

**Letting reality speak. How the Chicago School Sociology teaches scholars to speak with our findings.**

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**Think Piece**

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### **Introduction**

Roderick McKenzie was one of the first sociologists in the Chicago School tradition who provided a detailed study of ‘the neighborhood’. In his comprehensive book ‘The rise of urban America’ (1923) McKenzie dives into the meaning, differences, realities, and effects of neighborhoods in Columbus, Ohio. As any Chicago School scholar, McKenzie had to develop and invent his methodologies from scratch. He started out with what he had – the observable reality of the city he researched. McKenzie makes that reality speak. That empirical focus is in my view the most important contribution of the Chicago School for three reasons: the urban reality provides a socially relevant starting point, the findings and analyses crosscut disciplinary boundaries, and the empirical details lead to theorizing that is embedded in the complex reality of human life.

### **The urban reality as a the starting point**

The urban reality in the 1923 was in many ways very different from our urban worlds today. The process of urbanization was considerably new and the effects urbanization had on human life and relationships were unknown. That emerging urban reality provided an immediate social relevance to study a variety of topics in the urban context. McKenzie’s study reveals issues like density, poverty, mobility, housing decay, and segregation that shape the necessity to study ‘the neighborhood’.

Like other Chicago School scholars, McKenzie uses the city as a lens to study social change. He argues that,

‘The city is the spectroscopy of society; it analyzes and sifts the population, separating and classifying the diverse elements’ (Weber in McKenzie 1923: 156).

So the starting point to study the city is social change and that social change itself is the starting point of the analysis.

McKenzie starts out with a general introduction to the diverse neighborhoods of Columbus in relation to its industries. Industries are an important starting point because ‘in order understanding a city, we must understand the way a city is important to its industries’ (ibid: 146). He then moves to looking at the shape of neighborhoods – he described Columbus as cross-shaped and provides maps of the street plan (ibid: 147). Thirdly he adds the perspective of experience: ‘one does not *feel* that he is “down town” until he reaches this corner’ (McKenzie 1921: 149). These three representations – economic, physical, and experience – remain central throughout the empirical description of the neighborhood.

He comes to the conclusion that neighborhoods are ‘representing a patch of common life within the larger community, which is sufficiently differentiated from the city as a whole to be thought of as a unit’ (ibid: 352). He thus finds it empirically important to differentiate between neighborhoods and the city as a whole. If we look at the current state of the urban environment we can still find the same empirical necessity to study neighborhoods and their differences. Many of the topics discussed in McKenzie’s work are still determining urban life; socio-economic or ethnic segregation are in many cities still determined by neighborhoods, mobility from a poor to a richer neighborhoods is still difficult, many welfare policies are determined by neighborhood boundaries (for example the Vogelaar policy in the Netherlands). In other words, the societal relevance of studying neighborhoods in today’s urban research is not that different from 1923.

### **Crosscutting disciplinary boundaries**

The empirical starting point allows McKenzie to study the neighborhood in terms of three central representations – economic, physical, and experience. Today’s social science research seems to be much more bounded in terms of disciplines: geographers

study mobility, planners study public spaces, political scientists study government, anthropologists study everyday life, economists study industries, sociologists study social movements and segregation, and criminologists study crime. The Chicago School, however, teaches us how rich our analysis can be if we crosscut these disciplinary boundaries. McKenzie does not discriminate among topics that come up as he empirically describes the neighborhood. He studies topics ranging from industries, to income and demographics, to families composition, as well as community organizations, and delinquencies. He takes the empirical reality as his boundary instead of an academic discipline.

Also in terms of methodologies McKenzie crosscuts boundaries. Here again, it is the empirical data that drives his choices for using a particular method. A short overview of methods that he used:

- Historical analysis (immigration, industry, etc.)
- Statistical data on national background, income, mobility, rent, family make-up
- Mental maps of how people experience the neighborhood
- Maps of neighborhoods in general and specified according to skin color, income groups, criminal rates, industry
- Overviews of neighborhood churches, schools, industries, etc.
- Case studies of family life and delinquencies
- Detailed descriptions of community activities

This overview reveals that McKenzie does not shy away from an approach that easily shifts between experience distant and experience near (Geertz, 1974) concepts of the neighborhood. The integration of these topics and methods allows for a study that represents urban life in its full details and develops a grounded theory of the problems in what he calls 'disintegrated areas' (McKenzie, 1923: 149).

### **From empirics to theory**

The study of the neighborhood is primarily an empirical description of the topics mentioned above. But if one reads carefully, we can start to see how McKenzie lets the data speak in order to move from empirical descriptions to strikingly realistic

theories of social change<sup>1</sup>. The data speak in a way that moves the empirical description of disintegration to a theory of governance, the empirical description of mobility to a theory of agency, and the empirical description of community to a theory of identity.

*From disintegration to a theory of governance*

Much of McKenzie's understanding of the city and the division among different neighborhoods is based on economic value: 'The population of any city is distributed according to economic status into residential areas of various rental or real estate values' (ibid: 152). 'Family income tends to segregate the population of a city into different economic districts' (ibid: 152). He also describes the shortcomings of that approach, as the wards are less homogenous than what seems to be the case in the map. That same shortcoming, however, informs government policies:

'The system of government, municipal, state, and national is based on the assumption of the locality group as the unit of representation and administration. But modern means of communication and transportation together with the recent development of large interest groups whose common interest transcends geographical boundaries have undermined the foundation of our political system and have complicated all our problems of social reform' (ibid: 780).

McKenzie argues that this type of localism creates a what he calls 'boss system' that act on behalf of the 'good neighbor' and remains indifferent towards the interests of the neighborhood or community as a whole (ibid: 782). He argues that the local system of representation is a failure (ibid: 783) and that administrative problems of each geographical area in the city are not in line with the natural groupings of populations and their particular problems. The empirical description of disintegration moves towards a theory of governance that I believe has equal relevance for government practices today:

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<sup>1</sup> I want to make a sight comment here because it is inevitable that a scholar makes a choice of what data to include and what to neglect. That decision in itself is a form of analyzing. Therefore, a description of 'reality' is always a representation of the perspective of the scholar and the empirical description in itself is already an analysis.

‘If the neighborhood is ever to be organized as a political or social unit, it is of the utmost importance that the formal superstructure shall be made to coincide as nearly as possible with the natural neighborhood groupings of the population’ (ibid: 785).

*From mobility to a theory of agency*

The empirical description of neighborhoods places mobility as a central topic for understanding disintegration.

‘Perhaps the most obvious effect of the mobility of the population within a city is the striking instability of local life. Neighborhoods are in a constant process of change; some improving, other deteriorating.’ (ibid: 157)

McKenzie analyzes the effect of mobility as a vicious cycle of disintegration: people move out of poorer neighborhoods, this causes a situation in which those neighborhoods remain poor, have less social facilities, lesser community life, and provide lesser security and status (ibid: 160). The ability to choose where a family may live is shaped by the economic status of a family. But at the same time McKenzie brings in a more sentimental aspect of mobility:

‘The main consideration in the individual selection of residence location is the desire to live among one’s friends or among those whom one desires to have for friends; for which reason there will be as many residence neighborhoods in the city as there are social strata’ (ibid: 152).

The empirical description suggests that mobility leads to more disintegrated neighborhoods that deepen exclusion and economic disparity. But in the conclusions, McKenzie emphasizes the necessity to remain realistic about the importance for families to use their (limited) agency to move out of certain neighborhoods:

‘The modern family is loath to assume any responsibilities which may interfere with its freedom to move when opportunities or occasion arises. It is

all a phase of the dynamic economic and social order in which we are now living.’ (ibid: 799)

### *From community to a theory of identity*

The empirical description of ‘community’ centers on the concept of ‘neighborhood sentiment’. McKenzie provides case studies of community organizations, family life, and delinquencies. The case study of Hilltop reveals how a conflict shaped neighborhood sentiment and engaged citizens in community activities:

‘Moreover it is conflict with the city proper in regard to flood protection measures relative to the flood area which separates it from the down-town district, has resulted in the development of the “we feeling” as contrasted with the rest of the city’ (ibid: 362).

The empirical description of citizens who organized together against governmental decision-making provides a theory of identity construction.

### **Conclusions**

I argued that the most important contribution of the classic study of ‘the neighborhood’ lies in its emphasis on empirical data. If we let reality speak, our data tells scholars and policy-makers important lessons about urban life. The importance of empirical data is threefold. First, our own observations of injustice and grievance should provide us with a reason to undertake a social science project in the first place. McKenzie shows us how the urban reality is the starting point of our empirical puzzle. Second, that empirical puzzle does not end at the boundaries of academic disciplines. If we take our data serious, we crosscut disciplinary and methodological boundaries because we would only place the boundaries at what is necessary to understand in order to grasp social change. And finally, if we let our data speak for itself our theorizing emerges out of our observations and provides theories to understand change and governance that are embedded in the complex reality of human life.

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