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The everyday sociological imagination

Co-creating new knowledge through story and radio

Amanda McMillan Lequieu

Every day, everyday people *do* sociology. From quiet conversations at kitchen tables to formal political debates, from contentious protests to silent non-mobilization, everyday people are constantly seeking to define problems and find meaning within turbulent social worlds. When an unexpected disaster or previously unhoped-for possibility alters the status quo, families, neighbors and politicians alike search for new vocabularies that might offer clarity to a puzzling social moment. As people attempt to make sense of their localized experiences, they often practice what C. Wright Mills (1959:5) called a 'sociological imagination' – a desire to 'know the social and historical meaning of the individual in society.' This imagination emerges when an individual begins to see their own experience as historically (and geographically) situated and, perhaps, as representative of others in the same circumstances (Harvey 2005). With or without sociological training, everyday people grapple with incongruities between contemporary contexts and their deeply held beliefs about social differences, priorities and identities. There is a nascent sociological imagination in us all.

What, then, is the role of the sociologist? How might a scholar engaged in community research facilitate locally extant reflections on 'history and biography and the relations between the two in society' (Mills 1959:6)? Public sociology offers space for research that brings together local and expert knowledge. The practice of public sociology varies from pragmatic and applied research reformatted for stakeholder comprehension, on one hand, to imaginative, problem-driven participatory research. In its most basic incarnation, public sociology centers on the intention of the researcher 'to communicate with and actively engage wider audiences' (Jeffries 2009). In its most transformative conception, public sociology empowers scholars and everyday people to work together, as Burawoy (2005:5) put it, to find 'order in the broken fragments of modernity, seeking to salvage the promise of progress.'

Yet, instead of changing the world, Burawoy (2005:5) continues, sociologists 'have too often ended up conserving it.' Often well-intentioned public sociology is structured by scholar-determined definitions of problems, categorical boundaries or interpretations of social issues (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). Even transformative social projects within academia too often extract knowledge from, rather than build it with, everyday people. While academic research

itself can be enriched by integrating outward-facing, community-directed projects, Stoecker (2013) grimly cautions that some communities are wary of 'outsider academic researchers using research more to promote their own influence and prestige than to empower the communities they researched.' In the best cases, knowledge gained from public sociology is disseminated to its population long after the research is complete; at worst, that scholarship is siloed off as one more brick for a sociologist's ivory tower. The institutionalized rewards for self-building intellectualism have too often stripped the academic branch of sociology of its ethical compass.

This chapter shows how the vision of public sociology should be grounded in both social scientific research and local sociological imaginations through community-based work to define important local social problems and participant-directed dissemination of knowledge gained. I argue that scholars can empower and enliven local discourses about sociological contexts in ways that both clarify local issues and offer new analytical frames for academic projects. In the coming pages, I contend that everyday sociological imaginations emerge from the highly social and performative process of storytelling. Particularly when crises trouble previously sufficient vocabularies of loss or opportunity, stories, both in their collective coherence and ambiguous complexities, offer insight into how certain groups of people are grappling with change. I argue that researchers can midwife the transition of sociological imaginations from stories exchanged across the kitchen table into empowered community knowledge creation. This can happen by linking narrative analysis to moments of historical crisis, adding outward-facing, community-directed projects onto existing academic research, and utilizing locally appropriate methods to both develop and disseminate knowledge. I show how academics pursuing traditional scholarly research might engage both ends of the spectrum of public sociology, creating both accessible and transformative knowledge with and for the communities who are themselves the subject of research. Indeed, the 'strangeness' of the researcher's presence in a study location makes scholars well positioned to draw study participants into deeper conversations about social problems.

To make this contribution, I offer examples from a radio podcast project addended to my dissertation research in a rural Rust Belt community. This public sociology project aimed to bring individuals' perceptions of the boom, bust and possible renewal of iron mining in their community into the context of broader debates about economic marginalization and future growth. Using high-quality recording equipment, I gathered, edited and distributed participants' narratives over local radio. I conclude this chapter by discussing the successes and challenges of engaging sociological imaginations toward knowledge production. *With* the communities we study, we can search for patterns within the endless churning of modernity and change and, in the process, trace the links between biography and history.

Engaging the everyday sociologist: three approaches

How can scholars build on the existing sociological imagination of communities in order to better produce knowledge about – and with – that community? The production of sociological knowledge involves gathering facts, recognizing patterns, testing or creating theories and finding arenas of both consensus and conflict (Burawoy 2005). Central to such knowledge production is discourse. Through conversation, members of a community engage their sociological imagination when they work to define problems that have not been fully solved, articulate questions that are yet to be fully answered, or delineate gaps between social ideals and social reality. When a particular issue is perceived by a large proportion of the public to be a systemic problem that is worthy of discussion, public attention, and eventual resolution, that issue is defined as a social problem. By enabling certain conversations, researchers can help communities move their emerging sociological imaginations toward new knowledge creation.

I propose three ways that researchers can facilitate these productive conversations, moving from the theoretical to the intensely pragmatic. First, academic researchers can build knowledge with everyday social actors through understanding conversation as story. Storytelling is not just construction of self, it is an inherently social act often aimed at constructing social problems (Polletta et al. 2011; Riessman 1993). When considering the past, people do not mechanically recite facts or chronicle events. Storytellers choose a particular beginning and ending to their story, emphasize the experiences of certain characters more than others and leap over 'manifold scales of space and time' to make legible complex relationships (Bland and Bell 2007:262). People narrate experiences 'in a setting or scene and in the unfolding of a plot with characters who act and react in particular ways' (Peters and Franz 2012). Wertsch (2004:50) argues that to tell stories that are comprehensible to their audiences, individuals tend to select 'from a "stock of stories"' that have been fashioned and maintained over time within a specific social context. By systematically paying attention to narrative arcs and themes in participant conversations, scholars can trace the routinized vocabularies of localized 'deep stories' that frame contemporary concerns and inflect possible futures (Hochschild 2016).

Social scientific analysis of qualitative data – specifically interviews or oral histories – as story can be fruitful for local communities facing crises, disasters or other 'cultural traumas' (Alexander, Jacobs, and Smith 2012). A crisis of loss, such as an economic crash or an environmental disaster, troubles that 'stock of stories' and erases familiar landscapes upon which the narratives were initially constructed. Conversely, the analysis of storytelling is insightful in moments of opportunity. From a new company arriving in a town to proposed environmental interventions to an influx of middle-class immigrants into a neighborhood, crises of opportunity also erode shared motifs of meaning. When either loss or opportunity emerges, people may find themselves in an unnarratable moment. For instance, in his classic ethnography of a flash flood that destroyed a coal mining town in West Virginia in the 1970s, Kai Erikson observed that 'one can learn something about the cultural history of a people by watching the way they cope with the ambiguities built into their cultural terrain' (Erikson 1976:250). There is much to be learned about how people cope with new ambiguities by analyzing how they rearrange their stories to explain their concerns, values or fears in an altered landscape. In moments when the dominant storytelling framework no longer fits everyday life, and the interrelationship between the 'most intimate features of the human self' and 'the most impersonal and remote transformations' erodes, the everyday sociological imagination emerges (Mills 1959:6). When all or most members of a community are coping from loss or contemplating opportunity, new stories and vocabularies are required to situate a current experience within a wider context. Scholarly researchers, equipped with knowledge of the broader sociohistorical context of a community, are uniquely positioned to ignite an empowered, organized and sociological community conversation. By remaining attuned to how crisis is reorienting the arcs, characters and priorities of storytellers, academics can use frameworks of narrative analysis to trace the evolution of community-wide stories.

Second, I contend that academic research itself is improved by integrating outward-facing, community-directed projects into broader agendas. The 'strangeness' of the academic project can help create new vocabularies for communities in crisis and new categories of analysis for researchers (Simmel 1971). Typically, an academic researcher will be an outsider to a community – a separate (though hopefully not unwelcome) member of the group, ignorant of the assumed and embedded histories, main characters, code words or other storytelling shortcuts. Willing participants in the scholar's research will need to translate and clarify ideas, priorities and problems in order to effectively communicate their experiences. Such clarified vocabularies can enable participants to precisely explicate points of consensus and conflict about local crises and aid the researcher in identifying dominant social problems for analysis. This outsider status

makes the traditional academic research project an excellent launching point for public sociology projects (e.g. Allen 1999; Collins 2007; Vaccaro 2018).

Finally, researchers can facilitate the productive development of the extant social imagination by using locally appropriate methods for knowledge creation and dissemination. Strategies of information gathering should be smoothly integrated into existing social norms for interaction and sociological imagination sharing. Researchers must note how stories are told, how narratives are reproduced and how crises and problematic social issues are being addressed. These methods should reflect multiple perspectives and voices and include interactive ways to gather participants around a central question or problem. At the same time, methods of knowledge dissemination should build on local avenues of communication. Certain forms of communication may be more relevant or accessible in certain settings than others. An engaged public sociologist can stand on the edges of a social moment and, through both the storytelling process and the dissemination of its sociological lessons, facilitate deeper dialogue between community members about their most pressing social problems.

The case and its dual crises

I implemented a public sociology project in one of the cases central to my dissertation research – a former mining county in Wisconsin named Iron County. Once home to several deep-shaft iron mines that contributed to the Lake Superior Mining District's regional iron exports, the county is now a symbol of the post-industrial crises of prolonged depopulation and economic depression. Since the closure of its last mine in 1962, Iron County has lost one-third of its population. Today, fewer than 6,000 people – the vast majority white and working class – populate the 758 square miles of Iron County (U.S. Census Bureau 2015). The northern third of the county was the hardest hit by closure, with the school districts in Hurley, one of only two incorporated towns in the mining region of this rural county, enrolling fewer than 600 students. Hurley and its villages are bordered to the east by Michigan's Upper Peninsula and to the north by Lake Superior. Few employment opportunities and geographical remoteness make life challenging for people living in one of the poorest counties in the state.

If this 20th-century mine closure was a crisis of loss, a possible reintroduction of the mining industry caused a crisis of opportunity. In 2011, a large company proposed to open a $1.5 billion, four-mile taconite iron strip mine (Wenzel 2011). This proposal was quickly followed by a volatile conflict – a crisis of community that splintered along lines of race, class and politics. On one side, many white residents of Iron County were hopeful that this familiar form of industry might be a solution to their economic marginalization. The Iron County leadership rapidly passed resolutions to lower local, bureaucratic barriers for the new mining industry, and the county economic development organization optimistically predicted this new mine would cause 'the same economic benefits and revitalization of northern Wisconsin jobs and industry as it was in 1885' (Anon 2015). On the other side, leaders of the nearby Bad River Ojibwe Tribe articulated concerns about likely water pollution from any new mining. A tribe leader argued that even though the reservation had a 60% unemployment rate, 'we would rather have clean water than jobs' (Wenzel 2011). Conflict emerged along lines of political difference as well. Republican-leaning Iron County resented the influx of environmental activists and students from a liberal arts college in a neighboring Democratic county to the proposed mining site.

The mine conflict was a crisis of opportunity that brought to the surface contradictory narratives and nascent sociological imaginations. State and national news outlets explained the fraught debate as a classic case of conflict between politically conservative, pro-jobs factions and environmentally minded activists and indigenous leaders (Kaufman 2014; Pierce

and Schott 2012; Richmond 2013). This jobs-versus-the-environment framing reappeared when the mining company withdrew its application for the taconite mine in 2014, contending that the infeasibility of remediating wetlands per the Environmental Protection Agency's regulations removed the possibility of new jobs (Verburg 2014). However, on the ground, this binary definition of the social problem did not ring true. In my research in Iron County, I found more complex narratives emerging in early expressions of the region's extant sociological imagination – in regular public forums, newspaper editorials and radio talk show debates.

In the two years following the cancellation of the mine, I conducted historical and interview-based research on the long-term impacts of deindustrialization among the white working class in Iron County. In open-ended interviews conducted over three extended field visits, occurring between August 2015 and July 2016, I found residents' sociological imaginations centered around two crises: the crisis of loss due to the ending of iron mining in the 1960s and the crisis of opportunity of the mine proposal. Most white residents lived in the region only because their grandparents' generation migrated to the iron mines as laborers. The past economic boom from mining contrasted with the poverty, unemployment and isolation many residents were experiencing. Yet, interviewees also noted how their personal biographies were situated within broader patterns of change across the United States: first, the boom of natural resource extraction; then the bust of company closure and deindustrialization and, most recently, conflicts between economic development and environmental regulations. In one-on-one and small group interviews, people grappled with incongruities between contemporary contexts and their deeply held beliefs about social differences, values and identities. Interviewees were trying to make sense of their changing social world.

Although I entered this community intent to demystify patterns of rural residential stability in the face of prolonged economic depression, I grew dissatisfied with anonymized interviews as my primary method of inquiry. The traditional qualitative research process I used for my academic project seemed to reproduce the isolation participants were already experiencing during a crisis when public conversation was needed more than ever. Typical models of public sociology, where the researcher shares results after the study is completed, would come too late and be too detached from the sociological work that everyday people were already doing. Forms of public engagement already happening in Iron County (e.g., meetings, media) seemed to privilege voices already in leadership (Stella 2015). The community itself needed to produce its own knowledge about their changing stories and prioritized social problems.

Over multiple visits to this field site, I facilitated a community-wide conversation through a public storytelling project. I developed this project with input from key stakeholders in Iron County and, based on their suggestions, disseminated the final product – a short podcast – on a local AM radio station. The project expanded my social scientific understanding of how local people were situating localized experiences within broader social histories. I turn now to how I planned this project and conclude with a discussion of its successes and challenges.

Designing projects for knowledge production

The conception of this project began with a consideration of locally appropriate dissemination. In interviews, I noticed people referred to three forms of media in their remote county, in order of importance: newspapers, AM radio and internet. Most interviewees subscribed to one or both of the local newspapers that have been in circulation since the early 1900s. Radio was popular and surprisingly democratic. Several interviewees hosted local radio shows. Since there was, at that time, little wireless broadband in this rural county, internet access was limited. Even without

consistent internet access, however, people did use social media sites, such as Facebook groups, with some frequency (i.e., such as the perennially popular, 'You know you grew up in [city/region] if. . . ' pages). At the conclusion of this project, I used all three mediums – radio to share the result and newspapers and social media to announce key information about the broadcast.

Next, I selected when to arrange for a field visit to maximize participation. Several stakeholders recommend timing a public sociology project during an event around which locals centered their social calendars – the Heritage Festival. This two-week summer event included the county fair, class reunions, parades and organized outings and drew hundreds of former residents returning to visit friends and family. I decided to prepare a radio broadcast based on stories recorded at the Heritage Festival events and planned a field visit that coincided with these events.

Then I integrated this outward-facing project onto my existing academic research. First, with feedback from key stakeholders in this community, I developed a project proposal in order to gain funding by a University of Wisconsin grant purposed with enabling publicly oriented academic research. Then with support from my university's Institutional Review Board staff, I expanded my human subjects' protocols to include written consent to use real names and identifying information for the radio project. Participants could opt out of the radio project and simply offer consent to be part of my dissertation project (with anonymized names and changed identifying information) or ask not to be recorded or included in either public or academic projects. Within my revised human-subject protocol, I also recruited participants for the radio project using different methods than for my broader dissertation. I advertised via community Facebook groups and in announcements in the local newspapers. In advance of my field visit, I gained approval from a local radio station to have the final edited audio recordings broadcast during one of their most popular talk show hours after the project was complete.

The week of the Heritage Festival, I rented high-quality, audio recording equipment – a H2 Zoom digital audio recorder, with microphone attachments – and printed prompts, such as questions, photographs, and maps of the region. I asked community members for stories in response to open-ended questions that were suggested by stakeholders involved in developing this project. Questions ranged from 'What is the best future for Iron County?' to 'What do you wish other people knew about your home county?' to 'Where are your favorite places?' Prepared with this setup, I spent hours with people exploring the local historical society, attended multiple class reunions and parades and set up an oral history booth at the Iron County, Wisconsin, county fair. I also offered non-audio-based forms of communication, sharing memories or sentiments on small cards or identifying special locations on a large map of the region with pushpins. Across these events, I recorded 30 stories with 23 signed consent forms for the radio broadcast, and I had more than 50 informal conversations with residents and visitors. All participants were white; approximately half were former residents visiting for the Heritage Festival events, and all but five interviewees were over the age of 55.

After the event, I analyzed non-audio documents and listened to the recorded stories for emerging and persistent themes. I paid attention to both common narrative arcs and to deviations. Using an iterative, open coding process, I selected quotes that defined social problems using vocabularies that most Iron County listeners would recognize as representative of local perspectives. When I faced contradictory quotes, I triangulated them against other forms of data I had been gathering for this project (historical, statistical and longer interviews). As I will describe momentarily, I broadened my codes for these points of divergence in order to assess higher levels of problem definition, historical interpretation, translations between individual experience and impersonal contexts. Then I wrote and recorded my own narration of the

broader social context for participants' quotes and then edited the audio into a ten-minute broadcast for the local radio station. If participants provided written consent, I used their real names as part of this broadcast. In April 2017, the podcast was aired on the 'Sam in the Morning' show on WJMS AM. Later that week, I was invited to call in and answer questions about the project live on the air. This podcast and the subsequent radio interview remain available to the public via the Iron County Historical Society's web presence and an academic blog hosted by the University of Wisconsin. Both web programs aim to empower people to bridge their past, present, and future through collective storytelling.

Discussion: common themes and divergence

The radio project offered former and current residents an opportunity to exercise their nascent sociological imaginations and narrate their individual experiences of boom and bust in light of the possible future economic development of their home region. As I listened to recordings and made choices regarding how to edit residents' stories into a coherent podcast, a few common themes and challenges emerged.

First, the crisis of mine closure was the consistent climax for nearly all participants' narratives. Individual experiences shared into the recorder easily mapped onto the historical context of boom and bust. For instance, at the Iron County Historical Society Open House, I spoke with Gardy, a teacher in Minnesota. Although he has lived away from Iron County since youth, he comes back most summers to visit friends and family in the region. Into a recorder, he recalled a Hurley that looked – and sounded – very different than what he sees today. Gardy's 'earliest recollections were of the ore trains going through. The ore trains just ran and ran and ran, throughout the night.' Gardy and his brother would sit on a hill behind their company house to watch the cars haul ore to the Ashland, Wisconsin, ore dock – a mile-long freight rail bridge into Lake Superior. There, freighters owned by specific steel mills loaded the raw materials and began their journeys east and south through the Great Lakes. But when the mine closed in 1962, and the railroad tracks were pulled up, in 2013, the mile-long dock was demolished. These moments of irreparable disconnection were morally and economically devastating for Iron Countians. Gardy recalled his father telephoning him in the 1990s to grimly announce, 'They tore up the tracks. Hurley's dead.'

Similarly, Brian explained that, in the 1950s, his parents rented a little house owned by the company.

> The mining company was a fairly benevolent organization, a much nicer than the others. They didn't have to be. So, in the 30s and 40s and 50s, it was a very nice place to live.

His story followed the familiar boom-bust framework.

> Of course, the high point of the population of this area was close to 15,000, now the whole county is only 7,000 roughly. Iron County has the highest rate of unemployment in the state. Not the poorest county, but one of the poorest. And, I believe the oldest, there is a lot of people over 65 that live here. It's hard to find a job.

Again and again, I found one narrative arc deeply established and routinely drawn upon: a good past ('those good days,' as one participant quipped) contrasted with the troubled present (economic decline, job loss and disconnection). These narratives worked because they had been

tested against broader contexts, rehearsed in community settings and clearly defined as social problems. Tales of boom and bust were the heart of Iron County's 'stock of stories' (Wertsch 2004). Statistical data, economic performance and even the remote landscape of Iron County all reiterate that, in the six decades since mine closure, this former mining community has contracted. As I analyzed and edited participant stories into a radio program, it was clear that any radio project had to incorporate this internalized arc of boom and bust.

A notable challenge – and one rich with analytical promise – emerged not from these shared stories but from the discordant ones. The broken promise of the mine, proposed in 2011 and cancelled in 2014, seemed to have activated another set of vocabularies – a riskier set of discourses that centered on differences, identities under threat and incongruities between contemporary contexts and deeply held beliefs about self and others. In facing this dual crisis of opportunity and loss, former and current residents were doing sociological work to redefine values, question boundaries and re-interpret taken-for-granted social problems. My challenge was balancing my multiplicity of roles – as social scientist, facilitator of sociological imagination development and radio broadcast editor – to interpret and disseminate themes (in a qualitative coding sense) that reflected the complexity of social life as accurately as possible.

This challenge was expressed in two ways. First, and most simply, the proposed mine called into question the established narrative of the 'good past, troubled present' by highlighting complex emotions about the issue. Few participants in this public sociology project expressed strong approval or disapproval of the mine. Many expressed puzzlement and ambivalence about it instead. For example, Nancy shared, 'I think [the new mine] excited people because we are so desperate for jobs. Again, you do have environmental concerns, but I think the prospect on the economic boost was good.' She paused, wrestling internally. 'I was for it *and* against it at the same time.' Back at the Iron County Historical Society, Gardy expressed similar ambivalence. 'As far as the future goes, my gosh, what does it hold? I was so hopeful when they were talking about getting the mines going here again and all that, and people were just so ready for this!' He paused, and then added, 'But we can't be miners anymore, Hurley. It's not going to be it as once was. What could happen here? What kind of industry can flourish here?'

Certainly, some people viewed new mining as the best, if not ideal, solution to the persistent problems already defined in the common, deindustrialization narrative. Joe looked wary when I asked about it at a class reunion, but he conceded

> My dream would be to get that mine going up here, you know. It's an open pit, it's not a deep shaft mining – a lot safer than the underground mines. Because I worry about my grandkids, I really do. What are they going to do? They can't stay around here. In fact, all of our bright kids that graduated from high school are no longer around here. They're gone. There's nothing for us here.

Marty was more enthusiastic about his view that the new mine was an environmental and economic risk worth taking. 'Is it an opportunity for a number of people? Yes. Does everybody want to do it?' He paused and shrugged, as if answering his own question with ambivalence, before continuing. 'Why not? There's an opportunity for some people to do it and stay here, and some people may come back home.'

And yet, other people resented the very conflict wrought by the proposal of a new mine on the community. Outmigration, economic depression and other symptoms of deindustrialization already had weakened social ties in the county. Laura, for instance, expressed anger at how the new mine further separated her fragile and aging home community. 'It torn the town

apart,' Laura groaned. 'It tore the area apart!' These narratives of ambivalence and puzzlement about the future posed a welcome challenge to the familiar narrative of the white working class support of a new mine in this region. Complex opinions emerged consistently enough that I deemed it fruitful to include a few examples of them in the final podcast. I discuss these narrative choices at the end of this section.

However, a second category of discordant stories emerged that proved more challenging for me to navigate. For certain participants, any emotional discord between neighbors and friends was overshadowed by their feelings about interactions with 'outsiders' across the larger region. The participants (notably, all men) who discussed the disharmony between Iron County and environmental activists shared their opinions with me with veiled animosity. For example, Dennis grumbled that 'they've been trying to open a mine there and the *environmentalists* are against it.' He went on to describe environmentalists as interlopers who failed to engage in any meaningful conversation with Iron County representatives in the pursuit of their own interests. Likewise, Marty criticized vandalism at a mine probing site that resulted in the arrest of an environmental activist, arguing, 'You can't do things that are destructive and expect us to not respond.'

Only two participants openly wrestled with the long legacy of inequality between the Bad River Ojibwe Tribe and white Iron Countians. For instance, Thomas admitted, 'The old dirty secret of Hurley is that there aren't any Indians in Hurley.' He clutched his drink in the noisy room of an all-class reunion during Iron County's Heritage Festival and motioned for me and his friend Phil to lean closer. He softly murmured, 'Even during the wars, and every able-bodied person was working in the mine night and day – there weren't any Indians working in the mine.' His voice dropped even more as he whispered, 'It was against the union rules. The owners and the unions colluded so you can't find written documents about it.' His friend and former classmate, Phil, grimaced and shook his head emphatically. He countered with a different explanation for exclusion. 'They all lived on their reservations and they are provided for, so, they didn't look for outside employment. They could've left if they wanted to.' Thomas inclined his head slightly and quickly attempted to qualify what his friend had told me, 'Many of them went . . . West. They didn't come to this area. I mean it wasn't. . . ' – Thomas looked pointedly at his friend – 'when I was a kid, [it wasn't] active antagonism. It's just they weren't mentioned. Right?' Phil nodded in agreement as Thomas continued, 'It's just like they weren't there. They're only 30 miles away but they weren't mentioned. They weren't part of the program here. So, it's not like it was some kind of active nastiness.' Whether or not Thomas and Phil's hypotheses for why the nearby tribe was historically excluded from the economic boom of 20th century iron mining were accurate, both men were trying to make sense of a little discussed social difference. Instigated by their community's contemporary conflicts with the tribe over new mining and the risk of water pollution, these men were exploring a little-acknowledged story line of their community's social narrative. By contrasting familiar assumptions about the tribe with unanswered questions, Phil and Thomas were engaging their everyday sociological imagination by trying to find their individual places within a complicated social situation.

The process of selecting what stories of self and community to include in public sociology projects is a normative one. During times when established narratives are under threat, explicitly addressing social difference within a community can be at once deeply meaningful and particularly risky. Should we, as public sociologists, stoke fires of difference? How does the final product of a public sociology project – in this case, a very public radio program – constrain what *kinds* of knowledge we midwife into being? Indeed, as I turned from data gathering to narrative reconstruction for the purposes of constructing a radio program, I faced the challenging

decision of how to represent these diverse and, at times, contradictory perspectives on both the proposed mine and the role of outsiders.

I relied primarily on the qualitative method principle of saturation to guide the selection of content for the final radio program. As the 'stranger' listening to many stories, I was in a position to identify and ensure the representation of themes that were repeated frequently by participants across units of data. In addition to the narrative arc of boom and bust, the theme of ambivalence concerning the new mine quickly achieved saturation, emerging so frequently in analysis that I shifted my coding scheme away from identifying each divergent perspective and toward a general code concerning the future of the region. The multiple, alternative and, at times, self-contradictory opinions on the proposed mine shared in common a shift in narrative arc from the current 'troubled times' to a complex but hesitantly hopeful vision of a better future.

In contrast, the theme of political or racial difference articulated by a handful of participants did not achieve saturation. That social scientific reason alone was cause for me to not use direct quotations about race- and class-based differences in the final radio project. However, in my narration and selection of quotations for the radio project, I attempted to represent the core concern driving these few stories. Behind the animosity and othering, I saw a theme of tension between external forces and a threatened internal collective. Outsiders, broadly writ, seemed to further fuel internal conflict in ways that illuminated the weakening social cohesion of the old guard of Iron County. In a landscape marked more by crisis than stability, many participants wished to emphasize the flickering light of local solidarity by pointing to the looming shadows of outsider interference.

Conclusion

Developing a new story line far more complex than the simple 'jobs-versus-environment' conflict portrayed in media, participants in this project attempted not only to make sense of their individual position in broader society but also to offer visions for what it means to be part of a community in crisis. From feedback gathered with the help of key stakeholders at the Iron County Historical Society and online via locally thematic Facebook pages, I learned that many Iron Countians felt that this radio project accurately reflected the shared narrative arc of boom, bust, ambiguity and desire for greater social cohesion. Participants found that this radio project reflected the tension experienced by long-term residents and the people who come back home to visit: they live caught between an undetermined future and a past that was, by many measures, better than the present (though certainly not entirely, nor for all). Crises of loss and opportunity require individual and group reflection on the deep stories, identity claims, definitions of social problems and boundary markers that once animated a common narrative. As new opportunities disrupt the predominant narratives of boom and bust, everyday people who love their home regions are faced with the challenge of adjusting their nascent sociological imaginations as they situate new personal experiences within uncharted social contexts.

This chapter challenges scholars to engage the extant sociological imaginations of participants in existing research projects. Scholars have unique opportunities to offer insight into how contemporary issues situate in past and present social inequalities. Incorporating an outward-facing, community-based project into pre-existing academic research can be an effective way to capitalize on the inevitable 'strangeness' of the academic project and offer analysis on new narratives. Taking seriously how communities can and should produce their own knowledge will further root both community and scholarly work in the sociological imagination – a deepening of analysis and application that only enriches the public sociological project.

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