

An Interview with Dr. Marcus Britton
Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
Dr. Marcus Britton talks about Research, Urban Sociology, and Balance

**Interviewed by Meghan McDonald, Doctoral Student in Urban Studies,
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee**

Megan McDonald: Ok, today I am talking with Marcus Britton, Assistant Professor with Sociology and Urban Studies. Thank you for taking the time to talk to me today.

Dr. Marcus Britton: My pleasure.

M: Alright. So, thinking about your academic trajectory to UWM, let's start at the beginning. What was your first college major?

B: I was an English major, as an undergraduate, and I got my B.A. degree at Kalamazoo College, a small liberal arts college in southern Michigan. Yeah, I was an English major. I did become very interested in political theory. I took a couple of courses in the Political Science Department... I was still an undergraduate, and it certainly informed my trajectory in important ways, but I was an English major.

M: Ok, great. And, I guess, I'm also kind of wondering how you came to the place where you were interested in conducting research and doing graduate work.

B: Well, again, I took of these political theory courses, in particular a couple, Professor Kiren, uh... it's actually kind of disturbing. In any case, I took these political theory courses and found them interesting and became involved with this thing called the Monroe Academy, which was basically an informal faculty/student discussion group, where we would read various works of political theory and philosophy... and kind of get to know a couple of the faculty, both in Political Science, English, and Philosophy, who were involved in that group. Basically, they encouraged me to go to Graduate School and I spent a couple of years, after I finished my... undergraduate degree studying in Germany.

I got a fellowship from an organization called the Hans Seidel Foundation, which is sometimes referred to as a 'political education foundation,' which has mildly ominous... but, it's sort of an arm of one of the political parties in Germany, all of the mutual political parties have them and they sponsor students from all over the world to study in Germany. And, that's where I took my first sociology courses as a student in Leipzig, which is the city where I studied, so it was a combination of that experience and a more personal engagement with these faculty as an undergraduate that led to it, I guess...

It took an enormous, long time to figure out what research actually meant, much less what my specific research interests were, but that kind of sent me on a professional, academic/intellectual trajectory, I guess.

M: Yeah, and the faculty, student discussion group sounds like a great opportunity to get more face-time...

B: Yeah... yeah, it was great... It was called the Monroe Academy, because it was on the corner of Monroe and Academy Streets, and it's where one of the philosophy professors lived and he and this... I can't remember her name... political scientist, who specialized in political theory and one of the faculty from the English department were all active participants in that. A lot of it, frankly, consisted of them arguing with each other and students there sitting in awe of these heady intellectual discussions they were having, and it went a long way of getting excited about academic work.

M: And, are you from the Midwest?

B: I am. I'm from Upper Michigan, actually.

M: Ok, so, moving further along in your academic history... Judging by the title, your dissertation appears to be an interdisciplinary study? I was guessing...

B: You can say that. So, I got my PhD. at Northwestern through what was then called the joint program of sociology of organizational behavior. The organizational behavior department, actually, switched over the management and organizations over the course of my graduate studies; but in any case, it was interdisciplinary in a sense that management and organizations had faculty from sociology, psychology, and, sort of broadly, management backgrounds and that definitely did inform my dissertation topic, which was about spatial organization of the commercial banking industry, and how that's related to where commercial banks market their services and make loans in large metropolitan areas.

But, my advisor was Brian Uzzi, who is a pretty well known economic sociologist and since the mid-1980s, there has been a kind of resurgence of interest in economic issues, organizations, especially, from the standpoint of studying business organizations. There has been a resurgence of that in sociology. So, it was certainly interdisciplinary work, but with a strong sociological bent, also. I did have a financial economist on my dissertation committee.

M: Right, so I think that answered a second part of the question there. So, I notice on the Sociology Website that you have a wide range of research interests. There is economic sociology, like we were just mentioning, and also racial segregation, and all sorts of things. Do you find that, embarking on this, you know, becoming an established member of the University community, is that an asset? Is it a drawback, because people would pigeonhole you?

B: Well, (laughs), that is a good question. I wouldn't say it is necessarily an asset. That's also somehow a misleading depiction of what my research interests are. Not in the sense that I am not interested in all of those things, but in the sense that you look at interests in the Marxist

sense, right – so, interests, as something you have an economic interest in, that I am basically building my career. I'm doing urban sociology, stuff that has to do with residential segregation, and I do retain an interest in economic sociology and in organizations, work on organizations, but that's mainly at this point reflected in the courses that I teach, rather than things I am actively doing research on. That could change. When and if I end up getting tenure, but... I mean, I think, there is some value in getting some very different perspectives on sociology by sort of dabbling in different subfields, and that sort of thing, but when it comes to becoming a tenured professor, having a pretty narrow focus, ultimately becomes, if not absolutely necessary than it makes life easier because it's a lot of work to master all the work even in a very, very small subfield.

M: And, also, as a warning, some of these will be overlapping questions. Your publications are rather rich, both, in terms of methodologies and content, and just as you were saying, I can imagine that some research questions necessitate certain research questions. But, specifically, do you actively relate ethnographic approaches to qualitative, or is it just: This is my research question, what are the tools that I'm going to employ?

B: Well, you know, I have published one piece that takes an ethnographic approach.

M: Which Pat Goldsmith assigns in research...

B: Yes, right... And, you know, I have a great fondness for that piece, because I think it is one of the more interesting things I've published. But, realistically, that is probably the only qualitative piece that I will ever publish, at least until after I have tenure, because today I have become a... I have gone over to the 'dark side,' as I like to say, and I have become a number cruncher, so almost all of my work these days has to do with fiscal analysis, so either survey data or some kind of archival data. I think there is enormous value in sort of mixed methods approaches and above the level of the individual research project and the individual researcher. I think the field really benefits from having a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods, and different kinds of both. But, increasingly, I have become keenly aware that my competitive advantage is not in doing ethnographic work.

M: How did you become interested in political science and urban dynamics, as an area of research?

B: Well, there are a few things involved. I grew up in a very small town. As I said, I am from the Upper-Peninsula of Michigan and I basically grew up in the country, about 10 miles from the nearest tiny village of 500 people, Rapid River, Michigan. And, when I went off to college as an undergraduate and even more so as I had to live in German cities and US cities as a graduate student, I was very struck by, both in good ways and bad ways... I was very disturbed in many ways by sprawl, just because it seemed very ugly and inhospitable to me, but I was very engaged by some of the bigger cities I was exposed to, Leipzig, Chicago, and other places. So, I think it largely developed out of an interest in that. Or out of, you know, the very stark contrast between that and the kind of environment that I've kind of grown up in. But then from more practical

standpoint, I took a graduate seminar in urban sociology, which I really liked with Albert Hunter at Northwestern, who became my advisors.

And, then when I went off to Houston as a post-doc, after I finished my PhD, I needed a job and I was able to get this post-doc position by proposing to do some research on issues having to do with residential integration and inter-ethnic friendship, so it was sort of a practical matter, in terms of my specific focus, that was, you know, largely a... I had this ethnographic work in school that also focused on a racially and ethnically diverse neighborhood on the North-side of Chicago, and I was concerned with how that influenced the dynamics of social interaction between folks from different backgrounds. So, it kind of grew out of that, as well, cemented by the practical necessity of needing to have a project for this post-doc.

M: Can you say a bit about conducting research, whether it is quantitative, or historical, or field research, when you were a PhD student?

B: Sure, as I mentioned, I came to graduate study without a lot of practical experience with research, so I had... what had gotten me excited about it was about doing academic work more generally, was reading philosophy and political theory. So frankly, it took me a little while to sort of get the hang of it and develop a realistic sense of what was really involved in doing research. I think that one of the most challenging aspects of it for me as a graduate student and it has continued to be somewhat true, although I think I'm... starting to get the hang of it as a member of faculty, is just sort of managing the competing demands from different... time, from different projects, and a couple of things that I spent a significant amount of time on in graduate school that never really went anywhere. So, learning how not to let that happen has been, I guess, one of the most important and one of the most difficult lessons that I learned about actually doing research as a graduate student. I don't know if that answers your question.

M: Specifically, well, with 'My Regular Spot' study, I know this was published by the time you were already in Houston, but it's based on Chicago, but it's not your dissertation work, so I was just wondering if you had multiple projects going, or was there some beautiful way that it somehow happened...?

B: (Laughs) I wouldn't describe it as beautiful; it was decidedly... I don't know about ugly, but it was messy. Let's put it that way. The 'My Regular Spot' piece actually grew out of a project that... I took a qualitative methods course with noted ethnographer Gary Fine (spelling). I think it was, actually, my very first year of graduate school and one of the requirements of that course was that you actually went out and did a relatively short-term ethnographic project. I got really constructive and enthusiastic feedback about that, once I finished it up at the end of the semester and, you know, finished up a first draft from that project, after my first semester.

And, then, returned to it periodically over the next couple of years, always with this notion that I was going to do more with it than I actually did. Then, I finally threw up my hands and sent it in. It needed a lot of work, in terms of how I have set it up and how the data was presented, analyzed, and everything. But, you know, it was just a matter of getting the ball rolling, when it came down to it. That, actually, extended into the final draft, which I didn't write until I was a post-doc at Rice. So, that was published my first year, around the time, that I started here. It

was a matter of going back and forth between that project and my dissertation work... And then the other thing was... I did this quantitative analysis of hospital and orphanage location, I did with another professor in the business school. So, I was sort of juggling those three things. I'm not sure that's necessarily the best possible approach, but you know, at least two of the three ultimately ended up getting published. I haven't published anything from my dissertation work.

M: So... (laughs)... My next question was about tips on balancing. Time... Perhaps, it gets easier or you figure out how many to tackle at once?

B: Well, I think the big thing is that the more experience you get the more you realize how much goes into each publication. You become, in my case, reluctantly willing to accept that you can only take so much on at a time. And that forces you to be much more focused. I think that one can learn that a little faster than I did and that's probably not a bad thing.

M: Also, more specifically, I was actually looking for tips on balancing research and structure responsibilities, and one's personal life. So, there may be overlap with what you just said, but if there's anything else...?

B: Do you mean as a graduate student, specifically? Or, just in general?

M: Just in general. I was having a conversation with someone on the editorial staff and we were thinking about how we feel stretched. We can imagine it's worse for faculty. But, at the same time, we want you all to be whole and sound, so you can guide us...

B: Well, balancing teaching, research, and personal life, does not get any easier. The teaching aspect of it eventually, you start to get the hang of that, so it's not quite as... Once, you've prepped a few courses. That certainly does become easier. Fortunately, there is no magic bullet there... it's just a matter of slogging through sometimes. One of the great things about this profession is that you have enormous amount of flexibility, but that's also a double-edged sword, so... The trick is to put in enough time when you need to, but also just not get so burned out, that you find yourself sitting in the office for hours on end – and you are not actually getting that much done, but rather feeling frustrated and burnt out, like you still need to be there. It doesn't get a lot easier, but it's just a matter of slogging through, I think.

M: Your graduate work was in Chicago and you spent time in Houston as a post-doc, two rich, large urban studies. Now that you are in Milwaukee, do you plans to make use of our urban studying?

B: (Laughs) I do... Whether those plans will come to fruition before I have tenure or not is a very different question. Heeju Shin, my colleague in the Soc. Department, and I have explored some opportunities to work with the Milwaukee Public Health Department to do some work on the relationship between residential segregation, neighborhood conditions, and birth outcomes. So, things like, premature birth, infant mortality, etc. I think what we're finding is that may be a post tenure project. I'm very eager to do some work on Milwaukee; it's obviously a rich and important setting, specifically, when it comes to issues around residential segregation, given the

extreme racial inequality that we have in Milwaukee. But, just the way the timing has worked out, I probably won't get to that until after tenure.

M: My last question: What other research plans are on the horizon for you?

B: A number of projects are ongoing. I'm in the process of revising, resubmitting some work with Pat Goldsmith that looks at the racial composition of the neighborhood, where you lived as a teenager and where you lived as a young adult. That's getting pretty close to getting published, so we are finishing that up. I have another piece that extends work I have already done on inter-ethnic integration and friendship that I've done in Houston. It focuses specifically on Latinos and uses that, specifically, as a lens to look at the literature on spacial assimilation, which is basically the notion that we should see Latinos end up in affluent, relatively white neighborhoods, as they become more assimilated over time, across generations. So, that's something I hope to finish up this year.

And as, I've mentioned, Heeju Shin and I are doing some work on the relationship between residential segregation and birth outcomes. The piece we are working on so far looks at the metropolitan level... on the order of some 300 metropolitan areas around the country. It doesn't have a specific, local focus, as does the Milwaukee Health Department data that I have mentioned, but we are hoping to finish that up by the end of the year or the beginning of next year. Then, I also started some research in Germany last year. I spent a week at the German Institute for Economic Research and worked with the German Socio-Economic Data Panel, with a co-author there, named Jan Goebel, someone who works at the center... That will explore the relationship between, racial, ethnic, and immigrant diversity in large German Cities and how much social contact there is between folks from... that live in the neighborhood. It's a fairly full plate for the next couple of years.

M: I would say so. Thank you for your time. And we will look forward to those publications. Speaking on behalf of Urban Studies Graduate students, we're glad to have you.

B: Good!

M: Thank you, Marcus.

B: Sure thing.