

Nancy Mathiowetz speech: “*The Accidental Sociologist*” (4.28.2011)

Let me begin by thanking the members of the department for this award. The University of Wisconsin and specifically, the department of Sociology hold a special place in my heart and I’m deeply honored to have received this award.

I just want to take a few minutes of your time to reflect on life post graduation from the University of Wisconsin and this fabulous department.

Thank goodness for the breadth requirements of the College of Letters and Sciences. Without those requirements, a medical microbiology student may never have ventured into a sociology class offered by Bert Adams in the spring of 1976 and thus begin her journey as a sociologist. You might consider me the “Accidental Sociologist.”

As you well know, sociology is the study of social life, social change, and the social causes and consequences of human behavior. Sociologists investigate the structure of groups, organizations, and societies, and how people interact within these contexts. Since all human behavior is social, the subject matter of sociology ranges from the intimate family to the hostile mob; from organized crime to religious cults; from the divisions of race, gender and social class to the shared beliefs of a common culture. In fact, few fields have such broad scope and relevance for research, theory, and application of knowledge.

It is with this intellectual foundation, begun within the hallways of this building, further fostered in graduate school (at a not-to-be-named rival across the lake!) that I launched my professional career. Now depending upon whether you see the glass half empty or half full, you could characterize my professional life as a rich eclectic array of experiences or as a “checkered past.” Personally I prefer the former.

One of the facets of sociology that I found most intellectually stimulating was the distinctive and enlightening way of seeing and understanding the social world in which we live. Through its particular analytical perspective, social theories, and research methods, sociology is a discipline that expands our awareness and analysis of the human social relationships, cultures, and institutions that profoundly shape our lives and human history.

With that view in mind, I had little interest in academia as a starting point for my career. Rather, I wanted to be able to “dabble” across a broad range of substantive topics – public health, the environment, economics --from the perspective of the lens that sociology provided. I began my professional career in the private sector, working as a survey methodologist, drawing on the research methods and analytic skills developed as a sociology student. Those early years were spent trying to improve the data used to inform both health care policy and the practice of public health.

Consulting in the private sector also offered me the opportunity to experience the lighter side of research—for example studying the buying and consumption characteristics associated with Oreo cookies (yes, people do dunk Oreo cookies in Scotch, a perfect waste of both the Oreo cookie and the Scotch in my view).

After several years of work in the private sector, I turned to service in the Federal Statistical system. For those of you who are looking for an interesting job experience, I highly recommend the federal statistical agencies. What we know about the economy, unemployment, rates of infant immunizations, alternative energy consumption, crime rates, poverty, and the well being of our citizens for the most part are based on data produced as part of the mission of various federal statistical agencies. The Energy Information Agency, Environmental Protection Agency, the National Park Service, the Centers for Disease Control, even the Central Intelligence Agency, all hire sociologists for their broad view of the social world –and the research skills that are an integral part of sociological training. I spent my time in federal service in various branches of the Centers for Disease Control and at the Bureau of the Census. The experiences as a “fed” were rich and diverse –for example trying to explain to members of the president’s task force on health care reform why the federal government had three different estimates of the number of people without health insurance (The answer: question wording differences were the source of the problem).

I returned to academics in 1992, first at a joint position at the University of Maryland and University of Michigan, and then, in 2003, returning back to Wisconsin in a position down the road at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. The fun of academics and my work as a survey methodologist is that I still get to dabble across subject matter—right now I’m working on studies that are examining maintenance of sustainable recreational saltwater angling and the relative health risks of alternative non combustible cigarettes.

Through the study of social processes, sociology helps us to understand more clearly the forces shaping the personal experiences and outcomes of our own lives. The ability to see and understand this connection between broad social forces and personal experiences -- what C. Wright Mills called "the sociological imagination" -- is extremely valuable academic preparation for living effective and rewarding personal and professional lives in a changing and complex society. That “sociological imagination” provided the foundation for a rewarding professional life for me and my wish for those of you heading toward graduation this spring is for the same rich experience.

Once again, thank you for this kind award. On Wisconsin!