Introduction

*Contexts* plays a unique role in the American Sociological Association. Founded in 2002, the magazine’s goal is to take the best ideas that sociology has to offer and present them to the public. In its relatively short existence, *Contexts* has succeeded. Every issue offers articles that address important public policy issues, reviews cutting edge sociology, and articulates critical perspectives on popular culture. When preparing their courses, many, if not most, sociologists have asked themselves, “Can I assign a *Contexts* article to help students understand this topic?” The answer is often a resounding “yes.” Not surprisingly, *Contexts* has been recognized for its contributions to social science publishing.

We propose to build on this tradition of excellence in scholarship and public communication. If given the chance to become editors of *Contexts*, we believe that we can further develop the magazine as a tool for bringing sociology to the general public. By focusing on content that will resonate with a general audience and expanding its online presence, we believe that *Contexts* can develop an identity beyond the world of academic sociology. In this proposal, we review what *Contexts* and its previous editors have accomplished and what might be done in the future.

Building on Success

For the last decade and a half, *Contexts* has grown into a unique publication that bridges the academy and the public. When it started, the magazine was limited to print. By 2016, it has developed a notable web presence. Throughout its entire publication run, *Contexts* has produced many articles that have become widely discussed and cited. The *Contexts Reader* is a common feature in many sociology courses. *Contexts* is also known throughout the profession for its “style.” The articles tell great stories while retaining vital scholarly content. For the past few years, Ali and Cohen have taken *Contexts* to new heights. One of the potential editors was fortunate to have a front row seat by seeing how the magazine ran and the ways that graduate students were involved in its success. We will continue this record of excellence.

Bringing Sociology into the Public Sphere

At the same time, there is room for growth and opportunities for innovation. What we find most interesting is that there is not a “voice of sociology” in the world of magazines aimed at influencing the educated public. For example, the leading lights of literature often debate in forums such as *The New York Review of Books* and the *Times Literary Supplement*. Many crucial debates over international relations occur in *Foreign Affairs* and *Dissent*. Political scientists have their own dedicated blog at *The Washington Post*, “The Monkey Cage,” and *The New York Times* now hosts a widely read data science blog called “The Upshot.” While sociologists do occasionally write for these forums, the “sociological brand” is not well represented in this media landscape. Rarely do readers outside the academy look to a single publication for the
“sociological take” on a topic even though sociology has much to offer on issues of great importance such as crime, family, and the economy. We believe that Contexts can cultivate a position of intellectual leadership in American public discourse.

The success of these outlets suggests that it is important to focus on the following issues. First, a periodical must have strong focus on developing content that can’t be ignored. A lead article in Foreign Affairs, for example, attracts attention because the authors tend to be respected in their fields and they are able to effectively communicate the urgency of their issue. Second, the contributors to the periodical must have a strong academic and public voice. Rather than being mere translators for well-vetted research, the writers of these periodicals must stake a position that has important implications. A drawback of much academic writing is that writers tend to confuse prudence with wordiness and are overly cautious in drawing attention to the practical implications of their research. Instead, writers of more public periodicals need to be measured but direct. We believe that a consistent focus on strong writing and important topics will allow Contexts to become the magazine that brings sociology to a wider audience.

Innovations

We envision three primary innovations to build upon what previous editors, particularly Ali and Cohen, have done. First, we will solicit authors for a Great Researchers and Writers thematic section for the magazine. This section will feature articles from sociologists whose work has not only garnered respect within the discipline but who have been able to circumvent the Ivory Tower to obtain a broader following among the general public. For example, Matthew Desmond may write a piece on poverty, Nicholas Christakis may write a piece on social networks and public intellectualism, Myra Marx Ferree may write a piece on feminism and democracy in the 21st century, Forrest Stuart (whose book on skid row is in bookstores nationwide) may write a piece on gangs in America, Anthony Ocampo may write a piece on the future of Latinos in Southeast Asian, and Kimberly Hoang may write a piece on sex trafficking across continents. Since Ray and Rojas have decades of scholarly experience and extensive interactions with the media, we have rich professional networks that we can leverage to recruit the very best writers for Contexts.

Second, we will feature Lectures by Great Writers on the Contexts Website. As technology continues to change, the easy accessibility of video in addition to written text is important for accessible and enhancing sociology as a discipline. We will work with authors from the Great Researchers and Writers section to coordinate the video recording of talks that align with their articles in Contexts. These videos will allow Contexts to continue to grow its social media presence on Facebook and Twitter.

Third, we will coordinate a Response and Debate section of the magazine that will include a series of debate-style articles on a pressing topic from roughly six scholars. One scholar will write the main piece and others will engage this piece with their own research. For example, we could envision a Response and Debate on the 40th anniversary of William Julius Wilson’s Declining Significance of Race.
**Best Practices**

We also feel that *Contexts* can be a crucial link between sociology and the broader policy community. Sociologists have often been at the forefront of research that addresses core policy issues such as workplace inequality, schooling, criminal justice, and health care. One possible way to enhance the dialogue between sociology and the policy world would be to create a section of the website called “Best Practices,” which would summarize the best sociological research on specific policy relevant topics. We would seek authors who could effectively and concisely summarize policy relevant research. Each entry in the Best Practices series would focus on a narrowly defined policy issue, succinctly review the evidence for and against the policy, and then present a conclusion.

This type of web feature would expand the magazine’s profile. Policy oriented readers would “drop in” to read Best Practices and be drawn to other features. Furthermore, short 1-page summaries from Best Practices might facilitate the spread of sociological research in the policy community. These reviews could be included in reading packets distributed to academics, policy makers, activists, and nonprofit personnel that are the “public” for a particular policy issue.

**Getting the Word Out: Working with ASA Staff and Council**

ASA has worked very hard to disseminate the results of sociological research. Every year, articles in ASA journals are mentioned in the country’s leading news websites and broadcast media. ASA has also been successful in having sociological research included in high profile court cases via amicus briefs. *Contexts* can be a tool for enhancing this profile. For example, if we became the editors, we might arrange informal reading groups with interested scholars, journalists, and policy professionals. Given the location of one of the editors near Washington DC and the ASA office, we aim to capitalize on opportunities to showcase the public policy work that ASA members and staff do on and around Capitol Hill. Accordingly, we will work with ASA staff and the council to enhance the mission of making sociology more public. In addition to being hosted at the University of Maryland, these *Contexts* Meet Ups can occur at the ASA national office to further enhance its place among DC’s elite research entities.

We view *Contexts* as the public arm of sociology. In this vein, we plan to coordinate with ASA journal editors to determine what articles are forthcoming that may provide opportunities to draw attention to sociology among the general public and policy makers. Per the editors’ suggestions, we will contact authors to write a piece for *Contexts* geared toward a broader audience. This innovation will create more synergy between *Contexts* and other ASA journals, increase readership for both *Contexts* and the ASA journals, and provide *Contexts* with a clearer role among ASA-sponsored journals.

**Rethinking Sociology’s Audience**

One of the great assets of early 21st century publishing is the wealth of available information. Not only do we have traditional data like subscription totals or media mentions, we can also measure the impact of a periodical by its online impact. Using tools like Google Analytics, which provides information about search term frequencies, we can assess what people
enjoy the most about *Contexts*. Using that information, we can emphasize certain types of content and scale back efforts that have a more modest impact.

We also plan to use more traditional forms of audience research to map out possible readers for *Contexts*. If we get the opportunity to edit *Contexts*, we might work with graduate assistants to discover which readers would benefit from specific articles. Since the editors typically receive complimentary copies of the magazine, we can send these issues to selected readers in journalism, policy, and the arts. For example, if an issue had a particularly strong contribution on education, we could develop a list of individuals outside the academy, such as policy makers, nonprofit employees, and superintendents, who might benefit from reading exciting and up-to-date discussions of social science research.

**Department Support**

Indiana University and the University of Maryland are both committed to supporting *Contexts* should we become editors. Indiana University and the University of Maryland will provide office space, computer support, and ancillary assistance. We plan to include graduate students at each university for assistance and professional development. The chairs of each program have indicated that they will help manage our teaching commitments so that they synergize with our editorial duties. Both programs have a history of successfully hosting journals, not just *Contexts*, but also others like the *American Sociological Review*.

**Diversity Statement**

As editors of *Contexts*, we would be highly committed to diversifying the content and authors included in the magazine. We envision a magazine that represents our discipline across racial/ethnic background, ideological interests, and theoretical and methodological approaches. Being committed to diversity means thinking consciously about content and potential invitations. As potential editors, we have a broad range of complementary interests and professional networks. As co-editors, we will serve as a check and balance for each other and help *Contexts* to represent the diverse interests of our disciplinary colleagues.

**Scholarly Record and Administrative Experience**

Rashawn Ray is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Maryland, College Park. His work has appeared in the *Annual Review of Public Health*, *Journal of Urban Health*, *American Education Research Journal*, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, and the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*. Ray has two forthcoming books: *The Loves Jones Cohort: Single and Living Alone in the Black Middle Class* (Forthcoming, Cambridge University Press) with Dr. Kris Marsh and *Bordering Chaos: Family and Work in a Racially-Diverse America* (Forthcoming, Lexington Books) with Dr. Pam Jackson. Ray has been awarded funding from the National Science Foundation, National Institutes of Health, American Sociological Association Minority Fellowship Program, Society for the Study of Social Problems, and the Ford Foundation. Ray was selected as 40 Under 40 Prince George’s County in 2014 and Outstanding Black Male Leader of Tomorrow for the city of Bloomington, IN in 2010. In 2015, Ray served as
the Co-Chair of the Ford Foundation Scholars Conference with public intellectualism as the
conference theme.

Fabio Rojas is Professor of Sociology at Indiana University. Since joining the faculty in
2003, Rojas has accumulated a record of scholarship, teaching, and administration. Professor
Rojas is a scholar who studies social movements, organizational behavior, and institutional
theory. His work has appeared in leading social science journals such as the American Journal of
Sociology, the Academy of Management Journal, and Social Forces. He is the author of From
Black Power to Black Studies: How a Radical Social Movement Became an Academic Discipline
(2007, The Johns Hopkins University Press) and Theory for the Working Sociologist (2017,
Columbia University Press). With Michael T. Heaney, and is the co-author of Party in the Street:
Press). This last book has won multiple awards, such as the 2016 Leon Epstein Award for the
best book on the topic of political organizations and parties from the American Political Science
Association.

Collectively, we bring years of editorial and administrative experience. Professor Ray is
the editor of a special thematic section forthcoming in Ethnic and Racial Studies and he edited
Race and Ethnic Relations in the 21st Century: History, Theory, Institutions, and Policy (2010,
Cognella Press). He has been on the editorial board of Social Currents, Sociology Compass,
Teaching Sociology, Sociology of Race and Ethnicity, and Social Psychology Quarterly.
Professor Rojas has been an associate editor of the American Journal of Sociology, served as the
managing of Sociological Methodology, and has served on the editorial boards of Contemporary
Sociology and Computational Management and Organization Theory. Rojas has served as the
Director of Undergraduate Studies at his institution, served as an ASA section officer, and has
organized academic conferences. Ray has also been an ASA section officer, a member of the
ASA’s National Committee on Nominations, and has worked with the Ford Foundation to
organize scholarly conferences.

A Record of Public Sociology

Ray and Rojas have actively worked to bring sociology to the public. Professor Ray
is well known as a lecturer who brings the sociological vision to diverse students, ranging from
high school classes, to academic lectures, to non-profit conferences, to business meetings. He
also writes for The New York Times “Room for Debate” section, the Huffington Post, and Public
Radio International and has made appearances on Al Jazeera, Headline News, and National
Public Radio. In 2016, the University of Maryland gave Professor Ray the Research
Communicator Impact Award. He recently started the #DailyThought Vlog with the goal of
enhancing the visibility of sociological research.

Professor Rojas is also actively engaged with the public. Most notably, he co-writes the
Orgtheory.net blog, which is a focal point for sociological discussion online. Rojas’ work has
been covered in a wide range of sources ranging from The Wall Street Journal, to National
Public Radio, to ABC News. He has also written for The New York Times’ “Room for Debate”
feature and has published a widely circulated op-ed in The Washington Post about the use of
social media data in political science.
Biographical Summaries

Rashawn Ray is associate professor of sociology at the University of Maryland. Ray obtained a Ph.D. in Sociology from Indiana University in 2010. From 2010 to 2012, he was a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Health Policy Research Scholar at the University of California, Berkeley/UCSF. Ray’s research addresses the mechanisms that manufacture and maintain racial and social inequality. His work also speaks to ways that inequality may be attenuated through racial uplift activism and social policy.

Fabio Rojas is professor of sociology at Indiana University. In 2003, he earned his PhD from the University of Chicago on the topic of organizational behavior and higher education. From 2008 to 2010, he was a Robert Wood Johnson Health Policy Research Scholar at the University of Michigan. Since joining the faculty at Indiana University, Rojas has focused on teaching introductory sociology and social theory. He works on organizational theory, especially as it is applied to politics, higher education, and health.

[1] Associate Professor of Sociology, the University of Maryland, College Park.
[2] Professor of Sociology, Indiana University.