiting Professor William J. Issacson helped re-write New York State statutes, even while teaching a required course in labor law. Professor Alice Cook consulted with women unionists around the globe, even while teaching a required course in American labor history. Unstinting in their high expectations of us and of themselves, certain ILR faculty helped me understand how much dedicated and inspired people might accomplish—a challenge that has had me intolerant ever since of cynical faculty whose contend it is too hard to change anything of consequence.

Campus Culture

While the 1950s were not exactly turbulent years on campus, we had our share of activism, some of which was consequential.

To be sure, we had two or more hapless and light-weight panty raids a year, as announced by bugle calls sounded from the roof of the men's dormitory, an amusing "call to arms." The most memorable of these pranks (greeted by many co-eds with laughter and good-natured derision) actually had a few hundred of us gleefully follow behind a bulldozer hot-wired by an enterprising peer intent on breaking through the stone sides of a woman's dorm (campus police intervened, alas).

Far more inspiring was the midnight torching of a straw effigy of the university president as hundreds of us nervously sang our alma mater: we wanted him to know dorm restrictions on "our" co-eds were outdated, and we were delighted when they were modernized soon after. Only a participant, and not a leader, I was thrilled nevertheless to have one more vindication of the utility of action-taking moves.

Brief Visit with the Mandarins

To my astonishment and enormous relief, my sophomore year began with an invitation to move into Telluride House, an unusual parafraternity devoted to bolstering the skills of its members, and not incidentally, of the campus at large.

Membership was confined to males at the head of their college class, all of whom then had their every college expense paid. I no longer had to earn enough to stay at school, a most remarkable and very welcomed development (Would miracles never stop happening!). Telluride was a

heady experience. Each of us, for example, was responsible for monitoring a certain portion of a vast legacy in a stock-and-bond portfolio that provided house funds, and it was in this way that I made my overdue acquaintance with Wall Street realities.

We had celebrity guests we put up as the official host for Cornell. One morning I would breakfast alongside members of the Budapest String Quartet. The next day, I might lunch talking with Eleanor Roosevelt. The day after, the Indian Ambassador to the U.N., and so on and so forth. In combination with the world-famous philosopher who lived and dined in the House, these guests assured a steady diet of high-brow conversation that left me ever since discontent with conventional small talk over meals.

But my time at Telluride was not a comfortable one. The other chaps were far better schooled than me, and we all knew it. At meals one could be called on to extemporaneously deliver a satiric short talk about current events, a talk which ran the risk of earning derisive shouts of "contrived!" from the haughty assemblage. Once a week we gathered for serious house events, including forums, debates, and other unsparing forms of intellectual jousting. As no quarter was asked or given, I commonly found the gatherings more unsettling than informative.

The suicide of a house member shocked and disturbed me, as I felt some of it was traceable to the intellectual arrogance and aloofness of too many brothers. I became openly critical of our failure to take social issues into account in managing our portfolio. I upset some with my melodramatic pro-conviction argument in a House debate about the Nuremberg trial of top Nazis. And I campaigned to relax certain house practices I judged impediments to true fraternity.

Not entirely to my surprise, though somewhat to my regret, I was asked to pack and leave at the end of the first of what could have been three subsidized years of membership. The considerable pain of expulsion from "Eden" helped me learn the price of unpersuasive reform advocacy . . . and I have tried not to lose sight of the lesson.

My junior year found me penniless (save for small financial scholarships I was now earning for high grades), and back working hours as a librarian. Moving into college town I rented a small seedy room in a quaint old Victorian house (demolished the next year as unsafe), and I resolved to show my ex-brothers at Telluride I could remain at the top of my class, and maybe even at the top of my form, without them or their cushy high-brow castle. It was a lonely and trying time, especially as my folks could not understand why I had blown my opportunity.

Off-Campus Learning: Trying Factory Work

The ILR School required that I work summers at course-related jobs, and my incipient interest in sociology gained much from four ensuing experiences.

The first summer I toiled 64 hours six days a week, week after week as a riveter at a non-union aircraft factory. I was taught to rivet in a minute, and was shocked to learn that was all there was to learn about it, especially as my assigned mentor had spent nearly forty years doing only this job. We clocked in before dawn, clocked out after dark, and only saw the sky briefly over our lunch break.

To protect our overtime bonuses we did not go for aid for our work injuries, as this might have led the Navy (our prime contractor) to reduce our hours. Instead, we shrugged off most bruises and surreptitiously bandaged one another's lacerations at our work benches.

The money meant welcomed relief from the heavy consumer debt most men carried. Nevertheless, a steady diet of twelve-hour days took a mean toll, and in short order we resembled zombies far more than men (Seider 1984). With no union to speak for us, however, we slugged along, until the accidents we could not hide had the Navy step in and cut our hours back to a mere 48 a week.

A summer spent this way in a stupor left me persuaded enough could not be done soon enough to liberate "lifers" (high-seniority blue-collarites) from the mind-numbing, spirit-bruising factory work lives in which many felt trapped (Hamper 1991). Any illusions I had ever held about the merits of factory work, I left behind on the aircraft factory floor (Pfeffer 1979).

Trying Field Research

My second summer had me traveling in an official state car all over upstate New York investigating wage and hour practices in the amusement and recreation industry. I collected this information from very uneven payroll records that often colorful, and sometimes rascally employers were required to keep on young carnival aides at traveling fairs and on stable hands at seasonal racetracks.

Perceived as a threat by many of my respondents, I learned much that long hot summer about interviewing reluctant subjects, gracefully declining bribes (and later reporting the bribe attempts), and making sense of falsified data, all of which helped me conclude the job of field investigator was one others might better fill.

Trying Dispute Resolution

The third summer I worked as an aide and observer in the Manhattan office of the State Mediation Service. I listened intently for 12 weeks while in case after case, skilled mediators strove to help management and union disputants come to terms.

Obligated to have the patience of Job and the wisdom of Solomon, several mediators I came to admire were as impressive as any professors back on campus. Most were nowhere as pretentious, and many seemed to make far more of a contribution to the general well-being. I was especially intrigued by their use of veiled theory and some of the same intuitive skills my folks employed in relating to our Brooklyn neighbors.

Quite unexpected was my disillusionment with the role I found labor lawyers playing for either unions or employers. Many struck me as hair-splitting self-important obstructionists intent on impressing the client and "running the meter," rather than facilitating a swift and fair resolution. Mediators discretely concurred with my bleak assessment, and shared tales of memorable problems contributed by this prominent labor lawyer or that one to what was supposed to be a problem-solving process helped along by everyone.

I left this summer experience convinced that neutrality, when trying to help resolve a dispute of others, definitely had its place—an insight I've drawn on whenever my sociological practice has since put me between antagonists. I also concluded I was not cut out for the law, and I wondered if, on balance, society was really well-served by what the legal profession and the law had come to mean.

Trying Trade Unionism

I held the last of my summer jobs after graduation. It was probably the most consequential of them all, as it helped free me of one lingering career alternative I had to dismiss before I could seriously consider the option of a career in sociology.

I worked this time for a wild and woolly labor union located in mid-Manhattan, but eager to organize workers anywhere in the Greater New York region. Indifferent to jurisdictional lines drawn to inhibit inter-union warfare, my summer employer was willing to fight almost any other union for new members (drawing the line only at Mafia-linked locals known to kill to protect their contracts).

A no-nonsense, hard-boiled outfit, my union helped disavow me of certain naive illusions I had held about organized labor.

Everyday I accompanied a business agent in search of shops to organize, by whatever means necessary—including signing a contract with a boss eager to freeze out other more powerful unions, a contract we would later assure bewildered workers was the best we could get for them.

Once we actually “kidnapped” the employees of a shop as they showed up for work, driving them to a storefront we had rented for the day. We then offered to release them if their desperate employer would immediately sign with us. Careful never to blatantly break the law, we bent it and manipulated it to advantage, believing the other side was doing as much in turn.

Opting Out

By the summer’s end I had decided not to pursue a career as a union staffer.

I understood the harsh pressures with which my union staff friends wrestled, including the need to defend their lives against Mafia misleaders of mobbed-up locals, the need to out-maneuver union-busting lawyers and anti-union consultants, and the need to constantly add new members to replace the small under-capitalized shops that were always and suddenly going out of business.

I appreciated the argument that our members were better off for having our (top-down) contract and representation than if entirely at the mercy of the boss. But something still nagged at and bothered me, much as at the summer camp years before that had been something different than what was advertised.

I realized that I lacked the ability to give unquestioning loyalty to incumbent office-holders, favoring as I did something called “union democracy,” a soft-headed matter that evoked laughter when I brought it up. I lacked the ability to hold myself above the rank-and-file, favoring as I did respect for and trust in the membership, another disparaged soft-headed matter. And I lacked the ability to wheel and deal in an agile and amoral way, favoring as I did the idealism I associated with (soft-headed) textbook notions of a labor “movement.”

Over the years since this career resolution I have often had second thoughts, especially as I have had the privilege of getting to know (and teach) hundreds of union staffers who live and act in the idealistic spirit of my imagined labor movement (Geoghegan 1991).

But back in 1958, it seemed wisest to move along to something more accepting of my values and my eagerness to work with, rather than on urban villagers, factory riveters, and union members alike.

Questioning Sociology

Professors at the ILR School whose counsel I valued urged me to consider a discipline whose influence I had noticed coursing through my undergraduate years.

While I had never taken a course in the subject, I had read a considerable amount of sociology written by classical theorists (Marx, Michels, Veblen, Weber, etc.), and by a smaller number of modern theorists (Bell, Lynd, Merton, Mills, Reissman, etc.). Various ILR courses of mine had also made good use of books by then-prominent industrial sociologists (Dalton, Gouldner, Hughes, Kornhauser, Lipset, Moore, Sayles, Seidman, Strauss, Purcell, Whyte, and Wilensky, etc.).

Much of this material, however, was avowedly descriptive or analytical. Very little reported on an author's deliberate interventions based in sociological reasoning.

I found this quite vexing as I believed then (and now) that "sociological practice" should include deliberate intervention. I did not consider research "applied," regardless of how novel, difficult, or esoteric the endeavor, unless and until it resulted in an intervention. I wondered if sociology had room for my activist orientation, and if I could find and study with kindred pro-active types.

Getting Funded

In addition to questions about sociology I had questions about how to pay for more years of schooling. My only hope was a newly expanded program of Woodrow Wilson fellowships. At the all-important interview, however, I was unexpectedly challenged to defend myself in an unexpected area.

I had included in my fellowship application mention of summer camp counseling jobs I had held during my high-school years. A particularly pompous member of the selection panel of five academics haughtily dismissed the notion that such jobs had any merit at all. Talented at sarcasm (a la my Telluride House brothers), he soon had the others snickering at his image of lazy counselors lolling away empty hours around a camp pool filled with over-indulged pampered young wastrels.

I still remember thinking at first how much I wanted this graduate fellowship. I could meekly concur with his caricature, curse the bastard silently to myself, and struggle to redirect the panel's attention to some other less controversial part of my application.

On second thought, however, I knew how wrong this pompous ass was about my particular camp jobs, and I could not resist launching into a rebuttal that quickly earned me shocked stares from a panel not accustomed to such boisterous effrontery.

With considerable feeling I relayed how the camps I had chosen to work at had always hosted only charity cases, abandoned children, emotionally-scarred youngsters, gun-packing young delinquents, and others far removed from stereotypes about rich and spoiled children. I recounted instances of high-tension confrontations of mine with disturbed children on the verge of seriously hurting themselves, others, or me. I told of tactics and strategies I invented to help my wards recover aspects of self-esteem denied by the "mean streets" from which they came—and to which they had to soon return.

I asked if any of the faculty panelists had ever worked at a camp where counselors patted down campers on their arrival and removed knives, brass knuckles, zip guns and other lethal items, tagged everything, and returned it all two weeks later during the bus trip home.

I asked if any had ever had to explain to a seven-year old that his mother back in the city had fled from an abusive boyfriend, leaving no forwarding address, and he would therefore have to remain a few more weeks in camp until other arrangements could be made.

Or had ever listened while a frightened 10-year old furtively asked if it was "o.k." to continue to sleep with his widowed mother, who couldn't otherwise get any rest? Or had ever had to adjust to the discovery in the nearby woods of a sawed-off shotgun and shells somehow secreted into the camp by a 12-year old whose 15-year old brother had told him to use it before taking shit from anybody?

I went on and on for perhaps 15 colorful uninterrupted minutes, and explained in loud conclusion that I frankly didn't give a good Goddamn how they viewed the role of the summer camp counselor—but I had nothing to apologize for where that role was concerned. I had learned a hell of a lot about children, abused and denied, from scores of deprived, but often very brave youngsters I might have helped just a little bit.

Then I turned on my heels, and walked out . . . quite to the surprise of the utterly quiet panel. Convinced my emotional indulgence had blown

my fellowship chances, I resigned myself to foregoing graduate school for the time being.

I trained forlornly back from the distant interview, only to find the phone persistently ringing when I finally reached my college town room. The head of the Woodrow Wilson Selection panel explained that my outburst a few hours earlier had convinced the panel I deserved a Graduate Fellowship for prospective college teachers . . . and panel members wanted to thank me for giving them a lot to think about where camps and counselors were concerned.

Armed now with a fellowship that seemed to open doors everywhere (it included overhead money and three years of full financial support), I set out to find out what sociology was about.

Finding Applied Sociology

On learning I had never taken a soc course, nervous officials at the Graduate Admissions Office at Princeton sent me over to gain acceptance or rejection from the Department's representative.

I was delighted to find his open, though empty office overflowing with untidy piles of various liberal and democratic-left magazines and books dear to my heart. Invited in by a sign on the door that also posted an afternoon siesta hour, I rummaged about and grew more and more interested in whatever it was that this professor did.

I was even more pleased when the office's occupant, Melvin Tumin, a buoyant and caring applied sociologist, showed up, as we quickly discovered a mutual interest in wanting to make a difference with our book learning. On the spot, or so I now believe, I resolved to become whatever he was (and to some day secure a comparably chaotic, though homey campus office).

In the months that followed I accompanied Dr. Tumin to hate-filled Southern courts where he gave expert testimony in favor of school and voting desegregation plaintiffs. I studied industrial sociology and came to better appreciate its potential as a pro-reform intervention agent (Lester 1958). And I listened carefully while fellow grads (strong in having been undergraduate majors in soc) argued the merits and shortcomings of sociological theory and practice.

But, by then married and a new father, I felt obliged to take the fastest possible Ph.D.-gaining route through a discipline still new to me, two languages I had never studied before (French and German), and a required grad-level exam in statistics.

Fortunately, with the knowledge of my examiners I was able to familiarize myself with English language translations of the French and German books identified for sight-translation. Similarly, the stat exam was open-book and pre-computer in nature. My sociology comprehensive exams, however, took 10 grueling hours over two and a half days.

Had I it all to do over again, I like to think I would have taken twice as long, something I have advised breathless students ever since (save for those whom I recognize as in the situation I knew). But that was not to be.

Instead, three hectic and high-stress years later I left with a Ph.D in Industrial Sociology, my first published book (a revision of my thesis), and the exhilarating delight of a \$6,000 a year job as an assistant professor at Penn (Shostak, 1962).

I met the close of my pre-PhD odyssey with relief, as I was eager to get on with making a “real” difference with my new discipline. I little realized what an enriching experience the trip had been—something only doing this essay has helped me begin to grasp.

With my (then) wife, Susan, and our baby boys, Scott and Mark (both now practicing lawyers), we left to begin our post-PhD adventures in Philadelphia.

Postscript

Two matters warrant closing mention, each an important legacy from the past, reviewed above.

While still at college, visits home made clear the unexpected undoing of my old Brooklyn neighborhood. Despite misplaced reliance on *Costra Nostra* to protect the status quo, a large low-income public housing project was developed almost overnight at the edge of our urban village. Soon both old and new area residents suffered from soaring street crime rates and the contagion of racism.

Many old-timers moved, and five holdups in three years led my folks to reluctantly close their grocery and flee to Florida. “Brigadoon’s” passing underlined for me the suddenness of devastating events and the paucity of sociological tools with which to respond positively (Aronowitz 1973).

On the brighter side, while still at college, I enjoyed watching my younger brothers shape lives of action of their own, lives opposed to our neighborhood’s (ill-fated) fatalism. Stanley became a biology professor at Pitt and is one of its faculty union activists. Peter earned a

degree in hospital administration, and has ever since fought the Good Fight as an executive.

Not a bad record for offspring only one generation away from Ellis Island origins. Careful to appreciate changing times and circumstances, I find our bootstrap tale reassuring when, as an applied sociologist, I am trying to help others begin their ascent.

Summary

I hope you have found this exercise in reflection as rewarding as the journal editors and I would like. If so, please thank them and me by offering to soon share a similar autobiographical essay of your own; if not, please help us understand why, the better to help assure that the next essay in this series satisfies more of your hopes for it.

In either case, do consider pausing long enough in your practice to think about your pre-PhD odyssey, your own pathway into our community of applied sociologists—as insights possible from this exercise may enhance your practice and your life alike.

REFERENCES

- Aronowitz, Stanley. 1973. *False Promises*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Bell, Daniel. 1953. "Hard Times for the Intellectuals." *New Republic* 129: 8-10.
- Berger, Peter. 1963. *Invitation to Sociology*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Dalton, Melville. 1950. "Unofficial Union Management Relations." *American Sociological Review* 15: 5: 612-616.
- Gans, Herbert J. 1982, orig. 1962. *The Urban Villagers: Group and Class in the Life of Italian-Americans*. New York: Free Press.
- Geoghegan, Thomas. 1991. *Which Side Are You On?* New York: Plume.
- Gerth, Hans H. and C. Wright Mills, eds. 1946. *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gouldner, Alvin W., ed. 1950. *Studies in Leadership*. New York: Harper and Brothers.
- Halle, David. 1984. *America's Working Man*. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press.
- Hamper, Ben. 1991. *Rivthead: Tales from the Assembly Line*. New York: Warner Books.
- Hughes, Everett C. 1937. "Institutional Office and the Person." *American Journal of Sociology* 42: 404-413.
- Kornblum, William. 1974. *Blue-Collar Community*. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press.
- Kornhauser, William F. 1952. "The Negro Union Official: A Study of Sponsorship and Control." *American Journal of Sociology* LV11: 443-452.
- Lester, Richard. 1958. *As Unions Mature*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Lipset, Seymour Martin, Martin Trow and James Coleman. 1956. *Union Democracy*. New York: Free Press.
- Lynd, Robert S. 1948 ed. *Knowledge for What: The Place of Social Science in American Culture*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Merton, Robert K. 1949. *Social Theory and Social Structure*. Glencoe, Ill: Free Press.
- Michels, Robert. 1949. *Political Parties*. Glencoe, Ill: Free Press.

- Mills, C. Wright. 1948. *The New Men of Power*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Co.
- Mills, C. Wright. 1951. *White Collar*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Moore, Wilbert E. 1962. *The Conduct of the Corporation*. New York: Random House.
- Pfeffer, Richard M. 1979. *Working for Capitalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Purcell, Theodore V., S.J. 1953. *The Worker Speaks His Mind*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Purcell, Theodore V., S.J. 1960. *Blue Collar Man*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Reissman, David. 1950. *The Lonely Crowd*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.
- Sayles, Leonard. 1958. *Behavior of Industrial Work Groups*. New York: Wiley.
- Sayles, Leonard R. and George Strauss. 1953. *The Local Unions*. New York: Harper and Brothers.
- Seider, Maynard. 1984. *A Year in the Life of a Factory*. San Pedro, CA.: Singlejack Books.
- Seidman, Joel. 1958. *The Worker Views His Union*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Shostak, Arthur B. 1962. *America's Forgotten Labor Organization: The Role of the Single-Firm Independent Union in American Industry*. Princeton, N.J.: Industrial Relations Section.
- _____. 1964. *Blue-Collar World: Studies of the American Worker*. Co-edited with W. Gomberg. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall.
- _____. ed. 1965. *New Perspectives on Poverty*. Co-edited with W. Gomberg. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall.
- _____. ed. 1966. *Sociology in Action: Case Studies in Social Problems and Directed Social Change*. Homewood, Ill.: Dorsey Press.
- _____. 1968. *Blue-Collar Life*. New York: Random House.
- _____. ed. 1972. *Sociology and Student Life*. New York: David McKay Co.
- _____. ed. 1974a. *Putting Sociology to Work: Case Studies in the Application of Sociology to Modern Social Problems*. New York: David McKay Co.
- _____. 1974b. *Privilege in America: An End to Inequality*. Co-prepared with Jon and Sally Bould Von Til. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Spectrum Series.
- _____. 1974c. *Modern Social Problems: Solving Today's Social Problems*. New York: Macmillan Co.
- _____. 1974d. *Modern Social Reforms: New Answers for America's Social Problems*. New York: Macmillan Co.
- _____. ed. 1977. *Our Sociological Eye: Personal Essays on Society and Culture*. Sherman Oaks, CA: Alfred Publishing Co.
- _____. 1980. *Blue-Collar Stress*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley.
- _____. 1984. *Men and Abortion*. Co-authored with Gary McLouth and Lynn Seng. New York: Praeger.
- _____. 1986. *The Air Controllers' Controversy*. Co-authored with Dave Skocik. New York: Human Sciences Press.
- _____. 1991. *Robust Unionism: Innovations in the Labor Movement*. Ithaca, NY: ILR Press.
- _____. ed. 1992. *Guidelines from Gomberg: No-Nonsense Advice for Labor-Management Relations*. Phila., PA: Chapel.
- _____. ed. 1995. *For Labor's Sake: Gains and Pains as Told by 28 Creative Inside Reformers*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- _____. ed. 1996a. *Private Sociology: Unsparing Reflections, Uncommon Gains*. Dix Hills, NY: General Hall.
- _____. ed. 1996b. *Impacts of Changing Employment: If the Good Jobs Go Away*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Straus, Roger A., ed. 1994. *Using Sociology*. Dix Hill, NY: General Hall.
- Veblen, Thorstein. 1921. *The Engineers and the Price System*. New York: Viking.
- Whyte, William F., ed. 1946. *Industry and Society*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Wilensky, Harold L. 1956. *Intellectuals in Labor Unions*. Glencoe, Ill: Free Press.
- Wolff, Kurt H. 1950. *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. Glencoe, Ill: Free Press.