

To Boldly Teach: An Incredible Voyage Teaching the Beauty of Sociology, 1982-2020

Abstract

The unfolding of any academic career contains a level of mystery as one engages structural opportunities and constraints, dreams and aspirations, unexpected challenges or setbacks, as well as, one's own limitations and mistakes. After retiring from 38 years of teaching sociology in a range of academic institutions within the United States, below are my selective subliminal and conscious reflections. As such, this is a reflective essay that contains all my biases and proclivities. For me, teaching sociology at the postsecondary level has allowed me to pursue the most constructive ideas about humanity—especially those concerning individuals, groups, networks, institutions, organizations, social justice, and social systems. While my pathway was unique in many respects as an African American sociologist, I hope that all who pursue the sociological imagination across generations and various global populations will benefit from my particular adventures to boldly teach the controversial beauty of sociology. Humanity needs sociology now more than ever. Those of us who have been given the exquisite privilege to explore the life of the mind in this academic field are truly among the chosen ones. Never stop being bold in your teaching, research, and service to all humankind! Sociology matters greatly to all, even if intentional dullards or vested interests do not recognize its inherent worth!

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Early Background Antecedents

My entrance into this world in 1955 was shaped by my working-class African American family, only one generation removed from the barbaric sharecropping system within the segregated southern United States. My father was a laborer, while my mother was a homemaker. I was the eldest of eight children. My father had a sixth-grade education; my mother finished the eighth grade. Three of my brothers had severe mental disabilities (autism). For much of my youth, we lived in a segregated suburb in the Chicago metropolitan area. With these social origins, my life in sociology has been nothing short of a miracle.

As far as I can remember during the 1960s, my pre-professional life as an African American sociologist was inspired by the critical legacy of W.E.B. Du Bois, the preeminent cultural icon among African American intellectuals or social thinkers. Du Bois inspired young intellectuals like me to critique society because of the ubiquitous, hegemonic legacy of racial injustice and stratification in the United States. I grew up in a contentious era of school desegregation, after attending a segregated elementary school dominated by African American teachers and school administrators. This cocoon nurtured my intellectual growth, self-efficacy, and personal worth, thereby allowing me to overcome the structural vestiges of poverty by the sponsorship of a caring community. My segregated elementary school was subsequently desegregated in the eighth grade.

Early on in my youth, I was confronted experientially with the dynamics of social diversity as the only African American in my high school classes during my first and second years. Of course, this reality contributed to racial trauma, some cultural adaptations, and isolation—especially when racial confrontations occurred within the student body. I tried to understand these confrontations and dynamics scientifically as a youngster who had investigated ideas about racism, stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination in summer programs for gifted elementary school students in 1967 and 1968. I was then taught by high school teachers, none of which were African American.

I matured as a teenager during the ascendancy of Motown music in popular culture, so my emergent sociological aspirations were heavily influenced by Marvin Gaye's poignant album "What's Going On?"— with its many songs about the idiocy of war (Vietnam), police brutality, the dangers of drug addiction, the pathologies of urban life, environmental pollution, the future plight of children, religious faith, and similar sociological issues. This collection of music has imprinted me for life, across 65 years containing 38 years of teaching sociology! Most significantly, I have always started my classes by asking my students 'What's Going On?' from their uncensored perspectives.

My postsecondary education took place in two different social spaces: (1) a large, diverse public university in a distinctly 'southern' cultural milieu, (2) a racially-homogenous, predominantly 'white' evangelical liberal arts college. To my utter surprise, from the former social space, I had a dynamic sociology professor during my first year. His engaging instruction reoriented my life to distinguish between codifications (ideas or explanations) and tested evidence from popular culture, logical schemas, the humanities, and science. He 'rocked my world' in sociology with strategic insights that have always influenced my publications and teaching. From the latter collegiate context, I engaged the overt and covert organizational sociology of suburban Protestant evangelical elites with their particular social networks. Moreover, I explored the realms of religion and faith, contrasting these with scientific pursuits, dogmas, and the social sciences.

Eventually, these proclivities led me to the University of Chicago to explore the social construction of ideas in science, academic systems, and societies. Sociologists like Edgar Epps, Willian Julius Wilson, Edward O. Laumann, Peter M. Blau, Joseph Ben-David, and others like Hubert M. Blalock or Joe Feagin shaped my sociological development appreciably. At that time, mathematical and empirical sociology also infused my imaginations about racial stratification, social inequalities, and education, thereby enabling the contours of my research in the sociology of science and higher education. These interests often exceeded the classes I taught throughout my career, because my imperative was to integrate the natural, physical, mathematical, and social sciences in my work as much as possible. To sum, I received my Ph.D. on August 26, 1988 (exactly 32 years before the date of this writing).

Career Trajectories and Pathways: 1982 ~ 2020

The academic labor market was stagnant during the 1980s Reagan era, so there were few appropriate job openings for me at elite research universities. Thus, my first job was at Bethel College (now University) in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota, starting on August 1, 1982. At that time of economic recession and great distress, I was desperate for any academic work in order to pay the exorbitant medical costs associated with the emergency operation preceding the birth of my second child. While I was never a fan of cold winters, I loved the liberal progressive social atmosphere of the Twin Cities. Nonetheless, my meager wages were deficient, given the inflationary costs of living. I thrived as a sociology instructor teaching about race and ethnic relations, poverty and social stratification, social problems, and introductory matters. By using academic journals, I quickly learned that many of my ‘white’ students were terrified by having an African American professor. They wrote entries expressing their fears and anxieties. Many of them came from homogeneous suburban and rural social locations. I was the very first African American who had power and control over their lives. (When hired, Bethel had just two African American faculty, with my counterpart leaving the institution after her first year).

Negotiating these matters of diversity improved my social intelligence as a young sociologist. I had assumed a certain level of intellectual sophistication that was absent in my students’ social experiences, so I had to develop countermeasures or enriching assignments to cure any phobias about my professionalism and the ‘hidden curriculum’. To be accurate, I did have a few racist students— some of whom I converted, while others exited my courses. I built my pedagogy around research about various learning styles, research from cognitive and developmental psychology, and writing-to-learn schemas (especially academic journals). Listening to and engaging my students brought great success as well as joy to my role as a sociology teacher dedicated to enabling the sociological imagination in all my courses, no matter if they were targeted to lower-division or upper-division students. After five years (1982-1987), I left Bethel College because of poor salaries and other economic constraints. Its baptistic religious context as a denominational college mostly demonstrated an irenic atmosphere, a far cry from the more conservative antics of

other evangelical colleges. Decades later, students would contact me with kind remarks about the positive impact of my teaching. Nice!

Calvin College: 1987 ~ 1991

My career situation at Calvin College (now University) was a great improvement since I was promoted to Associate Professor of Sociology with increased remuneration. While the social ecology surrounding Bethel was dominated by Scandinavian descendants, Calvin's academic community was dominated by officials and students with Dutch ancestry. Despite their conservative Calvinistic pretensions or religious fervor, academic administrators at Calvin College were dedicated to the pursuit of racial and ethnic diversity in the faculty. This job was a tougher assignment culturally, but I had the best facilities to work with. While Bethel had a student body of 2200 students, Calvin had 6000 students. Issues related to apartheid resonated among students and faculty. Ideas regarding social justice flourished in this context as prominent faculty debated them. In many respects, Calvin had a much more European ambience within its faculty culture.

In contrast to the Twin Cities, the metropolitan area of Grand Rapids, Michigan was at that time much more conservative politically for me. My family was still growing. As I recall, less than 5 out of over 225 faculty members were African Americans. Fortunately, I had a younger colleague in my department. Moreover, I felt somewhat disconnected from much of the indigenous African American community, with the possible exception of one local church I attended. In retrospect, I deeply missed the inherent intellectual challenges and habitus of an elite research university (at Bethel, I had occasions to find nurture from colleagues at the University of Minnesota). Having been educated at a premier research university at the graduate level, being stuck at the collegiate level with undergraduate teaching duties was causing me to atrophy.

The main problem with my experiences as a sociologist at Calvin College was the homogeneity of its ethnic hegemony or related social networks, inside and outside the institution. Faculty had to subscribe to denominational tenets that were based in the ethnic evolution of its core constituencies. So, on the one hand, I thrived in its

academic freedom and expanded cultural engagements at Calvin College; on the other hand, I felt an ‘iron cage of religiosity’ that constrained or marginalized my ambitions. Beyond teaching about social stratification and similar introductory topics, I wanted to develop further competencies in mathematical sociology. Therefore, I left that campus in order to reach my full potential.

University of Rochester, Margaret S. Warner Graduate School of Education and Human Development: 1991 ~1997

Thanks to the recommendation from one of my professors at the University of Chicago, I had an interview at the University of Rochester and obtained an academic appointment in its interdisciplinary graduate school of education. I grew in a professional network of four sociologists, with my primary teaching and research duties being in the sociology of higher education. My signature course was about the academic professions and society. I also taught graduate courses in the sociology of education and urban education. At this university, there was a dozen African American faculty spread across other disciplines and academic departments! I consulted joyfully with them at the faculty club as well as other intellectual venues, including the Frederick Douglas Institute on campus.

At the University of Rochester, I developed my competencies in mathematical and computational sociology. Furthermore, I became a key scholar and consultant for the National Education Association analyzing national surveys about the status of the academic professions. From this vantage point, my career blossomed exponentially with professional connections to national conferences, school systems, teachers’ unions, and government agencies. I published relevant articles on the academic professions or the sociology of higher education, made pivotal presentations with esteemed educational leaders, and expanded my research portfolio. Unfortunately, the university had severe economic problems, thereby losing ‘star’ faculty colleagues and freezing modest salaries. This instability threatened my family’s future, so after my sabbatical, I decided to leave the University of Rochester for the Division of Social and Behavioral Sciences at the Rochester Institute of Technology (raising my income \$20,000).

Rochester Institute of Technology: 1997 ~ 1998

Moving to the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) should have allowed me to develop further competencies in mathematical and computational sociology, but that did not happen! Just a month or so after I took that academic job, the academic dean who hired me was deposed by vote of the faculty. My dreams and aspirations were crushed at the start. I was subsequently shocked and depressed. My classes (and the rest of the year) were filled with bouts of depression and drudgery. It was the worst of times. Yet, even in my dark despair, hope had emerged from unexpected directions.

I might have had a nervous breakdown if not for the responsiveness and salvation I received from most of my students. They seemed to enjoy my pedagogy and sociology! What a surprise, in the very midst of my deepest disappointment. At RIT, I taught classes about social change as well as social inequalities along with the usual Introduction to Sociology. Surprisingly, most of my students (whether ethnically diverse or not) engaged my subject matter and assignments with intellectual courage and honesty— especially feminists, gay students, technocratic types, and those from military backgrounds. These counterintuitive results enhanced my perceptions of the power of sociology. When I left RIT, years later, many of my students contacted me to express appreciation for my classes. Wow!

While I had my best financial circumstances at RIT, my collegueship was inadequate, marginal, and disturbing. Looking back, I attribute this outcome to my depression and struggles. I failed to allow myself to visualize the potential of that academic opportunity.

Wheaton College: 1998 ~ 2020

I accessed my job at Wheaton College through a mutual friend, a minority sociologist, who I met during a consulting opportunity in my second year of teaching at Bethel College in 1983. He was a tough, controversial, professional acquaintance that I kept in contact with throughout my career. He was a dynamic department chair with considerable influence over the hiring process. That social capital helped me tremendously during the processes and protocols of securing an academic

appointment at this evangelical liberal arts college. This was my best option, my urgent escape from the shattered visions of RIT.

As an alumnus (1975-1977), I originally anticipated a relatively short tenure at this homogenous, conservative evangelical campus, but I ended up finishing my academic career there after 22 years. Even though I shared many of the religious understandings of the college, my interpretations and implementations of those understandings were influenced by my social experiences within the African American church. My faculty role as a sociologist at Wheaton was an amalgamation of the professional adaptations and competencies I utilized during employment at Bethel College and Calvin College. Wheaton College is a private, nondenominational institution located in the affluent western suburbs in the Chicago metropolitan area. The campus is known as a citadel of 'white' evangelicalism.

Besides my introductory classes, I taught Urban Sociology, the Sociology of Education, and Criminology in the first decade of my tenure. For the first time in my career, I attained tenure at Wheaton, too. I served as a department chair for nine years in the latter half of my career, even as I developed courses such as Violence against Women, Sociology and the Civil Rights Movement, Violence in Minority Communities, and the like. Occasionally, I taught Urban Sociology, the Sociology of Science, the FBI and Policing. My courses were often considered to be too difficult for many undergraduates, but for those who endured I became a well-respected professor. Most of my most conservative students were not favorably disposed regarding my courses. For them, I was far too liberal and biased. My African American viewpoints did not sit well with an implicit white supremacy, the pretensions of popular culture, the idiocies of conservative dogmas, and religious bigotry (including its precursor of ethnocentrism). I taught against implicit bias, racism, patriarchy, foolishness, and their intellectual offspring! For me, scientific conceptualizations and proven evidence prevailed over ethnocentric dogmas, falsifiable panaceas, and informal traditions.

Sociology, its ideas, traditions, research, and evidences, was my solace all throughout my years. I experienced racial microaggressions, mainly from conservative or ignorant students, at Wheaton. Elite social status was no guarantee of wisdom or intellectual sophistication. Among the few African American faculty,

there was isolation and controversies at times. Invariably, there were empathetic faculty, students, and administrators who imbibed genuine diversity instead of habitualized assimilation or tokenism. Collectively, they were no match for the dominant informal tendencies of organizational culture or policies. Wheaton was a stressful place culturally, experientially, and professionally. I just did not fit these institutionalized, pathological aspects of the evangelical world with its norms of whiteness. Thankfully, things may be slowly changing for the better as policy norms or protocols implicit in institutionalizing diversity evolve.

My ultimate antidote for the organizational dissonance that existed beyond my classes was the pursuit of outside consulting challenges and opportunities. I published challenging and innovative articles regularly, incorporating my nascent interests from graduate school. In various capacities, I worked with the National Education Association, the American Bible Society, the FBI Academy, University of Oxford, Carnegie Mellon University, school systems, law enforcement, the Athens Institute for Education and Research, and similar venues to maintain my sociological sanity—culminating in joining the International Sociological Association (ISA). Through ISA, I have been the most fulfilled by far, engaging sociologists in Yokohama, Vienna, and Toronto. I connected (via webinars and websites) with Wolfram Research, the Royal Society, the Upjohn Institute, the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine—absorbing advanced research and other resources. Additionally, *Quanta Magazine* nurtures my interests in the sociology of science as I retire. Indeed, there is more to see than can ever be seen; more to do than can ever be done in sociology and beyond. We sociologists must not quit or surrender to the horrors of the sociologically illiterate, the vile, and oppressors.

Enduring Lessons

My passion for sociology is ubiquitous! Whether it is scientific or humanistic, artistic or philosophical, mathematical or idiosyncratic, sociology covers vast social universes—real or imagined. Our intergenerational, international pursuit is multidimensional in shape or substance across temporal sequences, cohorts, and

social spaces. From my career in teaching sociology for 38 years, let me briefly share a few of my most poignant principles, practices, and lessons.

1. *Let your human interactions or endeavors generate excitement and enthusiasm for sociology! Always nurture and anchor your academic work, intellectually and experientially, in the best of sociology. Let the sociological imagination infuse your soul like a virus or contagion. Do not ever become stagnant. Inculcate the heights and depths, the circumference and expanse of sociology to maintain its perpetual mystery. This academic enterprise, a particular version of the life of the mind, is like nuclear energy in the quantum dimension; it is a sustainable treasure of scientific joy. Never forget that social systems are not sacred entities, they are socially-constructed by specific populations plus their ideologies as well as vested interests (notions of patriotism).*
2. *Be curious about all human beings, especially those unlike you or with whom you disagree most vehemently. Let the unique existence of all humans stir your scientific or humanistic sensibilities in teaching, research, consultations, and service. As in Star Trek, feast intellectually on the infinite diversity expressed in infinite combinations among sentient beings as well as all forms of life. Life is short and precious always, regardless of violence, pandemics, and social disorganization. Let sociology be the sweet music of your soul like Marvin Gaye's epic album: "What's Going On?"*
3. *Relish the awesome privilege of teaching sociology, regardless of pedagogy, students, and classes. Discern its promise and potential as a liberating force for everyone. Of course, as I retire, ugly Nazi-level pathologies contaminate the sanity of science in the United States and beyond--as Trumpism, neoliberalism, police corruption and violence, kakistocracy, sophistry, and anti-scientific idiocy invade recent generations within democratic societies. Sociological theories and research can readily expose the potential lunacy behind racism, conservatism, and an ignorant populism. These are societal maladies that have re-emerged, being promulgated by deficient narcissists with paranoid or predatory motives as well as criminal impulses. Sociologists must lead the fight in*

understanding these social evils and creating countermeasures to refute them, thereby minimizing their pernicious, nefarious consequences. The cultivation of sociology within popular culture or in resident academic systems can inoculate one from the utter foolishness of the inhumane, stupid, and violent. We must always be impatient with the aggressive stupidity that destroys or inhibits human flourishing in society.

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