UNIT 11: STREET CORNER SOCIETY*

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11.0 OBJECTIVES
After going through this unit, you should be able to:
• describe the main themes of the book Street Corner Society (SCS)
• describe who are the ‘corner boys’ and their activities
• discuss the social relations and leadership patterns which exist in Cornerville.
• discuss briefly the advantages and challenges in carrying out participant observation
• discuss the main criticisms of the book
• describe the main contributions of SCS

11.1 INTRODUCTION
Street Corner society (SCS) was originally published as Street Corner Society by William Foote Whyte: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum by University of Chicago Press in 1943. It has been called a classic study of field work and participant observation. It has been republished several times over the years. It is a description of behaviours of some individuals organized into different groups in an Italian slum area of an American city. His data is drawn from a three- and half-year (1936-1940) study of the district which he called as ‘Cornerville’. Spending time in the area helped him to understand closely how the social structure of the street corner gangs changed over time.

His work has challenged the assumption that slums are inherently disorganized. Through his work, he sought to bring out the degree of organization is a slum. His writings imply that social researchers do not understand the nature of organization in slums and hence refer to them as disorganized. Spending extensive time in the field helped him to understand

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the manner in which relationships were structured in Cornerville. According to Whyte (1943:37) the character of slum social organization cannot be understood until more sociologists shift their emphasis from social disorganization in order to investigate the process of social reorganization. SCS can be seen as an attempt in this direction. SCS is a study about social interaction, networking, and everyday life among young Italian-American men in Boston’s North End (Cornerville) during the latter part of the Great Depression. It describes the complex social worlds of highway gangs and corner boys to prove that an underprivileged community does not have the need for social disorder. Part I of SCS describes the formation of local street gangs, the corner boys, and contrasts them with the college boys in terms of social organization and mobility. Part II outlines the social structure of politics and racketeering.

11.2 MAIN THEMES OF THE BOOK

The overall structure of the book is based on the major categorizations within the population studied: the ‘little guys of Cornerville’, the ‘corner boys’ and the ‘college boys’, as opposed to the ‘big shots’, the racketeers and politicians, going from ‘lower sand smaller to higher and larger types of organization. The text of the book shows a characteristic development starting with a wide scope of life in Cornerville, then narrowing the focus to one group of corner boys and then on one person, whom he referred to as Doc. After this the scope of the book widens again to include larger and more encompassing issues of the community and ends with description of Cornerville’s social structure. Whether the scope is wide or narrow, the analytic object remains the same as can be seen from Whyte’s statement—

“The corner gang, the racket and police organizations, the political organization, and now the social structure have all been described and analysed in terms of a hierarchy of personal relations based upon a system of reciprocal obligations. These are the fundamental elements out of which all Cornerville institutions are constructed.”

Whyte (1955): 273

The next few sections describe the main themes brought out in the book.

11.2.1 Corner boys vs College boys: Social Relations and Leadership Patterns

Whyte started his study of Cornerville without a clear background in both sociology and anthropology. His book underscores the disparities amid second generation Italian American for the college boys and corner boys (Whyte, 2012). He presents a lot of ‘real life’ material rather than an analytic framework. He follows an inductive process and gives his observations on the lives of the ‘corner boys.’ He designated different groups and communities within the region he studied.

In the first part of the book, there are comprehensive accounts for the establishment and systematization of local gangs. Street Corner men hardly saw each other outside their chosen corner, although various corner gangs reserved the same night every week. This formed their time for some special activity. These special activities unceremoniously bound the men together
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(Whyte, 2012). The gangs in the Street Corner Society were completely united since most of the gangs’ activities can be traced back to their early childhood (Whyte, 2012). Most of the gang members had been friends since childhood and this book explores lives of those living close together considering that they are the first chances are for social contacts. Home usually plays a very small role in the activities of the corner boys: people were usually known by their nicknames and not their family names.

In his work, Whyte described the peer group interaction of the ‘boys’ in the community by differentiating between them as the ‘corner boys’ and ‘college boys.’ His work brings out a compassionate understanding of groups and their qualities to social action. Whyte differentiated between the corner boys and college boys. He argued that the lives of the corner boys revolved around particular street corners and the neighbouring shops. Their home life was reduced to a minimum; many had no regular employment or were engaged in illegal activities; the focal point of action was the street corner which usually gave its name to the group. On the other hand, the college boys were more focused on good education and moving up on the social ladder (Whyte, 2012). The corner boys who were larger in number usually have less than high school education. While describing the relationships between people, Whyte explained the relationship and leadership patterns as well. The relationships between the corner boys were deemed to be stronger than ‘college boys. He explained that the informal corner leaders in their effort to gain social recognition finally supported many of the group activities, whereas bonds of thrifty “college boys”, who already are able to conform to some aspects of middle-class values that they wished to achieve were rather weak; ready to break whenever in collision with personal betterment. For “corner boy,” the most important criteria in relationship to others is loyalty and way one acts in personal relations, whereas socially aggressive “college boy” judges a man according to his capacity to advance.

By observing the group interactions, Whyte was able to learn about the street gang’s informal leadership patterns. He gave examples related to how two or three groups merged into a larger unit when the leader arrived. When the leader said what he thought the gang should do, the others followed. Others in the group could make suggestions of what they should do, but these usually dried up if the leader disagreed. This is best explained through the example of ‘Nortons’ a group that Whyte observed. He describes how he recognized the leader of the group—

“I determined that Doc was the leader through the following types of observations. Before he arrived at his place, I would see small groups of 2 or 3 conversing. When Doc arrived, the groups would dissolve and a larger group would form around him, another member spoke to the group but then noticed that Doc was listening, he would stop and then try again to get Doc’s attention. Often, but not always, Doc was the one to suggest a change in group. When another member made a proposal for action no activity change followed. Only if Doc made or approved the proposal did I observe a change in group activity (Whyte, 1993).”
If there were more than one potential gang leader, usually the lieutenants, this was shown by the members splitting up and following their respective leaders. Leaders who do not discharge their obligations are in danger of losing their position. Whyte maintained that the internal ranking in the group determines all types of social interactions. An example was that the group’s leader basically never borrowed money from persons lower in the group hierarchy, but turned primarily to leaders in other gangs, and secondarily to the lieutenants. This was a recurrent pattern that Whyte could find among the five street gangs he observed.

These networks and relationships that Whyte described were deemed to be very strong as they could not be disrupted by influences from other organizations in the community. For example, the Settlement Community House had minimal influence on the corner boys. According to Whyte, this was because the it was run solely by middle-class non-Italians who did not speak Italian language and had “no systemic knowledge of social background” (Whyte 1943) of those they wish to help.

11.2.2 Racketeering, Politics and Social Structure

In Street Corner Society, Whyte describes the social building and deeds of Cornerville in addition to the corner boys. In Part 2 of the book on ‘Racketeers and Politicians’, he brings out the relationships between corner boys, racketeers and politicians. He describes how each of them is useful to another and how different relationships develop. The second part, on Racketeers and Politicians, describes the workings of minor gears and levers on the political machine- “numbers” rackets, “beano”(celebration) parties, etc.-as well as the connections and interconnections that reach high in state and nation. Whyte sees his study on the social structure of the racketeers and their impacts on Cornerville as a continuation of the story of the ‘corner boys’. In his book, he confirms that in the 1930s, the racketeers were almost the only men seen on the streets. They were also among the beneficiaries who had money and political influence. Whyte’s purpose was to expose in detail the street gangs’ social, criminal, and political organization. These constituted alternative career paths for the Racketeers and Politicians.

For Cornerville’s politicians there are five prongs to their speeches: race, class, the candidate’s personal appeal, his qualifications for office, and a statement of his political strength. These impact their relationship between different gangs and who will offer political support to them. The Racketeers often serve as the mediators between the corner boys and politicians. The effects of the racketeers on Cornerville can be distributed into three classes, on daily life of the corner boys, the representatives and social structures. Racketeers exert influence on both corner boys and politicians and thereby the entire social structure of Cornerville.

Reciprocal obligations do not play its role only at a street level. Following lives of Tony Cataldo and George Ravello, Whyte makes the case of interconnected worlds of racketeering and politics describing social positions of their leaders as generally “the same.” Environment, interests and territorial influence over identical groups create among them “a mutual degree of intimacy” (Whyte, 1943). Whenever politician wants to win ward elections and get into higher politics, he
needs to create a pact with one of twelve “Eastern City” racket syndicates and exploits well-organized structure of subordinance reaching from “50 percent man,” larger agents and local agents back to level of street corner groups. In exchange, racketeer gains influential ally who helps to protect his gambling business—places where people go to “play numbers.”

Going back to the street level, Whyte recognizes cultural underpinnings which help to lubricate the whole structure. In contrast to middle-class Americans, police officers have more in common with regular inhabitants of the slum who, based upon catholic tradition which does not connect law with morality, “distinguish respectable and non-respectable illegal activity” (Whyte 1943). Next, racketeers are known as free spenders and patrons of local enterprises. They are thus important middle-man. They literally invest big portions of their profit into the local economy creating new employment opportunities. It reorients mutual responsibilities of previous migrant generations which were recognizable mainly along family ties and Italian cities of origin. Organized crime as an agent of socialization, therefore, contributes to the overall social cohesion of the district.

Check Your Progress I

i) What are the main areas covered by the book Street Corner Society? Give a brief answer

ii) How did Whyte identify informal leadership patterns amongst the gangs in Cornerville?

iii) How do Racketeers impact the social structure of Cornerville? Give your answer in five lines.

11.3 METHODOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF STREET CORNER SOCIETY

Whyte carried out his research study using the method of observation. In the first edition of the book, he does not write much about the methodology he followed. In the second edition of the book published in 1955, he added an Appendix A on methodology. This begins with his personal background
and how that influenced the selection of the research study, plan of the study, his initial efforts in establishing relationships and the challenges he faced in attempting that. He also describes meeting his key informant ‘Doc’ and how that helped him to gain entry into the field. This appendix which describes the personal journey of the researcher strengthened the book and increased the influence it had on sociology and on anyone wanting to practice participant observation.

Participant observation is a method which has many tensions and contrasts. In an unfamiliar setting, it offers a certain flexibility to the researcher. It is a method which requires time – a year or more. It is a challenging method to practice and therefore the descriptions given in SCS help us in establishing the usefulness of employing this method to explore new situations and areas. Adler, Adler, & Johnson (1992, p. 3) argue that “SCS represents a foundational demonstration of participant observation methodology. With its detailed, insightful, and reflexive accounts, the methodological appendix, first published in the second edition, is still regarded as one of the premier statements of the genre. SCS stands as an enduring work in the small groups literature, offering a rich analysis of the social structure and dynamics of “Cornerville” groups and their influence on individual members.”

For researchers Whyte’s work is extremely important as it offers many insights about ‘doing ethnography’ and participant observation. The appendix brings out the process of ethnography in a detailed manner. The process of entering the field, the problems he faced while doing so, the challenges of collecting data and living with it before being able to produce some coherent text around it. He talked about being immersed in a mass of confusing data and attempting to organize that data. He describes the anxiety and challenges faced by the researcher in various stages – from initial contact to the middle stages of research and also when the research is ending. He has written about the mistakes he has made in the field ‘trying to fit’. These insights are extremely beneficial for the beginning researchers who may be able to understand the need to maintain researcher boundaries while doing participant observation.

The appendix which presents his reactions in various situations help in understanding how patterns emerged in this research and also the process by which his position changed from being a non-participant observer to a participant observer. Whyte was substantially older than the members of the juvenile gang whose behaviour he wanted to study. His solution to this problem came through doing overt Participant Observation. Whyte gained the co-operation of gang’s leader (“Doc”), who served as his “sponsor” with rest of gang members. Being a participant observer helped him to observe, describe and analyse groups as they evolved and changed over time.

In the initial stages, he writes about of not knowing what to ask and when to ask it. One of his questions had actually led to complete silence in the group and people becoming distant. This is the time Doc advised him to “Stop asking questions. Hang around and you’ll learn the answers in the long run”. For researchers working in community settings, this is an important point. Following this advice, Whyte was able to collect more information than he would have been able to even after asking questions.
Selection of ‘what to research’ was another area of concern. Initially, Whyte wanted to conduct a holistic study of Cornerville (North end of Boston) with a special focus on slums. But he realized soon that this was an impossible task and there was a need for some structure. He highlighted the importance of selection of material as everything cannot be covered - cannot be comprehensive. He revised his original plan and confined his study to the street gangs’ social, criminal, and political organization in the city district. He argued-

“Though my study of the social structure of street corner gangs was based primarily upon direct observation, researchers cannot observe everything, and if we tried, we would end up with miscellaneous data, which would yield no intelligible pattern. We seek to observe behavior that is significant to our research purposes. Selection therefore depends upon some implicit or explicit theory—a process that is in large part subjective (Whyte, 1993: 293).”

“I abandoned the goal of a comprehensive study to focus on areas in which I had substantial systematic data: corner gangs and their relations to the rackets and political organizations (Whyte, 1993: 294).”

In ethnographic work or observational work, the above insight is imperative to remember as we are confronted by huge amounts of data which all appears relevant. Presenting everything would yield confusing results and hence selected material has to be presented.

Other challenges related to participant observation – those of becoming over involved in the lives of gang members and identifying with them, establishing boundaries while trying to maintain relationships, problems of researcher changing the behaviour of the group are brought out and discussed in the latest editions of the book. Whyte’s frank discussion of his methodology—participant observation—has served as an essential casebook in field research for generations of students and scholars.

Check Your Progress II

i) Discuss briefly the main contribution of Street Corner Society to field work methodology.

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11.4 CRITIQUE

The study continues to serve as a valuable source of knowledge in concrete field studies of group processes, street gangs, organized crime, and political corruption (Homans, 1993 [1951]; Short & Strodbeck, 1974 [1965]; Sherman, 1978). Whyte’s unique ability to describe concrete everyday details in intersubjective relations created a new model for investigations based on participant observations in a modern urban environment.
(Andersson, 2014). He writes in an easy flowing narrative style which has attracted many readers to the book.

The major emphasis of the first edition had been on the theory of informal group structures and leadership patterns, the organization of ethnic ghetto life, and the limited means that the people of Cornerville (now acknowledged to be Boston’s North End) had to link them with the larger society around them, and thus to opportunities for upward social mobility. Whyte’s most important conclusion is that the seemingly chaotic slum was informally organized. Whyte also undertook an examination of the association between Cornerville and the greater society. His key inference was that Cornerville was a community that was pre-arranged, something that contradicted the general belief that slums were informally muddled sections. He also explored this in his study that revealed the types of gang connotations and their link with gambling, party-politics and racketeering governments. Just like the structures of party politics and racketeering, the gangs also have a hierarchical organization that originated from the understanding and friendship of the associates over a long period of time (Whyte, 2012).

His work highlighted the importance of congestion, housing circumstances, joblessness and scarcity. According to him, the North End’s problem was not “lack of organization but failure of its own social organization to mesh with the structure of the society around it.” Even society outside the district did not offer an effective help. Whyte’s consistent criticism is levelled at the policy of Settlement House which is described as “alien institution upholding to middle-class standards,” it is fruitful to ask what today’s practice is? As shown by researchers such as Jane Jacobs (1993), Philippe Bourgois (2003) or Loïc Wacquant (2008), debates on policy of community institutions and recurring perception of disorganization of poor neighborhoods are still relevant. This then adds to the contemporary relevancy of Whyte’s pioneering work (1943) suggesting more cautious action of those in power while providing “more opportunities to participate and take responsibility for one’s life” to those in vulnerability.

Apart from the praise received by the book, questions have been raised about the methodology used in the research. As a single case study of the area Cornerville, SCS has been criticised like other classic case studies for being executed without concern for research focus, development of constructs, and largely lacking methodological rigour. However, Eisenhardt (1991) explains that single case studies are not really based on a single setting. According to her although Whyte based his work on a single setting, Boston’s North End (Cornerville), the study itself rests on insights and comparisons made across multiple gangs. Whyte (1941: 648) explains this in his book—

“I made an intensive and detailed study of 5 gangs on the basis of personal observation, intimate acquaintance, and participation in their activities for an extended period of time.”

Many of his insights are based on observation of multiple gangs; some of the observations are confirmed across groups and thus lead to generalizations. Whereas for some observations, he brings out the differences between the various groups. Drawing on an extensive ethnographic material and the
fact that he conducted participant observation for a longer period of time than “anyone before him had done in an urban context” (Anderson 2014), it undoubtedly increases power of his arguments.

Another area of criticism has been that he has chosen methods that reflect a rather positivistic view of science (Anderson, 2014). He has also been criticised for giving minimal attention to factors of tension, negotiation, crisis or change. Some critics have argued that Whyte was too focused on “looking for patterns” to correct theoretical assumptions of Chicago school (related to inherent social disorganization in slums) which caused to overlook other ethnographic data. His work has focused a lot on ‘structures’ while ignoring the agency of individuals in bringing about changes in their lives.

Many of the criticisms of the book have been addressed by Whyte in the newer additions of his book. The methodological appendix helped in clarifying many issues related to methodology and presented useful insights for carrying out participant observation. Street Corner Society remains a classic in sociological theory as it one of the first books which also attempts to connect the micro and macro systems. This is best explained in the author’s own words – Whyte (1955, p. 358) explains on the basis of similar structural-functional ideas how the different institutions or organizations and leaders in the North End are functionally and hierarchically connected in a larger social system:

“Although I could not cover all Cornerville, I was building up the structure and functioning of the community through intensive examination of some of its parts—in action. I was relating the parts together through observing events between groups and between group leaders and the members of the larger institutional structures (of politics and the rackets). I was seeking to build a sociology based upon observed interpersonal events. That, to me, is the chief methodological and theoretical meaning of Street Corner Society.”

Check Your Progress III

i) What were the main criticisms of Street Corner Society?

ii) What is one of the most important research findings in Street Corner Society?
11.5 LET US SUM UP

This unit describes the main themes of the book Street Corner Society, written by William Foote Whyte (first published in 1943). The book is a study about social interaction, networking and everyday life among young Italian-American men in Boston’s North End (called Cornerville by Whyte). The unit briefly discusses the lives of the street gangs called the ‘corner boys’ as well as their interactions with the racketeers and politicians. It presents the social relations and leadership patterns which exist in the Cornerville. An important contribution of the book is the detailing around carrying out participant observation in a community which is briefly described here. The main criticisms and important contributions of the book are also presented in the unit.

11.6 REFERENCES


11.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check your progress I

i) SCS is a study about social interaction, networking, and everyday life among young Italian-American men in Boston’s North End (Cornerville) during the latter part of the Great Depression. It describes the complex social worlds of highway gangs and corner boys to prove that an underprivileged community does not have the need for social disorder.

ii) According to Whyte, conversations of the group usually centered around the leader. If there were 2-3 ongoing conversations; they would dissolve and merge into one on arrival of the informal leader. The leaders were the ones who made most of the suggestions related to any changes or activities in the group. In addition to that, changes or activities were carried out only if they were approved by the leader.

iii) Relationships in Cornerville are based on reciprocal obligations. To win elections, politicians need to create pacts with different racket syndicates who extend their reach to the street corner groups. The racketeers then serve as mediators between corner boys and politicians.
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Their influence on both these groups ensure that they exert influence on the entire social structure of Cornerville.

Check your progress II

i) SCS gives detailed accounts of the nature of gangs and their interactions with the larger political environment. The author collected data through the process of participant observation and in his appendix to the book, he highlights the challenges faced during the process of data collection. He explains the process of entering the field, identifying key informants, manner of collecting information as well as selecting the topics that the research should focus on. The explanation related to how he began the research to challenges faced during various phases and the manner in which the research was concluded is extremely important for the new researchers. This book gives many insights into the process of participant observation.

Check your progress III

i) Street Corner Society was criticized for lack of methodological rigor as it was based on a single case. His methods seem to reflect a positivistic view of science and therefore gave less attention to individual factors related to tension, negotiation, crisis and change. SCS appear to focus more on ‘structures’ and in doing so often ignored the agency of the individuals involved.

ii) Whyte’s most important conclusion in Street Corner Society is that the seemingly chaotic slum was informally organized. His key inference was that Cornerville was a community that was pre-arranged, something that contradicted the general belief that slums were informally muddled sections.