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## Cultural Commentary: “Don’t Tell Me; I Was There!”

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## CULTURAL COMMENTARY

“Don’t tell me;  
I was there!”

William C. Levin

Uncle George used to slam his hand down on the dinner table and make his pronouncements. “You people can talk all you want about this,” he would say, “but I was there and I know what Ebbets Field (or the Stage Deli, or the Guggenheim Museum or World War II), was like.” Yeah, sure. Set us all straight about it so we’ll finally know what we’re talking about, and thanks so much for the help.

One of the constants of my teaching experience is the classroom discussion in which one student confronts another with the assertion that his or her knowledge is to be trusted because it is based on personal experience. A debate over whose knowledge is more worthy can deteriorate into a form of “sez who?” from which there is no dignified return. This is a problem in many ways. In the absence of information that is beyond question any discussion is subject to a struggle over credentials. Whose information should be trusted? This is especially important in an America in which the authority of even the most powerful people is up for evaluation, or ridicule for that matter. Do the names Bill, Clarence and Newt make the point? Of course, this is a matter of some interest to social scientists such as sociologists and historians. How can we, as professionals, describe our experiences so that we can be believed by most people, even though such stories often run counter to many of our personal experiences? A

recent trip to Boston’s North End reminded me of a nice example of the problem.

Jeanne and I met some friends there on a Sunday morning for a walk-around and lunch. I thought I knew the street life of the North End well because since I moved to Boston in 1964 I have eaten in many of the small restaurants and dessert shops there, and have a few favorite stores for Italian specialty cheeses, olive oils and spices. But our friends were much more familiar with the neighborhood than we were. They knew people there, and in our few hours of visiting we were introduced to what seemed like a dozen locals who happened by. Their knowledge of the North End was obviously better than ours, and gave them authority to tell us about the North End and how it had changed.



Procession of the Statue of Saint Agrippina di Mineo

The talk that morning reminded me of an experience from my graduate school days in the early 1970’s, so when I got home I dug out some of my old notes and searched for a book I remember reading on the subject of the North End.

In 1936 William Whyte, recent college graduate, arrived at Harvard University, having been offered a fellowship to study just about whatever he wished for a period of three years. Motivated by an uneasy sense that his middle-class upbringing and life had shielded him from much of the excitement and challenge of the world, Whyte consciously set out to understand how people lived in a neighborhood that was considered a “slum,” specifically, Boston’s Italian North End. At

first he merely took the trolley downtown and wandered around the North End, rather like an interested tourist. After some months he met “Doc,” a neighborhood insider then in his late twenties who was eager to serve as Whyte’s guide, protector, and contact. A short time later Whyte moved out of his room at Harvard and moved in with the Martini family, North End residents who owned a restaurant. His research was on its way.

Doc took “Bill” all over the neighborhood. Whyte was now fully involved in the conduct of a “participant observation” in which he tried to position himself carefully within the community he was studying. He wanted to be close enough to the people he was observing to learn what they did, who was involved, and what their actions really meant to them. At the same time, however, he wanted to remain removed enough from the center of these activities that he would never influence them directly. He met the members of what were then called “street corner gangs” and back in his room recorded careful notes of his experiences. Mainly by keeping his mouth shut and observing closely over a period of several years, Whyte was able to record masses of observations, which only much later began to form a coherent picture.

The picture that emerged was of a community whose social structure was very different from the upper-middle-class one in which Whyte had been raised. It was not at all like the disorganized and chaotic mess he was told to expect of a “slum” at the time. Its forms of community organization were not absent, only different from those of the middle class world. According to Whyte, the street corner society on which he focused consisted of three major components: (1) groups of young men affiliated with Doc’s more street-oriented gang and/or Chick Morelli’s Italian Community Club, (2) the Settlement House, which was the community social work organization of the time, and (3) the local racketeers and politicians, whom Whyte called the “big shots.”

Whyte’s book on the street life of the North End, called *Street Corner Society*:

*The Social Structure of an Italian Slum*, was filled with details of the lives he observed. For example, consider some of the information Whyte reported about the young mens' organizations in the community. Whyte had most of his early contact with Doc's street corner gang, called the Nortons. According to Whyte, these men spent little time at home, preferring to hang out on the streets with one another, play cards, and go for beers or bowl. Doc was the leader, and the hierarchy within the group became clear in the ways members spoke and acted toward one another. For example, prestige rankings among Nortons were reflected in their patterns of dating with members of the Aphrodite Club, a group of females in the community, with the lower-status Nortons dating the matching Aphrodites. Whyte also concluded that an individual's status within the group was revealed and reinforced by his performance at bowling, but not because status in the group was based on bowling skills. Higher-status group members were expected to win even if they were not such good bowlers.

Whyte also got to know the members of another group of young men, Chick's Italian Community Club. (Whyte was proposed for membership but, being non-Italian, was voted down and given a guest membership.) More educated and upwardly mobile than the Nortons, the group was organized for "the social betterment of the members and the improvement of Cornerville." The club held meetings with formal rules and organization, put on a play, and dated members of the Italian Junior League. Notice the social class difference in the activities of the two groups. A number of the Nortons, including Doc, were voted membership in the Italian Community Club, but there was a clear and persistent split within the group. Whyte described the hierarchy as consisting of three layers. At the bottom were the street corner boys, who focused on social activities in the local community. At the top were the college boys, who were interested in social advancement for themselves and Cornerville. Between these two layers were people like Doc, who served as intermediaries between those at the top of the hierarchy and those at the bottom.

Eventually, despite the efforts of the intermediaries, the friction between the street corner guys and the college men weakened the club. Its membership declined, and it died as an organization. Many of the college men moved on to join the district Republican Club and became active in politics

So, are you persuaded by Whyte's authority to say what the street corner life of the North End was really like back then? I was. And I still think his way of getting inside the life of community is the best way to tell the "truth" of a social life. But you should know that social scientists argue ferociously about the authority of voices like Whyte's. For example, more than thirty years after Whyte studied the North End another social scientist, W.A. Marianne Boelen, revisited Boston's North End a number of times between 1970 and 1989. She concluded that Whyte had gotten the story of its people all wrong in the first place. In article entitled "Street Corner Society: Cornerville Revisited," Boelen accused Whyte of bad research and bad faith.

Boelen was born and raised in Holland and lived in Italy for a number of years. In the late 1960s she was a sociology student at Columbia University where she read and discussed Whyte's book, finding something in it that rang untrue. She recalled from her years in Italy that the men there, like young men of the North End, were also in the habit of hanging out on street corners. Boelen wondered whether Whyte was wrong to conclude that street corner behavior was part of gang membership, and whether, instead, these men were merely exhibiting a cultural habit imported with immigration. In short, she questioned whether his entire book was based on a flawed interpretation of the meaning of this behavior. In 1970 Boelen went to the North End and began reinterviewing members of the community who had been part of Whyte's study thirty years earlier. Over the next twenty years she went back to the community "25 times, usually for 3 or 4 days, a few times 10 days, 2 weeks, or a month, and the last time for 3 months in order to have sufficient time to discuss the draft of this article with most of the characters of

"Street Corner Society". What she heard convinced her that Whyte had made serious errors in his study. For example, Boelen was told that people felt hurt that Whyte had characterized the community as a "slum" and the street corner men as "gangs." She concluded that Whyte was biased by his upper-middle-class upbringing and was determined to make the North End seem like some thing it was not—chaotic, criminal, and dangerous. She accused Whyte of incorrectly characterizing informal street socializing in the North End as gang behavior, for she believed it to be merely the transfer of the normal Italian style of community interaction to American streets. Boelen also concluded from her interviews that Whyte had exaggerated the importance of a "handful of isolated racketeers in the area and had overlooked the role of the family."

Who do you believe? I believe Whyte because he was there at the time while Boelen studied the place years later. She asked people to recall what things had been like. In addition, she spent less time there than Whyte had. Of course, there is no way of knowing if Whyte was biased in the first place, but if we are to have standards for deciding who is the best authority to summarize social facts they must be general. Who gets inside the community with no apparent axe to grind and is thorough and detailed in collecting and reporting observations? Those are the best standards we have, and until we can measure human interaction the way we measure the weight of a lump of stone, we'll have to make do with them.



*Men playing cards in a corner of the Prado*