

1989

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Hill, Michael R., "What It Means To Be a Humanist Sociologist: A Socioautobiographical Perspective" (1989). *Sociology Department, Faculty Publications*. 453.

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Hill, Michael R. 1989/2009. "What It Means To Be a Humanist Sociologist: A Socioautobiographical Perspective." Invited presentation to the Sociology Club, Department of Sociology, Kearney State College, Kearney, Nebraska, December 5.

# WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A HUMANIST SOCIOLOGIST: A SOCIOAUTOBIOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE <sup>1</sup>

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*In the nearly twenty years since I wrote the comments below, much has changed, and much remains the same. Unfortunately, the lofty programmatic ideals of the Association for Humanist Sociology became increasingly befogged in divisive organizational politics such that my life-partner and I eventually left the association. On the plus side, we eventually discovered a small group of scholars (now embodied in the Harriet Martineau Sociological Society, founded in 1996) who actively share our humanist ethic and with whom we continue to work collegially and productively. The eight attributes of progressive sociological activity, outlined below, remain among my highest professional priorities. The full potential of socioautobioraphy, a term initially defined below, has yet to be realized.*

MRH — January 2009

## Preface

I AM DELIGHTED to speak to you as a representative of the Association for Humanist Sociology. It is my purpose today to acquaint you with the Association for Humanist Sociology, to prompt your queries about the Association, and to answer your questions concerning the ways in which our organization supports the humanist values and professional interests of students and practicing sociologists across the country. Prior to talking about the “nuts and bolts” of the Association’s history and member services, however, I turn to my central topic for today: a socioautobiographical perspective on what it means to be a humanist sociologist.

## Preliminary Assumptions

I cannot speak about “what it means to be a humanist sociologist” without making several important assumptions about the nature of sociological discussion. The assumptions on which I base my talk today are crucial because they necessarily shape the content of what I have to say and they structure the conclusions that I will reach. If we have learned anything in sociology during the past several years, it is the idea that we must always do our best to state our assumptions as clearly as possible before we conduct a sociological research project, or explain a sociological method or theory, or talk about our experiences as social scientists—as I will do today.

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<sup>1</sup> Presented December 5, 1989, Sociology Club, Department of Sociology, Kearney State College, Kearney, Nebraska.

The process of making sociological statements is governed by a large number of assumptions, many of which seem at first glance to be far removed from the everyday practice of sociology or from the problems of mastering various aspects of sociology as a student. Today, I will mention only three particularly important assumptions, and you are advised to remember that many additional assumptions also underlie my thoughts about “what it means to be a humanist sociologist.” I begin with the following assumptions: (1) personal experience is an important source of sociological insight, (2) socioautobiography is a valuable sociological activity, and (3) values are vitally important to all sociological work and study. Let me briefly address each assumption in turn.

### **Personal Experience as Sociological Data**

The discipline of sociology owes a great debt to Shulamit Reinharz who identified and detailed the major principles of what she calls “experiential sociology” in her book, *On Becoming a Social Scientist* (Transaction Books, 1984). Reinharz demonstrates that the experiences we have as sociologists (as students and later on) are important sources of data about the social world generally and the world of sociological research specifically. In short, Reinharz points out how important it is for us to pay careful, systematic attention to our experiences and feelings: (1) during the process of becoming a sociologist and (2) later on during our activities as full-fledged sociologists. Following Reinharz, what I have to say today is based upon my experiences as a student, as a sociological researcher, and as a professional educator. It is important for me to state this assumption because we often read that sociologists should not allow their personal feelings and experiences to play any part whatever in our work as social scientists.

### **Socioautobiography**

If you are a sociology major, you know by now that sociologists particularly like to coin new terms and define new concepts. As a generator of jargon, I’m no different and so I offer you a new term to chew on: *socioautobiography*. If we are going to take our personal experiences as sociologists seriously—as Reinharz cogently suggests we ought—then we need to develop a coherent methodological format for collecting, organizing, analyzing, and writing about our sociological experiences.

There is already a strong biographical tradition in sociology, and this tradition gives us several clues about how to write about the lives of sociologists other than ourselves. Several theorists have understood the relevance of biography to sociological analysis, and these theorists include Alfred Schutz, Peter Berger, and C. Wright Mills. The biographical tradition in sociology is most fully developed: (1) in symbolic interactionist studies that focus on the collection and study of “life histories,” for example, Clifford Shaw’s classic study of *The Jack-Roller* (University of Chicago Press, 1930) and (2) in accounts of the history of sociology, of which Irving Louis Horowitz’ book, *C. Wright Mills: An American Utopian* (Free Press, 1983), and Mary Jo Deegan’s

study of *Jane Addams and the Men of the Chicago School, 1892-1918* (Transaction Books, 1988), are among the best recent examples.

The intellectual task of writing sociologically-informed biographies is currently enjoying a surge of interest and popularity. One of the emerging leaders in this area is Judy Long, whose new book, *The New Sociobiography* (Rutgers University Press, anticipated 1990), explores the methodological problems and promises of combining sociological and biographical analyses. (I should note in passing that I am preparing an article on “The Sociologist and the Archive” for Long’s *The New Sociobiography* and that my recently completed doctoral study of “Roscoe Pound and American Sociology” is first and foremost an exercise in sociobiography).<sup>2</sup>

It is a short step to extend Long’s idea of sociobiography to sociological writing about one’s own work as a sociologist, and thus we arrive at what I call *socioautobiography*. There are, in fact, several sociologists who have written intriguing accounts of their professional work. These include: *Twenty Years at Hull-House* by Jane Addams, *Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. DuBois, *Seventy Years of It* by E.A. Ross, and a work noted above, *On Becoming a Sociologist*, by Shulamit Reinharz. These works give much perceptive sociological insight, but they lack clear articulation of the specific processes by which one writes sociologically about one’s own sociological experiences (although Reinharz comes much closer on this score). When fully developed, socioautobiography will map these autobiographical processes and will guide us to a more reflexive understanding of our sociological experiences.

Definitionally, I view *socioautobiography* as the disciplined, systematic exploration of one’s life from a sociological point of view. In particular, sociological accounts of autobiographical experiences pay special attention to classically useful sociological concepts such as “lifeworld,” “role,” “class,” “alienation,” “power,” “status,” “socialization,” “the social construction of reality,” and so forth. I look forward to writing and reading future experiments in socioautobiography, and I encourage each of you to try writing your own life story from the sociological perspective of your choice.

To this point, I have suggested that my own discovery of “what it means to be a humanist sociologist” proceeds on two assumptions: (1) that personal experiences are important sources of

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<sup>2</sup> Like far too many proposed academic projects, Long’s planned book was never published. I did, however, incorporate much of my prepared article on “The Sociologist and the Archive” in my subsequent book on Archival Strategies and Techniques (Sage 1993). As framed by Long, sociobiography per se makes the following contributions: (a) it re-examines “the one-man-one-career model” typically employed in “the narrative/theoretical frameworks for telling lives” (p. 21); (b) it provides a corrective to psychologically-framed biography (p. 23); and (c) it illuminates the “institutional factors that shape intellectual production” and explores “the social production of obscurity” (p. 25). For details, see Judy Long, “Telling Women’s Lives: The New Sociobiography,” unpublished paper presented at the 1987 annual meeting of the American Sociological Association in Chicago. — MRH January 2009

sociological insight, and (2) that biography and autobiography, and specifically socioautobiography, provide a viable and sociologically meaningful format for writing about our experiences as sociologists. A third background assumption also shapes my thoughts about “what it means to be a humanist sociologist,” and this is the assumption that intellectual and moral values are centrally important to sociological work and study.

### **Values**

The place of values in sociology has been the subject of much debate among sociologists. Much of this debate has led us erroneously, in my view, to the conclusion that sociology should be value free or value neutral, that is to say, completely objective. In essence, many sociologists believe fervently that one’s personal values should have no bearing on the selection, formulation, and execution of sociological investigations. I resist this position for several reasons, not the least of which are based on arguments that strike at the heart of deeply philosophical questions such as “what is science?” (cf., M.R. Hill, “Epistemology, Axiology, and Ideology in Sociology,” *Mid-American Review of Sociology*, 1984). Suffice it to say that many philosophers of science now agree that intellectual and moral values cannot be banished from scientific work. The task now facing sociological methodologists is to uncover the unacknowledged moral and political values that lie within each and every research method that we use as sociologists.

Given this extended prologue on assumptions, I hope you will better understand my overall presumption that the discovery of “what it means to be a humanist sociologist” can properly focus on an autobiographical summary of my own experiences and values as a sociologist. I do not attempt to define “humanist sociology” in an abstract or comprehensive sense (although several admirable efforts by others appear in the pages of *Humanity and Society* and elsewhere, cf. Alfred McClung Lee, *Toward Humanist Sociology*, Prentice-Hall, 1973). Rather, I provide an autobiographically-generated list of what I have learned to value in sociology—and observe that it is among those who have banded together under the rubric of “humanist sociology” that I have—on average—found the greatest acceptance and support for what I value.

### **What I Have Learned as a Sociologist**

My introduction to social scientific work began twenty-five years ago when I declared an undergraduate major in geography and began a serious study of social, cultural, political, and economic patterns and processes. In the years that followed, I eventually completed two graduate programs, earning a doctorate first in geography (1982) and another doctorate in sociology (1989). During this long, virtually continuous period of student status, I also taught a variety of social science courses at several midwestern colleges and universities. In many settings, I was simultaneously a student, a full-fledged researcher, and a college professor. These sometimes anomalous roles provided both conflict and mutual reinforcement that enriched and sharpened my understanding of social science as a professional calling.

In reviewing my sociological career to-date (the details of which I spare you today), I realize that I have come to acknowledge and value some aspects of sociological work rather than others. Taken together, the dimensions that I value outline one way of being a sociologist that has—in my case at least—found support among many of the members of the Association for Humanist Sociology. Thus, by drawing your attention to what I have come to value in sociology, I provide one answer among many possible answers to the question, “What does it mean to be a humanist sociologist?”

As a result of my biographical experiences as a social scientist, I now assign high positive value to sociological activities that have the following attributes:

- (1) They are personally satisfying and personally enjoyable.
- (2) They encourage independent thought and reward integrity of action.
- (3) They purposefully seek emancipatory outcomes.
- (4) They are intentionally structured to facilitate reflexive reviews of assumptions, methodologies, and conclusions.
- (5) They exhibit unity between theory, methods, and action.
- (6) They reward innovation, creativity, and intellectual risk-taking.
- (7) They centrally involve the disciplined exploration of ideas, celebrate the intellectual qualities of clarity and logic, and revel in the excitement of discovery and the pride of publication.
- (8) They acknowledge teaching and writing as socially significant, central forms of sociological practice.

For me, it becomes increasingly unthinkable to invest any great amount of time in any sociological project that does not have all—or at least most—of the above qualities.

Strangely, from my perspective, many sociologists live professional lives devoid of most—if not all—of the qualities that I have come to value. In my experience, I have met numerous sociology teachers who despair at the self-imposed drudgery of teaching theories and methodologies they do not like. There are undergraduates who continue to major in sociology even though they do not enjoy their studies and grimace rather than rejoice at every opportunity to write term papers on topics of their own choosing. There are graduate students who opt for specialties and dissertation topics in which they have little or no personal interest. There are researchers who devote years to projects to which they have no personal commitment and which bring them no sense of meaning or emancipatory accomplishment. And there are sociologists everywhere who take the politically safe road, who too easily look the other way on matters of professional ethics, and who care little about the intellectual standards and moral integrity of their chosen profession.

### **Conclusion: The Rewards of Sociology**

It is difficult to keep to the values you admire and respect when those with whom you work or study on a regular basis opt for very different values. If you stick to your values in such a setting, you can expect ridicule and exclusion from the local professional group of which you are rightly a member. If you cash in your values in the interest of “fitting in” or “getting along,” you find yourself accepted by the group but alienated from your own sense of professional direction and self worth. Personally, I find that self-alienation is much too high a price to pay for approval by sociologists who denigrate my professional values.

In actively choosing to follow my values, I have received several positive rewards. First, my work is personally meaningful and gives me great satisfaction in and of itself. My daily work as a sociologist is fundamentally enjoyable. Second, I have—over time—met and corresponded with a number of sociologists who share values similar to mine. I have learned the importance of looking to a geographically-dispersed reference group largely outside of Nebraska as an anchor for my professional identity as a sociologist. A few of these professionally responsive people are members of the Association for Humanist Sociology—and it is the potential for finding and renewing confirming professional friendships that I find particularly valuable in our Association.

Third, I note with particular pleasure that I have been especially fortunate to find a life-partner who shares many of my professional interests and sociological values. Our days and nights are filled not only with the joys of shared everyday life, but also with the mutually supportive, centrally important reinforcements and intellectual understandings that only professional sociologists can give to each other. As you might expect, we are both members of the Association for Humanist Sociology and we count several mutual friends among the Association’s members.

I have tried in this necessarily short essay to acquaint you with the major assumptions with which I have approached the issue of what it means to be a humanist sociologist. These assumptions include the importance of experience, autobiography, and values in sociology. I outlined the characteristics of sociological projects that I have come to value highly in my experience. Finally, I noted that these values are, in fact, shared by and supported by several members of the Association for Humanist Sociology. I cannot offer you a cut-and-dried definition of “humanist sociology,” but I can offer you the example of my own autobiographical experience and suggest that if you subscribe to values similar to mine—or to those of other members of the Association for Humanist Sociology—there is a good possibility that you will find a rewarding and supportive professional welcome in our Association.

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