

Thoughts on the 50th Birthday of the UCSF Doctoral Program in Sociology

Robert Staples

My experience will be different from many of the Alumni of the Doctoral program in Sociology. As a Black person, I was raised in the racially segregated South. As the oldest child, my father had an 8th grade education and worked as a chef at a local hospital. My mother that was a high school graduate and was the mother of five children. She worked in the home. Despite the stereotypes of the South during the 1950s, the Blacks in my hometown of Roanoke, Virginia had a variety of working class jobs, could vote, and there were no known lynchings in my 16 years there. It was a benign form of racial segregation and we were treated 'well' by the White population. However, it is now described in publications as the center of the far right and most Whites would have voted for President Trump in 2016.

In 1958 I went to live with relatives in the San Fernando Valley area outside of Los Angeles. I attended two colleges in the San Fernando Valley, was the only Black student to graduate at one of them, and one of three Black graduates at the other. It cost me \$200 for those two degrees. My time in Southern California was different than the period in Roanoke and Northern California. In Los Angeles, I was stopped by police for using a public pay phone. They claimed there had been pay phone robberies and I responded it was not my desire to take money from a pay phone with a car I used that did not run. In Hollywood, I was stopped by the police, with guns drawn, while crossing the street to go to a movie theatre. Again, they explained there had been household burglaries in the neighborhood. Since I had just parked my car about one minute prior, I'm not sure when I was expected to burglarize the households or why my car was empty.

There were two other stops by the police while I was in Los Angeles County. I tried to explain to them that I was taking 15 units a semester and working 40 hours a week while robbing pay phones and burglarizing houses. Nor did I have the time to spend all my loot from these activities. In 1963 I went to San Jose up north and worked on a Masters degree in Sociology. In both the San Fernando Valley and San Jose I began to work with the Congress of Racial Equality. I was the only Black person in that chapter and later found out that the others were all Jews. Having come from the South, I didn't know anything about Jews since everybody in my city were Baptists nor did I know anything about their history or any stereotypes associated with them. In San Jose, I rose up in the ranks to Vice President and was one of three Blacks in San Jose CORE. Despite almost no cases of racial profiling in San Jose, I did encounter one suspicious incident in that city. My supervisor in the Santa Clara County Welfare Department gave a party for our unit and invited everyone but me. Some of my co-workers refused to go and somebody told the Director of the Welfare Department. From that day on, she was extremely nice to me. In San Jose most of our efforts were targeting a proposition 14 to legalize housing segregation in California. The measure passed and some of my co-workers apologized to me.

It did not matter since I soon left for the doctoral program at the University of Minnesota. This program was designed to teach us as much about the family as possible. There were only three

faculty, two Sociologists and an Anthropologist. My going to the University of Minnesota was purely an accident because two of the three faculty in my doctoral program had formerly taught at San Jose State University. My professor, who was gay, called the Chair of the program and I was admitted to one of the top Universities in the United States. Moreover, it was one of the few predominately-White Universities that had admitted Black leaders of the civil rights movement: Roy Wilkins, Carl Rowan, and Whitney Young. This time I did not work until I was short of funds and took Whitney Young's old job at the Saint Paul Urban League. Along with that job, I also participated in the Civil Rights Movement and the Anti-War Movement while taking 15 units of statistics, read two foreign languages fluently, passed an oral and written exam, and did a dissertation. Moreover I participated in the Anti-War Movement as I learned it was a neo-colonial war and that the USA had financed France's colonial stature, assassinated political leaders and used corrupt leaders in South Vietnam as puppets heading the war effort. From that moment until now I have been an activist scholar. After completing my PhD I spent much of my time and effort organizing students against racism, the war, and leadership at Black colleges. Again, my professors were moral examples for me. Many of the professors at San Jose State also belonged to San Jose CORE.

On July 1, 1972 I arrived at UCSF as the fifth faculty member in the Doctoral program in Sociology. I was not a perfect fit because I was not really a medical sociologist, not ever taken a class in medical sociology. The program, I understand, was started by Anselm Strauss and he selected three other sociologists to teach and do research in medical sociology and the discovery of grounded theory. It was a very unique program at that time. Unlike most departments, it was located in a two-story house off Parnassus Avenue. All the sociologists were housed there along with four academic staff members. Some of them actually had desks in the same offices as the faculty. However, as a medical campus, the sociologists had their FTEs in the Social and Behavioral Sciences unit in the School of Nursing. The sociology courses were taught in the house and the nursing courses in the School of Nursing building. Being in a house led to a certain closeness between the faculty and the staff. I was told that the faculty had to bail out one of the staff involved in the San Francisco State University protests. Another member of the academic staff had her teenage son disappear and he was never found. Originally, we all lived in the same area of San Francisco. If our faculty meetings ran late I would often drop off Professor Strauss and Elaine McDaren near where I lived.

Most of the faculty could be described as a minority by some definition although I was the only one with dark skin. While most of them never reported the discrimination against them except for Anselm Strauss. Consequently, all of them were progressive except one who will not be named - it was sad for them when Richard Nixon was forced to resign. It was a place where I felt comfortable when I arrived. All of them except one right-winger invited me to dinner and I certainly never felt my political leanings were a factor in their evaluation. I must note one faculty member who may still be alive although I had virtually no contact with him and am unclear on his status. His name is Barney Glasser and he showed up at some meetings, co-authored some of Professor Strauss's books. However, he was rarely visible after my fifth year on the faculty and I was told he was in some private business.

Most of you do not know me because I have been retired for almost 25 years. Moreover, most of my classes were attended by Nursing students; people I rarely saw due to the fact many worked on a full-time basis and out offices were often not in the same building as the nursing students. And I was often on a leave of absence while serving as a visiting professor at other universities. As I often found out many of my nursing students were more politically astute than myself. It did not surprise me that they are in the top five of political lobbies, perhaps the only one with a progressive agenda. The classes were some of the largest and smallest in the School of Nursing. They were among the largest classes since I was often the faculty of record for required courses for Nursing students. While a former chair called it a “dog and pony show”, we used guest speakers from the community, such as AIDS patients in the 1980s, Native Americans, and an expert on the American way of violence. Many of my students seemed to appreciate these kinds of speakers.

In my discussion, I have often referred to myself as an activist-scholar for much of my academic career. The activist role was not mine alone. Anselm Strauss was a life-long devotee of the American Civil Liberties Union. His widow Fran still works with that group. There is only one other person that I will discuss separately. Most of the faculty I have referenced are the four sociologists that were here when I arrived. I do not know the successive faculty well enough to note any activism on their part. Charlene Harrington, I think, falls in the progressive tradition. The person I want to pay tribute to is Virginia Olesen, the only person still alive of the four faculty who were present when I arrived in 1972. At that time she was Chair of SBS, effectively performing in that role but wanting out of it. At one time she suggested I succeed her and I declined. She then selected another faculty member who claimed that it was their turn. He then resigned and went to teach at another college – at a lower rank and lesser salary. Thus, for some reason, the right-wing faculty member was never considered because they thought he would invite President Nixon as a commencement speaker. Ginnie continues in the role until Anselm Strauss agreed to become Chair of SBS. Given his health problems we were not sure he should undertake such a role but he remained in the role of Chair of SBS for a long time.

Before giving my tribute to Ginnie I should let you know that for the last 20 years I have divided my time between Melbourne, Australia and San Francisco. During the period between 1982 until 2018, I have been a Visiting Research Fellow at the Australia Institute of Family Studies and as an Honorary Research Fellow in the Centre for Australian Indigenous Studies. In my spare time, I have worked on issues regarding Aboriginals in Australia.

Finally, I want to pay tribute to Professor Virginia Olesen for her kindness to me, her support of women with her Women’s Studies program, and her support of racial minorities. She kept the Chair when nobody else in SBS wanted to take it. More than any other faculty member, she always had the welfare of students as her highest priority with seeing that faculty and academic staff were treated fairly. She upheld the progressive tradition by writing a positive review of the Cuban health system. Just as one example, her friends in the United Kingdom invited me to dinner when I was distressed over the earthquake in San Francisco in 1979. My only time teaching a required course in Sociology was when I was asked to teach the course in Sociological theory. She was the one who invited minority speakers to campus such as Mrs. W.E.B. Debois and Dorothy Height. We shall never see her kind again, a woman who represented the better angel in our midst.