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## Teaching and Engaging Students in a Public Sociology Program on Gentrification

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“It is important to know what are the forces which tend to break up the tensions, interests, and sentiments which give neighborhoods their individual character”.

Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess, *The City* (1925)

### The Community of Lincolntonville: A Brief Overview

The community of Lincolntonville was established in the nation’s oldest continually inhabited city, St. Augustine, Florida, in 1866 by freed African Americans. St. Augustine is located approximately 40 miles south of the metropolitan area of Jacksonville in northeast Florida. St. Augustine was considered a hotspot during the Civil Rights Movement; Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. visited Lincolntonville several times and joined in non-violent protests. However, over the past few decades the gentrification process has changed the racial demographics in this community. In Lincolntonville, the population of black residents has consistently declined for decades and few still live in the neighborhood. The gentrification of this historically black neighborhood has elevated property values, resulting in higher taxes that have forced most of the original black owners to relocate. According to U.S. Census data, in 2010 the city of St. Augustine’s population was 42% white, however, by 2019 it increased to 85% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).

### Lincolntonville Gentrification Program Objectives

Flagler College is a small regional institution with a liberal arts focus, located in downtown St. Augustine, Florida which, due to its community focus and proximity to Lincolntonville provides students with an opportunity to better understand the community and the process of gentrification, and to contribute to a public sociology program that can assist community players in making transitions wrought by gentrification. In 2016 and 2017, Flagler students collected data as part of a senior seminar project to better understand the changes experienced in a gentrifying area. Currently, a program is being implemented at Flagler College,

the Lincolnville Gentrification Project, that further explores this topic through a close relationship between faculty mentors and student protégés.

The Lincolnville gentrification project, as recently established, has four main goals:

- 1) To enlist and train interested students in producing new knowledge in the phenomena of gentrification on a local level
- 2) To enrich student knowledge of theory and research
- 3) To use service learning to explain the subfield known as public sociology
- 4) To disseminate this information to various publics such as community leaders in the hope of informing planning and policy that seeks to revitalize neighborhoods without displacing marginalized subpopulations

The project seeks to incorporate these four goals provided by the Chicago School of Sociology's (CSS) program in urban sociology that began over a hundred years ago.

#### Chicago School of Sociology as the Theoretical Guide to the LGP

The University of Chicago, established in 1892, created a sociology department that same year to focus on theory, research, and public service. These Chicago School scholars brought their unique research system to the study of urban society. The contributions of the scholars, especially involving Park and Burgess, who, in coordination with their graduate students, delved into various social problems including crime, poverty, gangs, slums, drug use, prostitution, and the prejudice and discrimination experienced by marginalized groups, especially immigrants.

The CSS contributed a great deal of social research and their research program was passed down through a long line of students. Working in tandem with the CSS was Hull House, the famed settlement house that was operated by city progressives such as Jane Addams, and that provided social services and support to the immigrant families in the area. While the CSS faculty members were developing an urban sociology methodology, the Hull House social workers were developing practical applications for Chicago residents. The unique features of the legacy will now be provided.

### Key Features of the Chicago School

There were key features of the CSS that were distinctive. Seven characteristics are mentioned here: a view of the city as an urban laboratory, the Chicago School version of the philosophy known as pragmatism, the research methodology, the theoretical position which would become known as symbolic interactionism, the human ecology framework, the Progressive Era promise of social reform, and the close mentor/protégé relationship between the Chicago School faculty and students. Each of these will be explored in more detail.

### The City as Urban Laboratory

One of the salient features was the perception of the city as an urban laboratory, a social science analogy comparable to the methods favored by natural science. Without the use of technology that allowed a microscopic view of the contents under study, CSS faculty prompted students to immerse themselves in comprehensive studies of human behavior, especially while focusing on problems associated with rapid change: poverty, racism and ethnocentrism, sexism, crime, and others, to bring the innerworkings of social life into sharper relief. It should be noted that while some also described Hull House as a “social laboratory”, Addams resisted this

reference, preferring to focus on the people served by the settlement program rather than those conducting the research (Deegan 1988).

In a review of the population changes of Chicago, Stein (1960) chronicles the dramatic increases in the city's population from 1860-1930: In 1860, the population was slightly over 112,000. By the turn of the century there were nearly 1,700,000 citizens in the city, increasing to almost 2,200,000 by 1910. It jumped to slightly over 2,700,000 in 1920, then rising to almost 3,400,000 in 1930. It can be observed that there was a slowing of population growth between 1910-1920, resulting from immigration changes in WWI.

The "urban laboratory" analogy can be criticized on different grounds but its suggestion that students should look closely at the social life of communities can be beneficial. In addition, the fact that the concept harkens back to the successful research program of the CSS promotes a sense of the legacy of that program.

### Pragmatism

Pragmatism was another feature of the school. While this philosophy ran through the institution, the key figures in Chicago School Pragmatism were Mead, Addams, and John Dewey. Adopted from the thought of Harvard Scholars William James and C.S. Peirce, a key element of the distinct Chicago School version involves not only the notion that knowledge of concepts should be understood in terms of usefulness but that ideas should always be connected to practice more notably, direct action towards social reform. Addams and Dewey maintained a close scholarly, as well as personal, relationship and much of their individual scholarship was based on collaborative efforts such as Dewey's *School and Society* (Dewey 1900) and Addams'

*The Spirit of Youth and City Streets* (Addams, 1909) both reflecting the pragmatist influence in their promotion of reform (Deegan 1988).

The Chicago School brand of pragmatism involves visions of democracy and the role of government; Addams' pragmatic perspective could be considered "critical pragmatism" (Deegan 1988), as it included "social and economic equality as well as its political dimension" (248). Regarding the Hull House philosophy specifically, Deegan (2011) describes the pragmatist approach of that program as "feminist pragmatism" that, adopting Addams' thoughts of feminist virtue, connects a capable public with a "cooperative, nurturing, and liberating model of the self, the other, and the community" (249). If the community is responsible for the development of individual selves—a generalized other, according to Mead (1934)—one question for students of urban sociology should involve the consequence of a community that is gentrified and lacking the unity that creates a collective consciousness, a concern expressed by Durkheim (1893/1964). Additionally, Addams' humanistic values have been associated with Cornell West's concept of "prophetic pragmatism", that includes the use of spirituality as a catalyst for social reform. The newer focus on liberation theory (Feagin, Vera & Ducey 2015) and public sociology (Burawoy 2005) also find a connection with the feminist pragmatism of the Hull House (Deegan 2011).

Harney et al. (2016) describe a "process pragmatism" that draws upon the Chicago School pragmatism, especially espoused by Dewey, for its utility in conducting research in human geography. Dewey's perspective embodies the close examination of social problems and social action to alleviate those problems, coupled with the democratic engagement of "publics" (Dewey 1954/1927). This provides a useful framework for a public sociology component to the study of communities in flux, such as those that have become gentrified.

It was Albion Small's vision to create a research program at the new school that focused on "doing alongside knowing" (Harney et al 2016: 320). In this spirit the founders of the sociology department sought active engagement in their research agenda. The qualitative approach used in the many urban studies by the school's founders borrowed from British anthropology and featured immersion in the life of the city. Training students to go into the streets to do ethnographic fieldwork was long a part of the Chicago School pedagogy reaching through the generations to Howard Becker, to Erving Goffman, and more recently Elijah Anderson.

Qualitative research at the school consisted of not only fieldwork but also the use of life history reports, cases studies, and personal documents. The life histories were considered the preferable type of research by Thomas and others, and were used extensively in *The Polish Peasant*, a groundbreaking work emblematic of Chicago School qualitative research methodology. The use of these documents and histories were also methods used by Burgess, Shaw, Thrasher, and many others (Kurtz 1984).

Spatial Mapping is another type of research used extensively by the Chicago School and consisted of identifying and targeting areas of interest on a variety of urban concerns. Burgess made much use of maps in much of his work and he trained his students to follow suit. Likewise, the Hull House scholars used maps so extensively to plot the various immigrant groups and community needs that the walls of the buildings were decorated with them (Deegan 1988). Therefore, the CSS focus on pragmatism created a process that underpinned the on-the-ground empirical studies of urban spaces (Bulmer 1984); it is in this same spirit that research will be conducted by the students of the LGP.

Mapping is currently used with a variety of theories and methodologies, but local and historical factors should be considered rather than simply adopting a project that fails to consider these important factors (Preis, Janakiraman, Bob, and Steil (2021)). Therefore, a gentrification project in the nation's oldest city would likely not benefit from models used in younger and more urban environments. Development of a matching methodology is important for many reasons, notably the influence the project might have on local policy decisions, and for this reason Preis et al. (2021) recommend a comprehensive methodological program guide such as provided by Chapple et al. (2017); this and other guides will help support the formulation of the LGP.

### Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism, a term coined by Mead's student Herbert Blumer, refers to a sociological perspective that challenged the dominant European models of Marx, Durkheim and Weber and relied heavily on the thought of German sociologist Georg Simmel, for whom Robert Park was a student and devotee. Mead (1934) conceived of the self as a creation of personhood derived from the influences of others. He also emphasized how "definitions of the situation" are created by individuals and how they react to these definitions. The concept of "taking the attitude of the other" was used by Mead to describe the conscious awareness of the selves of others and how interacting selves require the understanding of the situations of others. Erving Goffman (1959), one of the later students of the Chicago School, adopted the concept of the self not only as an extension of significant others but an entity that is consciously presented in certain ways to others through "impression management". These concepts help us to understand the individual in society and in other groupings, including communities.



A focus on understanding the lives of the people they were studying—immigrants, workers, families, law breakers, the homeless, and other marginalized people—requires the ability to take the role of the other, an “other” often very different from the researcher. It also requires a definition of the situation the subject is currently experiencing. Research with a qualitative methodology was determined to be the best method for obtaining rich descriptions and symbolic meanings which can be reflected upon and adequately conveyed. Therefore, being where the situations are being defined is important as knowledge received from the field is more important than knowledge obtained in a library; by immersing oneself into this world creates a process that is “interactive and creative, selective and interpretive, illuminating patches of the world around it and suggesting further paths of inquiry” (Rock 2001: 30)

### Human Ecology

The human ecology framework was introduced at the Chicago School by Park, who provided seminal ideas on the subject (Wirth 1945). It was further developed in the school by Robert McKenzie (1924); this formulation analogized human environments with those of plants and animals. The ecologies of the latter group were important to the human ecologists because they provided a point of comparative analysis, however the focus in plant and animal ecology was the relationship between them and their physical habitat whereas in human ecology the research interest was in the relationship between humans and other humans that exists in part due to their physical location (Wirth 1945). While both types of arrangements are situated in environs in which the inhabitants cooperate, coordinate, compete for resources and generally coexist, the complexity of human communities involves habits, traditions, customs, ethics, and

laws (Wirth 1945) that are in a constant state of flux due to advancements in scientific knowledge and technology.

The human ecology approach is often not taken seriously by social scientists but learning of it provides a better understanding to current students of an early perspective in urban sociology. In addition, current findings in animal and plant ecology regarding coordination, cooperation, competition, and invasion are always in development and can continue to provide potentially useful analysis to human communities. These elements, especially invasion, are currently analyzed in gentrified or gentrifying communities.

### Social Reform

Social reform was a major focus of the CSS upon its inception. The early founders of the Chicago School, especially with their religious proclivities, sought to promote community through social reform, using this as a guiding principle for their scholarly work. The scholars were working during the progressive era and the school promoted reform activity. The influence extended for generations and can be perhaps most strikingly found in the Hull House scholars and activists whose work would contribute to the founding of the discipline of social work. It would also manifest in social activism, as later represented in the groundbreaking work of Saul Alinsky.

Mead and Thomas, though lacking the religious zeal of the school's founders, saw social reform as core to the continuation of the reform ideology of the Chicago School. Park and Burgess, especially Park, had less interest in reform as an objective in their work (Deegan 1988). Alternatively, the Hull House program was a major institution in promoting reform efforts in Chicago. Founded in 1889 by Addams and Ellen Gates Starr, the program was patterned after

Toynbee Hall in London. The program grew quickly during the early twentieth century, to over one hundred buildings in 1900. The residents, mostly unmarried women who were well-trained in urban research, lived and worked very closely together, providing research and practical application to people in the area. Some services included social, educational, & cultural opportunities to immigrants, women, and children; the program also provided intellectual and enrichment programs for academics and community members (Deegan 1988).

### Close Mentor/Protégé Relationship between Faculty and Students

There was a very close mentor/protégé relationship between faculty and students which produced a wealth of sociological research on a host of topics in urban sociology. The CSS produced several great theorists and researchers, some of them becoming a “second Chicago School” (Fine 1995). These include Herbert Blumer, Howard Becker, Louis Wirth, Walter Reckless, Clifford Shaw, E. Franklin Frazier, Saul Alinsky, Erving Goffman, and Elijah Anderson, among others.

One of the reasons for the success of the school was in the small faculty and the unusually high number of graduate students in relation to undergraduates. This created an intensive level of tutelage and collaboration in the desire to research the city to better understand the consequences of rapid urbanization. This fertile field of collaboration and mentorship which was prepared by Albion Small was tended and made fruitful by Park and Burgess. Clubs and organizations were founded by the two to promote collegiality between the students and faculty and graduate students and faculty shared the responsibilities of managing an extensive research program (Bulmer 1984).

While the close relationship between faculty and graduate students is seen to be beneficial, a similar relationship with undergraduates could likewise be advantageous. A lesser level of collaborative scholarship does not mean faculty cannot instill knowledge and skill building in students. And by taking a public sociology approach, students are exposed to practical knowledge of community work that can assist them in both academic and nonacademic careers.

### A Public Sociology Program in the Nation's Oldest City

In order to study the process of gentrification in a specific community or neighborhood, first faculty must create strategic collaborations with the local publics, including key stakeholders, and residents in the neighborhood undergoing gentrification. According to Pennel and Maher (2015), public sociology should start with faculty initiating community-based relationships with grassroots community organizations prior to involving students in the project. In the case of studying the gentrification of a neighborhood, these alliances enable faculty to utilize their strategic collaborations with the local publics and organizations in the community. Unlike the students of the CSS who were graduate level researchers, the undergraduate students of the LGP have been transplanted to the area more recently and are likely unfamiliar with the local organizations, therefore descriptions of these programs and introductions to these community groups will occur at the beginning of the program.

The CSS was famous for its early work in urban studies, easily drawing students into the program. The LGP at Flagler College will depend on currently enrolled students who express interest in a local gentrification study. The first goal is to recruit students who are interested in the project. Students who self-select into this project, will enroll in Urban Sociology and Public Sociology as their first requirement for the community integrated project. In both classes

students are exposed to seminal ethnographies and learn the key theories and concepts, along with training on how to conduct a needs assessment, and methodological approaches for community-oriented research. Students will also have taken Sociological Research Methods since they will need a solid foundation on how research is conducted before they begin this empirical project.

The culture and history of the neighborhood is extremely important, and students need to develop cultural competence, skills which are learned in the pre-requisite courses. The next step is to teach students to research the history and culture of the community and more importantly, the target neighborhood they are studying. This gives students the opportunity to conduct archival research that is not accessible online and visit community cultural centers where they can find historical information, including historical maps and other historical artifacts. In addition, they will also assess the demographic trends to determine how much the neighborhood has changed over time. This data can be obtained online from a variety of government sources. This deep engagement with demographic data, primary documents, and archival research creates a sense of connection to the neighborhood and provides a clearer picture of how the process of gentrification started and the challenges residents have experienced over the years. For example, if tax records document a higher increase for taxes in a neighborhood zoned for revitalization, students can further look for patterns in the percentage of tax increases compared to other parts of the city. This preliminary research will give students valuable skills on how to work with archival documents and government records. This will fulfill the second goal of the project: to enrich student knowledge of theory and research.

Moving to the third goal: To use service learning to explain the subfield known as public sociology. After students have a solid understanding of the process of gentrification, the history

of the neighborhood, and the theories and concepts from the pre-requisite classes, the next step is to conduct a needs assessment. A needs assessment is a systematic process that determines the current needs and concerns of the residents of the neighborhood. This will also give students an opportunity to go out into the neighborhood and build connections with the residents. And because the students already understand the history, demographic changes, and historical trends within this neighborhood, they can act as a grassroots effort to gather information from the neighborhood residents. According to research (Woods, Willis, Wright, and Knapp, 2013), found that neighborhood participants recruited through grassroots methods, had reduced feelings of alienation and experienced increases in feelings of personal efficacy, as well as strong civic engagement. This was attributed in large part to the sense of trust and solidarity that students build with neighborhood residents. In addition, many students reside in and around the Lincolnville neighborhood and have a deeper understanding of the characteristics of the community. And because they have a solid background on the historical trends in the neighborhood, they can effectively determine the best assessment method.

The fourth goal is to disseminate this information to various publics such as community leaders and ultimately inform planning and policy that seeks to revitalize neighborhoods without displacing marginalized subpopulations. Once students determine the perceived “needs” of the neighborhood or community, they can work with collaborating organizations to bring about the social changes that are necessary. For example, creating more green spaces, adding sidewalks, communal areas, and other additions that make a neighborhood into a community. Once the problem(s) are documented, and solutions are proposed, students can also hold a public forum or “Town Hall” for the public. This will give students the opportunity to heighten awareness about sociology and how it can be used to facilitate social change. Students can conduct interviews, use

focus groups, collect data with surveys, and spatially map the neighborhood with GIS software. While performing these tasks students will also build connections with various people in the community, ranging from community residents to key stakeholders and city planning officials. Knowledge disseminated to the community by the students should include extensive information written for the public. These could be fact sheets, an analysis of spatial mapping of the neighborhood, and other visuals such as graphs and charts. Students should include an overview of the plan, a rationale for the plan, and clear and understandable summaries of how the program was put into place, what it is expected to accomplish and how, and assess whether the residents feel their needs have been met by the chosen intervention(s).

To create a participant pool, students can use their relationships with community organizations. A snowball sample could be generated for sampling purposes. This will quite likely lead to individual interviews with members of the participant pool who are longtime residents of the neighborhood. According to Pennell and Maher (2015), this type of “organic” smaller scale research that is grounded in the local community gives students the opportunity to work on social change that they can see the results in the community, building a foundation for the larger process of social change on a state or national level.

After the proposed solution is implemented, either a post-needs study or evaluation should be conducted as well in order to reassess what residents felt they needed and how they feel about the programs put into place to address those needs. Areas that residents feel still need change and perceptions about interventions can be documented and the next cohort of students can continue the project as students in the current group graduate. In this way, the project can be ongoing and long term, rather than a small concerted effort that only occurs once. From a public sociology perspective, over time the connections between Town and Gown will quite likely

strengthen as students and faculty work with the community and use a public sociology perspective to direct the stream of knowledge back into the community in an effort to create new initiatives and programs for the residents of the community.

In conclusion, this mentoring relationship will benefit faculty, students, and the larger community. It gives students a natural lab they can use as an opportunity to actually do sociology in their community. In addition, the research generated and shared in these collaborations will lead to scholarship that engages the publics and aims to bring about social change.



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