

## SIDEWALK

MITCHELL DUNEIER

Social research is concerned with the definition and assessment of social phenomena. Many social phenomena in day-to-day interaction are taken for granted, such as riding on a city bus, the daily routine inside a beauty salon, and children playing on a playground. Social researchers enable us to get inside these diverse social worlds and discover what social forces are at work in creating social life. This selection from Mitchell Duneier's critically acclaimed ethnography, *Sidewalk* (1999), takes us inside the social world of street vendors in New York City. Duneier, a Distinguished Professor of Sociology at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, conveys well the character and complexity of urban life. In this excerpt, Duneier discusses his research questions and the research process he utilized to study urban street vending.

**H**akim Hasan is a book vendor and street intellectual at the busy intersection of Eighth Street, Greenwich Avenue, and the Avenue of the Americas—aka Sixth Avenue. He is a sturdy and stocky five-foot-seven African American, forty-two years old. In the winter, he wears Timberland boots, jeans, a hooded sweatshirt, a down vest, and a Banana Republic baseball cap.

One Thursday in February 1996, an African American man in his mid-thirties came up to Hakim's table and asked for a copy of Alice Walker's book *The Same River Twice*, about her experiences in turning her novel *The Color Purple* into a movie. Hakim was all sold out, but said he would get some more in stock soon.

"When you get some, you let me know," said the man, who worked delivering groceries.

"I'll let you know."

"Because, you see, not only that," said the man, "I've got a friend that loves to read."

"Male or female?" asked Hakim.

"Female. She's like this: when she gets a book in her hand, in another hour it's finished. In other words—like, with me, I'll read maybe . . . five chapters, then I'll put it down 'cause I gotta do something, then maybe I'll come back to it. But with her, she gets into it and goes through the whole

book like that. Boom. And she puts it on the shelf and it's just like brand-new. Like, when it's her birthday or what-have-you, I buy her books, because that's one of the things that she likes. I bought the book *Waiting to Exhale* in paperback, right? Listen to this: when I approached her with the book, the movie was coming out and she said, 'You late! I been read that book!'"

Hakim laughed. "I think she had a point."  
"I said, 'Better late than never.' I wish I read that book before I seen the movie. Now, you can tell me this, Hakim: is it the same thing in the paperback as the hardcover?"

"Yeah, it's just different print."  
"Just different print? Okay. Well, when you get the other book by Alice

Walker, you let me know."

The man made a motion to leave, but then he continued talking.

"Because, you see, what happens is that there are a lot of females . . . authors that are coming out that are making their voices heard. More so than ever black. Even Alice Walker says something about this. It goes deep, man."

"Yeah, I'm gonna read that book by Alice Walker," said Hakim. "I'm gonna read it today."

"Oh, you're gonna read it today?" the man asked, laughing.

"I just finished two books over the weekend. I read at least one book a week," said Hakim.

"I try to tell my son that," said the deliveryman. "If you read one book a week, man, you don't know how much knowledge you can get."

Hakim doesn't just name titles. He knows the contents. I have observed the range and depth of his erudition impress scholars, and have seen him show great patience with uneducated people who are struggling with basic ideas and don't know much about books. He might sit for hours without having a single customer step up to his table; other times the table becomes a social center where men and women debate into the night.

For two years, I lived around the corner from where Hakim sets up. Almost every day, whenever I had time to amble about on the block, I'd visit and listen to the conversations taking place at his table.

At first, Hakim sold what he called "black books," works exclusively by or about blacks. In later years, he became romantically involved with a Filipina book vendor named Alice, who carried used paperback classics and *New York Times* best-sellers, and they merged their vending tables. Now they are on their own again, working side by side. Alice is the only woman who works outside on Sixth Avenue every day, and she has practically raised her daughters and granddaughters there. Whereas Alice tends to be "about business," local residents, workers, and visitors come to Hakim to discuss topics of all kinds, from burning issues of the day to age-old questions.

Not long after we met, I asked Hakim how he saw his role.  
"I'm a public character," he told me.

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"A what?" I asked.

"Have you ever read Jane Jacobs' *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*?" he asked. "You'll find it in there."

I considered myself quite familiar with the book, a classic study of modern urban life published in 1961, and grounded in the author's observations of her own neighborhood, Greenwich Village. But I didn't recall the discussion of public characters. Nor did I realize that Hakim's insight would figure in a central way in the manner in which I would come to see the sidewalk life of this neighborhood. When I got home, I looked it up:

The social structure of sidewalk life hangs partly on what can be called self-appointed public characters. A public character is anyone who is in frequent contact with a wide circle of people and who is sufficiently interested to make himself a public character. A public character need have no special talents or wisdom to fulfill his function—although he often does. He just needs to be present, and there needs to be enough of his counterparts. His main qualification is that he *is* public, that he talks to lots of different people. In this way, news travels that is of sidewalk interest.<sup>1</sup>

Jacobs had modeled her idea of the public character after the local shopkeepers with whom she and her Greenwich Village neighbors would leave their spare keys. These figures could be counted on to let her know if her children were getting out of hand on the street, or to call the police, if a strange-looking person was hanging around for too long: "Storekeepers and other small businessmen are typically strong proponents of peace and order," Jacobs explained. "They hate broken windows and holdups."<sup>2</sup> She also modeled the public character after persons like herself, who distributed petitions on local political issues to neighborhood stores, spreading local news in the process.

Although the idea is meaningful to anyone who has lived in an urban neighborhood where people do their errands on foot, Jacobs did not define her concept except to say, "A public character is anyone who is . . . sufficiently interested to make himself a public character." To clarify, we may consider her opening observation that the social structure "hangs partly" on the public characters. What Jacobs means is that the social context of the sidewalk is patterned in a particular way because of the presence of the public character: his or her actions have the effect of making street life safer, stabler, and more predictable. As she goes on to explain, this occurs because the public character has "eyes upon the street."

Following Jacobs, urban theorists have emphasized what city dwellers in pedestrian areas like Greenwich Village have always known: sidewalk life is crucial because the sidewalk is *the site where a sense of mutual support must be felt among strangers* if they are to go about their lives there together. Unlike most places in the United States, where people do their errands in cars, the people of Greenwich Village do many, if not most, of their errands by walking. The neighborhood's sidewalk life matters deeply to residents and

visitors alike. Jacobs emphasized that social contact on the sidewalks must take place within a context of mutual respect for appropriate limits on interaction and intimacy. This made for interactive pleasantness, adding up to "an almost unconscious assumption of general street support when the chips are down."<sup>3</sup> The Village's "eyes upon the street," in Jacobs' famous dictum, indicated that residents and strangers were safe and consequently produced safety in fact.

Greenwich Village looked very different forty years ago, when Jane Jacobs was writing her classic book. Much of the architecture remains, and many people still live the way Jacobs' descriptions suggest; but there is another, more marginal population on these streets: poor black men who make their lives on the Village sidewalks. The presence of such people today means that pedestrians handle their social boundaries *in situ*, whereas, in the past, racial segregation and well-policed skid-row areas kept the marginal at bay.

In this [excerpt], I will offer a framework for understanding the changes that have taken place on the sidewalk over the past four decades. In asking *why* the sidewalk life has changed in this affluent neighborhood, I provide the context and point of departure for my research. It has changed because the concentration of poverty in high poverty zones has produced social problems of a magnitude that cannot be contained by even the most extreme forms of social control and exclusion. Many people living and/or working on Sixth Avenue come from such neighborhoods. Some were among the first generation of crack users, and so were affected by the war on those who use the drug and the failure of prisons to help them prepare for life after released. Some, under new workfare rules, have lost their benefits when they refused to show up to work as "the Mayor's slave."

In asking *how* the sidewalk life works today, I begin by looking at the lives of the poor (mainly) black men who work and/or live on the sidewalks of an upper-middle-class neighborhood. Unlike Hakim, who has an apartment in New Jersey, magazine vendors like Ishmael Walker are without a home; the police throw their merchandise, vending tables, clothes, and family photos in the back of a garbage truck when they leave the block to relieve themselves. Mudrick Hayes and Joe Garbage "lay shit out" on the ground (merchandise retrieved from the trash) to earn their subsistence wages. Keith Johnson sits in his wheelchair by the door of the automated teller machine and panhandles.

How do these persons live in a moral order? How do they have the ingenuity to do so in the face of exclusion and stigmatization on the basis of race and class? How does the way they do so affront the sensibilities of the working and middle classes? How do their acts intersect with a city's mechanisms to regulate its public spaces?

The people making lives on Sixth Avenue depend on one another for social support. The group life upon which their survival is contingent is crucial to those who do not rely on religious institutions or social service agencies. For some of these people, the informal economic life is a substitute for

illegal ways of supporting excessive drug use. For others, informal modes of self-help enable them to do things most citizens seek to achieve by working: to support families, others in their community, or themselves. For still others, the informal economy provides a forum where they can advise, mentor, and encourage one another to strive to live in accordance with standards of moral worth.

Yet the stories of these sidewalks cannot ultimately serve as sociological romance, celebrating how people on the streets "resist" the larger structures of society. The social order these relationships carve out of what seems to be pure chaos, powerful as its effects are, still cannot control many acts that affront the sensibilities of local residents and passersby. How can we comprehend types of behavior such as sidewalk sleeping, urinating in public, selling stolen goods, and entangling passersby in unwanted conversations? What factors engender and sustain such behavior? How can we understand the processes that lead many people to regard those who engage in such acts as "indecent"? How do the quantity and quality of their "indecent" make them different from conventional passersby?

One of the greatest strengths of firsthand observation is also its greatest weakness. Through a careful involvement in people's lives, we can get a fix on how their world works and how they see it. But the details can be misleading if they distract us from the forces that are less visible to the people we observe but which influence and sustain the behaviors.<sup>4</sup> How do economic, cultural, and political factors contribute to make these blocks a habitat—a place where poor people can weave together complementary elements to organize themselves for subsistence? And how do such forces contribute to bringing these men to the sidewalk in the first place?

I look at all these aspects of sidewalk life in a setting where government retrenchment on welfare is keenly felt, as is the approbation of influential business groups. When government does assume responsibility in the lives of people like these, it attempts to eradicate them from the streets or to shape their behavior. These "social controls"—e.g., cutting down on the space for vending or throwing vendors' belongings in the back of garbage trucks—are the intended and unintended results of what has become the most influential contemporary idea about deviance and criminality: the "broken windows" theory, which holds that minor signs of disorder lead to serious crime. What are the consequences of this theory, its assumptions, and the formal social controls to which it has led?

In trying to understand the sidewalk life, I refer to an area of about three city blocks. Here we can see the confluence of many forces: some global (deindustrialization), some national (stratification of race and class and gender), some local (restrictive and punitive policies toward street vendors). Here, also, are blocks which can be studied in light of Jane Jacobs' earlier account and which contain the kinds of social problems that have become iconic in representations of the city's "quality of life" crisis. My visits to some other New York neighborhoods<sup>5</sup> and some other American cities suggest that they, too, have tensions surrounding inequalities and cultural differences in dense pedestrian

areas. Across the country, liberals have voted to elect moderate, "law and order" mayors, some of them Republican. Whereas disorderly-conduct statutes were once enough, anti-panhandling statutes have been passed in Seattle, Atlanta, Cincinnati, Dallas, Washington, D.C., San Francisco, Santa Barbara, Long Beach, Philadelphia, New Haven, Raleigh, and Baltimore.

Yet New York City and Greenwich Village are unique in a multitude of ways. I certainly cannot hope to account for life in the majority of places, which have not seen severe sidewalk tensions in dense pedestrian districts; even many places that *have* seen such tensions are different from Greenwich village.<sup>6</sup> Nor can I hope to show how the sidewalk works in low-income neighborhoods where the majority of tense sidewalk interactions occur among members of the same class or racial group. In the end, I must leave it to readers to test my observations against their own, and hope that the concepts I have developed to make sense of this neighborhood will prove useful in other venues.

I gained entrée to this social world when I became a browser and customer at Hakim's table in 1992. Through my relationship with him, I came to know others in the area. He introduced me to unhoused and formerly unhoused people who scavenge and sell on the street, as well as other vendors who compete with him for sidewalk space and access to customers. These relations then led me to panhandlers, some of whom also sometimes scavenge and vend.

Once I was in the network, contacts and introductions took place across the various spheres. Eventually, I worked as a general assistant—watching vendors' merchandise while they went on errands, buying up merchandise offered in their absence, assisting on scavenging missions through trash and recycling bins, and "going for coffee." Then I worked full-time as a magazine vendor and scavenger during the summer of 1996, again for three days a week during the summer of 1997 and during part of the fall of 1997. I also made daily visits to the blocks during the summer of 1998, often for hours at a time, and worked full-time as a vendor for two weeks in March 1999, when my research came to an end.

Although in race, class, and status I am very different from the men I write about, I was myself eventually treated by them as a fixture of the blocks, occasionally referred to as a "scholar" or "professor," which is my occupation. My designation was Mitch. This seemed to have a variety of changing meanings, including a naïve white man who could himself be exploited for "loans" of small change and dollar bills; a Jew who was going to make a lot of money off the stories of people working the streets; a white writer who was trying to "state the truth about what was going on." . . .

My continual presence as a vendor provided me with opportunities to observe life among the people working and/or living on the sidewalk, including their interactions with passersby. This enabled me to draw many of my conclusions about what happens on the sidewalk from incidents I myself witnessed, rather than deriving them from interviews. Often I simply asked questions while participating and observing.

Sometimes, when I wanted to understand how the local political system had shaped these blocks, I did my interviews at the offices of Business Improvement Districts, politicians, and influential attorneys. I also questioned police officers, pedestrians, local residents, and the like. I carried out more than twenty interviews with people working the sidewalk in which I explicitly asked them to tell me their "story." These sessions, held on street corners, in coffee shops, and on subway platforms, lasted between two and six hours. I paid the interviewees fifty dollars when their sessions were over, as compensation for time they could have spent selling or panhandling. Throughout the book, I try to be clear about the kind of research from which a quotation has been culled.

After I had been observing on the block for four years, Ovie Carter, an African American photojournalist who has been taking pictures of the inner city for three decades, agreed to take photographs to illustrate the things I was writing about. He visited the blocks year-round and came to know the people in the book intimately. Ovie's photographs helped me to see things that I had not noticed, so that my work has now been influenced by his.

After three years passed, I believed I had a strong sense of the kinds of events and conversations that were typical on the blocks. In the next two years of this research, my field methods evolved to the point where intense use was made of a tape recorder. The tape recorder was on throughout my days on the block, usually kept in a milk crate under my vending table. People working and/or living on the sidewalk became accustomed to the machine and, after being exposed to it over a period of weeks, came to talk in ways that I determined to be like the talk I had heard before. Since the machine was taping on a public street, I hoped that I was not violating any expectation of privacy if it picked up the words of people who couldn't efficiently be informed that it was on. I have since received permission to quote almost all the people who were taped without their knowledge. When names are used, they are real ones, and I do so with consent. In those few cases when this is not possible (such as incidents involving police officers whose speech was recorded by my microphone without their knowing it), I have not used names at all or have indicated that a name is false.

I am committed to the idea that the voices of the people on Sixth Avenue need to be heard. To that end, my goal has been to assure the reader that what appears between quotation marks is a reasonably reliable record of what was said. (Some quotes have been edited slightly to make them more concise.) When the best I could do was rely on my memory or notes, quotation marks are not used. I have come to believe that this is perhaps especially necessary when a scholar is writing about people who occupy race and class positions widely divergent from his or her own, for the inner meanings and logics embodied in language that is distinctive to those positions can easily be misunderstood and misrepresented if not accurately reproduced. Furthermore, the increasingly popular practice of creating composite characters, and

combining events and quotations sometimes occurring months or years apart, is *not* employed here. No characters have been combined. No events have been reordered.

Some of the people on the street volunteered to "manage" the taping themselves, leaving the tape recorder on while wearing it in their pockets, resting it on their table when I was away from the scene or out of town. Such acts demonstrated the desire of persons in [my research] to ask their own questions, have their own topics addressed and recognized, and enable them to hear some things that went on when I could not be present. Sometimes they used the machine to interview one another and gave me the tapes. Given the knowledge Hakim had of both Jane Jacobs' work (which he respected me to reread) and the life of these sidewalks, I asked him to respond to this [research]. He took time out of his daily grind as a vendor to write an afterword.

There was another way in which the vendors, scavengers, and panhandlers worked with me as collaborators. I invited some of them to classes to teach my students, in both Santa Barbara and Wisconsin. And I asked all of them to judge my own "theories" of the local scene when the book was complete, though always indicating that, while respecting their interpretations, I would not be bound by them. Throughout [my research], it is I who have selected the material presented, and I take responsibility for the interpretations that go along with that material. For twenty-one people who figure prominently on the blocks, I have now made a commitment to return the advance and a share of any royalties or other forms of income that the book might yield.

Like all observers, I have my subjectivities. I know that scrupulous adherence to rules of method will not lead necessarily to objective truth. I believe that what is most important is that I try to help the reader recognize the lens through which the reality is refracted. I have written a statement of method to that end, and throughout [my research] I endeavor to explain my procedures for selecting data and my own biases and uncertainties about the inferences I draw.

Fieldwork is presumed to require trust. But one never can know for certain that he or she has gained such trust, given the absence of any agreed-upon indicator of what "full" trust would look like. In this case, I think some level of trust was shown by people's readiness to provide access to information, settings, and activities of the most intimate sort. They sometimes revealed illegal activities or actions which, if others knew of them, might result in violent retribution.

But . . . there were times when the trust I thought I had developed was nothing more than an illusion: deep suspicion lingered despite an appearance of trust. In some cases, perhaps it always will. Surely it takes more than goodwill to transcend distrust that comes out of a complex history. Though participant observers often remark on the rapport they achieve and how they are seen by the people they write about, in the end it is best to be humble about such things, because one never really knows.



## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage, 1961), p. 68.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>4</sup>For an excellent statement, see Stephen Steinberg, "The Urban Villagers: Thirty Years Later," remarks prepared for a plenary session at meeting of the Eastern Sociology Society, Boston, March 25, 1993.

<sup>5</sup>For an excellent collection of ethnographies of the East Village, see Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *From Urban Village to "East Village": The Battle for New York's Lower East Side* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994); for an excellent ethnography of the political culture of Corona, with reference to quality-of-life discourse among working-class blacks in Queens, see Steven Gregory, *Black Corona: Race and the Politics of Place in an Urban Community* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

<sup>6</sup>For a comprehensive analysis, see Lyn H. Lofland, *The Public Realm* (Hawthorne, NY: Aldine De Gruyter, 1998).