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On the occasion of the American Sociological Association's centennial, The Chronicle asked seven sociologists to discuss what attracted them to the field, what they consider to be the discipline's fortes and failings, and where they'd like to see it go from here.

SOCIOLOGISTS ON SOCIETY

Science From a Feminist Standpoint

By **BARBARA J. RISMAN**

Like many baby boomers, I came into sociology to change the world. But once in graduate school, I was told that my new profession was a value-free science, and that the appropriate measure of success was the number of articles published per year and how often they're cited. Engagement with the world beyond the ivory tower was not part of the job description.

Perhaps I was naïve to believe that sociology was the best way to change the world, but I have come to understand that it is even more naïve to accept a definition of science that presumes that values could be irrelevant to how we frame intellectual inquiry or interpret empirical evidence. I have tried to straddle the line by bringing my ethical commitments to scientific research.

I came to sociology because I wanted to understand the oppression of women. I had discovered patriarchy quite painfully in Judaism. I had a bat mitzvah in 1968 and was appalled at the pale imitation of the boys' ritual that was offered to girls. In that now-historical era, women were not allowed to read from the Torah, the core ritual that symbolically marks coming of age. I was deeply insulted and heard that famous feminist "click." As an undergraduate at Northwestern University, I channeled my feminism into action. The Equal Rights Amendment was hot and the Chicago Women's Liberation Union an exciting activist hub. We held strike days and successfully agitated for Northwestern's Program on Women, a precursor to women's and gender studies. My friends and I debated the origins of patriarchy as if the origins really mattered, as we ignored the state battle for the ERA as an issue that was too liberal (as in not radical enough).

The ERA went down, with Illinois a crucial loss. I was shaken. I needed to understand how women could act against their own equality. My sociology "click" was the realization that you cannot change something if you do not understand how it is socially constructed and sustained. I didn't understand many of the women around me, and I needed to.

I changed my major before ever having taken a sociology course. I knew that the professor hired to direct Northwestern's Program on Women, Arlene Kaplan Daniels, was both a feminist and a sociologist. Role models matter. I was hired as her editorial assistant for the journal *Social Problems* and discovered that you could make a living thinking, writing, and teaching about the social problem of inequality. I never looked back.

But most sociologists were not equally committed to engagement with the world. The men who ran the show -- and they were nearly all men -- still taught that serious scholars were not passionate about social justice. While I learned the value-neutral theory of science in methodology courses in grad school, my mentors at the University of Washington, Pepper Schwartz and Philip Blumstein, studied relationships in gay couples as well as straight ones. The simple decision to treat gay couples as legitimate respondents was, of course, hardly science without values. But then, excluding couples who are same-sex would hardly be science without values, either.

Sociology has changed a lot in the past two decades. Public sociology, or taking the discipline beyond academe, is winning legitimacy. The American Sociological Association now gives annual awards to academics and journalists for increasing the public's understanding of sociology. Yet there is still an unspoken hierarchy in the profession. The most prestigious academics publish only in scientific journals or write research monographs. To care too much about taking sociology outside academe or about one's teaching still marks one as a less-serious scholar.

My own career shows that it is possible to write both for other scholars and for popular audiences -- to discuss theory, test hypotheses, contribute to scientific journals, and work with journalists. Much of my own work has tested explanations for gender inequality in families. We cannot change what we do not understand. Theoretical and empirical works must be accomplished inside sociology before we have anything to take "public." We must understand how gender inequality is re-created in daily life -- the relative weight of childhood socialization, interactional expectations, and discrimination. No one can successfully intervene in the construction of social inequality, whether around race, ethnicity, sexuality, or gender, without understanding how it is re-created in every generation.

I believe we have an ethical obligation to share our expertise with the public. Toward that end, I am a co-chair of the Council on Contemporary Families. Its mission is to bring research and clinical expertise about families and relationships to the public conversation. We work with the news media to help journalists find the person doing the research most appropriate to inform a given story. We also proactively translate important research and clinical expertise into nontechnical terms by issuing white papers and policy analyses.

As sociology enters its second century, we must value and encourage diverse approaches to the discipline. We always need more and better professional research, published in traditional venues. But we also need to validate other aspects of the profession. Sociologists reach more citizens in their classrooms than anywhere else. We need more attention to and more rewards for the scholarship of teaching and learning. We also must effectively bring sociology outside our classrooms, to give back to our communities.

Only very recently, I have come to realize that my passion for sociology as well as for feminism can be traced to my Jewish roots. Sociology is my way to contribute to society, to do *tikkun olam*, Hebrew for "heal the world." I come to sociology, without apology, from a commitment to social justice. My small contribution to making the world a better place is to study and teach others about how injustice is produced in everyday life. My passion for arguing about the meaning of words, my respect for intellectual pursuits, and my belief that study is most effective inside a supportive community all reflect Jewish tradition. I marvel that I have the good fortune to be able to earn my living studying, teaching, learning, and writing about inequality. And I still believe that understanding how inequality is produced is a necessary step if we are to create a more just society.

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