TWO

IVORY TOWERS, PLAYING FIELDS AND GLASS CEILINGS:
BEYOND METAPHOR TO BEST PRACTICES
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Abstract: Taken from the keynote address given at SUNY Cortland's "Succeeding as Women in Higher Education" 2009 Conference, this address uses the framework of metaphor to question institutional practices and suggest steps toward gender equity.

In my remarks today, I will pay some attention to the institutional contexts in which we might search for best – or *better* – practices, I hope I can set the stage for your deliberations with some context, some questions that might provoke or stimulate discussion, and perhaps a lesson or two to help navigate the frigid waters of the chilly climate. It is fitting that I begin my talk with a metaphor. We academics just *love* metaphors. Everything can be compared to everything else, it seems, especially when we sociologists talk about inequality. Metaphors provide us with both visualizations of what may be happening to us in our institutions: the glass ceiling, for example, where one can *see* the place one wants to be, but never quite reach it. Or, the phrase "level playing field" – another place to aspire to, but which we very seldom reach. But these metaphors can also get away from us, or disappoint, as they are never really *about* what we're trying to describe or appreciate, and sometimes they get very creatively mixed: As Cher was reputed to say, "I've been up and down so many times, that I feel as if I'm in a revolving door."

Perhaps the "chilly climate" is the best example of the metaphor that also understates. In fact, most of the actual "chilly" institutional climates we end up discussing are a whole lot *colder* than simply "chilly"; some of them are so cold they are downright *dangerous.* It would be impossible to exhaust the examples of the frigid climates women face day in and day out in our academic institutions. When I was a student, one of my mentors was the late

well-known feminist sociologist, Alice Rossi. Introduced to a male faculty member at the University of Chicago one evening now over 50 years ago, he asked her what she did. When she replied, "I'm a sociologist", he replied, "My, that must be difficult to do at home." Twenty years later, when my colleague Janet Lever looked for a job, she was turned down by the sociology chair at a major university because they already had their "woman" (Lever, 1995). Referencing that same period in the 1970s, Judy Long, now emeritus at Syracuse, spoke of her time at the University of Chicago:

> The history of women faculty at the University of Chicago is a ghostly one, haunted by the absence of women scholars who have been "disappeared". For all I know, feminism persists at the University of Chicago in the same distinctive form: each one teaches one and then expires. (Long, 1995)

Ten years later, now fast forwarding to the early 80s, as I was facing the tenure process myself, the senior men in my department (who constituted the entire voting faculty) were determining the list of outside reviewers for my case – the outside letters (usually 6-8 in number) being the most consequential element of any tenure case. Instead of a list of scholars studying work, or women's work (although no one was studying housework), or even *women*, they reasoned that the best collection of outside reviewers of my work – in addition to a list of eight others – were all the living past presidents of ASA. "That way," it was explained to me, "we can be sure that the work is of the highest quality."

Whatever we determine its *temperature* to be, the metaphor of *"climate"* does communicate an important feature of inequitable institutional cultures: climates tend to be pervasive, so we can say that in our institutions if inequality exists at all, it probably exists almost everywhere. Or, perhaps I should said it *can* exist everywhere, and this knowledge – of the power and potential of inequity – affects our work lives as much as any other feature of academic life. And this morning I'd like to talk a little about both the intractability of our institutions and their potential for change.

It is at this juncture that I must make it clear that as a sociologist I know that our institutions are constantly changing, and like all other institutions they position themselves around a variety of

principles and practices, good and bad. Indeed, one would have to argue that with the passage of Title IX and the Equal Opportunity Employment Act in the 1970s, most of our institutions were transformed by the real opening of education to women and others who had been excluded. So, no metaphors please, about whether I see the institutional "glass" as half full or half empty. I resist bifurcating almost everything – especially water levels, so I won't. In fact, levels are changing all the time.

To return to my earlier examples, from that brief evening encounter with an academic moron, Alice Rossi when on to be a founder of the National Organization for Women, President of the American Sociological Association and a prolific feminist scholar, Janet Lever went on to teach at Northwestern University, Yale, and UCLA, and Judy Long had a very successful career at Cornell and Syracuse. So, in answer to any question about whether things are changing, the answer is yes. Are they changing for the better, sure – in some places. (After all, 12.5% of the Nobel prizes this year went to women, nearly 50% of women are employed in the work force and according to the Shriver Report, and husbands now appear to take on a whopping 20% of household labor! (Boushey and O'Leary, 2009). And that's the point: the choices to make our institutions equitable or inequitable are presented to us in the everyday, in the mundane, in the quotidian institutional determinations of faculty, staff, and administrators as they go about the business of education.

Yet, even in the face of all that real change we must ask how is it that our chilly climates are so ubiquitous and have such staying power. I believe the answer lies in the mechanics of inequity, and the way we create and reaffirm inequitable relations day in and day out. Some of my recent scholarship has focused on these complicated questions, so let me get theoretical with you for just a few moments.

For a decade or so I did some work with Candace West at UC Santa Cruz on the nature of inequality, beginning with gender and then trying to think about its intersection with other categorical identities, such as race and class. This work holds some insight as to how our institutions (and their climates) sustain themselves, and what the nature of the work to change them should be.

In their foundational statement, Candace West and Don Zimmerman presented the concept of gender not as a fixed physical characteristic, but instead they pointed to ubiquitous activities in social life – behavioral, emotional, linguistic, and discursive -- that mark, note, remind, create, affirm and reaffirm our conviction that there is something *essentially* male or female that resides within us and justifies our initial sex categorization – female or male. And, when we see the results of all these "doings" – all the practices that indicate the naturalness of gender differences and distinctions – we then typically take them as confirmatory evidence of that selfsame naturalness. Such evidence can be constituted from historically related practices, institutionally inscribed directives, and/or rapid-fire, thoughtless interpersonal social exchange (West and Zimmerman, 1987)

Their idea was that humans may be classified as males or females, but to be treated as competent group members they must – *must* – learn to feel and demonstrate what we anticipate to be their essential womanly and manly qualities. And not just in dress or deportment, but also in myriad ways, crafted according to every conceivable characteristic of a particular setting and situation. Categorical attributions like gender are granted meaning by particular social conditions, and are given concrete expression by the specific social and historical context in which they are embedded.

Over the last 15 years, this conceptualization of gender as an accomplishment has come to be standard sociological fare. Up to that time, sex and gender were seen as pretty much the same thing, or at least related in some cloudy, unarticulated way, with sex the natural imprint and gender a sort of vague social overlay. But the relationship between them was unclear, and while Sociology asserted them to be different things, the closer one got to gender (a purportedly social construction), the more it seemed like sex (a purportedly innate and "natural" status). Instead, we conceived gender to be not a characteristic of individuals, but an emergent feature of social situations: both as an outcome of, and a rationale for various social arrangements, and a method for justifying one of the most fundamental divisions of society. (West and Zimmerman, 1987, Fenstermaker et al., 1991)

One example: we exhibit all sorts of subtle and not so subtle behaviors that limit the number of woman scientists on our faculties. Institutional bureaucratic practices, long-standing sets of values and beliefs (for example, in the sanctity of departmental quality control and decision-making) and interpersonal proclivities all go into our institutional cultures and result in these outcomes. All of them are the historic or momentary reflections of the accomplishment of gender. But, often when we observe these effects we conclude that they we are not looking at the institutional legacies of constructed social practices, but at the "natural" qualities of those who are excluded. So, fewer women scientists? Well, there must be something about women that limits their capacities. Why? Well look around – we only had the one, and she never made tenure. Five women winning the Nobel Prize? There must be something about "those women" that make them so exceptional. Why? Well, we've never had so many before!

We also asked what accounted for the staying power of these mechanisms. There must be something at stake that leads us to such robust and deeply held views about the abiding differences between women and men, and why all these social arrangements that create and then point to such differences are justifiable. What is at stake that is so important? What we argue is that to be seen as appropriately placed in one's sex category – male or female -- lies at the heart of our understandings of competence as humans. How that competence is conveyed is through gender. Our legitimacy, our competence -- is confirmed – or denied in how we operate in the world as gendered people, how we negotiate the myriad particulars of social life as gendered – woman or man, boy or girl. All this matters so much because of *accountability* (Fenstermaker and West, 2002).

By 'accountability' we did not mean the holding of someone personally responsible, or blaming them for some behavior or another. Instead, we mean the ever-present *possibility* of having one's actions, circumstances, and nature be seen as "unwomanly" or "unmanly." Insofar as people know their actions are accountable, they will design their actions in relation to how others may see and describe them (e.g., as gee, that's just the sort of thing a woman *would* say"). Thus, accountability is a feature of social

relationships, and its idiom comes from the institutional arena in which those relationships are brought to life. (West and Fenstermaker, 2002)

Doing gender, then, is the ongoing activity of managing situated conduct to express "womanliness" or "manliness". Put another way, doing gender means creating differences between women and men. Once created, those differences are used to reinforce the "essentialness" of distinctive womanly and manly natures. Our understanding of what is at stake revolves around the consequences of gender transgressions – from failed job interviews, to feelings of awkwardness in conversation, to physical violence, depending upon each situation in which we are called upon to demonstrate (to others and ourselves) that we are appropriately and naturally gendered. So this powerful sense of accountability operates always – in situations of conformity with prevailing cultural dictates, as well as in deviation from them -- at individual and at institutional levels of human interaction. We took a page from philosopher Marilyn Frye, who wrote about gender about the time we were beginning our work:

 For efficient subordination, what's wanted is that the structure appears not to be a cultural artifact kept in place by human decision or custom, but that it appears natural – that it appears to be quite a direct consequence of facts about the beast which are beyond the scope of human manipulation (Frye, 1983, quoted in West and Fenstermaker, 2002).

That thinking about gender spawned a huge number of empirical studies: from wearing makeup to bias crime to summer camps to lesbian identities to reality TV to rock bands to sexual harassment, to animal rights to children's literature to prison guards – in all of them what we saw is gender an as an ongoing, situated, social accomplishment that had myriad consequences for everyone and to which we orient constantly (See Fenstermaker and West, 2002 for a bibliography of scholarly articles employing the "doing gender" perspective.)

It wouldn't matter so much, really, if the accomplishment of gender were about empirical observations of how men are men and women are women – sort of a "Vive la difference" inventory or, as

if we took a little tour to Mars and Venus. Of course we do that all the time: "Oh, men. Such dogs: only interested in one thing." Or, "Oh women: such drama queens." But these very mechanisms connect the accomplishment of gender to the exercise of power and the creation of institutions that reaffirm inequality. And that's where we came to understand that we probably shouldn't only be talking only about gender.

When we went beyond gender West and I reasoned that if the concept of 'doing' gender was indeed helpful in perceiving the constructed, fluid, situated nature of inequality, then might not other forms of inequality be likewise suitable for the same application? That is, the *mechanisms* by which gender, race and class inequality outcomes are produced are comparable. From a more formal, theoretical point of view, we wanted to find a way to ask what Mari Matsuda has called, "the other question": when something looks racist, she asks, where is the patriarchy? When something seems homophobic, she asks, where are the class interests? (Matsuda, 2002).

This notion that race, class and gender operate – not with the same *outcomes* – but by the same mechanisms, was a pretty radical idea. For one thing, it rested on two premises that are easier to say than to accept: (a) that we *truly* conceive of race, class and gender, as social constructions and (b) the salience of race, class, or gender in any given interaction may not be assumed a priori; that there was no inherent or fixed hierarchy among them, and no way outside of specific social interactions to tell what would trump what. But through a lens where the simultaneous accomplishment of gender, race, and class was possible, we might see what Michael Schwalbe calls the "patterning of joint actions that constitute othering and exploitation" (Schwalbe, 2002). In the accomplishment of difference, accountability is the driving motivator; the specifics of the normative order provide the content, with social interaction serving as the medium. Doing difference renders the social arrangements based on sex category, race category and class category accountable as normal and natural, that is to say, as legitimate ways of organizing social life. Differences among people that are created by this process can then be portrayed as fundamental and enduring dispositions (Fenstermaker and West,

2002). It is here where empirical examples are helpful, and I will offer two, very briefly.

The first is Julie Bettie's (2002) ethnographic study of Mexican-American and white working–class high school seniors in California's Central Valley. Bettie was interested in seeing how class is present, and made visible across racial boundaries. She asked herself if the girls she was studying constructed themselves as classed subjects. She found that while class was (as she called it) a "discursive absence" it is present in the accomplishment of gender and race. An example is the complex interplay implied in what she calls the "displacement" of class discourse. The young Latina's derogatory term "acting white" is firmly fixed as a description of only middle class white girls, never the working class. Moreover, the classed expressions of fashion, identity, and cultural style by the working-class girls are typically read by school authorities as expressions of hypersexuality. Thus, Bettie argues, in its use, class is both displaced and talked about at the same time, and always inflected by race and gender.

A second example is from Karen Pyke and Denise Johnson (2002) in their work on Asian American women. Interviewing 100 daughters of Korean and Vietnamese immigrants, they find that respondents narratively construct cultural worlds that allow no latitude beyond rigid patriarchal dictates, with American culture in contrast constructed as the exemplar of gender equality. As they move back and forth between cultural realms their respondents employ ideas about relevant hegemonic and subordinated femininities to guide them in their behaviors, activities, and expressions of identity. Here is a strong system of accountability, affected certainly by the conjoint interplay of gender and race to shape their experiences, and compel the respondents to consciously craft themselves for others. As one woman said, speaking of her Vietnamese male friends:

> They're like, 'you're Vietnamese and you're a girl, and you don't know how to cook?!?' I'm like, 'No, what's wrong with that?' And they go, 'Oh, you're not a Vietnamese girl.'

So this is the framework I work from when I think practically about institutional change: choices that result in inequity take place at multiple levels, including representation, micro-interaction and social structure, but they combine to form both backdrop and context for our decisions as faculty, staff and administrators. The context in which we work has resulted from someone's prior actions, often then instantiated in our "natural" ways of working. Thus, each moment is a reflection of prior choices, current context, and prevailing institutional logics. These are the mechanisms that make a chilly climate chilly and I believe hold a key to understanding how to make institutional change.

An overarching theory of how institutional inequity operates still requires an understanding of the particular *contexts* in which change is sought. I draw on one example from work done by members of a consortium in which I participated, and is described in a book entitled, *Doing Diversity in Higher Education: Faculty Leaders Share Challenges and Strategies*, edited by Winnifred R. Brown-Glaude, Rutgers University Press, 2009. There are a large number of discussions of best practices in this volume (including from my own research team at UC Santa Barbara), but I want to focus in particular on one discussion of microclimates in faculty retention at Smith College.

Before I heard the Smith team present their work, I had never heard of the term "microclimate", and I must say at first I thought it was just one more metaphor borrowed from meteorology. But, the word does direct us not just to the overall institutional culture on a campus (which is hard to get hold of and is probably too big an entity to grasp anyway) and instead focuses on the particular units in which interaction occurs, and where we actually experience our places of work and scholarship. As they define it, **"**A small, relatively self-contained environment within which a faculty member operates" (Ackelsberg, et al. 2009:84).

So, the Smith team noticed that it may be a campus climate that makes a big difference to *recruitment* of faculty, but it was the department that seemed to be decisive – either negatively or positively -- in retention. They undertook in-depth interviews with 20 faculty members, all with a range of biographic characteristics

and drawn from a variety of microclimates. Two findings stand out and are worth particular mention.

The most striking and obvious finding were the negative effects of bullying and harassment. I'm sure you are familiar with this one. It is certainly the way climates can exhibit their frigidity. The most common form is something I call "recreational dominance" – a fancy term for bullying – where faculty members invade the time and emotional space of weaker (often younger, or otherwise less powerful) colleagues apparently just for the fun of it. The disparagement can certainly impact faculty retention if it is coupled with a frequently expressed disdain for the scholarly work of others. I imagine there are many in this room who recall (long ago or recently) the difficulties one confronts when introducing new forms of feminist scholarship into their disciplines. It is also an apparently great challenge to department chairs (most of them completely unschooled in any sort of management) to intervene, defend, or otherwise advocate for those who are marginalized by such behavior. So, faculty members with options leave such environments – either to seek refuge in appointments in other departments, or to escape the campus altogether.

What the Smith researchers also found was that some of those they interviewed experienced very positive microclimates. There they found their work was affirmed, people were collegial and open to diverse viewpoints and scholarship. That's all well and good: some people inhabit healthy departments, and some inhabit dysfunctional ones. The important question for us – in search of better practices – is what do we do when such climates (okay, microclimates) are not built into the larger organizational culture? The answer at Smith was that some simple social events transformed some departments over time, but more importantly for our considerations, marginalized faculty found what the researchers called "alternative microclimates." As they say, "Indeed, participation in such alternative climates seems to have been the largest single positive factor affecting those who have persisted and thrived at the college over the years" (Ackelsberg, et al, 2009:94).

It is clear that alternative microclimates can provide a respite or escape from the predatory environments we endure day-to-day.

They can provide a place to experience shared scholarly and collegial values, and enlivening discussions. One criticism, of course, of this model (and we heard it more in the old days about Women's Studies and Ethnic Studies departments) is that it drains off faculty energy for change in the microclimates that need it so desperately. Perhaps so. But I would also like to think about alternative microclimates as a way to move our institutions to better practices more generally. To do that, I will use an example close to home: The UC Santa Barbara Senior Women's Council. I will argue that through such alternatives, we move the entire institution forward to better – or even best – practices.

First the briefest of descriptions of the UCSB Senior Women's Council: Founded in 1994 out of a realization that without an organized group of women faculty with "clout" who could be a presence on the campus and serve as a kind of watchdog, we would keep fighting the same battles for equity, over and over again. We also wished to formalize what some of us were doing already: advising younger faculty, women faculty, and faculty of color, as well as informally advocating for their recruitment, promotion, retention and equitable treatment. The initial mission statement and description of purpose has three parts, representing three motives of the organization. The first is the need to insure adequate representation of women in faculty governance:

> We come together in this regular forum out of concern for the small number of senior women in academic and administrative positions, the continuing lack of a political presence for senior women, and our often debilitating isolation from one another.

The second acknowledges the extensive campus service of women faculty, but also aims to insure that this service does not unduly burden any individual:

> We are a group that advocates service to the campus by tenured women faculty, but in ways coordinated to be much more inclusive and less burdensome for each individual. In the process, we will share information and provide each other the support often lacking in the day-to-day groups where we may be a significant minority.

The third recognizes that the issues of concern to the group touch others on the campus, necessitating coalition and cooperation.

> We come together to advocate for women's representation as senate and administrative leaders, to improve the conditions under which we work, and to coalesce with other groups who seek to improve the campus commitment to excellence, equity, and diversity.

Each directs the organization to a particular kind of work and way of being, and is obviously crafted for a certain sort of institution. Nevertheless, we can ask what might this suggest more generally for the creation of alternative microclimates and possibilities for change?

First, colleges and universities are replete with opportunities for groups to define themselves and operate quite differently from conventional bureaucratic and administrative structures. That is, this sort of institution is significantly more open to alternative microclimates than most work organizations. So, it wasn't all that difficult to declare ourselves established and begin laying the groundwork for a campus presence. Second, such alternatives are perfect examples of a self-fulfilling prophecy, with a little twist: if enough people tell enough people that your opinion matters, eventually someone will ask you for it. One of the first things we did was to hold a press conference about the lack of women serving on faculty governance committees. We were helped along by the then faculty senate chair who made a remark in a legislature meeting about how the representation of women and minorities was in no way a concern. This put us on a kind of map more quickly than we might have wanted, but from then on the Senior Women's Council was, metaphorically speaking, "at the table".

Third, alternative microclimates can define themselves as both independent but at the same time deeply engaged in campus issues. When we first formed, we were determined to be seen as independent from the infrastructures we thought excluded us in the first place. And that was smart, then. But later, we began to suffer from what Hawkesworth, et al. called "incomplete institutionalization" – success that is born of marginalization

(Hawkesworth, et al., 2009). We were not beholden to any administrative office, but at the same time we didn't have the funds to do very much. Fifteen years later, we now accept funds from the Executive Vice Chancellor, but we still claim autonomy in all decision-making about who constitutes the group, what issues to take on, etc. This has resulted, for example, in workshops and panels for untenured faculty that have quite a different content than those held by the administration. In addition, we are free to choose the methods by which we advocate for women faculty experiencing inequitable treatment from colleagues, chairs, or administrators.

Some of we founders of the Senior Women's Council were quite resistant to this arrangement. However, I have since seen that because we are in closer relation to the administration, we are able to press for change much more rapidly. And this leads me to my last point about alternative microclimates: the UCSB Senior Women's Council is now in a symbiotic situation of funneling suggestions for institutional change to an administrator with the title of "Associate Vice Chancellor for Diversity, Equity, and Academic Policy". Thus in the last year we have had a hands-on role in rewriting personnel policy on parental leaves to be more family friendly, encouraging much greater attention to getting chairs briefed on such policy; altering personnel practices to address a "glass ceiling" problem at the post-tenure, Associate Professor level; proposing a new survey to assess institutional climate solely for women faculty of color; promoting the development of a Career Equity Review, and urging the investigation of parental leave for graduate students and its effect on their progress. My point is that on many, many campuses it is faculty energy and effort that can successfully drive some administrative agendas, and they can be capitalized on with great success.

All institutional practices – good, better, or best – have to find their place in particular institutional cultures, climates, and yes, microclimates. But what I have tried to do is to look past the metaphors at some mechanisms that lie behind the pervasive inequity under which we often work, and consider some opportunities for change that institutions like ours present. In the end whatever *individual* success we enjoy, it is we who must bear

the responsibility for creating institutions of higher education that are worth having.

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