William A. Corsaro

Bill Corsaro’s distinguished career began as an undergraduate at IU, where he majored in sociology and earned a B.A. with honors. Having grown up in Indianapolis, Bill first tried a year at Purdue, but quickly came to his senses and moved to IU. Bill left IU for graduate studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he worked with two giants of social psychology and life course studies, Leonard Cottrell and Glen Elder, studying child socialization and child culture. After earning his Ph.D., Bill took a postdoctoral fellowship at the Child Study Center at the University of California, Berkeley, and then returned to IU in 1974 as assistant professor of sociology, rising through the ranks to become the Robert H. Shaffer Class of 1967 Endowed Chair. Although Bill has spent almost his entire life in Indiana, his research is truly global. His ethnographic sites included a nursery school at Berkeley, a Head Start Program in Indianapolis, and preschools in Italy and Norway. His work has defined the sociological study of childhood worldwide and has been influential in shaping educational practices and policies in Brazil, Italy, Norway, and the United States.

Bill is a pioneer. He continues to shape what is now a flourishing area of inquiry: the study of children. Bill’s mentor, Glen Elder, has noted that when Bill launched his dissertation work, sociologists did not take childhood seriously as a topic of study, viewing it largely as the domain of developmental psychologists. Bill has been instrumental in moving the study of children from an esoteric topic to a major subfield. In doing so, he also reframed how we think about that topic. To the extent that sociological theories entertained ideas about children at all, they did so through the lens of adult socialization, viewing children as empty vessels waiting to be molded as they matured into adults. Through his concepts of “interpretive reproduction” and “peer culture,” Bill has shown us that adult ideas are not written onto children’s minds, but rather are actively interpreted by children as they play and interact with one another. Bill’s approach to childhood is fundamentally sociological: What matters is how kids manufacture their own peer culture out of materials they borrow from adults or create on their own. Bill’s work has always been a model of interdisciplinarity, drawing from and informing fields of education, human development, psychology, and linguistics, long before it was popular or common to do so.

Bill has also pioneered how we study children. He is an ethnographer, in and of itself a rarity in mainstream sociology when Bill began his studies of children. Doing ethnography well requires that one become a part of the culture being studied, but for an adult researcher, gaining genuine access to the world of children is no easy matter. During his earliest studies at a nursery school in Berkeley, he became known as “Big Bill” among the children, who came to see him as just another playmate, despite his obvious bigness (and his recording equipment). Later, during field studies at a scuola materna (preschool) in Modena, Italy, Bill was able to exploit his nonnative grasp of the Italian language: the children would laugh at his grammatical mistakes, and correct them. In both instances, Bill was able to get inside children’s culture, to see the world as they are making it. Bill continues to get notes, pictures, and updates from the children he has watched grow up. His experiences working with children and his success in gaining entry to their worlds have served as models for ethnographers from multiple generations.

Bill has also been a pioneer in the sociology department. He arrived in the mid-1970s amid a cohort of new young sociologists who were, in Bernice Pescosolido’s words, “rebels with a cause” and engaged in “a serious project of institutional social change,” as well as a few pranks. Bill served as department chair from 1990 to 1994 and as interim chair in 2009, but his leadership and impact on the department spanned his entire tenure at IU. The department Bill joined in 1974 had a longstanding reputation as one of the world’s best for quantitative methodology. Not only did Bill help to establish it as an equally strong department for qualitative methodology, but he did so in a way that was unheard of within the landscape of sociology at the time; he made it a place where colleagues using different types of data and different methodologies spoke to (not yelled at) one another and even read, informed, and evaluated one another’s work. Bill understood that good research is good research. As someone who is deeply committed to outstanding teaching, and the first in our department to be awarded a university teaching award, Bill set an example, establishing the expectation that faculty become outstanding teachers as well as scholars. Finally, Bill has been instrumental in nurturing a strong culture of respect, fairness, and support throughout the department.

What makes Bill most angry is pretense and hypocrisy. He is a friend to many, generous with his encouragement, fiercely supportive of his graduate students, and ever so modest about his abundant scholarly achievements.

Eliza Pavalko and Tom Gieryn