Sociology: The Next Generation

The Sociology Department has begun a generational transition in its faculty with the retirement of Drs. Butsch and Sharma this summer. The department will lose the decades of experience of senior faculty, but gain the opportunities of setting new horizons. Dr. Victor Thompson joined the Department four years ago, bringing expertise on race, demographics and quantitative research methods. Dr. Janani Umamaheswar joined the Department this year with expertise in the field of criminal justice.

Women in Prison

Dr. Umamaheswar grew up in Nairobi, Kenya and moved to Toronto, Canada for her undergraduate degree. “Sociology helped me understand these two strikingly different cultures.”

Dr. Umamaheswar earned her PhD in sociology with a focus on criminology at Penn State University. Dr. Umamaheswar’s dissertation focused on how women prisoners construct definitions of adulthood in a prison setting where they have little autonomy. When asked how she came to choose that topic, Dr. Umamaheswar responded, “There is not enough research on women prisoners’ lived experiences.” In response to their social isolation, female prisoners tend to rely on one another for emotional support, and they form fictive-families based on social rather than biological ties while incarcerated.

When asked what advice she would give to sociology students, Dr. Umamaheswar emphasized the importance of thinking about our lives in relation to social patterns, such as those based on race, class or gender, and always being open to questioning our views on social issues. She reiterated, “I believe doing this gives students an appreciation for how much of our behavior we take for granted and underscores how much we rely on one other in a culture to make sense of our world. Connecting their own stories to broader patterns really helps students contextualize their views on the world and defend those views confidently and correctly. I think that is incredibly important as they figure out who they are and what kind of people they want to be.”

Census Categories

Currently, Dr. Victor Thompson is working on two research projects. In the first, he is comparing racial and ethnic enumeration practices around the globe by examining racial and ethnic categories used on census forms and population registers. Not surprisingly, there is a lot of variation. Some countries use race, some use ethnicity, many use neither, and still others use a combination on their census forms. Dr. Thompson explained that, “making sense of this seemingly random distribution of racial and ethnic categories is at the heart of what I do as a sociologist.”

In his second project, he also explores the importance of racial categories, but in this case it is in the U.S. where seemingly non-racial policies and laws translate into massive racial disparities in the criminal justice system. He said, “Again, making sense of something that appears to be one thing, namely a ‘war on drugs’ or a ‘war on crime’, but is, in practice, something very different in outcome, is central to this project. In short, I do exactly what most sociologists do on a regular basis. I look at the ‘taken for granted’ aspects of society and ask why.”

Racial and ethnic categories are a fundamental part of who we are as individuals. These categories have an impact on how we interact with each other and with whom we interact, and are central to the organization of our society. He said “The inclusion and/or exclusion of racial and ethnic categories on census forms is a social and political process that translates into differential access to power, resources, and politics. Anything that acts as an axis of inequality is not only worthy of sociologists, but a necessary variable for understanding who we as a society.”

When asked what guidance he’d give to sociology students, he advised, “Find something you are interested in and go for it. You can’t go wrong as a sociology major. The beauty of sociology is that it gives you a toolkit with which to explore the world around you, one that transcends boundaries. Sociology also trains you to think critically about the origins of those very things you used to blindly accept as ‘facts’, thereby changing your own understanding of who you are. It is likely for this reason that sociology students have the highest cognitive gains across their 4 years in college, beating out not just other social science majors, but all other majors.”

Edited by Elizabeth Huang

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Social Work and Sociology at Rider

The Sociology Department created and administers Rider’s social work minor, offering a wide range of sociology courses relevant to social work, such as the Family, Health Care and Society, School and Schooling, Inequality and Drugs and Society, as well as many of the new criminal justice courses. Sociology helps social work students to understand the many problems experienced by individuals and families, including poverty, abuse and neglect, domestic violence, mental health issues, addiction, and the effects of incarceration on families and communities. In this way sociology lives up to C. Wright Mills’ aspiration for a “sociological imagination,” in which we can gain knowledge of the social forces shaping our individual lives as well as learn how to change and improve them. Social work grew out of the Progressive social movement of a century ago and is dedicated to helping people cope with these forces and to improving the society in which they live.

A valuable feature of the minor is the field work experience course, taught by experienced social workers, in which students observe and work in a social service agency, gaining real-world knowledge of how agencies are structured and how they deliver services to clients. Unlike a typical internship, however, this course brings students together on a regular basis so they can share experiences from different settings and agencies and understand how their academic courses provide insight to this work and these agencies. The minor is increasingly popular, and with over one hundred students enrolled, is now the second largest minor at Rider.

Student Spotlight

Kate Bain
Senior

After taking Sociological Imagination and enjoying the class, Kate Bain declared sociology as her major at the end of her freshman year, which complemented her social work minor. Learning about topics such as sociological theories and race and class relations has allowed Kate to develop a greater understanding of people and the world. Now a senior reflecting back upon her choice of major, Kate said, “In today’s world, I think it is very important for us to know how we got here and why people are where they are.” She identified several highlights as a sociology major. “One was making Dean’s List. Another one was during my field work experience for social work last semester. I got the chance to intern at a nursing home/rehab center and met a 100-year-old woman. I still visit her twice a week. Having that opportunity really solidified what I wanted to do with my life.” After graduation, Kate plans to take a year off before graduate school. She will pursue a master’s degree in Aging, and hopes to work with the elderly in a nursing home or hospital.

Jordan Hulass
Junior

Junior sociology major, Jordan Hulass, was not always a Rider sociology major. “Like many freshman, I took Sociological Imagination, and loved it. I really enjoyed the way my professor taught and related everything to our lives. At the end of my freshman year, I decided to major in sociology.” Jordan loves that the field of sociology involves studying the development, structure, and functioning of human society. “This allows us to understand connections to patterns of human behavior and individual life changes. I think the most meaningful aspect is that this field is for people who have a genuine care for humanity and society as a whole.” For Jordan, the benefits of being a sociology major include classes such as Power & Politics, Retirement and Leisure, Religion and Belief Systems. In the future, Jordan aspires to become a counselor.
Meagan Fitzgerald ‘11

After graduating Rider in 2011, Meagan Fitzgerald went on to pursue a master’s degree in Art Therapy and Counseling. She previously worked at Saint Ann Elementary School in Lawrenceville as a counselor, where her sociological background was a tremendous advantage in interacting with students facing various situations and from diverse backgrounds. Meagan currently works as a case manager for Catholic Charities Mobile Response and Stabilization Services, and provides emergency assistance to Mercer county families, responding within one hour of being called during family crises. She counsels families in 8-week management cases, working with different organizations on a daily basis. She said, “My bachelor's degree in sociology truly prepared me for the real world. I am appreciative of how, during my time at Rider, sociology helped me develop an understanding of people.” Everyday Meagan finds herself using the skills and knowledge that she obtained as a sociology major, particularly when it comes to meeting people. “Sociology helps you understand people rather than judge them. I find myself approaching life with curiosity rather than close-mindedness and ignorance,” she explained. When asked what advice she would give to current and future sociology majors, Meagan said, “I encourage everyone to keep pushing sociology. Some people underestimate the significance of sociology, but it is essential to remember that sociology is applicable to all aspects of our lives and will always be relevant. We are social beings and everything is sociological.”

Shaviece Harmon ‘04

Shaviece Harmon, a 2004 Rider graduate, has always been drawn to sociology and it has helped shape Shaviece into the person she is today. Shaviece has been working in higher education for the past ten years. Shaviece currently works as a college transfer office coordinator at Bard High School Early College. She said, “Sociology has prepared me to think, write, and speak well in academic and professional settings. As a college counselor, it is my job to advise and counsel students during the college admissions process - which we all know can be overwhelming. I am constantly thinking about the socioeconomic, cultural and religious differences and how I can be more culturally competent when working with my students and families.” With her sociological skills, Shaviece is able to incorporate her experiences when advising students and their parents in a way that helps them make the right decisions.

Sociology continues to play a significant role in many aspects of Shaviece’s life. “I am a sociologist at heart. Issues of the day are constants in my daily conversations at home and at work. I read and debate the issues of the day with my colleagues and even students. I am always willingly to give back to the community that fostered my personal and academic growth.”

Dana Lopes ‘00

A 1997 (BA) and 2000 (MA) Rider graduate, Dana Lopes has used sociology extensively when working with students in various settings. Sociology provided her with the necessary foundation to understand people within the context of the larger society and circumstances in which they live and act. “It truly helped me understand how society can influence or reinforce certain behaviors and shape a student's experience,” she said. For example “Earlier in my career, I taught Introduction to Sociology at Union Community College in Cranford, NJ, where my sociology background was obviously important. Her current position as Assistant Director of the Student Support Services Program at Rider requires an in-depth understanding of how government agencies work and how these agencies affect college students' success. “The Student Support Services Program is funded in part by grants from the U.S. Department of Education, which means every five years we have to apply for a new grant. This includes providing government agencies with statistics that demonstrate the effectiveness of the services offered to students.” In addition to serving as the Assistant Director, Dana is also the advisor of two organizations on campus, the Latin American Student Organization and Rider SERVES, where her academic study of diverse groups in American society is helpful.
The Sociology Department at Rider University offers a wide range of sociology and anthropology courses. Our faculty areas of specialization include: aging; art; cities/suburbs; deviance, crime, and the justice system; demography; the economy and work organizations, the environment, families; gender; health & medicine; media; law; politics; race & ethnicity; social interaction; social change & social movements; social diversity, and social inequalities.

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COMMUNITY CONNECTION

ArtBeast

During last Spring semester’s Art Beast festival, the now-annual event held by Rider’s Arts Administration Association, the Sociology Club sponsored a graffiti workshop hosted by two prominent wall writers and muralists from Trenton, Will “KASSO” Condry and Leon Rainbow. Both Condry and Rainbow are part of the Sage Coalition, an artist’s group dedicated to the revitalization of the community through murals and street art. As a result of their efforts, Trenton has become a vibrant home to many different styles of graffiti and wall art.

At the workshop, students practiced basic graffiti techniques such as balloon lettering and shadowing as KASSO and Leon created their own distinctive demonstration murals. These panels, plus others from an earlier Art Beast graffiti workshop, compose the five luminous panels, illustrated here (bottom photo), that are now on display on the second floor of the Fine Arts building near the Sociology offices. Under the guidance of professors Victor Thompson and James Dickinson, the Sociology Club has been active in efforts to showcase the graffiti art and murals found in Trenton. By organizing tours of the street art in the city, students get to see that there is still a lot of life and creativity in our less privileged urban communities.