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Alice S. Rossi (1922 –).


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ALICE S. ROSSI (1922–)

Alice S. Rossi is a Renaissance scholar. She is a leader in several specialties within sociology and between sociology and other disciplines. Her studies of women, occupations, the family, the life course, sociobiography, and socialization bring together work and ideas from sociology, biology, history, psychology, and anthropology. Her far-ranging academic interests are matched by her influence in the wider society and within professional circles.

BIOGRAPHY

Brooklyn, New York, was a vital immigrant area when Alice Schaerr was born there on September 24, 1922. She was born and raised in a brownstone townhouse with three generations of her maternal family: “a German-Lutheran immigrant grandfather and one aunt on the street floor; two unmarried aunts on the second floor; (and) my parents and me and an unmarried uncle on the third floor” (Rossi 1983, 3). They shared their evening meals together in a communal kitchen and dining room located on the basement floor. Her mother was “shy and yielding . . . the hub of my world . . . in perpetual fear of displeasing either her father or her husband” (Rossi 1983, 5). With her daughter, however, she shared warmth and interests in food, fabric, and flowers.

Her grandfather was a socialist and carpenter who combined his political and religious ideals in his work on an Episcopal church in Manhattan. Her three aunts were lively women who shared their world with her. Her father was an experimental machinist who created machinery for scientists at the Rockefeller Institute. He was quiet but supportive of his young daughter’s dreams.

This idyllic, albeit traditionally gendered, world abruptly ended with the Great Depression. The family slipped into hard times; her father began drinking more,

while her mother did janitorial labor. Young Alice began scrubbing clothes and floors, escaping this dreary round of daily struggle through reading her weekly ration of five library books. A tall adolescent, she was more at home in high school than in junior high school. In high school she “edited the newspaper, served in the student senate, was president of the Poetry Club, and dared to dream of college” (Rossi 1983, 8). She did enter Brooklyn College, where she met Louis Schneider, who inspired her to switch from a major in literature to sociology.

At nineteen, a few weeks after Pearl Harbor was bombed, Alice Schaerr married a former economics teacher who was twelve years her senior. By the spring of 1942 she was an army wife, and moved between various towns in the South throughout the war years. She worked in a variety of settings, ranging from a day-care center to a prisoner-of-war camp. She “even delivered a black baby in South Carolina, when [she] volunteered to find out why [her] landlady’s ‘girl’ did not show up for work, and found her alone in advanced labor” (Rossi 1983, 9).

After the war ended she returned to college and earned her bachelor’s degree in 1947, and entered Columbia University for graduate work in sociology. After a difficult decision to divorce and “several foolish affairs” (Rossi 1983, 10), she married Peter Rossi at the age of twenty-nine. “This has been a lasting love, with sparks in the mind, shared tastes of palate and politics, a spicy difference in intellectual flair, a mutual love of hard physical work—a heady brew still potent after thirty years” (Rossi 1983, 10).

Alice Rossi worked briefly for Alex Inkeles at the Russian Research Center at Harvard, and then with Peter Rossi in a community research project at the Graduate School of Education at Harvard. Then Peter Rossi accepted a job at the University of Chicago, when Alice Rossi was pregnant with their first child. She quickly bore three children in four years in her middle and late thirties. Applying superwoman standards in her public and private life, she found herself with insomnia and neuritis misdiagnosed as arthritis. They were living in a gracious Victorian home in Chicago, but it was more picturesque than the lives of this growing family. Rossi has described this stressful time in detail (Rossi 1983, 10–11; 1973, 43–46, 72–75) elsewhere, but succinctly she resented giving up her professional work, her own income, and staying home; she became engrossed in having and being with her children, and felt socially and professionally isolated. After being fired by an anthropologist at the University of Chicago who wanted to claim her ideas and work as his own, Rossi intimately understood the problems of sex discrimination on the job.

This experience was the impetus “to rethink the functionalist sociology I had swallowed whole from Columbia” (Rossi to author, March 7, 1990). Her first feminist publication that resulted from this reanalysis of sociology was her classic article, “Equality Between the Sexes: An Immodest Proposal.” She also fought back against this oppression through her work for the reform of abortion laws in Illinois (e.g., Rossi 1966), cofounding the National Organization for Women

in 1966 and Sociologists for Women in Society (SWS) in 1970. Meanwhile her productivity as a scholar dramatically increased along with her national visibility. She was elected president of SWS in 1971, president of the Eastern Sociological Society in 1974, and both vice-president and president of the American Sociological Association in 1974 and 1978, respectively. In 1989 Rossi was awarded the Common Wealth Award in Sociology (Peter Rossi was similarly honored in 1985). In addition, she has received honorary degrees from Towson State College, Rutgers University, Simmons College, Goucher College, and Northwestern University.

Harriet Martineau's* foundational role in sociology was heralded by Rossi in her outstanding anthology *The Feminist Papers* (1973). When Rossi was honored with a named chair at the University of Massachusetts—Amherst, she chose, as the first occupant, to name the position the “Harriet Martineau Professor of Sociology.”

In her sixties today, Rossi is planning new adventures and a return to old childhood dreams. “And so, at sixty, I feel closer to the Alice of thirteen than to the Alice of twenty or thirty. I like this new-old Alice better, too. Does anyone know of a play calling for a woman character with a purple cape and a walking cane? I feel old enough and young enough, to finally take center-stage” (Rossi 1983, 28).

MAJOR THEMES

Rossi's early work encompassed voting behavior (e.g., Rossi and Gleicher 1950), intergroup relations, the sociology of occupations, and the Soviet social system. These early writings, published primarily in the 1950s until the early 1960s, are individually of high quality, yet as a set of writings they do not carve out a special area in which Rossi was the leading intellectual. In contrast, her writings on women, parenting, the life course, and the feminist movement have been path-breaking, and they are the focus of interest here.

A major segment of Rossi's writings emerge from a blend of feminism, biography (sometimes autobiography, noted above, e.g., 1964, 1983), history, life course, and intellectual critique. This innovative approach was evident in her rediscovery of Harriet Taylor and her influence on John S. Mill (Rossi 1970b). This scholarship was brought to a new height and development in her classic anthology *The Feminist Papers: From Adams to de Beauvoir* (1973). This book presents an account of political action that combines a sociological and feminist perspective with major intellectual statements written primarily by women. Rossi's sociological text on women's theory crossed academic and popular boundaries as well as disciplinary lines in scholarship.

The linkage between the individuals and life cycle changes is increasingly a focus of Rossi's writings. Rossi integrates four bodies of thought, from distinct disciplines, in her study of adulthood: “life-span developmental psychology,

sociology of age and the life course, sociology of the family, and biosocial science" (Cheryl Ann Miller 1981, 87).

The biological basis of parenting is a controversial and compelling feature of Rossi's work over the past decade. Her "biosocial perspective on parenting" (Rossi 1977) emphasizes the role of endocrinology (hormones) in parenting. She italicized the following point in her argument: "*A biosocial perspective does not argue that there is a genetic determination of what men can do compared to women; rather, it suggests that the biological contributions shape what is learned, and that there are differences in the ease with which the sexes can learn certain things*" (Rossi 1977, 4). This italicized thesis and data on endocrinology, aging, and comparative parenting are examined in other writings as well (e.g., Rossi 1980b, 1983, 1984). This theme is reflected in a fascinating debate with Judith Lorber and Rose Laub Coser* in which they each critiqued the neo-Freudian view of mothering by Nancy Chodorow (Lorber, Coser, Rossi, and Chodorow 1981). Rossi stressed a more biological basis of parenting than Chodorow, a neo-Freudian, does.

In 1983, Rossi chose the theme, gender, and life course for the annual American Sociological Association meetings. She stimulated scholarship on this topic, as well as coordinated sessions and papers that resulted in an anthology (Rossi 1985). She boldly rejected all existing sociological theories on gender and parenthood as inadequate if they did not integrate biological and social constructs (Rossi 1985, 6; see also Rossi 1984). Here, as elsewhere, she supported the work of Matilda White Riley* (1985, 333–347).

Women's paid labor is analyzed by Rossi in a variety of occupations. Professional work, especially within the academy, is a hallmark of her emphasis on socialization, gender, and historical opportunities in contemporary contexts (e.g., Rossi and Calderwood 1973).

Rossi's early work on politics emerged again in her panel study of women: *Feminists in Politics: A Panel Analysis of the First National Women's Conference* (1982).

CRITIQUES OF ALICE S. ROSSI

Alice Rossi is part of a rich network of scholarship. Many authors cite her works as starting points for their own statements. A number of authors in the anthology by Martha T. Schuch Mednick, Sandra Schwartz Tabgri, and Lois Wladis Hoffman (1975), for example, cite Rossi's work on women in the professions and women as achievers. A similar pattern is found in other anthologies published on women in the past fifteen years. This pattern points to the wide scholarly audience inspired by Rossi's work, but this is different from more complex analyses of her ideas.

This more thorough extension of Rossi's work is found in that of her eminent female colleagues. For example, Matilda White Riley (e.g., 1989) and Alice Rossi (e.g., Rossi 1985) publish each other's works, sometimes share comments

before publication, and apply their common ideas to the topic of aging and the life course (Rossi frequently uses Riley's ideas, noted above). Rose Laub Coser has a similar pattern (e.g., Coser 1985). Of course Rossi's comments on the work of Nancy Chodorow also fit this pattern (1981). Chodorow (Lorber et al. 1981, 5–6, 507, 511–513), however, found Rossi too biological in her interpretation of parenting, an interesting comment for a psychoanalytic sociologist.

A major interpretation of Rossi's work was done in 1981 by a group of scholars working collectively. Kathleen S. Crittenden began the analysis explaining Rossi's biographical location and significance in sociology: Rossi's blend of "politics, passion, and personal experience." (1981, 74). Carla Howery positively examined Rossi's activism, including her writing as a form of practice. Howery notes: "Rossi's strength as an activist comes from her position on the margin" (1981, 94). This outsider status is embedded in Rossi's positions of privilege as well as her continual questioning of such power. Martha E. Thompson (1981) examined how this activism is specifically located in Rossi's feminism. Cheryl Ann Miller (1981) examined "Rossi and Adult Development," elaborating on the complexity of Rossi's thought, interdisciplinary skill, and innovativeness.

Rossi's most controversial analysis is her interpretation of biology and parenting. Martha McClintock criticized Rossi's biosocial perspective on parenting (1979; Rossi's reply, 1979), and McClintock's concerns are echoed by many other scholars (e.g., Chodorow 1981; Miller 1981).

In what may fairly be called a controversial critique, Mildred Kerlin Verhein (1981) noted that the strength of Rossi's *Feminist Papers* was the intellectual and situational blending of women's ideas. Verhein found Rossi ambivalent about "the impact of a woman's intimate relationships upon the direction, scope, and intensity of her feminist productivity. . . . Even the possibility of lesbianism mutes Rossi's insight, as does the suggestion of intimacy among the sibling set" (p. 77). Rossi's inability to link feminism, women's lives, and passion is a fatal flaw, according to Verhein.

Dale Spender draws on Rossi's historical and biographical work to generate a complex rebuilding of women's intellectual and theoretical contributions (1985, 107–118, 219–223). Spender assesses Rossi's writings on Harriet Taylor and John Stuart Mill as "a revision of history which took women's experience as its starting point" (1985, 112). Spender was inspired by Rossi's *Feminist Papers* to write *Women of Ideas—And What Men Have Done to Them* (1982; role of Rossi noted in 1985, 230). Deegan, as the editor of this volume, and Hill, as the biographer of Harriet Martineau,* frequently drew on Rossi's sociobiographies. The introductory essay in *Feminist Papers* was particularly helpful in thinking through the process of writing the introduction to this volume.

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I assume responsibility for this final form and appreciate the entrant's difficulty in reading about herself and her summarized in an overview.

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