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Author: Olesen, V  
Title: BECOMING A SOCIOLOGIST: ONE WOMANS JOURNEY  
Source: Studies in symbolic interaction., v. 33, 2009, p.75-96  
Publisher: JAI/ENGLAND: ENGLAND  
ISSN: 0163-2396  
WorldCat number: 4292849, 822747312  
DOI: 10.1108/S0163-2396(2009)0000033008

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## BECOMING A SOCIOLOGIST: ONE WOMAN'S JOURNEY

Virginia Olesen

I get an e mail from Lonnie Athen: "As the editor of the SSI 'Blue Ribbon Paper' series, I invite you to submit a paper addressing the above Question ('How I Became a Sociologist'). I say yes. On November 17 he sends more details: 'We are particularly interested in the experiences that lead to choice of careers and particular sociological views and interests.'"

Though flattered, I am also anxious. This is a step into my past, present and future fraught with difficulties: Which stories to tell? Which to gloss? Which to forget? What format: Epistolary? Theatrical? Novelistic? Research report? (Chase, 2005). Moreover, I have just moved into a retirement community after 30 years in a wonderful home, a shift entailing considerable emotional and physical demands. Do I have the mental energy to undertake such an archeological dig? In keeping with Lonnie's invitation to write how I became a sociologist and how my interests developed, I here foreground those and pay less attention to other parts of myself, though I fully recognize that these are intertwined. Following Mead (1934) and; Athens (1994), I view the self as a shifting composite of different and mostly unified selves. The unwieldy, rich sociological stories demand recounting all by themselves.

These stories constitute a series of transformations in my sociological self, transformations deriving from interactions<sup>1</sup> and the emergence and unfolding of self in social and cultural epochs and in institutions where we fashion our lives and are fashioned (Strauss, 1993; Harding, 2007):

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*Studies in Symbolic Interaction*, Volume 33, 75–94  
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ISSN: 0163-2396/doi:10.1108/S0163-2396(2009)0000033008

Individuals, the history that makes them, and the history they make are unique not because they emerge at particular moments because they are crafted in a specific fashion, but because they are the outcome of a unique process, itself a product of individual action and social structure. (Fenstermaker, 1997, pp. 209-210)

That said, we can now begin the journey that I followed in becoming a sociologist, examining various phases, cycles and turning points, and bearing in mind that "Experience is at once already an interpretation and in need of interpretation" (Scott, 1991, p. 779).

### BEGINNINGS: THE GREAT DEPRESSION, WORLD WAR II

Growing up in a small (1,000) Nevada town in the 1930s and 1940s, I acquired a neophyte's sociological eye and sensibility, though, of course, not an analytical framework from which to make sense of that social world. The everyday life in that little town encouraged perception of subtle, but nevertheless very sharp social, cultural, economic, racial, gender, and class differences among its residents.

In that milieu at the height or the depth of The Great Depression in 1931 when I was six and my only sister four, my father's business failed, our family lost our home and my mother, thanks to the Works Progress Administration (WPA), became the breadwinner, drawing on her training as an elementary school teacher. Little wonder then, that her mantra, as we proceeded through the local schools, was "You have to be able to earn your own living when you grow up."

With those words ringing in our ears, my sister and I went in the 1940s to the University of Nevada in Reno 100 miles away. At that time, it was not only the lone campus of the state university, which expanded later to Las Vegas, but was also the only institution of higher education in the entire state. Back then, very few high school graduates went on to university. If it were not for my mother's hard work and vision, we could never have gone to college.

Entering the university, I dreamed of a career in the State Department, so signed on for majors in history and English literature. Sociology courses, reputedly boring, could not compete in my mind with the courses that I was taking in my two majors. My interest in journalism was steadily growing. Not only was journalism stimulating, but it held the promise of "being able to earn your own living." But, when graduation time came in June 1947, I did not have a job. I passed the hot, Nevada summer days in a stew of anxiety worrying about if and where I could find work. Finally in August, I got a job

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as the assistant editor on a small weekly newspaper published on the Mare Island, California, shipyard for Navy personnel, residents, civilian workers and towns people. I think my mother breathed a deep sigh of relief. I know I did.

### POST-WORLD WAR II AND THE 1950S

If I thought Lovelock highly stratified, Mare Island was in another league. The shipyard, a venerable institution dating to the Civil War, employed naval personnel from seamen to admirals as well as a highly differentiated civilian work force. Status consciousness was more pervasive than anything that I had experienced either in my hometown or at the University of Nevada.

Beyond the daily experience of stratification in its various versions and forms, being a journalist in that setting brought me face-to-face with and plunged me into bureaucracy in ways I had never known. This was not the romantic, journalistic adventure I had envisioned on graduation, but a careful treading of acceptable paths to find or create interesting stories that could be published. That was not hard to do. The great manufacturing "shops", as they were called, each devoted to specialties that produced the submarines for which Mare Island was famous, were dramatic locales with abundant, compelling human stories. I was doing ethnography, but did not know it.

It was a comfortable life: a good job with a good salary, particularly after being promoted as editor. I might well have stayed on, but after seven years the journalistic work had become too routine for me: stories that I wrote one year sounded similar to those that I had written in previous ones, so what was once a challenge for me, no longer excited me. When my journalism professor at Nevada, Alfred Higginbotham, wrote me about a tuition fellowship to the University of Chicago to study mass communication for a master's degree in an interdisciplinary program, I jumped at the opportunity. I resigned from my position as editor, packed my bags, and drove across the country alone to Chicago.

### THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO: A MAJOR TURNING POINT

I still vividly recall the excitement of being at the University of Chicago in the mid-1950s. It was an unending feast of delights: one stimulating class after another; memorable meal time talk at the dorm where I lived; daily, lively contacts with graduate students in archeology, history, anthropology,

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sociology, geography, literature, and interaction with great Chicago faculty: Everett Hughes, Lloyd Warner, Sol Tax, and Robert Redfield. This heady mix proved fertile ground for the first stirrings of a sociological self, quite unformed and still in the shadow of my journalistic self.

In particular, two encounters started me on my way in becoming a sociologist, Anselm Strauss' course in Sociological Social Psychology and working in David Riesman's office. Strauss' course was the first sociology course that I had taken, one that I recall with pleasure still to this day more than 50 years later. Anselm would come into class, ascend the lecturer's platform and in his soft voice talk of Mead and symbolic interactionism. I quickly realized I had to sit in the front row or miss the exciting ideas he presented. Symbolic Interactionism (SI) literally turned the lights on. I found a framework for the Nevada and Mare Island experiences and much more.

I landed in Riesman's office on loan from the University Hospital clerical pool where I worked at a typing job to earn money to replace my diminishing savings. There I had extensive contact with Riesman, a generous, thoughtful supervisor-mentor. His exciting class on popular culture led me to work on two research projects, one the study of leisure then underway under his direction, and the other, a study of lyrics of popular music being done by Don Horton. These two projects were my first encounters with sociological research, albeit at a very humble level.

When the time came to consider what to do after Chicago, however, I did not see myself as a sociologist. I did my master's thesis on children's use of television. I still entertained notions of working in mass communications, an upgraded version of my undergraduate dreams of being a journalist, but I had little idea of how to go about getting a job in that field. While on my way to the library one day in my second and final year, I noticed by chance a poster for pre-doctoral Ford Foundation Fellowships at Stanford University to study mass communication. That sounded like an exciting opportunity in the field I thought I was still interested in. I received a fellowship and drove back to California in the summer of 1956 leaving the University of Chicago's gray, majestic Gothic buildings for Stanford's creamy Spanish colonial architecture.

### ANOTHER TURNING POINT: THE STEP TO SOCIOLOGY

Once at Stanford, I found that study of mass communication was a grave disappointment. I could never re-ignite the spark of intellectual excitement

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that I had earlier felt at Chicago, except with graduate student friends in English, sociology, and history. It did not help that the political climate at Stanford was for the most part quite conservative: when I wore an Adlai Stevenson button in the dining hall, one server accused me, "You're a Commie!" Moreover, I did not perform well in the classes which held little interest for me. Needless to say, I slept poorly, spending many nights worrying about how to rescue my career, stay in graduate school and finish with a marketable degree. Finally, I gathered my abundant Chicago sociology credits and transferred to Stanford's Department of Sociology.

There I felt at home. In the flexible but demanding, stimulating and highly informative, well rounded and enriching program, I regained the excitement I had known earlier, though there was little discussion of symbolic interactionism. I felt myself growing a sociological self: Richard T. LaPierre's incisive classical theory classes, Robert Ellis' offerings on social stratification, Paul Wallin's impeccable methods seminars, and Edmund Volkart's social psychology courses, in which he discussed his work on W. I. Thomas. Because the faculty encouraged taking courses in other disciplines, I also studied anthropology with Bernard Siegel, George Spindler, and Gregory Bateson.

However, most memorable were Volkart's pioneering course offerings in medical sociology which were among the first in the country (Bloom, 2002, pp. 133, 138-144, 147). My fellow grad students and I eagerly and enthusiastically took his seminars: he was a very good teacher, supportive and challenging, and conveyed a keen interest in medical sociology. His courses made a lasting impression on me. I began to think of medical sociology as a possible specialty.

Everything was going well for me in sociology when I developed an ovarian cyst. I swung between anxiety about potential malignancy, and depression about being forced to end my studies if it were malignant and require lengthy treatment. Fearful, I dilly dallied, but finally went to the excellent Stanford student health services, had surgery and, afterwards, was hospitalized. Fortunately, the cyst was benign, so radiation or chemotherapy were not necessary. With the enthusiasm of one saved from a painful fate, I returned to finish my work on my Ph.D. degree.

## INTO THE JOB MARKET

Entering the job market in 1959, I had only a few nibbles. Then Anselm Strauss wrote to ask if I would be interested in a position on a research

project that he was organizing at the School of Nursing, University of California, San Francisco, which Fred Davis would direct. David Riesman had brought me to Strauss' attention. It looked very promising, though some fellow students scoffed at work in a school of nursing. Ever the optimist, Volkart, who was a generous and highly supportive mentor, told me: "You can make of it whatever you want." That was all that I needed to hear.

I flew to Chicago for a memorable day long interview with Strauss and Davis and eagerly accepted their offer. I was elated: I was an older graduate (all of 34 which to me now seems very young), and a woman in a thin job market. There was no affirmative action in those days. I also felt very lucky: this was not only a good chance for me to get in on the ground floor of medical sociology, which at that time was not a widely recognized subfield of sociology, but also to work with Chicago interactionists. It did not hurt that the position was in San Francisco.

We were all in transition: Strauss moving from Michael Reese Hospital in Chicago; Davis, from the Polio Foundation in New York City and I, from graduate school. I was by now seeing myself as a sociologist, talking and thinking like a sociologist. My journalistic self now had almost faded away completely.

The intertwining of our lives was concurrent with an institutional transition that would provide opportunities and shape our selves and biographies for decades even as we helped shape the institution. A remarkable, far sighted nurse educator, Helen Nahm, who held a doctorate in psychology from the University of Minnesota, had just become dean at the UCSF School of Nursing. Nahm, who was determined to upgrade baccalaureate nursing education by the introduction of the social sciences and research training, learned of Strauss from Everett Hughes. She recruited Strauss to UCSF to lead this effort. The vehicle which was to provide social scientists to work with nurse faculty at the UCSF school, was a three year NIMH grant to do an ethnographic study on how students become nurses. Nahm and Strauss, now on the UCSF faculty, had written the grant. Later, Elvi Whittaker, an Estonian-Canadian from the University of British Columbia, who had studied nurses, joined the project team.

### UCSF: CONTEXTS OF BECOMING

Development of a sociological identity is not predicated solely on contacts with other sociologists. This process implicates other actors, sometimes quite significantly, as I found at UCSF. UCSF is not a general campus, but

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a health sciences campus (Schools of Nursing, Pharmacy, Dentistry, Medicine, and numerous bench scientists). We were usually seen by the other professionals with whom we daily interacted at that resolutely male, pale and medical bastion as a pretty strange bunch of folks. Indeed, we were clearly "the other." We were often mistaken for social workers or frequently queried, "What exactly *do* you do?" These sometimes irritating encounters sharpened my views of myself as sociologist, for I had to fully and clearly explain just what I did *do*. No theoretical flights into the sociological stratosphere here! Just solid, everyday talk about our work and sociology. Not always easy to do.

As an antidote, our ethnographic work (Olesen & Whittaker, 1968) immersed us in the students' worlds – public and private – in ways which harked back to the Chicago school of ethnography (Deegan, 2001; Rock, 2001). For the students, we were "their sociologists," a flattering, but sometimes restrictive attribution. For the faculty in nursing during the three year study, we were colleagues, but not quite, as the uncomfortable wall of the research relationship was always between us.<sup>2</sup>

In the daily stimulating interactions with Davis and Whittaker, my symbolic interactionist's selves emerged in discussions about the fieldwork, its problems and promising conceptual issues. Strauss occasionally joined us, but was busy, with Barney Glaser, with their studies of dying patients and their development of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Over the years, the issue of "otherness" faded somewhat. More social scientists, notably anthropologists and psychologists made their way on campus, so we were no longer so unusual. We gradually become players in Academic Senate and campus politics, a way to be visible as sociologists, though sometimes with challenging difficulties, as I found on the UCSF Institutional Review Board (the human subjects committee) where for several years I was the only woman and the only social scientist. These years sorely tested me. The physicians and bench scientists who dominated the committee disdained qualitative social science research and deemed it "soft" and "unscientific." Since many of the nursing research projects under review utilized qualitative approaches, I often engaged in fiery exchanges to defend and explain this style of work, sometimes successful, often times not, and always wrenching from my viewpoint as a sociologist.

In 1968, thanks to Strauss' leadership, skillful negotiating and the goodwill he had built in the School of Nursing, we successfully maneuvered our way through campus politics and university bureaucracies to establish a doctoral program in sociology.<sup>3</sup> That gave us recognizable and creditable academic footing at the university. When the School of Nursing



departmentalized in 1972, we became the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences. We were now a structural unit in the university with legitimate claims on its resources, and no longer merely a group of social scientists in someone else's department. I served as the first chair, but after three years stepped down to help with care giving for my terminally ill mother. I also realized that university administration, even in such a small department and school, was not my forte and that I had better stick to research and teaching.

Equally critical, earlier in 1966, I was moved from a research grant position to a tenure track appointment, one of the last to become available at UCSF before the hard times of the Reagan years in California. In 1967, I earned tenure. These structural changes were personally satisfying and professionally reassuring: I had an institutional, as well as disciplinary base, for my sociological self. For the first time in my academic life, I felt anchored. The institution and I had both changed (Harding, 2007).

### BEYOND UCSF

Though our research and interactions with social science and nursing colleagues at UCSF were stimulating, it nevertheless lacked the intellectual vivacity of a general campus. Consequently, even before getting tenure and certainly after, meetings and conferences in sociology and other disciplines became and continued to be important sources of new, stimulating ideas needed for the growth of my sociological self (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). I eagerly participated in ASA's medical sociology section, which I chaired in 1978 and in the bi-annual International Social Science and Medicine meetings. These activities enlarged my views of medical sociology, where my work fit and where significant differences lay. From the Social Science and Medicine (SSM) meetings life-long contacts came with British qualitative and medical sociologists whose conceptual sophistication challenged and altered, always for the better, my sociological imagination.

The most dramatic non-UCSF educational context that I experienced was at the American University in Cairo. I spent five months there in 1976 to help my colleague and friend, Cynthia Nelson, an anthropologist, establish a medical sociology/anthropology program in AUC's social science curriculum (Nelson & Olesen, 1977). This required working across disciplines, being sensitive to the multiple complexities in Egyptian life (social class, gender, religion, rural/urban, colonial history, and globalization). It was mind

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No account of impact would be complete without (SSSI). At national, it has been a rich source of exciting and rewarding experiences for great professional pleasure the first time: "Olesen, *Dialogue*). SSSI also opened. When the Society gave me, I was deeply touched and honored. It was great that for a long-time sociological self. In fact, I sometimes think of George Herbert Mead

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The Nursing Careers Program and my sociological evolution. I think about ethnographic work and imagine few career beginnings. I had never done fieldwork before, observing people as a different animal altogether. It had important implications because observation and description. I learned a great deal from this degree theoretically and in writing talents, and I learned this lesson and acquired

My fieldwork experience was an interdisciplinary team assembled to do a study of education at various institutions. They were reforms in their education with an interdisciplinary approach to addressing policy issues. It was a stimulating experience

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blowing, but incredibly stimulating. I left Cairo a wiser sociologist and a happy one – I felt that I had accomplished something worthwhile.

No account of impact on my sociological self in contexts beyond UCSF would be complete without the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction (SSSI). At national, international, and regional meetings, SSSI has always been a rich source of enriching, stimulating, and professional and personally rewarding experiences for me. One of the most memorable, still the source of great professional pleasure, was Carl Couch's comment on meeting me for the first time: "Olesen, you did a damned good ethnography!" (*The Silent Dialogue*). SSSI also opened new intellectual vistas, which I will discuss later. When the Society gave me the George Herbert Mead Award in 1996, I was deeply touched and honored. The impact of this recognition on me was so great that for a long-time I could scarcely incorporate it into my sociological self. In fact, I sometimes still say to myself, "Was that really me they gave the George Herbert Mead Award to?"

#### *Altering Selves: Emergent Interests*

The Nursing Careers Project, which provided a strong, creative impetus for my sociological evolution, has had a lasting effect on how I approach and think about ethnographic research and sociological inquiry in general. I can imagine few career beginnings where one would be so fortunate. Although I had never done fieldwork, I found that my many years of interviewing and observing people as a journalist proved useful, but analyzing data was a different animal altogether. I found that how one reports a story has important implications for your later analysis. There are no naked facts because observation and theory are combined together in their very description. I learned that how one reports something always is to some degree theoretically driven. Davis' superb observational, analytic and writing talents, and Whittaker's supremely subtle thinking helped me learn this lesson and acquire my general analytic skills.

My fieldwork experience later brought me an invitation to join an interdisciplinary team that included David Riesman. The team was assembled to do a three-year field work study of competence-based education at various institutions across the country that had tried to make reforms in their educational programs (Grant, 1979, pp. 439–490). Working with an interdisciplinary team, participating in a large scale study and addressing policy issues proved to be a highly demanding, but very stimulating experience for me (Olesen, 1990b, pp. 219–227). Among other

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things, I realized that I could use symbolic interaction and qualitative methods to study policy issues.<sup>4</sup>

Returning to the Nursing Careers Project, we gathered and analyzed more data as part of a follow-up studies. By the time this project had finally drawn to a close, we had produced a substantial body of publications on professional socialization, emotions, cultural symbols, and women's roles.<sup>5</sup> Did our work make a difference in higher education in nursing? I do not think that even our centerpiece, *The Silent Dialogue*, influenced policies or practices, perhaps because our findings depicted students as active rather than passive participants in the learning experience, which was in opposition to the then prevailing view, or alternatively because the interest in the field had shifted from broader questions about nursing careers to the narrower question of what the minimal requirements should be for entry level nursing positions. Other consequences of our project made a bigger impact. Paradoxically, the advice that we gave while conducting this project to faculty members and later to graduate students in nursing at UCSF about their research ultimately had a much bigger influence on nursing education and research than our project's actual findings. In this unanticipated way, we realized Dean Nahm's vision of a proper nursing education (Olesen, 2007, p. 418).

After the nursing career project ended, we did not continue our studies on socialization. Times had changed. Funding for research projects, like the one that we had conducted, had largely dried up. Interest had shifted away from the study of socialization to clinical issues. Qualitative research projects had also fallen out of favor among major granting agencies (Steinmetz, 2005a, 2005b). Practically speaking, the only remaining sources of support for research projects on this topic employing qualitative methods were small grants from university research offices (Davis, Lin, Gan, & Olesen, 1992).

Besides, I had grown tired of socialization studies and was looking for fresh research adventures. Remembering my days working in the University of Chicago's typing pool and my criticisms of sociologists and feminists who focused on women in elite occupations or exotic or deviant pursuits to the exclusion of occupations in which most women were employed, I got a small grant from Eliot Liebow's Center for the Study of Metropolitan Problems in NIMH to study temporary clerical workers. I and a gifted graduate student, Fran Katsuranis, found that these women had exercised far more control over their work environments than we had anticipated. Moreover, their views of themselves were not solely based on work, but also from other activities, such as playing a musical instrument, singing, doing arts and crafts, etc. (Olesen & Katsuranis, 1978). Years later, when Eliot Freidson expressed admiration for our small study, I felt an unseemly surge of

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intellectual, feminist and sociological pride and regretted not pursuing this research further, given what has now happened in the US labor market.

### FAILURE AS TURNING POINT

Concurrent with these research projects, I had teaching responsibilities, including a required undergraduate social psychology course for student nurses. Modeled after Strauss' memorable class that I took during my graduate studies at University of Chicago, this class fared well until the early 1970s. Then one offering went completely sour. Since I had up until this time regarded myself as a "good" teacher, this was not only a big jolt to me, but also a very unpleasant one. Until this happened, my course evaluations had supported my view of myself as a good teacher, but now something had clearly gone wrong. Nursing my bruised ego and sifting through the ruins, I concluded that deep ethnic, racial, sexual, marital, social class, and educational differences among the students necessitated a radical change in the content of this course. Reluctantly, I abandoned the Chicago influenced social psychology and completely revised the content of the course to focus on the social psychology of women's health, praying that this would engage the highly diverse students. It did the trick. By moving my feminism from the background to the forefront of myself, I was able to rescue my tattered teaching reputation and restore my self-confidence.

This personal transformation involved much more than resuscitating my self confidence and teaching reputation. I had been aware of and sympathetic to the Women's Movement for some time, but it was this painful incident that finally drew me into it all the way. Other feminists have written about the feelings of togetherness and belonging that the movement evoked in them. I shared that experience. The emergence of the Women's Liberation Movement and the Women's Health Movement brought new found awareness of belonging and potential to realize social justice for women that I had not previously experienced in the male worlds of sociology and UCSF. Those were exciting days. In those dawning moments of the Women's Movement, I realized I was onto something important.

Like many women, I was angry about the treatment women received. What better place to take action than in the health care system? Though I thought demonstrations, marches and protests of all sorts were critical, and, indeed participated in them, I also believed that some solid knowledge base was necessary if matters were to be changed. Working through contacts I no longer remember, I obtained federal funding for a two-day,

international research conference at UCSF on women as health care consumers in the new era, the first one in the United States (Olesen, 1975) and one that helped place women's health issues in the spotlight. I had to work across disciplines and with federal bureaucrats, a new experience that not only refined my interpersonal skills, but also expanded and humbled me as a sociologist.

Meanwhile, collaborating with feminist colleagues on our faculty, Lucile Newman and Ellen Lewin, anthropologists, and Sheryl Ruzek, a sociologist, I also organized graduate social science classes on women's health, including feminist theory, policy, and research. These courses, which vigorously criticized and veered away from conventional medical views about women and their health issues became the "Women, Health and Healing" specialty in the UCSF Graduate Sociology Program.<sup>6</sup>

Thanks to a three-year grant that Ruzek, Lewin, and I obtained in 1982 from the Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education, these new classes also planted the seeds for curricular innovation movement that spread far beyond UCSF campus.<sup>7</sup> Adele Clarke, a feminist symbolic interactionist, who was finishing her doctoral work in UCSF's sociology program, later joined us. Our joint efforts refined conceptualizations of and concerns about women's health that changed the landscape of this entire field of study.<sup>8</sup> My participation in this effort also solidified my identity as a feminist sociologist, sharpening not only my sense of who I was, but also my sense of where and how my research might make a difference in women's lives.<sup>9</sup>

#### *Fresh Directions*

The circuitous route that I traveled in becoming a sociologist took a new and important twist in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Two events precipitated these changes in my sociological self: Norman Denzin's "Cultural Studies Panel" at the 1988 Mid-West Sociological Association meetings and the 1990 British Medical Sociology Conference. Denzin's cultural studies session and others like it, such as Howie Becker's and Michal McCall's performance piece were so provocative that they challenged the very foundation on which my then sociological self rested (Athens, 1995). Only vaguely aware at the time of the new currents in deconstructionism and postmodernism, I was literally swept away by the presentations that the panel members made. I later wrote:

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jubilant. What's been going on? What are these new ideas? Some seem tantalizingly similar to conversations in the long ago days of our ethnographic studies at UCSF. Where do I learn more about this? How does this fit with 'standard' sociology? The meetings over, I fly home, a phoenix risen from the ashes of a sociology that seems out of step, out of tune and strangely old fashioned. But is this just trendy? Have I been seduced by the compelling artfulness of the presentations and overlooked the sociology in them? I have no answers, but float, savoring something new and exciting, but, not sure of what it is or, where I could fit. (Olesen, 2001a, pp. 267-268)

The postmodern turn created a huge controversy in sociology. Since this controversy has been amply documented elsewhere, (Rosenau, 1992; Charmaz, 1995; Delamont & Atkinson, 2004), I do not need to recount all the details of it here. Instead, I will limit myself to the impact that this controversy had on me. In retrospect, I was never closely tied to the positivist strands in SI or qualitative sociology. Because of the vestiges of my former romantic journalistic self, I was very open to entertaining and trying out these provocative ideas.

Did I go postmodern? I can still recall my revised feminist theory class in which students and I would literally wallow our way through the postmodern/deconstruction mazes. I also asked my students to "perform" their term papers in my social psychology of illness class and in my qualitative feminist research class. From my years of attending Denzin's stimulating cultural studies panels (Olesen, 2001a, 2001b), talking with my colleague Adele Clarke, who was taking grounded theory around "the postmodern turn" (Clarke, 2005), not to mention the teaching of my feminist theory class and my qualitative research classes, I was well prepared to confront the issues of reflexivity, voice, the hermeneutics of field work, validity, voice, text, and more. This struggle, which endures to this day, has sharpened my qualitative research and deepened my appreciation for the history and untapped potential of qualitative research. Eventually, I concluded that Kathy Charmaz's (1995) social constructionist's position is a highly sensible one.

These sometimes mystifying and frustrating labors in the postmodern-deconstructionist vineyards prepared me to accept an invitation from Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (1994) to contribute a chapter on feminist qualitative research to their handbook, which Peter Manning (2003, p. 1035) aptly termed "a landmark". I found that writing that chapter (Olesen, 1994) and its subsequent revisions (Olesen, 2000b, 2005) was incredibly demanding, requiring that I move across disciplines, grapple with controversies within feminist thought, explore tensions among qualitative methods in fields which seem to expand exponentially with each passing

year. The writing and revising of this chapter has continued to this day to affect my views of myself as a sociologist.

An invitation from organizers of the 1990 British Medical Sociology Group's annual meeting to give the plenary address changed me in a different way. They had accepted my suggestion that I address issues of emotions in health care, which, at that time, was a neglected issue in medical sociology. I saw this as a golden opportunity to take my long-time interest in medical sociology in a new direction by examining the profound changes that the US health care system was now undergoing. Our now highly cost conscious health care system demanded that health professionals speed up their delivery of physical care at the expense of their previously valued emotional care, a problem which I labeled "emotional lag." I realized that I had to think through *very carefully how both* macro- and micro-sociological processes shape our work and selves, a type of analysis with which I had precious little experience. It took me several months of intensive study to get myself up to the speed required for me to speak before a British academic audience as one who was highly knowledgeable about this issue. I was pleasantly surprised to find that my speech at this group's annual meeting was very well received, which was a milestone in the further development of my sociological self. I had broken the boundaries of my previous self by doing something which before that time, I never dreamed that I could do (Athens, 1995; Olesen, 1990a).

### SOME FINAL REFLECTIONS

During the almost 54 years that my story of how I became a sociologist covers, I unsurprisingly witnessed great changes in my three areas of sociological specialization: qualitative methodology, medical sociology, and women's studies. Although there have been some ups and downs, qualitative sociology with some important exceptions has steadily grown since the 1960s in its influence and importance (Best, 2006; Fine, 1993; Sandstrom & Fine, 2003). We now have a larger theoretical and methodological repertoire than ever before in our history to choose from, especially for studying large scale societal issues with important policy implications. Today, the biggest problem facing qualitative sociologists remains obtaining funding from research granting agencies (Steinmetz, 2005a, 2005b).

Medical sociology has also grown leaps and bounds over the last half century. Inquiries have begun to be made in bio-medicalization and globalization. There also has been a renewed interest in the old problem of

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the costs and quality of health care delivery, the breadth of its coverage, along with disparities in its availability. As the health care crisis deepens in our society, I expect the interest in these problems will continue to grow. Medical sociologists will be increasingly called on to contribute to their solution

After 40 years of feminist scholarship, I think that feminist sociologists have left an indelible mark on the discipline. It is now an intellectual strand in sociology that must be reckoned with, although feminist sociologists continue to argue among themselves over the degree to which this is true (Laslett & Thorne, 1997). Although much has changed for the better for women regarding their access to faculty positions, their impact on curriculum, their participation in policy-relevant research, and their general influence in the discipline (thanks to *Sociologists for Women in Society*), much remains to be accomplished.

More generally, feminist research is particularly needed on how gender, race, class, sexuality, and age intersect in diverse societies. I am hopeful, however, that the increasing numbers and sophistication of present-day feminist sociologists, both novices and veterans, can, eventually, move this critical work to new levels.

### INTO THE FUTURE

I retired early (1993) to take advantage of the benefits that my fiscally pressed university offered to persuade well-paid senior faculty to stand down. Thirty-three years of demanding teaching and committee work at UCSF were enough to persuade me to accept the university's offer! I have not experienced retirement as particularly difficult or painful. However, I have found that my role as a retired sociology professor is one which must be executed with great finesse and flexibility. As far as one's local colleagues are concerned, the trick is to remain interested in their problems and work, but not obtrusive; to be helpful when possible, but not overbearing. As far as with one's colleagues elsewhere are concerned, the gambit is to remain current and lively. As far as myself is concerned, the tactic is to remain busy and productive, not fritter my time away, and enjoy the relief of not sitting on committees or preparing for classes.

Retirement for me was a calendar marker to be sure, but in terms of my sociological self, more a way station than ending point. I have papers to finish, boxes of data from old projects to analyze, files full of memos on ideas for new papers to reflect on, and speaking and writing invitations to consider<sup>10</sup>, so there is still plenty of work for me to do. My life is



“continually open to new formulations, resisting determinancy” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003, p. 850). I look forward to developments in my three areas of interest (qualitative, medical, and feminist sociology) that will present new challenges and bring more opportunities for my sociological self to grow. Over my long career, my sociological self has evolved in ways that I could have hardly anticipated at its beginning. I certainly do not plan to stop evolving as a sociologist now because I am retired. My intention is to wear out, not rust out. It’s the only way to go!

### NOTES

1. The Vietnamese Buddhist concept of “interbeing” can be integrated with symbolic interactionism. (Olesen, 2000a). On interaction, space prevents acknowledgement of many wonderful clerical staff members in three universities, particularly UCSF, who were significant for me. Academic careers and selves are not only the fruits of scholarly work and collaboration, but also derive from staff labor and institutional knowledge.

2. Soon after our research started, the turbulent and challenging Civil Rights and Anti-Vietnam War movements swept American Universities, but never fully took root at UCSF, though a powerful Black Caucus emerged. We marched and sat in protests elsewhere.

3. By 1968 there was a small “critical mass” of sociologists, including Leonard Schatzman and Barney Glaser, which made establishment of the doctoral program possible.

4. This was an extraordinary project. Each team member did field work regularly over three years at his or her own site which the entire team also visited once to become acquainted with participants and programs at the site, to help the individual team member to assess and analyze emergent findings. I studied the Mt. Hood Community College Nursing Program near Portland, Oregon (Olesen, 1979). We exchanged all our field notes, analyzed others’ notes as well as our own and wrote memos. This episodic field work posed special demands (Olesen, 1990b, pp. 223–226), but I could see I could do field work beyond a single setting.

5. The project produced numerous papers on the nursing profession. I cite here those most closely related to my emerging sociological selves and interests (Davis & Olesen, 1963; Olesen & Whittaker, 1964, 1966, 1968; Whittaker & Olesen, 1964).

6. The Women, Health and Healing Specialty quickly became and continued to be the site for gifted graduate students to complete their own feminist-sociological projects which further shape expand sociological analysis of women’s health issues.

7. Our three summer teaching institutes drew national and international university teachers starting social science women’s health courses in various disciplines or women’s studies. We produced curricular materials, such as a bibliography on the health of minority women of color, one of the few at that time, an important contribution in the pre-cyber scholarship era (Ruzek, Anderson, Clarke, Olesen, & Hill, 1986).

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8. We outlined theoretical issues leading to new perspectives on women's health (Lewin & Olesen, 1985), we emphasized diversities and complexities to criticized scholarly and medical homogenization of women's issues (Ruzek, Olesen, & Clarke, 1997), and examined post-structural, post-colonial and post-modern perspectives to revision women's health (Clarke & Olesen, 1999).

9. UCSF presented many opportunities to undertake feminist interventions which ranged from the informal, for example, reminding male colleagues that I, too, held a doctorate and wished to be addressed the same way they spoke to my male colleagues in sociology or psychology (Dr. or professor) rather than by my first name, to confrontations with campus institutions. Colleagues in nursing and I successfully struggled to change Academic Senate by laws to enable senior nurse faculty to sit on the powerful Committee on Academic Personnel where previously they had been excluded. The Chancellor's Committee on the Status of Women, an administrative committee, which I chaired (1984-1986), did a major study of salary discrepancies between male and female faculty members.

10. My paper in a festschrift collection honoring my friend and colleague, Meg Stacey, British medical sociology pioneer who had significantly influenced my sociological, becoming set fresh directions for my sociological self (2001b). Kathy Charmaz, a leading medical sociologist renowned for her work and, a major grounded theorist, involved me in two enriching collaborations, one on ethnographic research in medical sociology (Charmaz & Olesen, 1997), one on SI and medical institutions (Charmaz & Olesen, 2003). Two nurse researchers, Diane Hatton and Anastasia Fisher, included me in a group at the Rockefeller Study Center at Bellagio to add feminist sociological perspectives to their project on health of incarcerated women (Olesen, 2009).

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I am enormously indebted to two critical and helpful readers: Lonnie Athens' wide ranging editorial criticisms and suggestions for theoretical and substantive changes greatly improved the initial draft. Anne Davis' close, thoughtful reading helped polish and improve later drafts.

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