



Editorial Introduction to the Volume: Re-Imagining the American Dream

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Social science researchers have directly challenged and problematized the ideology of the "American Dream" by critically analyzing and exposing the fallacies and consequences of neoliberalism, the instability of the nuclear American family structure, and the dire consequences of marginalization and colonization. Critical analysis only takes us so far; social scientists also have a role to play in developing solutions for imagined futures. In this volume of *Social Thought and Research*, graduate and early career scholars have analyzed the "American Dream's" ideological premise and conceptualized possibilities for imagined futures.

The volume begins with Christopher Brown's exploration of Habermas' theory of the public forum and how modernization has problematized the operation of the public forum in our everyday lives. Brown traces the historical roots of Habermas' ideas and analyzes how they now operate within the context of the age of social media. Technology, he argues, has both promoted public discourse and zombified it into a shell of its former self, stripping away the human element of organic connection. This article asks important questions about communication, connection, identity, and how technology alters the notion of free speech in the modern age.

The next article by Nicole Lounsbery and colleagues demonstrates how efforts to enhance diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education have not necessarily improved enrollment, retention, or academic success for historically marginalized students. Using interview and focus group data at a Tribal College or University (TCU), the authors incorporate the Ripple Effect Mapping (REM) process to understand how DEI goals are reached through bottom-up strategies and top-down institutional policy changes. These initiatives resulted in efforts to include students as experts on their own lives and needs, confronted implicit bias among faculty and staff, and challenged historical ways of thinking and doing. By adopting these lessons and implementing these efforts, universities can begin to meaningfully reach diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts on their campuses.

Concluding this volume are two interviews conducted in 2023 with guest lecturers to the Department of Sociology at the University of Kansas. Dr. Tahseen Shams presented research at the department's *Blackmar Lecture* from her most book, "*Here, There, and Elsewhere: The Making of Immigrant Identities in a Globalized World*." Dr. Sharmila Rudrappa presented her ongoing research which analyzes the commodification of women's bodies and human reproduction in connection to the techno-pastoral management of the natural world.

This volume has been three years in the making. The articles and interviews in this volume were written and conducted prior to the current U.S. federal administration led by President Donald J. Trump in January 2025. This administration has made concerted efforts to eliminate diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts on University campuses and impose control over journalism and the media. Additionally, the administration has carried out initiatives to reign in illegal immigration resulting in both legal immigrants and U.S. citizens being caught in the cross-fire. Due to delays in publishing this volume until 2026, the authors in these articles have *not* directly addressed the challenges we face in this present political moment. Nevertheless, the editors at *STAR* hope that these ideas will invoke further critical analysis of the problems and possibilities inherent in American idealism. It is only through critical evaluation of taken-for-granted assumptions that we can design improvements to meet the needs of our society now and in the future.



The Zombification of the Public Forum

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Abstract

The all-encompassing nature of digital technology has killed society's public forum and resurrected it into a zombie. Tracing the public forum from its historical roots to the age of social media, this analysis highlights how the advent of digital technology has fundamentally altered the nature of the public forum. Social theorists including Jürgen Habermas, Jacques Ellul, and Sherry Turkle are invoked to show how the nature of the new digital public forum is distinct from centuries past, exerting its efficient yet dysfunctional influence over human communication and connection. With technological innovations like the internet and social media that foster discourse, the digital public forum is as loud and active as ever. But this resurrection is not organic. Because of the nature of digital technology and how human interaction is mediated through it, this new public forum is zombie-like. Crucially, the public forum in the digital realm exists in a state of constant contradictions. It features and fractures democratic deliberation, connection, and identity. While powerful, ever-expanding, and a lively setting for political discussion and social interaction, the public forum is nonetheless a shell of itself, having lost the crucial human element of organic connection, much like a zombie brought to life in its original body but without the human spirit that defines it. It will take a concerted effort among the public to reclaim it.

Keywords: *public forum, public sphere, public square, social media, internet, digital technology, disembodiment, digital sociology*

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THE ZOMBIFICATION OF THE PUBLIC FORUM

The public forum, a cornerstone of democratic society, facilitates the exchange of ideas to shape collective will and guide governance. Jürgen Habermas (1992) conceptualizes this as the public sphere – a communicative space defined by open access, equality among participants, and deliberative discourse. These components underscore the public forum's role in fostering rational debate essential to democracy. However, Nancy Fraser (1990) critiques this model as overly idealistic, highlighting its failure to account for social inequalities and the presence of multiple, often exclusionary, public spheres influenced by power disparities.

The advent of digital technologies has transformed the public forum, amplifying its reach while introducing dysfunctions. Scholars like Benson (2009), Eisenegger and Schäfer (2023), and Seeliger and Sevignani (2022) note that digital platforms reshape public discourse, yet uncertainties persist about their democratic implications. This analysis tackles these gaps by posing two key questions: How does the digital public forum simultaneously feature and fracture democratic processes? Similarly, how does it feature and fracture social connection and identity? It also introduces “Zombification” as a lens to explore these paradoxes and differentiate the digital public forum from its traditional predecessor. Grounded in Habermas's (1992) and Fraser's (1990) normative frameworks, this analysis examines the digital public forum's evolving role. But despite its abstract architecture, concrete examples show the dynamic nature of the public forum in the digital age through the dimensions of democratic deliberation and connection and identity in the sections that follow.

DEMOCRATIC DELIBERATION

The first feature, democratic deliberation, lies at the heart of Jürgen Habermas' theory. He famously describes the public forum as “made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state” (1992:176). It is understood as a place where all people have access and public opinion is formed. Habermas views the public forum as democracy in work: “through the vehicle of public opinion, it put the state in touch with the needs of society” (1992:31). This democratic nature of the public forum is important because it assumes an openness among the citizenry. The public forum is not exclusive to only certain citizens, rather all can equally participate (Habermas 1996). Of course, this normative conception of the public forum's democratic ideals should be seen not as a rigid definition, but rather as a Weberian ideal type of modernity's general trend toward how we collectively communicate today.

In the modern world, societies with open democracies generally have the most robust and active public spheres (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Norris 2000). For example, the United States supports lively and contentious debate on issues ranging from abortion to gun rights to the death penalty, and everything in-between. The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution fosters such open debate, protecting the right of all people to express themselves and collectively protest. On an almost daily basis in the United States, one can find communities actively discussing and debating social issues and public policies in public demonstrations, town

halls, school board meetings, community centers, and university classrooms. In the ideal sense, rational discourse and honest dialogue between individuals underpin this modern, public forum.

Habermas recognized this modern, bourgeois public forum as historically unique. While there have been other distinct instantiations of the public forum from antiquity to the Middle Ages, none have had the crucial element of open and public discussion that we experience today, divorced from the authority and supervision of the state or sovereign (Habermas 1992). In contrast, the public forum in modern society is characterized by “private individuals assembled into a public body” which often have the effect of criticizing authority (Habermas 1992:52). This open and democratic nature of the modern, bourgeois public forum is the crucial difference that separates it from public forums in preceding historical epochs. In the past, citizens who openly criticized a feudal sovereign could face severe, even fatal, punishments. In today’s public forum, public criticism or mockery of political leaders is legally protected and considered culturally important.

This, to Habermas, is democracy in action – where the public forum is ruled by uncoerced deliberation and rational discourse. However, Habermas’ ideal public forum is not without its critiques. For example, with their elevated social position, the bourgeois public forum has historically been dominated by middle-class, property-owning men, leaving working-class, racial minorities, and women excluded from deliberation and thus subject to the public forum’s consensus. (Fraser 1990; Negt and Kluge 1990).

In addition to its exclusion of the subaltern, the public forum in modern decades has lost some of its democratic ideals. Despite being characterized by democratic participation and organic opinion forming, the public forum under consumer capitalism often promotes private interests over the public good. For instance, the formation of public opinion on any given issue has undergone a tremendous change from an open and democratic forum to a small number of special interest groups which carry a disproportionate influence on the outcome of public opinion (Bernays and Miller 2004; Herman and Chomsky 1988). Mass media, advertising, and lobby groups have all co-opted the public forum in some way to benefit small interests, divorced from the process of democratic, public discourse.

These critiques have generated a now near ubiquitous consensus among scholars that the singular model of a public forum is outdated (Breese 2011; Eisenegger and Schäfer 2023). Rather, “multiple but unequal publics participate” in civil society (Fraser 1990:70). This may be especially true in the digital era, where participation is more decentralized, transnational, and marked by competing groups (Hoskins 2014; Kaiser and Rauchfleisch 2019; Volkmer 2019). This analysis, however, is compatible with both a singular and multiple public forum model. As will be shown, the features/fractures inherent in the digital realm exist regardless of how the public forum is conceptualized.

CONNECTION AND IDENTITY

The second feature of the public forum is connection and identity. If democratic deliberation is the heart of the public forum, then connection and identity is the lifeblood. Through the public forum, connection and identity give meaning to the social world. Connection and identity formation are both the requirements and the effects of a vibrant public forum.

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Fraser (1990) makes clear the importance of this feature: “public spheres are not only arenas for the formation of discursive opinion;... they are arenas for the formation and enactment of social identities” Fraser (1990:68). She explains that “public discursive arenas are among the most important and under-recognized sites in which social identities are constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed” (Fraser 1990:79). These “public discursive arenas” are the location(s) for communication about non-trivial political and social issues. Coming together to communicate these issues is a crucial aspect of both individual and collective identity (Fraser 1990; Mouffe 2005; Peters 1997; Seeliger and Sevignani 2022).

This fundamental connection between identity and social deliberation is supported in social science literature. Cooley (1902), Mead (1934), Goffman (1959), and others have established that societies require communication and interaction with others to formulate individual and collective identity. Simply put, connection and identity are fundamental not only for participation in the public forum but also social well-being. As will be shown, connection and identity are becoming increasingly fractured in the digital realm.

DISCUSSION

The Digital Realm

The physical settings of the public forum have varied materially across time and space. Modern streets, sidewalks, community centers, as well as pre-industrial salons and coffee-houses have all fostered public debate and discussion. No matter the setting of the public forum, it, nonetheless, exists in a material space and time. Public forums of the past were generally predictable and stable events in which the settings and actors are available for all participants and observers to see, hear, and know. However, with the invention of the internet, and particularly social media platforms, the nature of the public forum has fundamentally changed.

Within the last few decades computerized technology has infiltrated all aspects of social life, causing a paradigm shift in how humans interact with one another. It became possible to instantly send and receive information across vast distances anywhere in the world. Social media has forever changed how people (including anonymous strangers) meet, interact, develop relationships, understand the world, and understand themselves.

The digital public forums of social media and the internet more broadly, exist in the context of the technological takeover of the human realm. Jacques Ellul (1964) understands technology to transform all elements of civilization, including the digital public forum. “Modern technology has become a total phenomenon for civilization, the defining force of a new social order in which efficiency is no longer an option but a necessity imposed on all human activity” (Ellul 1964: 17). Modern technology is all-encompassing. There is no aspect of society or any social process untouched. Not only the public forum, but everything, including science, religion, health, politics, and education, is subject to the dominating logic of efficiency.

Ellul calls this phenomenon “technique” (1964), and it is the defining feature of modern society. It is “the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity” (Ellul 1964: xxv). Not surprisingly,

the digital public forum has been thoroughly shaped by this ruling milieu of technique. The internet and social media are predicated on efficiency. With the ability to simulate the traditional public forum, instant connection and communication mark this new frontier, without the limitation of space and time. While it has no doubt made social life more convenient in many ways, the destabilizing effects on society and people are evident.

As such, the digital public forum should not be conceptualized as a tool that people create and use to an end. Ellul joins Langdon Winner (1977) in understanding that technology is not a neutral force molded by people in a one-directional relationship. On the contrary, technique guarantees that people adapt to technology and re-organize society under the principle of efficiency. Thus, the assumed one-directional relationship is more so the opposite way, where technique is not truly controlled by anything, but compels people to adapt to it. Winner calls this principle “autonomous technology” (1995), and it is driving society toward a “technological determinism” (Ellul 1990). Efficiency, therefore, has a totalizing effect on society, even to the point of defining humanity.

For example, participation in the digital realm is becoming more of a requirement if one wants to live and thrive in a modern world. It becomes increasingly difficult to gain employment, access information, socially connect, and foster relationships if one chooses to live without the internet and cell phones. Thus, technology, particularly the digital public forum, is not a value-neutral entity. It compels social behavior while at the same time it is naturally driven forward by itself. For instance, almost any scientific achievement or solution to a social problem comes alongside an increase in technology, not a step away from it. Ellul argues that “the present-day ideology of science is an ideology of salvation ... Science alone holds the future to our society” (Ellul 1990:182, as cited in Hanks and Hanks 2015).

Ellul’s strong opinions about technology’s impact on society are seen vividly with the prominence and totalizing nature of the internet. However, the digital public forum, ruled by technique and the value of efficiency, does not necessarily represent a defeat for humanity and its platform to communicate. The situation is nuanced, with positive and negative aspects interacting in a continuing contradiction.

Zombie-like Contradictions

The nature of this new digital public forum has profound implications for discourse in society. By mimicking the face-to-face, physical interaction of the traditional public forum, the internet and social media are marked by internal contradictions in ways that previous public forums were not. These contradictions fundamentally change the nature of the public forum in the digital realm. While acting as an extension of the traditional public forum, speech in the digital realm has fundamentally lost the human element. The digital public forum is like a zombie, loudly presenting as a new and improved self-created element of humanity not bound by space and time, but also dead inside, marked by internal contradictions often antithetical to human well-being. Figure 1 visualizes the distinctions between traditional and digital public forums.

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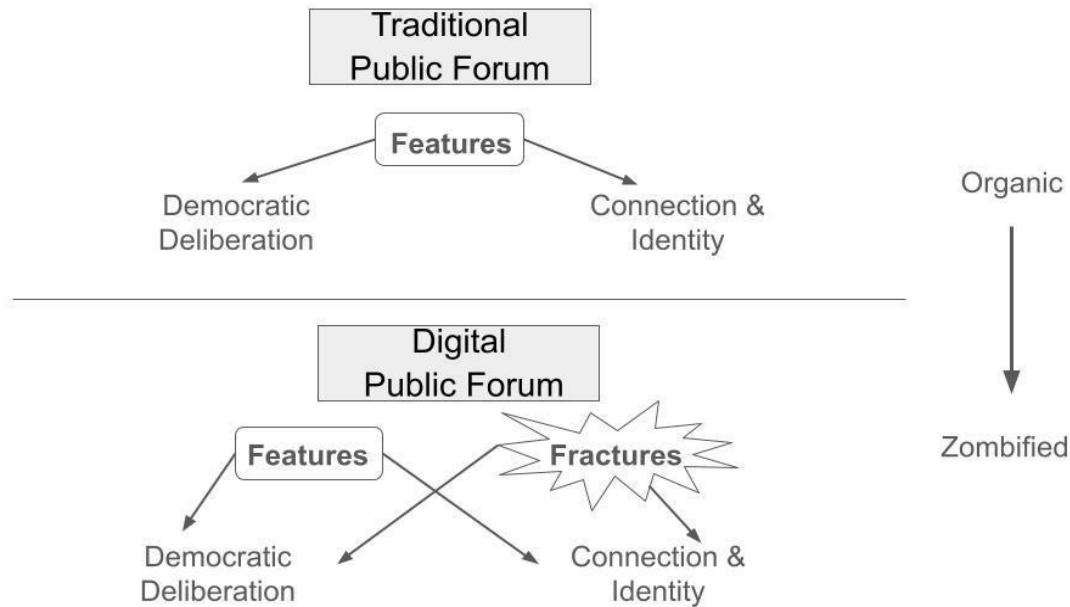


Figure 1: Traditional versus Digital Public Forum Fractures

Features and Fractures: Democratic Deliberation

Democratic deliberation has expanded in the digital realm. Increasingly, people from all over the world can transcend geographic boundaries to connect and communicate – often freely or at low cost – in a continuing democratic process that bolsters the public forum. No other innovation has pulled more people into the public forum and amplified democratic discourse, than digital technology.

The massive increase in the digital connection of cross-national, diverse people has also had the effect of decentralizing information streams, allowing for a multiplicity of viewpoints and topics of concern. Consistent with the multiple public forum model (Breese 2011), these points of public interest have spawned “counterpublics” (Fraser 1990; Kavada and Poell 2021).

Fraser refers to these counterpublics as “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (1990: 67). While often seen in the way subaltern groups strive to gain recognition amidst dominating groups, counterpublics can also be dysfunctional and anti-democratic, leading to radicalism and extremism (Fraser 1990; Kaiser and Rauchfleisch 2019). Regardless of their ethical value, however, counterpublics nonetheless “expand discursive space” (Fraser, 1990:67). This expansion is evident with even a brief glance at the internet’s diverse social and political atmosphere.

Blooming alongside cultural and ideological diversity, counterpublics have led to numerous social movements which could have only been possible in the digital realm. For example, the Arab Spring and #MeToo are two examples of social movements to have successfully utilized digital platforms to spread awareness around their message throughout the

Arab and Western worlds, respectively. Thanks to the unique ability to go viral in the digital realm, information can rapidly spread, allowing for broader and more immediate democratic deliberation.

Despite the achievement of expanding democratic deliberation in the digital public forum, this ideal is fundamentally fractured on two accounts. Firstly, online social media forums are privately owned and thus are not subject to requiring First Amendment protection for its users. As such, private owners can construct parameters around acceptable speech allowing social media platforms to censor speech or expel speakers that fall outside these parameters. Secondly, a large percentage of the global population does not have internet access and is thus completely excluded from participating in the digital public forum. The lion's share of the debate and discussion online occurs in a few social media platforms, namely Meta (Facebook and Instagram), X, WeChat, YouTube, and Reddit (among others). All of these are private corporations resembling a public forum in some fashion. Each is tasked with setting appropriate parameters of speech that necessarily constrict the content of discussion and the subsequent formation of public opinion.

For example, every major social media platform uniformly banned President Donald Trump from their platforms for his perceived role in the U.S. Capitol riots on January 6th, 2021. And in the height of Covid-19 pandemic, X (at the time Twitter) banned over 11,000 personal accounts for violating their policies regarding speech, questioning the safety and efficacy of newly created vaccines, claims of fraud in the 2020 Presidential Election, and QAnon conspiracy theories (Thompson 2022). Moreover, when Elon Musk acquired Twitter to create a free-speech centered platform, controversial speaker Alex Jones was initially banned but later allowed on the platform. The reversal of this decision emphasizes the struggle for online platforms to set consistent and fair speech parameters.

While some may applaud the limitation of controversial speech, the digital public forum is nonetheless inherently undemocratic given that the parameters for acceptable speech are controlled by a few individuals, whose decisions impact billions. Unlike in the traditional public forum, where unpopular, offensive, or even hateful speech has legal protection, speech on digital platforms is subject to restriction and removal by the discretion of each digital platform, with no avenue for recourse. The co-optation of corporate control of the public forum in this way echoes Habermas' concept of re-feudalization (1992). Social media corporations sell the idea of an open platform where discussion and debate are untouched, allowing for social opinion to be formed, but this can only happen within the context of acceptable speech.

Thus, social media corporations give the illusion of providing a public forum, but this forum is subject to the corporate logic of generating profit, as all corporations are. Much attention has been drawn to social media corporations' fiduciary responsibility to the public (Collins, Marichal, and Neve 2020; Cramer 2020; Giannelos 2023), and even interest in reframing these giant corporate platforms as public utilities (Andrejevic 2013). Still, barring any momentous shifts in the socio-political landscape, social media corporations will remain private and profit driven.

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In addition, there exists no major digital public forum without this corporate logic – all recognizable social media are corporations. They own and control the means of communication online; there is no alternative for anything else resembling a public forum in the digital realm. To be sure, there have always been alternatives that people create and seek out that are more open and democratic than hegemonic social media platforms such as Facebook and X. But for any alternative platform to scale up and reach anything resembling a public forum, the costs involved require profit to be the driving motivator.

Thus, an entire apparatus of technocratic control emerges with content moderators and misinformation experts who constrain speech and speakers at the behest of investors, shareholders, advertisers, even governments. Ellul echoes the anti-democratic nature of the technological society, and by extension, the digital public forum in what he refers to as the “the technological bluff” (1990). Ellul (1990: xvi) broadly defines the technological bluff as:

...the gigantic bluff in which discourse on techniques envelops us, making us believe anything and, far worse, changing our whole attitude to techniques: the bluff of politicians, the bluff of the media, the bluff of technicians when they talk about technique instead of working at them, the bluff of publicity, the bluff of economic models.

The corporate control of not only social media platforms, but also for most activity on the internet, reveals the technocratic bluff of the digital public forum. So, while the promise of life in the digital realm is utopian-like, where democracy thrives in the abstract, it is, in practice, an exercise in “monitoring, predicting, and managing citizen behavior” (Hanks and Hanks 2015: 468).

If there is ever a bid to make a social media platform more open and democratic, profit is rarely on the chopping block. The converse is also true; generating profit necessitates limiting undesirable speech and speakers. Outside of an epoch beyond capitalism, it is doubtful that reconciling the conflict between the promise of the public forum and the profit motive is even possible. What remains are a few behemoth social media corporations that dominate the digital public forum by sacrificing democratic ideals on the all-holy altar of profit.

This technocratic logic of setting speech parameters in accordance with profit motive is not the only reason the digital public forum is undemocratic. Every person being able to participate is a major assumption of what defines the public forum, yet this is not the case in the digital realm. For instance, an attractive feature of a digital public forum is that it is assumed to be international, totally transcending the limitations of spatial and national boundaries by connecting anyone from anywhere in the world. Yet, of a global population over 8 billion people, only a little over half use the internet and social media, 5.18 and 4.8 billion, respectively (Petrosyan 2023). In addition, this digital divide is not evenly distributed among different countries and cultures. For example, over 99% of the population in Saudi Arabia, Norway, and the United Arab Emirates use the internet daily, while in the world's most populous country, India, the number drops to around 50% (Petrosyan 2023). In North Korea, the internet is severely restricted with only a few thousand privileged members allowed access, leaving over 25 million completely isolated from the rest of the world (Burgess 2023).

Over the past few decades, internet access has grown steadily, but billions of people remain entirely cut off from online life. This creates a fundamental contradiction in the digital public forum. It promises to unite the global population on an open platform for dialogue and democratic opinion-forming, yet that dialogue is inevitably shaped and constrained by corporate logic, and only those fortunate enough to have internet access can participate.

Features and Fractures: Connection and Identity

The second, and most consequential, contradiction of the digital public forum is the nature of connection itself. The internet, particularly social media, allows for almost unlimited social connection. People can reach out and connect to those whom they have never met, in a place they have never known, and they can create and develop (sometimes) intense relationships online. But despite overcoming these incredible hurdles, the nature of human connection, and the subsequent formation of identity, is fundamentally fractured in the digital realm.

While social connection has unquestionably been amplified by digital technology, the crucial communicative process is largely absent. The back-and-forth process necessary to construct the digital public forum is completely mediated by technology. The normal way of connecting, namely by face-to-face verbal and non-verbal communication, has been replaced by on-screen videos or text-based messages or posts that people create, read, and send at their leisure. The traditional act of communication is in real time a back-and-forth “game” that in the search for truth and understanding has an inherent “risk” to it (Gadamer 1960). This game has its own dynamic nature to it, generated from, yet independent of, the participants involved (Vilhauer 2013). Our own perspectives of the world and of ourselves are at risk of changing when we play this communicative game. This is what makes communicating in real life so profound. One cannot escape the “game”; it is the foundation of all traditional communication.

In contrast, digital communication lacks the real time, face-to-face “game.” This separation creates disembodiment, characterized by a fundamental separation between oneself and others (Murphy 2022 and Zaner 1964). The back-and-forth “game” is gone. In its place is a simulacrum (Baudrillard 1994), a synthetic copy of the original communicative process. While this digitally mediated communication can be seen as a much more efficient version of the public forum, it lacks the fundamental, organic nature of how humans have traditionally connected and communicated.

Still, the distortion is powerful and compelling. It increasingly blurs the distinction between actual and virtual reality and marks the desire to transcend the limitations of the physical realm (Buongiorno 2019). This distortion between space/time and organic bodies transforms how people interact and develop a sense of self. As activity in the digital realm grows, so does its effect on people.

Social activity online is a new frontier in the formation of one’s identity. In the digital world one can be free from the limitations of one’s own physical body, which can be represented in a myriad of ways that do not reflect reality. Untethering the self from the body can provide relief for some, especially around adolescence where the self, or multiple selves, are constantly

being explored (Turkle 1999). This echoes Erikson's seminal concept of a "psychosocial moratorium," or a phase during adolescence with intense interactions with people and ideas combined with a pause on consequences (1950). The internet and social media provide many opportunities to engage in this fluid and dynamic interaction between bodiless selves.

While some feel a sense of relief that interacting in the digital realm provides, others experience a sense of fragmentation (Turkle 1999). This profoundly impacts the sense of self and formation of identity because the body is the self (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Zaner 1964). Thus, it is common to experience a sense of disembodiment when separation, purposeful or not, occurs. While the modes of interacting online can certainly mimic organic interaction offline (Papacharissi 2012), the effects of shifting social life into the digital realm can be dramatically different.

The rise of digital technology, particularly the internet, represents a pivotal shift in human history, redefining how people communicate and connect. This transition from embodied, face-to-face interaction to disembodied, digitally mediated communication has accelerated in recent decades, raising concerns about its psychological consequences. Social presence theory (Short, Williams, and Christie 1976) provides a useful framework for understanding this shift. They posit that communication media vary in their capacity to convey social cues (e.g., tone, facial expressions, and physical presence) essential for fostering intimacy and immediacy. The move toward digital platforms, which often lack the richness of organic communication, may undermine psychological well-being, as evidenced by rising rates of mental illness in the digital age.

Mental illness, encompassing a spectrum of psychological distress from anxiety to depression, has become increasingly prevalent in modern society. Twenge et al. (2018) document a sharp increase in depressive symptoms and suicide-related outcomes among U.S. adolescents between 2010 and 2017, correlating with the proliferation of smartphones and social media. Similarly, the World Health Organization (WHO 2022) reported a 25% global surge in depression and anxiety following the Covid-19 pandemic, a period marked by an unprecedented reliance on digital communication tools due to social distancing measures. While multiple factors contribute to these trends, the correlation with increased digital technology use warrants scrutiny.

Historical linguistic analysis further supports this linkage. Bollen et al. (2021) examined 120 years of language records and identified a marked rise in cognitive distortions – negative thought patterns associated with mental distress – beginning in the late 1990's, coinciding with widespread internet adoption. This surge reached unprecedented levels by the 2010's, exceeding any prior period in their dataset. Although causality remains elusive, the authors point to socioeconomic shifts, technological advancements, and social media as likely contributors. This suggests that the psychological toll of digital communication may stem, in part, from its tendency to amplify distorted perceptions of reality (Short et al. 1976).

The impact is particularly pronounced among youth, who have grown up immersed in digital environments. A 2022 Pew Research Center survey found that 97% of U.S. teenagers use the internet daily, with 46% reporting near-constant use up from 92% and 24%, respectively

in 2014–2015 (Vogel, Gelles-Watnick, and Massarat 2022). Smartphone ownership among teens has also risen, from 73% in 2014–2015 to 95% in 2022, enabling instant access to digital platforms. This rapid immersion raises critical questions about its developmental consequences. Drawing on social presence theory, the diminished social cues in digital interactions may hinder the formation of secure attachments and emotional regulation, skills honed through in-person communication.

Empirical research underscores these concerns. A meta-analysis by Huang (2017) of 63 studies found a small but significant positive correlation between social media use and symptoms of depression and anxiety, particularly among frequent users. More recently, Keles, McCrae, and Grealish (2019) conducted a systematic review linking excessive social media use to heightened risks of internalizing disorders, with perceived social isolation being a key mediator (Primack et al. 2017). This aligns with social presence theory: digital platforms, despite their connectivity, often fail to replicate the intimacy and immediacy of physical interaction, fostering feelings of loneliness and disconnection.

The mounting evidence has spurred action from public health authorities. In 2023, the American Psychological Association issued a health advisory on adolescent social media use, citing its potential to exacerbate psychological distress (APA 2023). Concurrently, former U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy highlighted a decade-long spike in youth sadness and hopelessness, an increase of nearly 40% from 2012 to 2022 (Surgeon General Advisory Report 2023; Ritchel 2023). This report labeled social media use among adolescents “the defining public health issue of our time.” Twenge et al. (2021) further corroborate this, linking loneliness with greater smartphone access and internet use.

The shift from organic to digital communication, framed through social presence theory, reveals a mechanism for the observed rise in psychological suffering. While digital technology offers undeniable efficiencies, its limitations in fostering social presence may erode the quality of human connection, particularly for young people. The integration of robust studies spanning longitudinal trends, meta-analyses, and systematic reviews, strengthens the case that this technological inflection point carries significant mental health implications, urging a reevaluation of our reliance on synthetic forms of interaction.

Though the digital realm fundamentally fractures connection and identity, it simultaneously expands them, bolstering the public forum. Social media, for example, transforms communication into a decentralized exchange, departing from the top-down model that legacy media provided for decades. This rhizomatic structure of the internet facilitates social connection to those outside of one’s milieu, something near impossible without the aid of digital technology adopted *en masse*. Moreover, it opens doors to communities, both online and off, centered around social and political issues on topics that span the range of human creativity.

These communities—whether facilitated on social media giants, smaller chat rooms, or organized digitally before spilling into the physical world—carry profound social potential. They rally around specific causes, offer religious minorities a space to worship, or allow victims of domestic abuse a lifeline of support while also linking broader bonds, like sharing political ideas

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among millions. Undeniably, digital technology has amplified the public forum's reach and significance.

This paradox – simultaneously featuring and fracturing connection and identity – makes participation in the digital public forum deeply significant, particularly for youth. Sherry Turkle (1984) highlights a key distinction: while adults engage computers with settled perspectives, youth wield them as tools “in the process of world and identity construction” (Turkle 1984: 165). Thus, the digital realm has an enormous effect on how young people perceive the world outside their own experiences, how they learn to connect and interact with others, and how they understand themselves. Unlike adults, whose identities and worldviews are more fixed, youth remain malleable, subject to the influence of digital technology – both by what it offers and by its inherent effects.

To adolescents, learning to socialize within this digital technology may seem like a normal stage in their own development into adulthood, a maturing process that everyone goes through, naively assuming the technology is mature (Turkle 2011). But of course, this is far from true. The internet, and especially social media, are in their infancy when compared to any other technology that has historically changed society to the same degree. What people experience when participating in the digital public forum is not and has never been normal.

Ironically, however, participation in the normless digital public forum is becoming increasingly normal. Turkle (2011) introduces the term “realtechnik” to describe mediums that can both distance us from humanity and serve as a normalized stage for connection. Turkle urges skepticism about linear progress, for good or bad, with new technology and always reconsider and reassess the impact on society. She is in line with Habermas (1992) and Ellul (1990) in stating that technology, and more broadly modernity, is irreversible. People must work within the milieu they find themselves in, not withdraw or dismantle it.

CONCLUSION: THE PRINTING PRESS 2.0?

The advancement of technology is not inherently a deterministic factor advancing humanity and having a uniform impact on the social world. Notably, the invention and diffusion of the radio and the television throughout the 20th century changed society (via the public forum) significantly. The closest comparison to the impact of the internet and digital technology on modern society is the invention of the printing press in the 15th century (Bawden and Robinson 2000; Mun 2013).

Gutenberg's invention allowed for the ability to document events and spread ideas with unrivaled efficiency. Eisenstein (1979) famously makes the case that the printing press was the prime causal agent of the Protestant Reformation and the Scientific Revolution, along with their destabilizing effects on society. With avenues of communication multiplying and ideas and information spreading at a rate never seen before, European social and political life was dramatically altered. The societal shift from script to print fractured global normality and changed the course of human history.

But the printing press' impact on society did not happen overnight. It took over three years to print 200 copies, and most people at the time were illiterate (Roos 2023; Dewar 1998).

Yet the seeds were planted for the radical transformation of society. In a similar way, digital technology has been ongoing for decades but the rate of evolution from its inception is already dramatic. Moreover, internet-based communication is far more powerful than the printing press. Whatever disruption the printing press brought to 15th century Europe, digital technology is on pace to not just mirror but far exceed it in our time and on a global scale.

Digital technology and the internet have the power to change humanity in profound ways. Digital communication, while synthetic, is almost unlimited in scope and scale. Information processing and analysis are growing at an exponential rate, and we have the near totality of human-generated knowledge inside a device that fits in our pockets. The ability of the internet to transform society dwarfs the impact of the printing press. But despite the almost unlimited possibilities of the internet's effect on society, we struggle to predict with any accuracy what comes next.

The blind foresight means there are many unintended consequences that we are forced to deal with retrospectively. For instance, few if any predicted that packet switching computers onto a single network would lead to the mass adoption of the internet, a place where people increasingly live their lives in a continuing separation of humanity from nature. But despite this separation, people are inherently social with a base need to connect and communicate. Thus, we created the internet and social media platforms which constitute the new digital public forum. How this trend eventually plays out remains a mystery, as we are in the early stage of this historical phenomenon.

Thanks to digitally mediated technology, science fiction ideas from the past, like augmented virtual reality and artificial intelligence (AI), are now realities. They may indeed drive society forward. But how people interact is a more fundamental yet often ignored mystery in the digital realm. What is the future of the digital public forum, and how will it impact human communication? What are the parameters of acceptable speech in the digital realm, and do they differ from the traditional forum? Is the internet a new kind of human-created nature, qualitatively different but no less important than the forests and the plains, as Smith (2022) posits? Is it no more than a simulacrum? Jurgenson critiques the concept of digital dualism, claiming that there is no fundamental separation between the digital and organic world (2012). Could it be that all differences will boil away as digital reality becomes increasingly adapted into all aspects of social life? There is evidence that internet usage fundamentally alters our brains (Carr 2010; Firth et al. 2019; Kühn and Gallinat 2015); what implications does this have for us as a biological species?

These are pressing questions, yet our general acquiescence puts us on a one-way path to wherever digital technology takes us. The nature of how we connect and communicate are fundamental aspects of what it means to be human. This analysis seeks to confront the reality of our new zombified public forum and wrestle the conversation away from a dominating narrative that portrays us as passive players, forced to adapt to whatever technology provides for us despite how inevitable the digital takeover may be. On the contrary, crucial issues relating to the public forum must be at the forefront of political and social life.

THE ZOMBIFICATION OF THE PUBLIC FORUM

What separates this zombified notion of the public forum from other conceptions of the Habermasian model in the digital age is not that the internet simply transforms the public forum into a digitized mirror of whatever society creates. The implication is that the digital public forum is largely static, modeled from whomever or whatever creates it. Indeed, with the advent and influence of AI, the digital public forum might become designed by something non-human. The zombified concept of public forum should be thought of as a natural and inevitable – yet unpredictable – result of modernity and what Ellul describes as the technique of technology. Notably, this digital version is highlighted by internal contradictions that not only feature core elements of the Habermasian public forum, namely democratic deliberation and connection and identity, but at the same time fractures them.

In this vein, this analysis suggests reconsidering the nature of the public forum in the digital age. Of particular importance is the zombified process of how the public forum died and was strangely resurrected into something few could have imagined, a powerful version of itself existing only in the abstract, digital realm, and marked by internal contradictions. This monster has the body of the public forum; it has become a major place for people to discuss and debate political and social issues worldwide, to form opinions and in the process, form identities. But it crucially lacks the human spirit. Through no fault of their own, billions are excluded from participating, and it is corporately owned and controlled, dictating what is or what is not acceptable to say. And it fundamentally changes the way humans connect and interact, upending hitherto normal communication. To make any progress in the public forum, society must recognize and navigate around this monster carefully.

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Expanding the Circle: Rethinking Approaches to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

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Abstract

Diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives abound in higher education, yet rarely move the needle toward increasing gains in enrollment, retention and success among diverse students. This paper utilizes qualitative data from a project designed to increase Native American graduate student enrollment and retention. In addition to interviews and focus groups, we engaged university faculty in a Ripple Effect Mapping process. The ripple effect of individual transformations in ways of thinking and doing, coupled with shifts in university policies and procedures, provides insight into how combining a bottom-up strategy with top-down changes has the potential to alter institutional culture and more effectively meet DEI goals. Rethinking approaches to DEI in higher education can help us reimagine the American Dream as inclusive and accessible for all.

Keywords: *diversity, equity, inclusion, higher education*

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Expanding the Circle: Rethinking Approaches to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

This paper analyzes data collected during a three-year USDA Higher Education Challenge grant designed to create online graduate courses to support Tribal College and University (TCU), community college, and other faculty teaching in higher education. Changing accreditation standards required these institutions to create additional graduate-level credits in specific disciplines in order to continue teaching. In this project titled, “Expanding the Circle: Increasing Access to Graduate Education for Tribal Communities and Colleges” university faculty received training on course design; attended workshops on the structure of TCUs, Tribal sovereignty, and Native American culture; and taught courses targeted to TCU faculty needs and participated in evaluation activities. TCU faculty attended classes as students and applied what they learned in their own classes. The goals of this project included:

- Realign onboarding, recruitment and retention efforts to better serve nontraditional graduate students living in remote rural areas where broadband internet is not easily available
- Develop workshops and training for university faculty and staff on how to work with TCUs, Native students and faculty
- Provide in-depth training focused on the TCU family-centered approach, which was mandatory for faculty teaching in the program and optional for other interested persons
- Assist with online course delivery structures and strategies
- Evaluate activities to determine project outcomes and potential impacts

While the project collected a variety of quantitative and qualitative data from these activities, we rely on the qualitative results of both TCU and university faculty, including student interviews, focus groups, and the ripple effect mapping process, to analyze address three primary research questions:

1. How does changing faculty's social construction of who students are and what they need affect how they teach and their approach to pedagogy?
2. To what extent do changing attitudes about who students are impact student success?
3. In what ways can those willing to adapt their social construction of students, and consequently their role as faculty, encourage similar changes among colleagues as well as changes in accepted norms and practices?

THE IMPORTANCE OF DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION TO THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Three factors spur efforts to increase diversity, equity and inclusion and justify the resources attached to these efforts. First, some higher education systems have faced legal challenges to the historical patterns of exclusion and privilege that have produced the metrics that demonstrate systematic inequities (Patton et al. 2019; Lewis and Shah 2021). Second, research clearly demonstrates that more diverse teams and organizations are more innovative and productive than monoculture teams (Stahl et al. 2010; Tekleab 2016). Third, amid a looming demographic drought, many higher education institutions are desperate to attract new student populations and find ways to make up for the expected shortage of traditional students (Williams 2021). Despite the many efforts and resources institutions deploy, progress on diversity, equity and inclusion remains a challenge. We acknowledge that forces for change also face pushback from faculty and staff hostile to these efforts (Gwayi-Chore 2021; Moreu, Isenberg and Brauer 2021) and particularly from legislatures in low population rural states involved in a national strategy to eliminate or reduce resources designated to support more equitable, inclusive, and diverse university environments.

Since the 1960's, predominantly white institutions (PWIs) of higher education have responded to legal challenges related to federal legislation, student activism, and an increasingly diverse student body by implementing initiatives to support underrepresented students, acknowledge campus diversity, improve retention rates, and address past exclusion and present climates of discrimination (Patton et al. 2019; Lewis and Shah 2021). The more recent student protests and activism related to the 'Black Lives Matter' movement also sparked new attention to diversity, equity and inclusion in higher education. As reflected in the movements from the 1960s, recent activism involved "demands to change various institutional policies, procedures and infrastructure to promote diversity, as well as equity and inclusion" (Byrd, Sanders and Luney 2021:1).

Despite the implementation of diversity initiatives, including mandated training and hiring of Chief Diversity Officers, higher education institutions have shown a lack of real transformation and organizational change in policies, procedures and infrastructure (Patton et al. 2019). De Welde (2017:201) states that moving the needle towards equity, inclusion and diversity within higher education institutions requires work to take place at all levels: "institutional, cultural, climate; and must be a long-term commitment." The author goes on to note that institutional practices are likely to resist change over time, further impeding strategies to address diversity, equity and inclusion. Research also indicates that staff and resources supporting diversity, equity and inclusion efforts across higher education institutions are frequently the first to be cut or reduced in an effort to balance budgets, highlighting the genuine lack of commitment and support for these diversity initiatives (Marcy 2004; Patton et al. 2019).

INVOKING THE SOCIOLOGICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL LENS

While this study relies on a grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2014) to let the data speak for itself, analysis of that data led us to invoke social constructivism (Berger and Luckmann 1966) to inform our emergent explanatory framework. Social constructivism refers to

the idea that our understanding of reality is socially constructed through social interaction, language, and symbols, as people create shared interpretations of the constraints and opportunities that shape behavior. The social constructivist lens has previously been applied to students and the choices they make (Bonet and Walters 2016; Tight 2020; Tomlinson 2017). For example, in addressing student retention, Ball and colleagues (2002) highlight what has been further reiterated by Bawa (2016:53) that prospective higher education students' perceptions and decision-making processes are shaped through a complex interaction of social influences, which are fundamentally rooted in differences of social class and ethnicity.

Researchers interested in understanding how graduate students learn through strategies of co-learning and co-discovery of knowledge also apply the concept of social constructivism to change student and faculty views of learning and knowing (Rink 2001; Hickey and Austin 2007; Jocuns 2012). However, we rarely apply this sociological lens to the university's social construction of who graduate students are, what they need to succeed, and how they should fit into higher education; nor have we considered the impact this construction has on student success. We found only a few articles that address the social construction of graduate student identity and how this shapes faculty and staff interactions with students. Davis and Harrison (2013:4) comment, "reality is understood as constructed, which raises questions about the constructor." Wildhagen's analysis of policy and staff interviews at a small liberal arts college speaks to that question as her research "reveals an institutional discourse about first-generation college students that marks them as academically and culturally deficient and proposes specific corrections to these deficiencies" (2015:296). Hull et al. (2002) find a similar pattern in their study on remediation as a social construct. In our work, we found that institutional policies and procedures often rely on unchallenged assumptions about students that do not reflect today's more diverse student body and are deeply embedded in everyday ways of doing and habits of thought (Swartz 2002) that unconsciously underlie approaches to teaching, learning, and advising.

Our data analysis also led us to Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984). Kingston (2001:89) applied Lamont and Lareau's (1988) approach to cultural capital in his work on education:

Cultural capital is institutionalized, i.e., widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goals, and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion...Cultural capital is like money in that it can be saved, invested, and used to obtain other resources (such as access to economic positions)... Cultural capital "counts" because many people or, at least, key gatekeepers believe it should be rewarded.

Bourdieu's work on cultural capital also examined the social norms that govern how systems and institutions operate, as well as the everyday ways of thinking and doing that unconsciously shape our interactions and help us conform to those systems. It is the latter aspect of cultural capital that concerns us. Socially constructed everyday ways of thinking and doing become part of people's understanding of institutions, including what is necessary to successfully navigate them, and what options people see as available, thus shaping both individual and collective agency. Social constructs function as implicit knowledge of how things operate and are handed down to some more effectively than others through the informal

onboarding processes that teach informal rules for how things really work. According to Garratt (2016:84):

Bourdieu's work helps us locate where racism resides in habitual perception and how this is constructed, perpetuated and linked to resources and rewards. Embodiment then is not simply something that demeans other groups; but is our state of existence in the world and the means by which we come to know what the world is.

Students whose life opportunities conform to the norm of the 'typical' student often more easily acculturate to the institution due to their financial and cultural capital. Generally, these students come from families who have high incomes, are generationally educated, and can understand the demands and expectations of university life. Institutionally, similarities in how things were done before students joined the institution with what they encounter when they arrive make the environment more welcoming versus students whose life opportunities shaped a different understanding of how the university operates. The social construction of students, informally shared and passed on, helps shape how faculty understand their role, as well as the everyday ways of thinking and doing that reflect how they operationalize that understanding in classroom management and pedagogical approaches (Hull et al. 2002; Wildhagen 2012). It is our contention that in order for DEI initiatives to really move the needle on key indicators of inclusion, everyday ways of thinking and doing must change.

We introduce a third perspective, diffusion of innovation (Rogers 2003), to understand challenges in advancing the DEI agenda in higher education. In analyzing the data, we identified emergent patterns related to changing the social construction of students which coincide with Roger's theory of how actors adopt new ideas and practices. According to Rogers (2003), there are five types of adopters based on their receptiveness to new things: innovators, early adopters, early majority, later majority, and laggards. The innovators and early adopters are those who typically initiate or adopt new ways of thinking and ultimately influence other adopters. The last three groups are named for the rate at which they adopt an innovation. For our purposes, it is important to note how the spread of new ideas and practices often begins with a relatively small group of innovators and early adopters, then unfolds from there.

Wejnert's (2002) analysis of factors influencing adoption of innovation includes the importance of cultural capital in the adoption process:

There is one additional way in which cultural variables may influence adoption rates: socialization of individual actors, which is influenced strongly by culture, may mobilize available societal talents of entrepreneurship, perseverance, determination, and marketing skills required of actors who consider adoption of new practices or policies. (Rothwell and Wisseman 1986; Ruttan 1988:314)

According to Rogers, diffusion theories demonstrate similar patterns in the change process across diverse cultures and in other contexts (Scott and McGuire 2017). The diffusion of innovation framework consists of four elements in which the spread of ideas, or change, occurs; 1) the innovation itself, 2) communication channels used for education and outreach, 3) the time involved in adoption of an idea and 4) the social system (Rogers 2003). We can utilize these elements in analyzing and understanding challenges to successful DEI strategies.

Mental models

Small interventions that address the mental models that underlie systems can initiate a change process. Using the iceberg archetype as a metaphor for understanding systems (McLean et al. 2019; Maani and Cavana 2007), the tip of the iceberg represents classroom management techniques and pedagogical approaches faculty use in their teaching, which are also the behaviors new DEI-related policies and procedures are intended to change.

METHODS

Our data included interviews with students and university faculty involved in the project, two Ripple Effect Mapping (REM) sessions, and two focus groups. All were analyzed to identify changes in DEI, including outcomes and potential impact on faculty and student success within the Expanding the Circle project. Potential impacts refer to the emergent changes in systems, structures, and everyday ways of thinking and doing that have potential to transform those systems. We also referred to our student data to identify comments about how faculty changes in pedagogy, class structure, and student expectations impacted their learning, program retention, and teaching methods. A total of 28 faculty were involved in training and REM sessions.

The project's evaluation process used Appreciative Inquiry to frame the question and interview process (Coghlan, Preskill and Catsambas 2003). We wanted to know what aspects of the project were most meaningful to both students and faculty and why. We also wanted their input on how we might do better in serving students, helping faculty create more welcoming and inclusive learning environments, and expanding faculty understanding and acceptance of diverse epistemologies and sources of knowledge.

REM is a relatively recent addition to an evaluator's toolkit and has quickly become a standard practice in many evaluation units and companies (Chazdon et al. 2017). REM emerges from participatory research approaches with a focus on how social interaction can change social construction through individual and group reflection. REM as an evaluation tool gives back to the participants through the reflective process and is a powerful way to build both individual and collective efficacy for change. During the REM sessions, faculty articulated specific examples of how the project encouraged them to think differently about students, their role as teacher, and their pedagogical approach. These new and different understandings and the resulting changes in behaviors were integrated into ripple maps to identify how small differences can ripple out to have a larger effect. These ripples, when supported, can lead to system level changes through shifts in cultural capital that underlie the shared implicit knowledge that reinforces privilege. REM results indicate that these small but significant adjustments in thinking and doing emerge from an interactive and experiential reflective process that cannot be replicated in standard training designs (Chazdon et al. 2017).

In our initial analysis, interview and focus group data were line coded to identify themes which were later organized into categories related to changes in faculty role perceptions, as well as pedagogical stance. We also found themes related to helping students succeed and challenges to student success. For this paper, we reanalyzed the data, which enabled us to identify specific examples of how experience in the project changed faculty's understanding of students and it led to changes in everyday ways of thinking and doing related to teaching and

research. We then revisited the data collected from students to find examples of how changes in faculty thoughts about their role and teaching efforts impacted students.

FINDINGS

In analyzing our data, we found evidence to answer each of our research questions. Examples from the data are included below.

1. How does changing faculty's social construction of who students are and what they need change how they teach and their approach to pedagogy?

Our data indicates a change in faculty beliefs about who students are, what they need to succeed, and the strengths and knowledge they bring to the classroom. During the REM process, all faculty participants indicated that the opportunity to see students through an inclusive lens helped them overcome the stigma attached to those who differ from the 'typical student,' i.e., nontraditional, older, mid-career, etc., as well as those from different racial, cultural, and geographical contexts. This emergent ability to acknowledge learners as knowledgeable co-participants in learning impacted their approach to teaching in three fundamental ways. We are not just teaching *to* them, we are teaching *with* them, where all are participating in the pedagogy.

First and specific to our project, faculty participating in *Expanding the Circle* (ETC) had the opportunity to learn about Tribal sovereignty and to understand the important distinction between Tribal membership and race. As one faculty member noted: "For a lot of faculty, there wasn't a clear understanding of the distinction between Tribal membership and race, so helping people understand that distinction was essential."

Second, while many faculty perceptions of Tribes, Indigenous people, and reservations were shaped by the fear of difference and deficit thinking, workshop participation helped uncover implicit bias in those perceptions. Faculty were able to recognize how the implications of that bias interfered with their ability to see students as strong, caring members of their community. One faculty commented on the "integrated" effect of the experience, "It helped me to see a student as a student, like a person as a person, to see a challenge as a challenge." Another commented on the "humane" aspect of learning, "A student might be one flat tire away or a bus or a babysitter away from not getting their degree, do you want to be that teacher?"

Third, faculty were able to view their past efforts from a different perspective and integrate a new understanding of students in a more culturally competent way, as one stated:

In my 25 years in higher education, the past few years of teaching for *Expanding the Circle* program has provided one of the most rewarding and eye-opening opportunities for the direct impact. The program's guidance and resources helped hone my teaching craft to grow more culturally responsive.

Changing faculty's social construction of who students are, i.e, faculty understanding Tribal culture and the needs of a non-traditional native student helped change their view of students and their approach to pedagogy.

2. To what extent do changing attitudes about who students are impact student success?

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We looked at how changes in faculty understanding of students altered approaches to pedagogy in ways that helped graduate students succeed. In the REM process, faculty described how a more inclusive lens impacted pedagogical thinking. There was a shift in faculty's perception of students from being focused solely on university education to an understanding that students focus on family and community first. This allowed faculty to see the importance of flexibility in course design. Second, graduate students taking those courses reported new learning that impacted their own teaching. After listening to student stories, one faculty commented, "Not everybody needs to meet a deadline. This semester I've tried to emphasize it's more important to understand the material than it is to try to meet deadlines."

In the workshops, faculty discussed the importance of adapting courses to students' needs and contexts as opposed to dictating what they ought to learn. One faculty acknowledged, "Students were highly motivated, especially when content and discussions related directly to the challenges they face. Having the motivation to design a course to include specific concerns/topics made the content all the more relevant and multiplied student motivation." Faculty collectively noted that it became important for them to ascertain whether students could see themselves in the syllabus.

The fact that students were able to directly benefit from the material and the way it was presented encouraged faculty to further expand their understanding of students. One faculty recalled her students mentioning, "I can use this to reach my students!" or "This is exactly what my students need." For this faculty, it helped to be able to design courses that address specific teaching and student needs.

Faculty participating in focus groups unanimously agreed that changing attitudes about graduate students and what they need to succeed positively impacted student success and course outcomes. This could also be corroborated by student comments, for example, "[I] commend all of the professors... I have really implemented a lot of things they taught me...they had us dig into syllabi... that was helpful."

Another described how the graduate course they took with ETC helped her rethink the course she teaches at the TCU:

Classes like "Informational Literacy" and "Foundations of Education" helped me evaluate my course. I made smaller groups, prompts that touched students personally, scaffolded assignments, and did away with textbooks. I drew from the things I learned. I have improved the way I instruct.

One student TCU faculty member rethought her own classroom activities based on what she learned, such as navigating mass media sources and bringing new things to the classroom, stating, "It was beneficial and enabled me to ensure my classroom is current." Thus, the new approaches and pedagogical understandings that graduate faculty developed helped create meaningful learning opportunities for TCU students to reflexively apply that learning to their own teaching.

3. In what ways can those willing to adapt their social construction of who students are, and consequently their role as faculty, encourage similar changes among colleagues as well as changes in accepted norms and practices?

We drew data from both the interviews and REM process to learn how faculty were acting on their new understanding of who students are and what they need to learn. Faculty participating in the project applied a new construction of students, what they know, and how they can learn together outside of the project in other aspects of their academic roles. Faculty described how the project encouraged them to address issues within their own field. Most commonly, faculty applied these new insights into pedagogy and classroom management in some, if not all, of their other courses as one highlighted here:

I applied that same model to other classes and felt such a wonderful dynamic in the class. Students were resonating with communication theory, which doesn't happen, shar[ing] their own experiences with how those theories were present in their lives. It's wonderful.

Another faculty member commented on how this new understanding impacted relationships with students, stating "It is important for students, but it's as important for the faculty, the sense of this is a real person who's an individual, where mutual learning is happening."

Faculty involved in the project also indicated a desire to learn more about students in seeking opportunities to challenge additional assumptions:

It'd be interesting to learn more about the responses and reactions that the TCU faculty have had, just to help uncover, discover, and discard some of the myths and assumptions we bring to the table.

Some also described how this new understanding impacted their service work, indicating that conversations about cultural priorities helped guide and manage additional areas. Other respondents discovered ways in which a revised social construction of students changed their approach to research. One faculty discussed her support for students incorporating non-traditional methodologies of doing research, stating "My master's student is writing the project and thesis in a completely different way. So, hopefully everybody else will be fine with it. I don't really care, it's more about stories of different voices, as a researcher, you're not the only person that has knowledge."

Faculty also described how they shared a new understanding of students with others to encourage additional changes in departments and schools, for example:

It started conversations in our hallway, because some of my colleagues have, still, very different views than I do about the deadlines. It sparked conversations. I'm not saying that it's moved the needle for anybody, but it has given me a chance to share a different viewpoint.

Another faculty member felt the need to defend students in the face of views informed by the traditional social construction of who students are and what they need:

One particular faculty member kept referring to these 'bad' students.' I snapped, saying they aren't 'bad.' I started listing off by name, this kid lives here, and if it's snowing, he's not coming, you know he's not going to risk his life to come to class in order to be here for an hour and go back. Everyone was very quiet around the table. It was an uncomfortable moment for them. I was angry.

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Finally, the discussion also included challenging accepted ways of thinking related to students, with one faculty commenting, “That’s part of challenging the system a little bit and having that focus on not just demonstrating disciplinary knowledge; how do we do this in a way that honors different ways of thinking.”

Results from interviews, focus groups, and the mapping process illustrate how engaging with faculty about the accepted and implied views of students that underlie everyday ways of thinking and doing in higher education can lead to changes that impact student success. Faculty working through this process can then become advocates for changes within the system.

DISCUSSION

As these findings indicate, small interventions that address the mental models that underlie systems can initiate a change process. Using the iceberg archetype as a metaphor for understanding systems (McLean et al. 2019; Maani and Cavana 2007), the tip of the iceberg represents classroom management techniques and pedagogical approaches faculty use in their teaching, which are also the behaviors new DEI-related policies and procedures are intended to change. Just below the water, are patterns of inclusion and exclusion, as well as the everyday ways of thinking and doing that shape social interactions with others and the roles individuals play within the institution. At the very bottom of the iceberg are the mental models, or as we have described in this case, the faculty’s social constructions of students that shape patterns of everyday ways of thinking and doing which, in turn, influence interactions and inform roles.

Using the ripple mapping process, we mapped the changes in thinking that led to changes in actions at the top of the iceberg, including:

1. redesigning classes to be culturally relevant,
2. utilizing different methods, including Indigenous methods; questioning the use of traditional methods and outcomes,
3. encouraging more follow-up and interaction with students, and
4. rethinking what really matters.

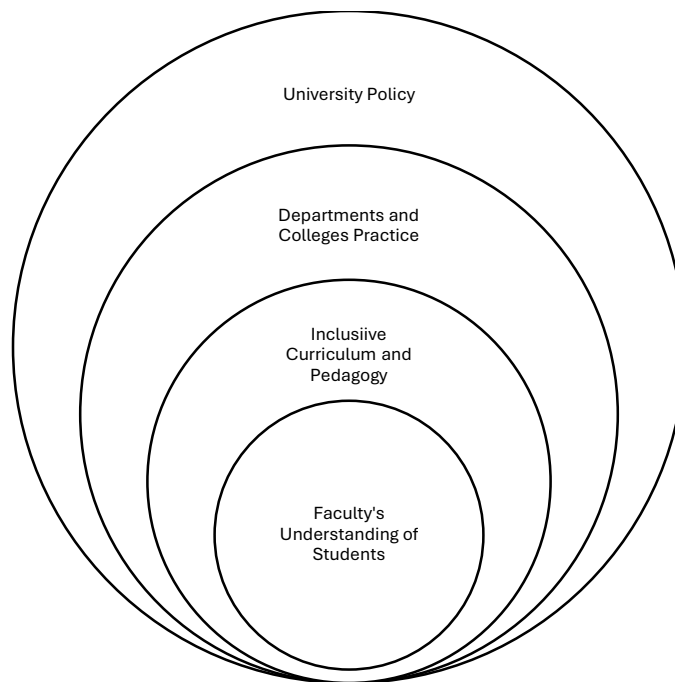


Figure 1: Ripple Effect Changing Faculty Perception of Students

These changes in action led to changes in interactions and roles, resulting in engaging with others on diversity-related processes and policy in the middle of the iceberg. For instance, faculty in this study:

1. developed outreach that challenges who is the expert,
2. confronted others' implicit bias, and
3. challenged current ways of thinking and doing.

In this case, existing administrative endorsement and related policies and procedures provide support for those whose reimagined social construction of students and what they bring to the educational endeavor alters everyday ways of thinking and doing, and consequently, interactions and actions within faculty, advisor, and collegial roles.

Engaging in processes that surface implicit understandings of students and what they need provides space for faculty to create new ways of thinking and doing related to teaching and learning that increases both individual and collective efficacy. Faculty in our project described identifying new opportunities in teaching, research, service, and collegial relations. As the ripple mapping process indicated, by engaging with others around reframing mental models of who students are and changing pedagogical practice, faculty experienced a heightened sense of both individual and collective agency.

CONCLUSION

Reimagining the American Dream for higher education institutions to be more inclusive and accessible involves more than just implementing new policies and procedures. This paper posits that by focusing on how we can change assumptions underlying not only explicit policy, but also implicit ways of thinking and doing, we can harness cultural capital assets to support policy change intended to move the needle on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

In this project, diffusion of innovation theory (Rogers 2003) provided a way for us to see how a few faculty could serve as “early adopters” of the innovation, an emergent and more diverse social construction of the student. These faculty then communicated with other faculty through informal conversations, focus groups, and other forums regarding this more diverse social construction of students. Scott and McGuire (2017) suggest that diffusion occurs when people within a social system share a common goal, and the university is designed with a primary goal to recruit, retain, and graduate students. Faculty wanted to create more meaningful experiences for students by becoming open to different perspectives, which enabled them to include these changes as evidence of meeting teaching expectations. Over time, as acceptance of this alternative view of students becomes more diffused, it is our hope that the process will lead to permanent changes in institutional culture. As our data suggest, small changes do have the potential to spark institutional shifts, particularly when the university has made a commitment to genuine DEI efforts.

Our analysis highlights the importance of mental models to initiate transformative system-level changes. Mental models emerge from social constructions of reality which shape the cultural capital that embeds the assumptions framing those constructions in everyday ways of thinking and doing, as well as in the implicit patterns of social inclusion and exclusion perpetuating privilege and institutionalizing structures that preserve inequities, particularly along racial, class, and gender lines. Without attention to these mental models, real DEI transformation is less likely to lead to meaningful changes in institutional culture over time.

Limitations

This paper reflects a snapshot in time and can only capture emergent changes from these interventions. Returning to this situation in several years would enable us to determine if the emergent changes were sustained or grew to include additional adopters. We would also be able to identify additional facilitators of the change process and constraints to further adoption of new mental models.

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Interview with Tahseen Shams, Ph.D.

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University of Pennsylvania School of Arts & Sciences

Interviewed and transcribed by:
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¹ Tahseen Shams is a sociologist studying immigration, globalization, and identity. She is the author of one book, 14 peer-reviewed publications, and numerous invited book reviews, essays, and lectures at campuses across the world. More information about Dr. Shams' work can be found at <https://www.tahseenshams.org/>.

INTERVIEW WITH TAHSEEN SHAMS, PH.D.

In April 2023, The Sociology Graduate Student Association (SGSA) at the University of Kansas invited Dr. Shams to present her research for her book *Here, There, and Elsewhere: The Making of Immigrant Identities in a Globalized World*. This work illustrates how immigrants are “vectors of globalization” who are both subject to and an agent within the interconnectedness of societies. She argues that immigrants exist in a space that is neither the immigrants’ homeland nor hostland- a place Shams calls “elsewhere.” Dr. Shams’ book has received multiple awards including ASA’s 2021 Thomas and Znaniecki Award (International Migration Section), ASA’s 2021 Distinguished Book Award (Sociology of Religion Section), ASAs 2021 Asian American Book Award (Asian and American Section), and the Pacific Sociological Association’s 2021 Distinguished Scholarship Award. In this interview we discuss her book, how she came to research this topic, implications of this research for sociology, and general insight into her journey as both graduate student and early career scholar.

JB: Jennifer Babitzke

TS: Dr. Tahseen Shams

JB: In your award-winning book, you introduce the concept of “elsewhere.” What is elsewhere? How do you conceptualize it?

TS: Yes. So my book *Here, There and Elsewhere*, is about how global geopolitics is as important an element in America's identity formation as their homeland and hostland dynamics. In my book, I present a new analytical framework, multi-centered relational framework, which shows how places beyond the immigrants' homeland and hostland are also important for immigrants' identities. I conceptualize these places that are neither the immigrants' sending countries or receiving countries as “elsewhere”. But elsewhere does not mean everywhere, anywhere that's even remotely interesting to the immigrants doesn't mean that it's going to be an elsewhere. Where a place is located, the relationship between that place with the hostland country and homeland dynamics determines whether that place is an “elsewhere.” Does that place determine how immigrants self-identify or do they self-identify with that place? Does that inform their own sense of selves? Does that place beyond the homeland and hostland inform how other people identify the immigrant in light of elsewhere? So that's what my book is about, extending the homeland/hostland dyad to think about this third kind of space in immigrants' everyday lives.

JB: And that complicates our traditional notions of assimilation and acculturation because there's this other third, ephemeral place that influences how one identifies and how one is perceived.

TS: Yeah, so assimilation has its back turned to the border. It looks at what's happening inside the hostland, how homeland context shape immigrants' hostland identities over time, how immigrants become similar to the native population of the hostland. Transnationalism expands that focus to include the sending countries' dynamics, but it's still limited to that homeland/hostland dyad. Just because an immigrant is from one country and has come to another country doesn't mean that those are the only countries that are important to the immigrants, that no other dimension, other aspect of their identities are equally informative. Diaspora is another framework that we often use in international migration, even though there is a separate area called diaspora studies. But I show that diaspora also conceptually is tied to this dyadic framework where people are dispersed across different receiving countries but are connected to this one sending country or one homeland. My framework breaks through this dyadic framework to look at three centers, the homeland, hostland, and beyond.

JB: Toward the end of your presentation, you talked a little bit about generalizability to other ethnicities and cultures. Could you speak a bit about how you believe this might look with other immigrant groups such as Latin Americans or Latinos in America, French Caribbean immigrants in Canada or other immigrant groups?

TS: Sure. In my book, I did discuss historical cases that in migration scholarship we take for granted to show that there was an elsewhere effect that we just did not have the toolbox to see clearly. So for instance, I use the case of South Asian Muslim Americans to conceptualize elsewhere, but I also talk about how elsewhere, an elsewhere framework reveals a more complicated picture about Irish Americans, Catholics, Eastern and Southern Europeans, even the formation of Asian Americans. So you mentioned Latinos, how elsewhere can be relevant to that population. So one dimension that I talk about in the book is after 9-11, the entire U.S. immigration policy paradigm shifted from an economic cost-benefit paradigm to a security, national security paradigm. That did not affect Middle Easterners or Muslims nearly as much as it did immigrants from Latin American countries, especially Mexico. Because very, very few people fly into the United States. Most immigrants cross the border on foot or by driving. So this national security apparatus affected not Middle Easterners, but Latin Americans. So that's a kind of like an elsewhere effect. It was the exogenous shock that was rooted in Middle Eastern politics ended up affecting not Middle Eastern Americans, only, but more than that, the Latin American immigrants. Another example is the racialized context of the United States, where Latin Americans have suffered misdirected hate crimes after Islamist terrorist attacks. All brown people are lumped together as if they're the same. Latin Americans have often been mistaken as Middle Easterners. If you are non-white, if you look brown, you are a suspect. You are exposed to the national security threat, you know, that pervasive atmosphere of national security threat after moments of crisis resulting in Latin Americans suffering misdirected hate crimes after certain terrorist attacks in the United States.

JB: I'm kind of going back a little bit in your ideas of elsewhere, your conceptualization of that. I was struck by how elsewhere is constructed by the perception of others about immigrants. And so I started thinking about Patricia Hill Collins' idea of controlling images. Did that idea influence any of your framework? How does that play into this idea of elsewhere?

TS: I did not connect elsewhere with Patricia Hill Collins' work, even though, of course, as a sociologist of race, ethnicity, religion, nationalism, I am aware of this work. But the idea of being perceived by others in association to something that happened is just one part of elsewhere. It's just one part of the story. The other part, that's identification by others in relation to elsewhere that is obviously rooted in the stereotypical narratives, the controlling images of Muslims here in the United States. But that [controlling image] doesn't speak to how the Muslims think about themselves in relation to elsewhere. They too see themselves, perceive themselves in association with places that they're not from or have never visited. So that's the controlling image as part of the public presentation of self. That is just half of the story.

JB: Do you think elsewhere is a recent phenomenon made possible by communication and media, the 24-hour news cycle and higher political polarization, or has this concept always been a factor?

TS: I argue in my book that this is not a new phenomenon. For instance, let's look at how Catholics, Irish American immigrants were perceived back when social media was not a thing. They were seen as agents of the Pope, [people who] were taking directives from Rome, and they are going to subvert the Protestant ethic of the United States and make it into a Catholic haven. And they were discriminated and persecuted for it. There wasn't social media or advanced communication technologies there. Same thing with Southern and Eastern European immigrants during the Red Scare. They were suspected of, again, being agents of the Bolshevik Revolution because they were in the United States and the US had geopolitical tensions with the Soviet Union. Let's look at how Asian Americans as a pan-ethnic group was formed. Vincent Chin, who was a Chinese immigrant, was killed because he was misperceived as Japanese during a very heightened tension between the United States and Japan. They were economically competitive and there was a lot of tension and Vincent Chin, although he was Chinese, he was identified as Japanese and therefore he was brutally murdered. That paved the way for the Asian American Pan-ethnic Coalition². There wasn't a role of social media or the advanced telecommunication technologies that we're seeing here today. That does not mean that this unprecedented speed in which we get to learn about far away events almost immediately has no role; I think it spreads faster. We get to hear from a number of different places faster, a number of different places in general that we did not have the technology to hear from. For instance, anyone can go on social media and talk about their day, tell the world of the conditions of their lives. But that doesn't mean that the age-old hierarchy or the world systems that existed long before social media or advanced telecommunication technologies is not playing a role. Still now, what happens in the core countries matters a lot more than what

² Little, Becky. 2020. "How the 1982 Murder of Vincent Chin Ignited a Push for Asian American Rights." <https://www.history.com/articles/vincent-chin-murder-asian-american-rights>.

happens in the peripheral and semi-peripheral countries. We only care about what happens in the margins if we have a stake in that story. So I think telecommunications make it a faster process, but it does not change the elsewhere story that has long been present in the migration phenomenon. We just did not have the toolkit to tease it out and show that this is a geopolitical interplay and not just hostland dynamics of racialization or assimilation.

JB: KU, like many higher education institutions, has a robust international student population. How do you see university settings impacting immigrant identity?

TS: University campuses are often places where students are exposed beyond their parents' social network for the very first time. These are the places that are politicized. In high school, we may be exposed to different kinds of people, but we are usually circumscribed by the neighborhoods we live in. But it is truly in the college campus milieu that we first get a taste of this microcosm of the larger world. We see international students, we see activist groups, we see different kinds of classmates who care about different things, people who look different, people who speak different, people who dress differently. And we finally get to intermingle, and that's where, physically also, not just culturally or religiously, we are basically enmeshed together, so I think that it is different from the kind of interactions we would have outside of campus. What happens on campus is not really representative of the interactions that we would have off campus.

In my research, I have found that the interactions and exposures that my South Asian Muslim participants have had in their colleges have had a long-term effect in how they viewed the world and their position in it. They understood through their participation in activist organizations, with classmates, conversations, or debates, or organizational tensions on campus that this is what being a Muslim means. Or these are the places around the world where people like me are also persecuted or are discriminated against, and this is what the world looks like; this is where I fit in and this is my role here. Just because they have graduated from college doesn't mean that the friendships and the relationships that they have made on these campuses have ended. Many of our participants have continued maintaining those relationships. I think that college campuses definitely are places where students come to construct themselves in a new way, like in a more diversified way, in a more informed way with a more expanded worldview.

I think it is interesting to view what happens to international students when they go back to their sending country. After they're exposed to these conversations that maybe they don't have the privilege or the security to engage in their homeland because of some authoritarian regimes, they still take these ideas back with them. Similarly, when they come from one country to another to go to college, they are also giving students a different light of what their home country is like. And that reminds me of, for instance, an anecdote that everyone thinks that Pakistan is like a war-torn country, poor, nobody is safe there, but according to one of my participants who is Pakistani, a lot of his American white friends found from him that Pakistan is a very modern country. Like [when he shared] pictures of Islamabad and Karachi, they were awestruck that it's so advanced and the streets are clean and it could be like any very technologically developed country. That's the first time they've even learned what Pakistan looks like other than pictures of violence that they see on the news, or women wearing the hijab on

the news. So there is a lot of exchange, flows of information that informs both the international students, but through them, the other students also learn a lot. They go off with a more expanded, diversified worldview.

JB: Oh, that's really interesting. And bringing those ideas back to their home country when they return is also fascinating and acts like potential kernels of change for future generations.

TS: Sometimes they also find the toolkits to articulate what they feel needs to be changed in their home country. They learn to see their home country in a new light.

JB: Shifting gears a bit from the findings of your research to the process of conducting research, many grad students struggle finding their research topic and question, one that is significant and contributes to the field. But then there's also this long haul of doing the work of writing the dissertation. You've also worked on this topic all through grad school and now into your professional life. How do you maintain interest in your research topic?

TS: Interestingly enough, migration continues to be the fire that keeps me going. Like my interest in global geopolitics and migration, that hasn't waned over time, but I do have moments of burnout and boredom. And for instance, my second project on interracial, interethnic romance, I'm very bored by it. It's not something that I chose to do. When you are an assistant professor, it's expected of you that as soon as your first book is published, you need to have a second project [so] I was just playing around with this idea. And some of my colleagues who are very supportive loved it because it spoke to their research interests. And I thought, "Oh, okay, I'll give it a shot." Somehow, a small project now has 150 interviews, and now I have all this data that I'm just not sure if I have the interest that's going to sustain me through digging through, analyzing, writing about this entire data. But I think that with the way that I keep interest is I look at the data in the way that is interesting to me. If I'm interested in politics and contentious politics, geopolitics, I look for evidence of that to see, how can I frame this in a way that's interesting to me. And sometimes it also helps to just take a break because when you look at it a second time around, you're like, "Oh, that's actually pretty interesting." I think this balance of looking at a research project in a way that's interesting to you rather than what other people find interesting is something that is more helpful. Yeah, encouragement is very important, but [also find] something that's helpful for you to keep going when you're sitting in front of a screen late at night trying to figure out how you're going to continue writing the next paragraph when you're bored out of your mind. So look at it the way that is interesting to you. Frame it in a way that speaks to the literature that interests you, if possible, and take a break away by doing another project or trying to do a collaborative project. That way you keep your research agenda going, but you're taking a break away from something. But I think that with migration, there is, at least for me, there was something about migration in my personal life that resonated with me. So that keeps me going. If you're not interested in, for instance, gender, that will be very hard. There could be different projects to find in that topic, but if you're just bored of gender overall, it would be very difficult. I think just have an area that's just interesting to you and just engage in different projects if need be, rather than just stick to one project.

INTERVIEW WITH TAHSEEN SHAMS, PH.D.

JB: Yeah, I can see for some grad students, and I felt this a little bit in my own research with my advisor, that she's encouraging me in this one direction. And maybe I follow that direction a little bit and I'm like, "Gosh, this isn't resonating with me." So for grad students who have that experience, maybe trust what ignites your passion, follow what interests you.

TS: Yes, I've changed my project several times in my first year because I was interested in this idea. And then the end of my first year, somebody wrote that exact book, [my idea] got published! And I was so panicked at what do I do now? I don't have anything, right? Well, what am I going to do now? And there's that added stress that everyone keeps asking you, so what's your research about? What's your research project? What's your research project? And when you don't have a research project, you're like, oh my god, I shouldn't be here, you know, imposter syndrome, 100%. So, I've had a lot of floundering with different research projects. I ended up going back to that original research project because one of my advisors said, that doesn't matter, just do your own project [but] answer it in a different way. And it ended up being my book!

JB: An award-winning book, by the way! Several awards, in fact. So you're an early career scholar. You're within five years of graduation, and you have a very prolific CV. I think you've published 9 or 10 publications plus a book in this short period of time. What advice do you have for graduate students who want to prepare themselves for the job market and want to start or maintain a rigorous writing practice? What did you do?

TS: I wrote every day. I identified when is my A time and when is my B time? So I am a morning person, the earlier I wake up from sleep and get to my desk, the better I think and write. It's very easy to say. Sometimes our schedules are not within our control. Even if you want to work in our A-time early in the morning, we can't because baby wakes up or some family obligations, or we're taking care of our elderly parents or someone who is sick. I feel uncomfortable saying that, but whatever that one can do to give themselves a solid writing time, [is beneficial]. Because there are very few things in the job market that you can control; the only thing that you can do is publish as much as you can so that you have as much advantage as you can over the other candidates. It doesn't matter where you're graduating from, ultimately, if your research publications are impressive. I think, finishing your dissertation on time or whether you are writing a book or an article, I think the key thing is to give yourself time every day, even if just an hour, to write. Even if it's just 3 sentences, 4 sentences, or just edit what you've written the day before. Just make steady progress, even if it's very slow, just make steady progress every day. It's very easy to say, it also has a fragrance of privilege, but that is the only way that I think you can make progress, giving yourself the time to think and write.

JB: You mentioned A time and B time. What is the distinction of those different times?

TS: A time is when you think the clearest and writing comes more naturally. Your head is clear, you think more creatively, that's when you have the brighter ideas. B time is when you're tired; that's not the best time that you give yourself. That's probably like, yeah, I can answer emails, I can grade, but I probably can't write a chapter of my dissertation now because I'm tired or my

focus is just not on my work right now, I'm distracted, or I have some family obligations that I have to do. So yeah, I can work, write some emails, do some administrative stuff, but I can't put out a very creative piece of work or a paragraph. So that's the B time. And then the rest of the time, you basically try to do as much of non-work work, like some non-academic work, so that you can save some A time for yourself. So that's how I managed my schedule. I made sure to give myself some time every day to write. I turned off my cell phone or turned my phone on silent. I closed off my e-mail. I am not a big social media person, so that was never a big challenge for me. I tried to remove as many distractions as possible and write during my A time. During my B time, I did all my administrative stuff. And the rest of the time, I managed all my other obligations so that I saved my A time so I didn't have my non-academic work bleed into that time.

JB: Or feel the pressure to attend to other things because you already have the time and it's place for writing.

TS: Yes *and* have realistic expectations!

JB: Do you have any other comments or advice or anything in general for graduate students, early career academics, or people on the job market that you want to add before we finish the interview?

TS: Hmmm...I think that is the hardest question you've asked me. I think I would rephrase it a little differently, like what I would have done differently if I had another chance. I think I would have been more conscious of my mental health, and I would have been more attentive to work-life balance so that I had a better self-support mechanism for mental health. For instance, like I used to have my phone ding whenever I received an e-mail. What that meant was my phone was always going ding, ding, ding, ding, ding. So I was never off! A simple change like that to free up time, to be in the moment. I still suffer from being unable to be present and content with what I have. It's always like, what else do I have to do? What's next that I have to do? Like, I did this, but I didn't do that. I could do this better. I would start that practice for the long-term health of you know, my family life, my own mental health from grad school and not now as an early career scholar.

JB: I love that advice. Easy to say, sometimes hard to do, especially turning off the brain and just being present. Maybe meditation practices will help with that.

TS: Totally. Yoga helped so much when I was in my last year of graduate school.

JB: Well, I'll start my meditation practice and yoga. Thank you so much for spending this time with us.

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Interview with Sharmila Rudrappa, Ph.D.

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¹ Sharmila Rudrappa is a sociologist studying the commodification of women's bodies, infertility and human reproduction, and techno-pastoral management. Dr. Rudrappa has authored or co-edited three books, published 17 peer-reviewed articles, and authored numerous book chapters, essays, and book reviews. Dr. Rudrappa has received sizeable grants and fellowships and presented at conferences around the world. Visit <https://soc.uic.edu/profiles/rudrappa-sharmila/> to learn more about Dr. Rudrappa's fascinating work.

INTERVIEW WITH SHARMILA RUDRAPPA, PH.D.

In the fall of 2023, the Department of Sociology at the University of Kansas invited Dr. Rudrappa to present her research at the annual Clark Lecture. Her presentation titled “Landscapes of Infertility: The Afterlives of Colonialism in India” described how the worlds of plants, animals, insects, and diseases weave in and out of narratives of human reproduction guided by the question: What must be carefully nurtured and what must be exterminated in order to render life possible? Dr. Rudrappa seeks to answer this question by examining the human and non-human aspects of coffee plantations in southern India and how *techno-pastoral imaginaries*- the human aspiration for orderly, hierarchical landscapes where land, beasts, and nature are managed through technical expertise to generate profits- create both life and death. In this interview, we discuss how the ideas in this talk parallel her previous research about the commodification of women’s bodies on the global market. We also discuss how Dr. Rudrappa integrated her background in conservation biology into an interdisciplinary focus in the sociologies of labor and reproduction, and gained insight about how to structure publications as a graduate student to enhance one’s CV for the job market.

JB: Jennifer Babitzke

SR: Sharmila Rudrappa

JB: A part of your research has focused on the sociological view of human reproduction, specifically how Indian women's bodies are commodified within industries ranging from surrogacy to cutting hair, the selling of women's hair in global markets. What inspired you to focus on these specific areas of study?

SR: Its very interesting because when we think about women and labor markets, really, we think about paid care work. But what we’re increasingly seeing, at least from the global South and certainly among working class women, is that there's fewer returns on labor. That is, wages have stagnated or dropped. And so people are finding it harder and harder to make ends meet. Work is more precarious and episodic. It's very difficult to even maintain a lower middle class standard of life, so people are looking for other ways by which they can put food on the table. Women are turning toward surrogacy, where women are literally harvesting their bodies to get a big chunk of money, to provide economic stability for themselves and their families. This was interesting to me, and this is why I always call myself a sociologist of labor, because at some level, it is an extension of what is already happening in women's lives. Whether surrogacy is a labor of love, or a labor of simply trying to get money, you can't think about it outside of the kinds of personal labor histories of that individual. And once we start thinking about personal labor histories, we also need to think about how those personal labor histories are anchored in political economy.

JB: You were trained originally in conservation biology. So how has your research interest shifted over the years, specifically if you consider what you studied in grad school versus what you are interested in now?

SR: My master's was in conservation biology and I was a teaching assistant in a class called Women and the Bodies in Health and Disease. And the reason the instructor for that class, Dr. Nancy Worcester chose me as a teaching assistant was that I was a conservation biologist. She wanted science-minded people who were interested in feminism and women's health and such. In my training I was tracking elephants, looking at what plants were growing and botany and such. And when I interviewed for the job, I was kicking and screaming, saying, "I don't want to do this. I'm tired of biology!" But it was really life-changing for me. I brought these kinds of training that I had in biology to thinking about we imagine health and women and women's bodies. It's not as if there's an easy translation and a link between the two, but I think my training in biology and in women's health really helped me come to the point that I am today in terms of how I'm thinking about surrogacy. The "Women in their Bodies in Health and Disease" class in UW Madison helped. But in my current work, I turned to my training as a conservation biologist-- I was really interested in the ecologies and thinking about the different parts and parcels that go into making something possible or not possible. What grows here? What are the kinds of conditions that make such growth possible? What are the sorts of socialities that come together in order for something to happen? So I think that, for me, was a very critical process by which helped me approach my research.

JB: Yes, I mean, it doesn't seem like on the surface it would be connected, but if you think about women and giving creating life and giving forth of life. I mean, that's intimately tied to the land and the plants and giving life in that way too.

SR: Yes, So I think these were really very helpful. And then now with one strand of my work is really pulling in my training as an ecologist into thinking about the land. Much of our work on infertility, as reproductive sociologists, focus on the singularities of the human body. Can we also think about the kinds of infertilities we see around us because of the sorts of lives we pursue? Landscapes of infertility is a very critical concept, for me, because I come from the coffee growing areas of South India where massive amounts of death is unleashed on the world around you in order to grow that coffee plant.

JB: What kinds of death needs to be unleashed to do that?

SR: For example, there's a mealybug that makes the coffee plant less healthy, but also mealybugs can bring in bacteria and viruses that affect the coffee plant. But there is this ant species that has a mutual relationship with the mealybugs. These ants nurture those mealybugs because of the sap that the bugs secrete. Which the ants feed on. Optimizing coffee health is directed at not just those mealy bugs, but also destroying those ants that nurture those mealy bugs. It is multispecies death.

JB: It is about destroying an entire ecosystem to grow coffee plants.

SR: Exactly. As gorgeous and beautiful as these coffee plantations are, and as much as I long for them and there's so much nostalgia, there's an incredible amount of destruction unleashed in order to make that kind of reproduction of coffee plantations possible. Moreover, such plantations survive under particular kinds of social processes, namely inheritances within patriarchal nuclear families and extended families. Landscapes of infertility, the cultivation of coffee, human fertility, and patriarchal lineage are linked. Moreover, like on landscapes, human infertility is socially mediated—we determine who is allowed to have a child and who is not allowed to have a child. Why, for example, are we so disparaging of queer parents?

JB: And that's intimately tied to colonialism and the colonial way of doing things.

SR: Exactly.

JB: Since you have come from so many different places intellectually, have you ever been met with resistance or constraint within your advisors, your supervisors, even within your program?

SR: I think some sociologists can find it very difficult to grapple with my work. Most of my engagements are with anthropologists and women and gender studies. There's a particular kind of sociological method that we're trained in, so it's a little bit more difficult for sociology, especially American sociology, to grapple with my work. I tend to get invited more in various parts of Europe for guest lectures, and in the US, I'm more in conversation with medical anthropologists.

JB: I think your work, as interdisciplinary as it is, helps us find creative ways to get outside of our narrow way of thinking.

SR: Yes and also it took me a long time to get here. In order to be interdisciplinary, you also need the training in the disciplines. I love our discipline of sociology and I keep thinking, wow, I wouldn't want to be anything but a sociologist.

JB: Do you have any, I don't know, advice for grad students if they want to pursue a more interdisciplinary focus, how they can survive and do it successfully?

SR: As a grad student, I really focused on honing my skills in the discipline that I was getting my degree in. So I would really say, focus on being a sociologist. It is like any other discipline, it has its problems. But I always say, as a sociologist, you can study just about anything because there's that human dimension to it. And a structural question that you bring into it. Simply focus on mastering your discipline. And then as you gain more professional standing, you can be a little bit more exploratory.

JB: In terms of your current work, where do you see this moving towards? Are you working on a book?

SR: Yeah, so there's three projects that I'm working on. The work that I presented on regarding famine in South India is a long-term project, because I simply don't even know what kinds of archives there are, and it's far more exploratory. I might also have to look into folklore on famine, an archive that we tend not to use in sociology. This is much more of a long-term project. But the more immediate projects are the one on uterine transplantation and the one on egg donors in Eastern Europe, and Central Asia.

JB: And this is coming out of your 2015 book, "Discounted Life: The Price of Global Surrogacy in India" which analyzed how garment workers in India engaged in surrogacy as a form of labor. In 2016, the Indian government banned surrogacy thereby eliminating this as a legitimate form of economic labor.

SR: Correct. Because India and Thailand banned commercial surrogacy, surrogacy moved first to Nepal, and then there was Kenya. Nepal has now banned surrogacy. The Republic of Georgia had emerged as a site for surrogacy, especially with the ongoing war in Ukraine. The former Soviet state provided a really good educational infrastructure, so there are incredibly skilled medical personnel there. But in order for these spaces to become sites for surrogacy, you also need a large segment of the population that is economically precarious where you might be making enough today, but you don't know what's going to happen tomorrow. So industries like commercial surrogacy are premised on of economic precarity for women, for families.

But I really didn't want to do any more on surrogacy because it can be pretty depressing. But by now I do know a lot of people, agents who've taken clients to India, who are now taking them to Tbilisi. I feel like at this point in time, gosh, the book came out in 2015, eight years down the road, I know so much about this, I feel like an investigative journalist, that I'm ready now to move back into it, but I don't know. It was pretty depressing work.

JB: But this time you're going to be focusing on the doctors, right? Medical professionals.

SR: For the uterine transplantation project, yes. For the surrogacy, I'm not interested in surrogate mothers anymore, but I'm really interested in egg donors because there's a lot of racial matching that's going on globally. For example, they're bringing in Azerbaijani women in the Republic of Georgia to become egg donors for Iranians. Kazakh women for the Koreans and the Chinese. It's really fascinating.

JB: Because your work focuses so much on Indian, Asian, and European contexts, how do you believe your findings apply or have meaning for audiences in the Global North?

SR: These are processes that are being unleashed on the world around us, and I think it's just important to understand and read what is going on in the Global South. It is important to hear these stories about medical technologies and how they emerge in order to have a critical sensibility about the world in which we live. How do medical procedures get standardized? Right now, with uterine transplantation, the doctors are very ethical, they really care about their patients, but what one doctor may be doing in one country is very different from what someone is doing in another country. Right now, these doctors are in conversation trying to think about what is the best clinical practice. I'm curious about how these processes are getting standardized, and how medical professionals want to do right by their patients.

JB: But how do you do that across national contexts and different bureaucratic things?

SR: The different cultural contexts are really fascinating. For example, in Sweden, if uterine recipient has a BMI of more than, I think, 28, they don't accept that. Because it's much more difficult to do the surgeries, but also it's very difficult to figure out, say, the amount of immunosuppressants to use. In the US, they accept women up to 40 BMI. You can already start seeing these differences, right? So how are they going to standardize this? What are best practices going to look like? Here are these doctors or scientists, but at some level there's also an art to it.

JB: You have been a prolific writer, both, I think, in grad school and outside of grad school in your career. Do you have any advice for students or new career professionals to really develop a solid publication practice?

SR: I was told when I became an assistant professor, to try publish one article per semester as a qualitative sociologist. It could be a book chapter or a peer-reviewed journal, but it was important to focus on getting one article per semester. Think about it this way, as a graduate student, you're already writing one term paper per semester, maybe 2, right? So while you're writing and working on your book (as an assistant professor) or dissertation (as a graduate student), can parts of that be pulled out to writing an article? Or, you might be developing a new project, so that can that be worked into an article.

Some people have the practice of writing every single day. That may not work for everyone. It doesn't work for me. Instead, I might go into a coffee shop and spend the entire night writing because I'm a little bit obsessive compulsive that way. I'm not able to just do half an hour of writing and get up and leave.

JB: Right. Especially if you get in the flow and then it's like, I have this idea, I want to get it out on paper.

SR: Yes, people have different rhythms to their work, so it's important to understand your rhythm and work with that rhythm rather than against it. As a graduate student, see if you can get an article out of your master's thesis. Write your master's thesis as if it's going to be an article, because that can help you just convert it much more easily. For the dissertation, all of

your data isn't necessarily going to go into that dissertation. You've probably got a ton more data. Can that data be used into writing an article? I would also recommend that you attend the ASA or the regional sociological meetings. Attend these conferences, send your paper out. Even if it's a term paper that you've gotten really good feedback on, send it and see what happens to it. Because that's the way you put yourself in the world out there. Another piece of advice that I was given as a student, if there's one author that you're citing very heavily in a paper and you are heavily influenced by their work, send that paper to the authors that you're citing heavily. They may write back to you, they may not. But that's how you network. Networking is intellectually connecting with people.

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