In the Field
In the Field

A Sociologist’s Journey

Renée C. Fox
For Willy De Craemer,

Who made it possible for me to travel to places inside and outside of myself

that I would never have known otherwise,

and who silently understood the sense of my life better than anyone ever has.

and

For Judith Swazey,

Beloved colleague, coauthor, friend, and sister-in-questing.
Contents

Acknowledgments ix
Introduction: An Ethnography of the Life of a Sociologist 1

1. Origins and Beginnings 5
2. Growing up on West End Avenue 15
3. Freshman Year (1944-1945) at Smith College, and the Summer of 1945 31
4. Polio 41
5. The Year in Whittier 49
6. Return to Smith 61
7. Graduate School: The Harvard Department of Social Relations 71
8. Experiment Perilous 83
9. Columbia University’s Bureau of Applied Social Research and the Sociology of Medical Education Project 95
10. Teaching at Barnard College 107
11. The Summer of 1959: A Portal to Belgium 123
12. The Transforming Effects of Belgium on My Life: Part I 135
13. The Transforming Effects of Belgium on My Life: Part II 153
14. Africa: Léopoldville, Kisantu, and Usumbura 159
15. My Years in the Congo 175
16. Deciding to Leave Barnard 201

Photographs 206
18. Professor at the University of Pennsylvania (1969-) 225
19. A Sociologist in a Medical School 237

Miss Balkema’s Death 242
20. Chairman Renée 243

Talcott Parsons’s Death 297
22. China, 1981: Tianjin and the “Team of Two” 299
23. Bioethics: Reflections of an Observing Participant 319
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25.</td>
<td>The 1990s: A Time of Consummation: (II): Leaving the Field of Organ Replacement</td>
<td>343</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.</td>
<td>Going Up to, and Coming Down from, Oxford</td>
<td>351</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27.</td>
<td>Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders: Medical Humanitarianism and Its Dilemmas</td>
<td>365</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.</td>
<td>Retiring</td>
<td>375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29.</td>
<td>Willy’s Last Days</td>
<td>397</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30.</td>
<td>Becoming Eighty</td>
<td>409</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Envoi</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>415</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Index 417
Acknowledgments

Most of my acknowledgments are woven into the pages of this book. As the autobiographical story that it tells unfolds, readers will meet many persons who have been vital presences and participants in my life as a sociologist. Among them are family members and friends, teachers and mentors, classmates and colleagues, students and research companions. Who they are, the roles they have played in my life-journey, and how enduringly I am indebted to them are chronicled in detail.

In addition, there are some persons, indispensably related to the writing of this book and to its preparation for publication, who do not appear within it, whom I want to identify and thank here. Foremost among these is William Whitworth, who edited the manuscript of the book in two successive phases. With modesty and understatement, he has characterized the work that he did on it as “light editing.” It is more accurate to say that my writing benefited immensely from the craftsmanship of his exquisitely meticulous and highly intelligent editing. Subsequently, with generosity and sensitivity, as well as with great professional skill, he helped me carry out the difficult task of making the major cuts in the manuscript that the publisher’s page limit required. He also gave the book its double entendre title, In the Field.

It was the editor and writer Anne Fadiman who introduced me to Mr. Whitworth, and recommended that he undertake the editing of my manuscript. I am immensely grateful to her for that.

Judith Watkins incorporated Mr. Whitworth’s penciled editing marks, and mine, into the computerized text; and she also constructed the book’s index. This involved more than countless hours of painstaking work and high technical competence. Throughout the process, she was a constant source of encouragement, and of devoted friendship.

A circle of close friends and colleagues in Philadelphia—Peggy Anderson, Harold Bershady, Tovia and William Freedman, Gail and Allen Glicksman, Mark Gould, Jan Jaeger, Victor Lidz, and Mary Ann Meyers—showed endless interest in the book, and in how it was progressing. They also quelled my anxiety about its autobiographical nature by steadfastly maintaining that it was not unduly egocentric, and that it had potential significance that extended beyond the boundaries of myself.
In the Field

I asked my colleague, Nathan Sivin (the Emeritus Professor of Chinese Culture and of the History of Science at the University of Pennsylvania), if he would check the spelling of the personal and the place names in the chapters of the book that concern my trips to China, and identify any factual or interpretive errors that these chapters contained. He did far more than that. He improved this section of the book by bringing to bear upon it his scholarly knowledge of China, his fluency in Chinese, and his fine ear for literary composition.

In Williamstown, Massachusetts, Olga Shevchenko (a faculty member in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at Williams College), who makes a cameo appearance in the book, followed its development as devotedly as my Philadelphia circle of colleagues and friends. It was her journalist husband, Chris Marcisz, who suggested that I change the wordy and rather pretentious subtitle for the book that I was considering, to the elegantly succinct, A Sociologist’s Journey.

In Bar Harbor, Maine, Judith Swazey, who is one of the two persons to whom I have dedicated this book, and who is a paramount figure within it, read every page of every draft of the manuscript while she was in the midst of writing another book of her own. She brought to bear upon it her special combination of candor, astute criticism, and emotional and moral support.

Finally, because this book is primarily focused on events in my professional life, my sister and brother-in-law, Rosa and Robert Gellert, and my (late) brother and sister-in-law, Howard and Gerry Fox, are mentioned only fleetingly within it. They and their families, however, are important persons in my private life.

Note: I also want to express my more impersonal, but nonetheless great gratitude to the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for the Emeritus Fellowship that it awarded to me in 2004-2005, which contributed both to my material and to my moral support in writing this book.
Introduction
An Ethnography of the Life of a Sociologist

Writing this autobiography has an antecedent. In April 2002, during the month that I spent as a visiting professor at the Tokyo Medical and Dental University, several Japanese colleagues—a historian, a sociologist, a jurist, and an editor-publisher1—organized a series of evening conversations with me. These were structured around their interest in my long career as a sociologist of medicine, my sustained involvement with ethical, as well as social and cultural aspects of health, illness, and medicine, and my relationship to the young field of bioethics. My interlocutors seemed to regard me as a “mother”—even a “grandmother”—of medical sociology, and also as a founding, social scientist figure in U.S. bioethics. They tape-recorded the oral history that they elicited from me, and gave me the chance to lightly edit the transcribed text. It was then translated into Japanese, and published in Tokyo as a small book with a title that in English was equivalent to Looking Intently At Bioethics: Fifty Years as a Medical Sociologist.2

In these conversations, and the text that resulted from them, I began to explore the geographical, social, and historical terrains on which my becoming and being a sociologist has unfolded; its wellsprings; the way of life, especially the teaching and the questing it has entailed; and the influence of a procession of people—not only family and friends, colleagues and students, but also persons whom I have come to know through my research as a fieldworker within the social worlds they inhabit. I spoke of the topics around which my teaching, research, and writing have been centered, and the leitmotifs with which they have been pervaded. It became apparent as we talked that health, illness, and medicine have been media through which I have been able to continually explore social and cultural, and also moral and metaphysical, questions that have come from inside me, as well as from inside the living reality of what I have studied.

***

The autobiography on which I am embarking is a love story in several respects—love of my life as a sociologist, in the classrooms, hospital wards,
clinics, and medical laboratories in which it has unfolded in the United States, the land of my birth, and in all the milieux beyond these in Europe, Africa, and Asia to which it has conveyed me. It is also a love story about my relationship to those who have accompanied me along the mysterious, unlikely, but chosen and committed path I have traveled.

* * *

I have been inclined to think and speak of this as an autobiography. But now, as I stand on the threshold of writing it, I wonder whether it is an autobiography, or a memoir, in the usual senses of those terms. It might be more accurate to call it an *ethnography*—an *ethnography of the life of a sociologist*.3

The primary materials on which it will draw are the vast corpus of my handwritten and typewritten field notes, which encompass and chronicle the entire span of my career, and the inner and outer places to which it has taken me. For, throughout my lifetime as a sociologist, I have been “a perpetual fieldworker and an engaged ethnographer.”4 And even the notes and documents pertaining to the early, pre-professional years of my life that I found in my files, which I shall incorporate into this book, have a participant observation/ethnographic quality to them. Ethnographic research has been “more than a method” for me. It has been a way of life and of being—of “vertical and horizontal” traveling that has carried me “geographically, intellectually, and emotionally to nearby and faraway places,” and transported me into “deep layers of the real lives of real people, into real situations, and into the innermost recesses of my own life and psyche.” It has also “enabled me to move beyond the boundaries of myself and my own native land.”5 Most of the articles and books I have published have been based on such field research, written in the kind of ethnographic literary style that anthropologist Clifford Geertz has characterized as “thickly descriptive,” interpretative, and evocative of “being there,” with the discernable presence and distinctive voice of the author in the text.6

Thinking of this book as another such ethnographic work makes it feel less like a self-absorbed, ego-driven endeavor. It gives me the sense that by making my life as a sociologist the object of study and of narration, I am joining hands, in gratitude, over time and space, with all the persons who have been participating subjects of my research, and who people the pages of what I have written.

Notes

1. The participants in these conversations were Takeshi Sasaki, Professor in the School of Liberal Arts and Sciences of Tokyo Medical and Dental University, Akira Narusawa, Professor on the Faculty of Law of Hosei University, Yasutaka Ichinokawa, Associate Professor in the Department of Advanced Social and International Studies at the University of Tokyo, and Mr. Shogo Morita, Editorial Director of Misuzu Shobo Publishing Company.

3. Ethnography is a qualitative mode of social research that involves prolonged immersion in the field as a participant observer. In this crucial respect it differs from methods of research through which quantitative data are collected more impersonally, at a greater distance from the lived situation.


