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The Challenges and Joys of Publicly Engaged Sociology

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In this essay, I lay out my motivations for doing publicly engaged sociology, emphasizing both the joys and the challenges of this work, and some of the key lessons that I have learned. I explore my attempts to impact policy at the federal level and the local level of my university, as well as efforts to shape changes across academia during the COVID-19 crisis. I have found it meaningful to be working toward all of these changes. Moreover, making sense of the spaces that I inhabit, collecting data, exploring patterns, and connecting it to social theory, has deepened my thinking as a sociologist, and bettered my research more broadly.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19; critical sociology; intersectional feminism; policy; public sociology; social space.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of the discipline of sociology, there have been consistent tensions around sociology as a "science" versus sociology as a "practice" (Burawoy 2005; Clawson et al. 2007; Collins 1998; Du Bois 1935; Mills 1959). In the former camp, scholars emphasize the importance of basic research, methodological rigor, publishing in peer-reviewed journals, and maintaining the discipline's legitimacy as objective social scientists (Black 2000; Cole 2018; Horowitz 1994; Ogburn 2019; Turner and Turner 1990). In the latter camp, scholars emphasize the importance of the impact of research, methodological diversity including community engaged and participatory research practices, reaching wider audiences with research findings, and working with a range of other actors—social movements, policymakers, community groups—to create a better world (Burawoy 2005; Collins 1998; Du Bois 1899, 1935; Feagin 2001; Gans 1989, 2016; Lee 1976; Lynd 1939; Mills 1959; Smith 2022). At times, disciplinary leaders have stressed the importance of using sociology for social change, asking about sociology for whom (Lee 1976) and for what (Lynd 1939). At these moments, it has seemed that sociologists should not just identify inequalities but use our knowledge and skills to try to unmake those inequalities.

The last two decades feel different from those earlier cycles. Since Burawoy's (2005) call for public sociology, rather than cycling back toward framings of the importance of sociology as "pure science," publicly engaged sociology has felt more like a tree that has taken root and is flourishing and growing in several different directions. We now have multiple awards that celebrate public sociology, at national[2] and regional[3] levels—highlighting and holding up this work as valuable.

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[2] https://www.asanet.org/about/awards/public-understanding-sociology-award.
[3] https://www.essnet.org/public-sociology-award.

Departments offer degrees and awards in public sociology, emphasizing the practice of sociology as central to the discipline. The American Sociological Association (ASA) promotes public sociology through toolkits and the Sociology Action Network that connects nonprofits with researchers. Indeed, an ASA subcommittee on "the evaluation of social media and public communication in sociology" issued a report about how to assess the quality and impact of public communication in the field, opening the doors to counting engaged work in evaluating sociological careers (ASA 2016). Even funding agencies increasingly emphasize engaged work (Smith 2022).

Yet, that flourishing may develop in particular directions. Burawoy (2005) delineated different types of sociologies. For example, "traditional public sociology," or policy sociology, may reflect op-eds and efforts to influence public debate without participating, versus "organic public sociology" which reflects sociologists working "in close connection with a visible, thick, active, local and often counter-public … a labor movement, neighborhood associations, communities of faith, immigrant rights groups, human rights organizations" (Burawoy 2005:7–8). These traditional and organic public sociologies can be complementary, and also rely on *professional sociology* (work aimed at other academics), which provides both legitimacy and expertise for policy and public sociology. *Critical sociology* rounds out Burawoy's (2005) framework, producing knowledge also aimed at other academics, identifying the biases and silences in the field. He argues that these four different modes of sociology—public, policy, professional, and critical—can "derive energy, meaning, and imagination from its connection to the others" (Burawoy 2005:15).

Yet, Burawoy's categories may reinforce certain ideas about the importance or inherent value of different kinds of work, with the connections between different types of sociology undertheorized (Smith 2022). I do, most certainly, engage in professional sociology, including writing books and articles aimed at other academics, though as an intersectional feminist, much of my work is also critical, taking aim at gendered and racialized biases in knowledge production. Much of my publicly engaged work looks more like "policy sociology" than "organic public sociology," but there are connections between the two. Importantly, I believe that the connections between the different sorts of sociology we do lead to better, more meaningful, and more grounded work in all realms. Rather than seeing one type of scholarship as more valuable than others, I see the types of work we do as linked (Smith 2022).

In this essay, I lay out my motivations for doing publicly engaged sociology, emphasizing both the joys and the challenges of this work, and some of the key lessons that I have learned. I explore my attempts to impact policy at the federal level and the local level of my university, as well as efforts to shape changes across academia during the COVID-19 crisis. I have found it meaningful to be working toward all of these changes. Moreover, making sense of the spaces that I inhabit, collecting data, exploring patterns, and connecting it to social theory, has deepened my thinking as a sociologist, and bettered my research more broadly. Some may see some of this work as "me-search," research that too closely relates to my own identity to be considered "objective," despite using appropriate methods, receiving funding, and publishing after rigorous peer review (Harris 2021). I disagree. And, I hope that

publicly engaged sociology in all of its forms will cement its place as a valued, critical element in sociological careers.

MOTIVATIONS FOR PUBLICLY ENGAGED SOCIOLOGY

My teenage years were spent in Shreveport, Louisiana, as the economy was weakening due to Reagan's embrace of neoliberalism. Anti-Black racism and homophobia were commonplace, women's rights were an afterthought, and immigrants were told to assimilate. As the daughter of politically progressive immigrants from India and Switzerland, I had grown up with an intimate knowledge that there are many different ways to organize societies, and thus, that working toward social change was critical. As an Asian-American, Marxist, feminist, and second-generation immigrant, I knew that the dramatic inequalities by class, race, gender, nationality, and sexuality that confronted me, every day, could be challenged. As Collins (2007:103) argues:

> African Americans, Latinos, new immigrant groups, women, working-class and poor people, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) people, and others who remain penalized within American society and their allies may gravitate toward a sociology that promises to address social issues that affect the public.

I joined progressive causes including the anti-apartheid movement (opposing South African apartheid), the sanctuary movement (to provide a haven for Central American refugees), the women's rights movement (including reproductive rights), and protested against military intervention in other parts of the world, as well as CIA recruitment on campus. I wanted to change the world.

I did not expect to go to graduate school. Most of my close friends were smart, politically engaged, working-class kids who had not gone to college. My small private college experience in Shreveport reflected students who saw college as a place to earn a credential, rather than a place to think. I was running my college's "alternative" music radio station, and planning a career in radio. But my parents encouraged me to take the GRE, just in case, and when I did well, encouraged me to apply to graduate schools, just to see what might happen in the future. Graduate school acceptances made it the path of least resistance. And in graduate school at Emory, I met brilliant students and faculty who were excited about thinking and drawn together by similar political goals. I found a warm and generous community in a rapidly diversifying city, even though I was one of very few BIPOC students and only one of two BIWOC students.

Yet, my training emphasized basic science, methodological rigor, and publishing in academic journals and did not provide information about communicating with broader audiences, using research to influence policy, or working with community organizations. As Hays (2007:79) argues about her experience of entering sociology:

> I remember well my disappointment upon learning that sociology was not what I had dreamed of while filling out all those graduate school applications—it was not a vibrant and inclusive community of public intellectuals dedicated to social change.

There were signs of submerged activism in the discipline, and I appreciated conversations at meetings held by the Society for the Study of Social Problems, the Association of Black Sociologists, and Sociologists for Women in Society. But it was clear that the more professionally oriented talks at the ASA meetings were more valued by the field.

Throughout graduate school, I hired myself out as an "applied researcher" for the medical school as well as for researchers on Centers for Disease Control (CDC)-funded projects focused on sex work and HIV. Act Up protestors were, rightfully, outraged at the CDC response to the AIDS crisis (as was I), but I had an opportunity to use research to push for better responses. This work felt meaningful, as it could lead to more direct change than the articles I was writing in graduate school. Although my graduate school research was on topics that were deeply connected to my political priorities—capitalism and global inequality, labor unions, and women's movements—it was harder to see how *my* research contributed to social movements strategies. My feminist dissertation showed how women's movements in England and France had strategically won family-friendly policies, yet I had no sense of how to engage with current women's movements.

By the time I was working as an assistant professor at the University of Georgia, I felt that publicly engaged work was disconnected from my professional work. In hallway conversations and my written pre-tenure evaluations, I seemed to be judged only by where I published, and how much I published, with little interest in my impact on the world. I keenly remember attending a session at the Southern Sociological Society, where William Julius Wilson and Pepper Schwarz, important publicly engaged sociologists whose insights impacted policy and public discourse, discouraged sociologists from engaging in public sociology before earning tenure. While the theme of the meeting, organized by publicly engaged Southern Sociological Society President Rebecca Adams, celebrated publicly engaged work (Adams 1998), I felt, quite literally, the discipline was working to "cool out" sociologists from their activist desires. And I had many conversations with sociologists who felt the same—that our political activism delegitimated us as sociologists, and thus better be kept under wraps. As Burawoy (2005:5) argues, "The original passion for social justice, economic equality, human rights, sustainable environment, political freedom or simply a better world, that drew so many of us to sociology, is channeled into the pursuit of academic credentials." It was a low point.

And then I was hired into a joint appointment between a Sociology department and a School of Public Policy. I took the job not knowing what it would mean to be in a policy school, and somewhat suspicious about teaching professional-track Masters students. Yet, because my appointment was at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, an activist-oriented campus, and because my cohort of hires included progressive thinkers from across social science fields, I soon felt like I could pursue my passions. Surely it helped that I also had earned tenure.

Teaching public policy students whose aim was to take the two years of training we gave them to make the world better, freed me up, helped me refocus, and gave me wings. This work also coincided with several key events. With colleagues Dan Clawson, Nancy DeProsse, Nancy Folbre, Naomi Gerstel, and Eve Weinbaum, and funding from Foundation for Child Development, Schott Foundation, and A.C.

Mailman Foundation, we developed a movement bringing together labor unions and childcare advocates to support an expansion of publicly funded childcare along with better pay and working conditions for childcare workers. These meetings, which brought together academics, advocates, and activists, were exciting. Al Gore was running for President on a platform that emphasized early childhood education and care, and it felt like an organic movement that would make childcare accessible to working families. Yet, the Supreme Court's decision to award the presidency to George W. Bush was heartbreaking, and a setback to the movement (Hasen 2003). But I had a sense of the way forward.

After Burawoy's important contributions to thinking about public sociology, I had another opportunity to dig deeper. With colleagues, I co-edited a volume, *Public Sociology: Fifteen Eminent Sociologists Debate Politics and the Profession in the Twenty-First Century* (Clawson et al. 2007). This brought me in close dialogue with a number of my heroes, like Patricia Hill Collins, Frances Fox Piven, Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Sharon Hays, and Judith Stacey, who thought through publicly engaged sociology in productive ways. I took their ideas to heart. In the sections that follow, I consider strategies I have taken to do publicly engaged research at the federal level, in academia, and during a crisis.

POLICY AT THE FEDERAL LEVEL

My work on building an early childhood education apparatus in the United States was related to my long-term research agenda, indeed building on my dissertation work around the way labor movements, social Catholic movements, and women's movements had won family-friendly policies (Misra 1998, 2003). In talking to US labor activists and childcare advocates about early education and care, I understood better why the United States was so exceptional. Rather than learning from the family policies available in other wealthy countries, US policymakers did not think these policies benefited society, considering care for children as an individualized choice, in the words of Nancy Folbre (2008), seeing "children as pets." In teaching public policy, I also understood better the challenges to moving policy priorities onto the political agenda, and the incremental policy-making process (Birkland 2007; Ingram and Smith 2011; Lipsky 2010; Schneider and Ingram 1997).

This led me to a research agenda focused on *illustrating* the beneficial impact of these policies on large-scale outcomes that strengthen the economy. In other words: rather than arguing that these policies were morally right, I needed to show policymakers that these policies cost less than the economic gains that they generate. I collaborated with colleagues in Sociology and Economics to engage in research that empirically shows the benefits of investing in these policies by comparing outcomes for intersectional groups across countries with different policies. We wrote grant proposals funded by the National Science Foundation and Washington Center for Equitable Growth and published research that laid out the benefits of work-family policies such as well-paid moderate-length parental leaves and investments in early childhood education on outcomes such as employment, wages, and poverty (Boeckmann et al. 2015; Budig et al. 2012, 2016; Jee et al. 2019; Misra et al. 2007a, 2007b,

2011a, 2011b, 2012; Misra and Murray-Close 2014; Moller et al. 2016). This work reflects our engagement in professional sociology, convincing funders, journal editors, and reviewers that our methods are sound, making contributions to theory as well as empirical understanding. In other words, this established my professional credentials, which strengthened my authority as a publicly engaged sociologist.

Next, I publicized these findings to broader audiences. I began writing op-eds, agreeing to speak to journalists, appearing on radio and television programs, and having my work cited in the popular press. I also wrote short pieces for *The Conversation*,[4] a vehicle that pairs academics with journalists to write short, clear, research-based articles and then allows newspapers and online media to reprint these pieces. I have published 10 pieces with The Conversation, which have been read by hundreds of thousands of people, and helped connect me to other journalists. Over the years, I've also seen public opinion moving in the direction I've been working toward.

This work has also made me recognize the importance of building relationships with journalists. I regularly drop my "scheduled" work to talk to journalists, not only about my research but to help them find the right researcher contacts for the stories they are working on. I have found, as in anything, that reciprocal and generous relationships with journalists pay off, helping not only me but social science researchers more generally, get our findings out into broader conversations. Washington Center for Equitable Growth, a progressive think tank that has funded my research, has also provided coaching and opportunities to meet with legislators and advocates. I increasingly write, engage, and meet with legislators or, more often, legislative aides and policy advocates in Washington DC, to discuss not only my research findings but the specific logistical details about how to design policies to lead to the most equitable outcomes. These strategy conversations have also fed back into my research priorities, as well as my publicly engaged work.

Thus, while primarily engaged in "policy research," in Burawoy's (2005) formulation, this type of publicly engaged research has felt very useful. Burawoy's analysis of "policy research" as different from more organic forms of "public sociology" has also seemed at odds with my experience, since policy research and public sociology often intermingle. As Smith (2022:5) argues, "changing laws, policies, practices, or budgets is a prime goal for community organizations or movements and for their collaboration with scholars." When US President Biden laid out the American Families Plan, many of the programs that I have promoted were included in his vision (Marr et al. 2021). While the Plan was not adopted by Congress, it matters that these policies are on the political agenda—even if they have not yet been accepted by Congress (Birkland 2007). I expect to spend the rest of my career working on this topic, as a professional, critical, policy, and publicly engaged sociologist (Burawoy 2005; Smith 2022).

POLICY AT THE (VERY) LOCAL LEVEL

I have also engaged in public sociology as a faculty union activist. Chairing the Work-Life Committee at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst as a Vice

[4] https://theconversation.com.

President of the faculty union (the Massachusetts Society of Professors), my collaborative research has shaped changes in university policies and the labor contract. While this work draws upon academic research, including my work on family policy, it is also closer to the notion of "organic" community-engaged research, since faculty members from different fields work to define the problems and design the research. We formulate and carry out research, and then use that research to inform changes in policies and practices. Yet I have also engaged in "professional" and "critical sociology" by publishing findings focused on race and gender bias in academia in peer-reviewed journals, and built on the research findings to publish "policy sociology" in venues aimed at academic practitioners, such as *Inside Higher Education*. Thus, this work is meant not only to better my institution, but also to contribute to knowledge, and help better institutions around the country.

Early in my career, I did research with doctoral students looking at how race and gender intersect in the experiences of university faculty (Kennelly et al. 1999; Misra et al. 1999), as well as in how publishing reflects race and gender biases (Karides et al. 2001). This reflected my trying to make sense of my experiences on the job market, when colleagues suggested that "of course, *you* got a job," implying that as an Asian-American woman, I benefited from affirmative action on the labor market, even though I had published in both the *American Journal of Sociology* and the *American Sociological Review* in graduate school (Hicks and Misra 1993; Misra and Hicks 1994). I was also interested in understanding the difference in reception to my feminist political economic work ("critical sociology" in Burawoy's formulation) (Misra 1998, 2003; Misra and Akins 1998) relative to similar political economic analyses that did not focus on gender ("professional sociology") (Hicks et al. 2005; Hicks and Misra 1993; Misra and Hicks 1994).

Yet, ironically, I also found my intellectual contributions to these phenomena were discounted. Even when using sociological theories, analyzing survey data and other data sources, and publishing in peer-reviewed journals (Karides et al. 2001; Kennelly et al. 1999; Misra et al. 1999), the research was often treated in reviews as "service" or nonscholarly work. As a pre-tenure faculty member, I was surprised to discover that colleagues referred to my research output in one review only in the areas of "welfare state" and "world-systems" research, treating my peer-reviewed articles on gender and racial inequalities in academia as superfluous. Asking a mentor to help me understand, she explained that although she recognized this work as important, many of my colleagues did not read work on women of color in academia as true social science, reminiscent of experiences documented by Collins (1986), regarding the "outsider within." Most researchers study the experiences of people like them, but people of color are more likely to be disciplined for doing so. "Me-search" wasn't the term used at that time (Harris 2021), but senior colleagues advising me on my career choices and tenure prospects were clear that such work would not be counted as refereed research articles in my personnel actions because it looked like "me-search," and that I needed to focus my publication record in areas that would be counted. These institutional inequalities in knowledge production were both deeply embedded and invisible to sociologists who themselves were studying inequality. This led me to dig in even more, to consider and theorize epistemic exclusion.

Early in my time at the university, the union successfully negotiated the adoption of a paid semester's paid leave for tenure-stream faculty members who became parents through birth or adoption. Although this was personally helpful, I knew the university still had a long way to go to best support caregivers at the university. Working with union colleagues on the work-life committee, we researched different policies that other universities had put into place, and used them in bargaining with the administration for supports. Yet, it became clear that we needed more evidence in support of these changes.

Thus, my colleague Jennifer Lundquist and I engaged in research exploring how caregiving impacts faculty careers at my institution. We worked with union members and colleagues at the university to develop a survey that captured the key issues that caregivers felt and explored how gender, nationality, and race intersect with caregiving. After piloting the survey with a diverse group of faculty members and revising it, we conducted a university-wide survey with the help of excellent research assistants. The data was very clear: women faculty were substantially hampered by caregiving work (often their children), while faculty of color were often engaged in caregiving work for their extended families. We wrote several reports, aimed at addressing issues like workload, caregiving, and promotion to full, email burdens, and commuting, that we presented to university audiences, including the union and key administrators (Curtis et al. 2009a, 2009b; Lundquist et al. 2009; Misra et al. 2009; Templer 2010). We used these data to push for changes in policies and the union contract and to develop greater recognition of the challenges faced by faculty of color, women, and caregivers.

The survey helped us provide hard numbers that emphasized the particular challenges that white women and faculty of color experience. Yet, to convince the administration to agree to the changes that the union felt were necessary, we further collected focus group data with faculty of all ranks. This focus group data was critical since it provided illustrative descriptions of the challenges that faculty members experience on campus, while it also allowed faculty to talk to one another, understanding better the structural limitations impacting their experiences at work. Focus groups also helped the faculty connect to the union, understanding the union's goals and interests in representing faculty voices to the university administration. Thus, the focus groups both generated useful data from key stakeholders, but also allowed those stakeholders to strategically work together with the union, to address the challenges faculty face. While this project was an enormous undertaking, it was also very rewarding. We were able to push forward with improvements in the contract in ways that created opportunities for faculty members who were not on the tenure track to win leaves, as well as win a dual partner hire policy particularly important for women and BIPOC faculty.

In addition, we used the data to publish findings in peer-reviewed journals (Lundquist et al. 2012; Misra et al. 2012a). The data showed important workload imbalances across the university, reflecting gender, race, and rank. Thus, certain faculty members—for example, white men at senior ranks—were able to spend more time focused on research and disciplinary service while others—white women and faculty of color—were spending more time on less valued activities like advising and local-level service. We further showed that when faculty members become parents,

mothers spend less time on research, maintaining their teaching, service, and advising workloads, while fathers reserve their time on research, cutting back on other elements of their workload (Misra et al. 2012a). Thus, insofar that women sacrifice their research time to cover the communal work—and men sacrifice the communal work to protect their research time, parenthood exacerbates gendered differences in workloads. Yet our data also showed that assumptions that men were taking advantage of the gender-neutral parental leave policy were also overblown; most men did not take leaves, and many men whose partners had to return to less flexible workplaces did substantial care without taking leaves (Lundquist et al. 2012).

ANALYZING AND ADDRESSING SOCIAL INEQUALITY IN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

Having carried out this work, and using it to inform bargaining and policies on our own campus, we wanted to find ways to impact colleges and university more broadly. Thus, we took our research at our own public university and engaged in kind of policy sociology by publishing in spaces aimed at practitioners (Curtis et al. 2013; Misra et al. 2011). For example, our article on "the ivory ceiling of service work," which suggested that women faced challenges in being promoted to full due to their high levels of service and advising at the associate level, led to speaking engagements and meetings with faculty activists on many other campuses. This work, which allowed us to speak to broader audiences, was meaningful, since we were intervening in inequalities that mattered. Yet, despite its many citations, this research was not always recognized as research. Even when we published articles in academic journals, our department counted it as "service" rather than research in our yearly merit reviews.

Lundquist and I, decided to forge ahead, thinking it more important to get the word out, publishing a series of columns in *Inside Higher Education*. Our work also led to us consulting with a wide array of universities and speaking at a conference aimed at labor leaders, as we worked to ensure that universities recognized and responded to the needs of their faculty. I began regularly meeting and talking to both rank-and-file faculty activists and progressive university leaders at different colleges and universities and saw some quickly adopt policies we recommended aimed at supporting women, faculty of color, and caregivers.

Compared to what feels like a glacial pace of change at the federal level in the United States, working with universities felt like a real opportunity to influence meaningful change at more local institutional levels. Institutions with progressive faculty and leaders were sometimes able to make changes at lightning speed. For example, I met with one provost of a highly ranked but rural state university, describing to him the importance of partner hiring programs for universities in more rural areas. Less than a year later, my department lost a hire to that university—with both universities touting and using their partner hiring policies as an incentive.

The research we did further led to an opportunity to take part in an action-research project led by KerryAnn O'Meara at the University of Maryland and funded by the National Science Foundation ADVANCE program. This project, set

up as a traditional experiment yet with a participatory action component, was quite exciting. Departments at public universities in three states were recruited to take part in the workload equity action project. Those that applied were randomly assigned into "treatment" and "control," and all departments received a pre- and postsurvey about workload equity in their department (the control group received the treatment in the second part of the study). The work built on our earlier findings about workload inequities. Knowing that certain groups—by rank, race, and gender—are disadvantaged in how they are assigned and take up workload, our goal was to identify interventions that could address those inequities.

The project was quite large—spanning multiple institutions across three states. We brought the treatment departments in each state together for a series of meetings, where we discussed workload challenges, and measured workload inequities through both a survey and a dashboard capturing workloads, which we helped departments build. We provided detailed feedback to each department as they identified the key workload inequities that they wanted to address. We also engaged the departments in brainstorming solutions or identifying strategies around workload that were working in their departments. In the next step, we provided them with strategies around workload to address the specific challenges they had chosen. The workload policies were developed through a grassroots effort, meeting and talking to faculty and leaders across a range of states, including those in our treatment departments, as well as through combing through union contracts and other documents. The faculty engaged in the process could choose between policies, tweak policies to better fit their contexts, or propose new policies, allowing for substantial agency, along with support and guidance from the team leaders. We provided them with feedback on their proposed policies and helped them work through strategies for implementation. After the policies were implemented, we surveyed the departments again and found a substantial improvement in faculty members' experiences of workload equity among the treatment departments (but not the control) (O'Meara et al. 2018). The project allowed for a great deal of learning and interaction between the teams, informing our approach as project leaders.

While doing publicly engaged work with university faculty may not fit with the image of such work as being with communities outside academia, we saw faculty members gain a sense of agency is strategizing to address inequities. Our goal was consistently to provide guidance and support—but also learn from what the faculty members on the teams were telling us, adjusting and incorporating their feedback and proposed policies, so that the work reflected their experiences and perspectives, and not simply the research literature. The faculty on the department teams played a key role in helping us understand how to devise approaches to creating workload equity, and we emphasize workload equity efforts as needing to be led by faculty at the department level and not by administrators.

Our next step, again, was to publish not only articles in peer-reviewed journals about these interventions (Culpepper et al. 2020; Misra et al. 2021b; O'Meara et al. 2018, 2019), but find more accessible strategies for dissemination. Thus, the project has two short videos (see: https://advance.umd.edu/fwrp/home) summarizing the approach, pieces in *Inside Higher Education*, and pieces in journals aimed at practitioners, like *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* and *The Department*

Chair, as well as through webinars and publications with the American Council on Education (Culpepper et al. 2022; O'Meara et al. 2020, 2021a, 2021b). Once again, we found ourselves giving talks at universities around the country, often providing talks for multiple audiences (equity advocates, faculty, leaders) at the same university. Through these efforts, it has been exciting to see universities support departmental workload equity policies that make a dent in workload inequities.

This work also led me to engage in an NSF-funded ADVANCE-Institutional Transformation grant at my university. As with previous work on academic inequalities, our team, headed by Laurel Smith-Doerr, engaged in large-scale research—including focus group interviews, a faculty survey, and one-on-one interviews—to identify interventions to address challenges for white women and women of color, as well as other intersectional groups of women by sexuality, nationality, caregiving status, rank, and field. We began with focus group interviews by gender and rank, and drew from those findings to identify the key supports faculty need to build successful careers—resources, relationships, and recognition (Misra et al. 2017). Our research as part of the ADVANCE grant has directly addressed issues of faculty inclusion, even as we wonder if this research counts as professional or critical sociology (Kanelee et al. 2022; Mickey et al. 2022b; Misra et al. 2022a, 2022b). In part, this is because we have collected much data at one institution, with relatively small samples. This work also seems more welcome in journals outside of mainstream sociology—interdisciplinary or feminist journals, journals targeting higher education scholars, which are treated as somewhat suspect by our colleagues assessing scholarly productivity. Yet, it has been meaningful to use this research to set up interventions aimed directly at these inequalities within the institution. And, this project has also been reshaped by the COVID-19 pandemic.

ADAPTING A PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY PROJECT IN THE PANDEMIC

The beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic hit during the second year of our 5-year grant aimed at "institutional transformation." The institutional transformation ADVANCE grants aim not at changing women faculty, but at changing the institutional structure, in ways that allow white women and women of color to succeed at the university. Yet, the pandemic shut things down in ways that meant that institutions were already transforming and changing in unprecedented ways. It would have been very easy for our project, with its focus on gender and racial equity, to have been sidelined.

Instead, ADVANCE played a central role in brokering strategies aimed at centering gender and racial equity in COVID-19 university policies and practices. This was only possible because the ADVANCE team had already been on the ground for about 16 months, and had developed trustful relationships with the faculty labor union, the faculty senate, and the administration, with key leaders willing to work in partnership with ADVANCE, not simply performing DEI but embracing it. From the initial campus shutdown to the current COVID-19 policies, ADVANCE brings together insights from the research literature, feedback we receive from faculty

across campus, and strategies aimed at addressing inequalities to suggest policies and procedures that would protect women, faculty of color, and caregivers.

From the beginning, our Provost noted that the massive changes to move courses online and support students in crisis would impact research productivity, offering tenure delays to pre-tenure faculty, as well as a range of other technological and caregiver supports. No doubt, having a feminist sociologist as Vice Provost, Michelle Budig, helped shape the Provost's response (Laube 2021). University stakeholders acknowledged that these impacts were not evenly distributed across faculty members but varied based on a wide number of factors (Budig 2021; Gonzales and Griffin 2020; Goodwin and Mitchneck 2020; Higginbotham et al. 2021; Myers et al. 2020; Shillington et al. 2020; Status of Women Council 2021; Woitowich et al. 2020). ADVANCE and university leaders shared concerns that the uneven impacts of the pandemic could exacerbate negative outcomes for women and BIPOC faculty.

Faculty members experienced substantial increases in workload, as they moved teaching and advising online, as well as more service to reimagine the university under COVID (Budig 2021). Students navigating the crisis require additional attention, creating emotional burdens for women and BIPOC faculty, who generally spend more time on advising (Budig 2021; Griffin and Reddick 2011; Hanasono et al. 2019). For a time, faculty research labs were closed, and field sites, archives, and human subjects research were, by and large, inaccessible, with impacts varying in important ways by method, field, and subfield (Higginbotham et al. 2021; Myers et al. 2020). Faculty members have also lost access to networking and collaborations, due to travel limitations and conference cancellations (Higginbotham et al. 2021).

Outside of the university context, the pandemic also had uneven effects. Women and primary caregivers are more likely to be dealing with the effects of preschool, childcare, and school closures, while faculty of color are disproportionately dealing with pandemic impacts on their families and communities (Budig 2021; Gould and Wilson 2020; Higginbotham et al. 2021; Malisch et al. 2019; Myers et al. 2020; Pereira 2021; Staniscuaski et al. 2021). At the same time, waves of anti-black police violence and anti-Asian hatred exacerbated pandemic impacts on black and Asian faculty members (Cui et al. 2020; Higginbotham et al. 2021; Pirtle and Wright 2021). In addition to lab and research site closures, these gendered and racialized impacts continue to reduce the time for research.

Substantial evidence suggests that productivity plummeted for some groups, especially for women faculty with young children, mirroring effects on mothers more generally (Budig 2021; Collins et al. 2021; Cui et al. 2020; Squazzoni et al. 2020). In some fields, women were submitting fewer papers, while submissions from men increased, which suggests that the pandemic was not only disrupting women's careers but widening gaps between men and women (Cui et al. 2020; Squazzoni et al. 2020) Women were reporting much higher service burden and much greater research interruptions than men, as well as higher time spent providing mental health support to students and moving courses online (Berheide et al. 2022; Budig 2021). ADVANCE saw these impacts potentially shaping not only, for example, the careers of pre-tenure faculty, but graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and faculty of all ranks. Our goal was to address pandemic impacts consistently to ensure an inclusive

approach, addressing and mitigating the pandemic's impact, so that the university's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion remained centered.

By June 2020, faculty members were reaching out to ADVANCE with substantial anxiety about how the pandemic would reshape their careers—long before we knew how long the pandemic would continue. Our three-million-dollar grant meant that we had staff members in place, as well as faculty whose time was "bought out" to focus on ADVANCE interventions, who could pivot to meet the challenges of the moment. I also had a research fellowship during 2020–2021, time meant to be focused on writing a book on family policy, which I shifted to focus on mitigating pandemic impacts instead. Our interdisciplinary and diverse collaborative team structure also meant that we understood the differential impacts of the pandemic on faculty in different parts of campus, using different methods, or with different life circumstances. Doing publicly engaged sociology in a crisis was only possible because of the resources the ADVANCE grant provided, and the deep relationships the team had developed—some over decades—with faculty and administrative leaders on campus. For my part, having a long-time relationship with the faculty union, and members of the Faculty Senate Committee on the Status of Women, as well as a strong relationship with the Provost and several Deans, was a benefit. Yet, many of the ADVANCE team had their own deep relationships with the Provost and Deans, giving us important legitimacy in a crisis.

We set up a Town Meeting with the Provost and Deans of two of the colleges. Faculty sent in questions or concerns ahead of time but also could post questions in the Zoom chat, or speak onscreen, asking directly for support from the administration. It was a powerful event. Many of the participants were untenured faculty and lecturers but included faculty across the ranks. The points raised by faculty, and the responses from the leaders—who appeared to genuinely want to help—led our team to formulate some additional policies and strategies, including, in July 2020, "pandemic impact statements," which allow faculty and departments to identify the key impacts the pandemic has had on their careers. These statements were then swiftly bargained into the contract by the union and were in place by the Fall of 2020.

We continued to work with leaders in the union and the Provost's office to formulate new and changing supports given the changing pandemic. In addition to pushing for policy changes around how faculty are evaluated, tenure delays, and care supports, we also provided an array of tools and workshops on writing pandemic statements, evaluating pandemic statements, and mentoring for pandemic recovery on campus—all directly in response to calls from faculty for supports (Misra 2020, 2021a, 2021b). These efforts were aimed at implementing the new policies in effective and consistent ways across our campus.

We wrote for *Inside Higher Education*, summarizing some of the key points institutions should keep in mind to center equity while adopting pandemic strategies that meet the needs of their faculty (Clark et al. 2020; Mickey et al. 2020; Misra et al. 2021c). We "zoomed" into different settings—colleges and universities, groups of disciplinary leaders, and state university systems—to provide support to faculty and leaders aiming to make a difference. In these settings, we described the differential impacts of the pandemic on faculty work, strategies that colleges and universities

could adopt to address those impacts, and how these strategies fit into broader equity goals.

We wrote about these strategies for both peer-reviewed journals and popular audiences, to disseminate our work as widely as possible (Clark et al. 2020, 2022; Mickey et al. 2020, 2022a; Misra et al. 2020, 2021a, 2021c). We were cited in a National Academies report (Higginbotham et al. 2021) and invited to give talks as part of an online National Academies workshop, as well as part of an NSF event highlighting best practices for faculty equity in the pandemic. We summarize our recommendations as the "5-R" Institutional COVID-19 Action Plan, emphasizing the importance of (1) reworking timelines; (2) realizing care responsibilities; (3) recognizing faculty work holistically; (4) recalibrating evaluations based on faculty work contexts and workloads; and (5) retraining evaluators. Thus, we do not provide a "one-size-fits-all" set of strategies, but instead, identify the key areas that colleges and universities need to adjust to keep centering equity in pandemic responses. Many institutions have experimented with changes such as tenure delays, changes in teaching evaluations, or adopting pandemic impact statements. Unfortunately, many more institutions have yet to adopt approaches aimed at mitigating the impact of the pandemic on faculty careers. Our "5-R" model provides a clear framework that institutions can take, while also allowing for variations based on the context.

This approach to doing public sociology in a crisis is built on previous work and relationships, in ways that might be most accessible to faculty with long histories at an institution. It further indicates the importance of developing relationships, reflexive leadership, and listening to social science data (Laube 2021; Smith-Doerr 2021). By working with those being impacted, communicating their challenges to leaders, and crafting policies and strategies aimed best at addressing those challenges, we have centered equity. While stepping away from other pressing responsibilities to focus on pandemic recovery may not be ideal—it has also made a necessary difference at a challenging time.

CONCLUSIONS

In her analysis of public sociology, Hays (2007) argues that the challenges of institutionalizing public sociology reflect concern among academics that public sociology is not part of our job description and not part of why universities pay academics, as well as belief, or even prejudice, that public sociology is not high-quality social science. My own experience suggests that these challenges remain. Much of my publicly engaged work has not always been recognized as "research" by my colleagues and instead seen as leadership or service work. Yet, I have also been surprised, to hear from colleagues at other institutions about how useful this public-facing research has been. At the same time, I consistently balance the "professional" and "critical" work I do in peer-reviewed venues with the publicly engaged work I do in public or policy venues, a strategy given to me now decades ago by my friend and eminent public economist, Nancy Folbre.

Collins (2007:105) suggests that institutionalizing public sociology might lead to some sociologists doing public sociology as a form of service, "with the 'real'

sociology of professional sociology still holding sway." Given that my work on equity within universities has often been treated as service in my reviews and evaluations, I fear she may have been right. Discussions of publicly engaged sociology remain an afterthought in most of my merit reviews—often not mentioned, or treated as superfluous. Despite efforts by the ASA to see publicly engaged work rewarded in sociological careers (ASA 2016), I see too little proof that things have changed in my setting. Yet, like Collins, I cannot imagine having done my career differently, given the meaning that engaging in this work has for me.

Being a publicly engaged sociologist is challenging, even when working with the public like faculty members or university leaders, or attempting to influence policymakers with research findings. My reading of Burawoy (2005) led me to privilege the importance of *organic* public sociology, to the detriment of other forms of sociological work. Yet, in truth, my work as a professional, critical, policy, and public sociologist has been intertwined throughout my career, in ways that make it difficult, if not impossible, to disentangle. I have also been able to gain traction through policy sociology in ways that suggest it is more important than Burawoy (2005) seems to recognize (Smith 2022). Using research to persuade policymakers—at the federal level or among university leaders—to adopt policies aimed at equity is a good use of sociological skills. Doing these forms of publicly engaged research needs to be recognized more broadly, and valued more highly.

This work is meaningful. I do not merely conduct research and publish it. I conduct research, often in conversation with the community I am studying, and work with them to devise strategies that lead to more equitable outcomes. I work with faculty labor unions to understand the issues faculty face—but I also work with administrators to convey the needs of those faculty. My research helps expose some of the most central needs of working families, but I also work with policy advocates, legislators, and legislative aides to understand the strategies that may be more successful given our political system. In both federal and local settings, I use my research and knowledge of the literature to develop policy solutions to address inequalities. And this research is enriched by my conversations with policymakers and journalists, helping me identify the next steps and dig into areas where I have earned some legitimacy as an expert. I also take the work I have done, including peer-reviewed publications, and use it to craft arguments in public venues for different policy approaches. The kind of institutionally publicly engaged sociology has strong synergies with my research, often prompting me to undertake new projects aimed at creating greater equity.

Practicing good sociology should mean researchers pursuing the research that matters to them, using the theoretical and methodological skills that our training brings us, while also engaging with communities and stakeholders who can help us deepen our understanding of the social phenomenon and widen the impact of our work. It is possible to be committed to sociological methods and theories (even if this includes widening the kinds of methods and theories sociologists use)—and to social change. And while change may take time, in my case it has also gained speed as my career progresses. Publicly engaged research matters, both to creating better sociology and a better world.

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