

William Foote Whyte

STREET CORNER SOCIETY

Whyte's study of urban young men in "Cornerville," an Italian neighborhood in Boston, conducted between 1937 and 1940, is one of the best such studies ever done by a sociologist, especially in the skill with which he characterized the men and their lives. Like an anthropologist, Whyte worked alone and relied almost exclusively on participant observation as a technique. Like some anthropologists, he came quite close to "going native," getting caught up in the lives of his subjects to the point of voting illegally in elections.

His discussion of that fieldwork experience, added after he wrote the book, provides a wonderful commentary on the process of garnering knowledge as he did. In particular, he describes the personal stakes he had in the project, his many false starts, the difficulty of gaining entree into the neighborhood, and the nature of his relationship with Doc, his main informant. His consideration of the book's effects on some of its major protagonists is also exemplary.

It is hard to pick favorite parts of Street Corner Society for special emphasis, but one report of the way status is maintained in a social group gives a good example. The Nortons, a street-corner gang with whom Whyte associated, were avid bowlers. Doc, the leader, was the best bowler. Status in the group was correlated with bowling skill. When Long John, whose position in the group depended mainly on his friendship with Doc, began to bowl over his head, the group heckled him until his score fell to its appropriate level. Later, when Doc left the Nortons, leaving Long John more vulnerable, his score fell disastrously. When Doc returned, Long John's score picked up sharply. Thus, the evidence seemed to indicate that status determined bowling skill rather than the other way around. The implications are striking.