

## Sociology and Inequality: What Have You Done for me Lately?

Neither Sandy nor I have a Ph.D. in Sociology, but we were both drawn to it because, as he told me many times, Sociologists ask the best questions. He also told me he thought Economists had the best answers, but there, I suppose, we parted company. Each of the disciplines we recognize today has different kinds of answers and they have all contributed in important ways to our understanding of inequality.

Trying to summarize forty years of the sociological answers is a daunting and probably impossible assignment. The discipline has contributed to a voluminous set of topics that are relevant to inequality over this time period. Indeed, for me, the hardest task in this homework has been to think of those aspects of sociology that do not intersect the problem of inequality. For many people in this field, the study of inequality overlaps to a large degree of the most central intellectual problems of the discipline: the study of stratification and mobility. At least since World War II and perhaps even before that, stratification has been THE core subject of sociology. Hence, in places where stratification dominated the intellectual agenda – including Harvard, Berkeley, Chicago, Wisconsin, Princeton, and a few other important institutions – the study of inequality, its causes, consequences, and remedies, could be said to be close to the entire ballgame.

Even so, there are a set of key problems within the general domain of stratification and inequality that, from my perspective, have been especially important, four of which were central to the book whose anniversary we are celebrating today. They are so fundamental that it's fair to say we will never be satisfied that we have all the answers. Accordingly, how hard we should party now on this anniversary depends on how much progress you conclude has been made since the debut of Sandy's magnum opus.

My nominations for the five most important domains in the sociology of inequality are as follow:

1. The role of the **family** in influencing mobility outcomes for individuals. This includes the study of parental characteristics, parenting behavior, socialization practices (a la Annette Lareau), the study of sibling outcomes.
2. The significance of **neighborhoods** which Eric Wanner at Russell Sage used to call the "holy grail" of inequality studies. Does it make a difference for outcomes if individuals who are poor grow up in neighborhoods that are predominantly poor or with high levels of unemployment? Or are family and individual factors more powerful?
3. The contributions of **institutions**, particularly schools, but also labor markets, the military, prisons, unions, churches, political parties, institutions of civil society, etc. Sociologists tend to think of institutions as channeling or redirecting human behavior and potential. Hence Rob Sampson's work on turning points looks at young men who were in trouble and turned their lives around if they found themselves in institutions like the military that surrounded them with structure. Bruce Western has looked at the consequences of incarceration on the life time earnings of young men and has suggested that the era of mass incarceration has injected a

pathway to oblivion that intensifies the impact of inequality on those who were already at the bottom, by weakening any link to necessary human capital.

4. The significance of **culture** is the fourth domain of sociological studies of inequality. Here researchers have focused on the prevalence of normative orientations, belief systems, tool kits and models of behavior that are generated on the streets, in peer groups, across generations, through popular culture, and increasingly reinforced by social media. The assumption is that cultural norms influence behavior that has mobility implications, more so when skill matters a lot than when it matters less. But there are lots of lurking questions here:
  - a. Do we inhabit a society with one, all powerful, mainstream culture with offshoots that are deviant subcultures?
  - b. Or are we a fragmented collection of cultures and if so, what is their relationship to one another?
  - c. How much do these beliefs and normative orientations matter in generating mobility? And is their content exaggerated in importance when labor markets are tight, skill premiums are high
5. Finally, near and dear to my heart is the fifth dimension which was less visible than the other four in Sandy's book: the role of **historical periods** in generating opportunities (or lack of them) for mobility, and in shaping durable norms about the legitimacy of inequality. C. Wright Mills once famously said that sociology lies at the intersection of history and biography. It tries to explain social problems in ways that illuminate individual experience by virtue of the time period in which it unfolds. As Glen Elder's work on the Great Depression and subsequent research on generational experience has shown, inequality shifts with war, with catastrophic economic downturns, massive political upheavals, or periods of high growth, gender revolutions, etc. The experience of the depression generation teaches that a stumbling entry into the labor market followed by persistent underemployment creates an aberrant biography that may follow its bearer for the rest of his/her life, even after conditions improve. So too do expectations shift about what is normal, what levels of inequality are legitimate.

The entire gamut of research methods in sociology has been brought to bear on these five questions singly and in combination. From the earliest quantitative studies of mobility, a la Featherman and Hauser and the even older qualitative studies of urban change conducted by E B DuBois or his successors in the Chicago School, inequality has been a critical subtext no matter what methodological camp we belong to. The work that Chris Winship, Bruce Western, David Harding, Steve Morgan, Susan Mayer, Yu Xie, David Grusky, and many others in the quantoid tradition have contributed has been essential for sorting out not just substantive answers to these five questions. They have also been of signal importance in speaking to a question that we often hear from Sandy: how do we know when we have the right evidence to speak to a question? What is the most conceptually adequate way of measuring mobility, educational attainment, income, poverty, material deprivation? And how should we sort out what we really want to know if the measures we use, for example, of poverty lines don't converge completely with measures of deprivation or standard of living?

The research contributed by Kathryn Edin, Annette Lareau, Michele Lamont, Mary Waters, Mario Small, and yours truly, focuses on the texture of inequality. Why does it matter so much? How do those who fall on the wrong side of the stratification machine justify their actions, explain their good fortune or their personal tragedies. How much impact do values have in shaping the pathways to mobility whether up or down? What role does race, national origin, gender, regional location, generation or institutional experience play in shaping those cultural precepts anyway? Do we have one culture, one set of norms, or many? And if the answer is the latter, how do we explain the divergence?

Here too, the intersections between these domains is of importance in sociology. How do cultural models, norms and beliefs, structure the formation of families and households? How does parental class background shape their understanding of child rearing, from “natural growth” to “concerted cultivation” to “hyperbolic helicoptering?” How do racial identities or concepts of masculinity influence the pathways that children pursue through school, either embracing mainstream models of performance or rejecting them as “acting white?” Is there any empirical validity to the whole idea of “acting white?” Comparative work, like the research contributed by Sandy’s student, Meredith Phillips or that of Prudence Carter, tells us that what we have often described as a race based rejection of conventional aspirations in school is really an adolescent preoccupation with being cool that crosses over race lines. Mary Patillio argues it has more damaging consequences for young black men who may not get a second chance. Roland Fryer and Karolyn Tyson argue that much of what oppositional culture theory points to as anchored in racial identities is actually situational, ignited under the condition when race and tracking coincide, but not otherwise.

These findings matter not only for the sociological truths we are after but for the policy debates they inform. No one has been more influential than Sandy in linking these two domains and hence we have a lot to thank him for, as we do Bill Wilson for that matter, in pulling the field into the sphere of policy debate and making it consequential for designing and evaluating the most important questions we face as a society.

## Policy

To catalogue the ways in which this body of research has mattered would take hours. I will point to just a few domains:

- Education. Findings on family influences, education and mobility have influenced the formation of Head Start, universal pre-K education, charter schools, school-to-work training programs, anti-drop out programs, investments in teacher/student ratio improvement, testing regimes (see Jal Mehta’s NY times piece on this question), credentialism among teachers (ed school training versus Teach for America), etc.
- Welfare reform, the Earned Income Tax Credit, investments in workforce training and studies of the working and non-working poor. These are domains that have been the subject of far more research by economists, including your own David Ellwood, but a lot of what we know about families who intersect the welfare system and those who benefit from the EITC comes from research by Andrew Cherlin, Linda Burton, Bill Wilson, Kathryn Edin, Laura Lein, and Celeste Watkins-Hayes. This work has helped to inform policy makers about how reform could be

structured to break down some of the barriers to labor force participation (especially child care), to improve the mobility prospects of low wage workers as they gain more skill.

- Housing. Sociologists have been important contributors to the study of housing segregation and remedies for it including the Gatreux and Moving to Opportunity projects, which are predicated both on legal questions stemming from segregation, but also on theories of neighborhood influence on social and occupational mobility. One thinks here of Jim Rosenbaum's work, among others. De-concentrating poverty is thought to be an important policy goal because its opposite is seen as compounding the problems of individual or family poverty.
- This list could be expanded into areas I know a lot less about: mental and physical health inequalities, aging, incarceration dynamics, etc.

Sociologists are everywhere in the policy landscape, even though, until the inequality program was built here at Harvard, a direct connection was often not acknowledged as a worthy goal for training a new generation that would understand its mission to make that connection. Since this is also the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Inequality Program at Harvard, it bears mentioning that much of its success can be laid at the feet of Sandy Jencks.

I say this as one who, along with David Ellwood, Theda Skocpol, Bill Wilson, Jennifer Hochschild, Paul Pierson, Larry Katz, Claudia Goldin, and many others in this room, put a lot of time into developing it. At the base though, if we look carefully at how this program achieved its extraordinary reputation, especially in Sociology, all eyes would turn to Sandy. In the years I worked here, it did not escape my attention that the papers that our student wrote in the course of completing their requirements for the program, the ones that passed through Sandy's critical hands were the ones that had the highest hit rate in the major journals in our field.

Those students have now gone on to hold faculty positions in the nation's most prestigious sociology departments. From Cybelle Fox at Berkeley, Mario Small at Chicago, David Harding at Michigan, Celeste Watkins-Hayes at Northwestern, Jal Mehta here at Harvard, and the list goes on and on, this program has produced the next generation of intellectual leadership in this discipline.

At Johns Hopkins, we have something we call "smoke plots," which are representations of the National Research Council rankings by field in every university. The width of the bar indicates the degree of consensus among the respondents about those rankings. The Sociology and Social Policy program is the highest ranked program of any doctoral degree at Harvard and the width of the band is the narrowest of any in the nation, which means the consensus is very high. The data for the NRC was collected in 2006, about 7 years after the establishment of this program. For Harvard, it was going up against Ph.D. programs that are more than a century old.

If that doesn't count as success, I cannot imagine what would. And it is to the eternal credit of this faculty, these graduate students, and most especially the intellect and demanding standards of the man we are here to honor today, that this is the state of the state.