

# The Gift of Obscurity:

## Advice for Emerging PhDs

*Editorial Note: In addition to intellectual debates, sociologists engaged in the "professionalization" aspects of a career. In general, the conclusions implicitly suggest that the benefits of a career only increase as one progresses. In this essay, written as "advice for one's niece" given to a group of pre-doctoral fellows funded by the Spencer Foundation, the author argues that there are benefits to the early stages of a career which often subside as one's career advances.*

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When I was at the stage of just finishing my dissertation in sociology, my friends and I seemed to long—actually with some amount of pain in our longing—for recognition. We often commiserated about our obscurity. We keenly noted that we knew so few people at the ASA annual meetings, and that famous people certainly did not know we existed. We worried that we had published so little. It was unclear if we would get a job, where we would get a job, if we could finish manuscripts we were pleased about, and if anyone else would see anything of value in them. In short, it was unclear if we could make it. All of us had our own personal nightmare that we joked about in an uneasy fashion. The elements of the nightmare varied but essentially suggested we would never get a job, we would always be broke, our student loans would need to be paid and we would end up as a PhD waitress, cab driver, or bartender for the rest of our life.

In the end, we all did get jobs, some of which were in truly terrible locations, we did publish, some of us got new and better jobs, we did get acquainted with others in the field, and, perhaps most importantly, we all got tenure. But now, ten years away from our degrees, all of us are complaining, sometimes bitterly, that we lack time to work, time to think, and time to do research. I want to highlight here the *advantages* of the earliest stage of a career in sociology, particularly in an academic position. One such advantage that comes at the moment of finishing a dissertation is the gift of obscurity. This gift, which for me only appeared in retrospect, gives you more time and opportunity to do your own research than you will probably have later in your career.

External demands on my time, and the time of my friends around the country have increased as we have aged and, especially, as our careers have developed. Attached is the schedule for a "Professor" ten years after the doctorate. As you will note, although the professor only teaches two classes a semester, he or she maintains other obligations that interrupt one's ability to think and write. Particularly burdensome are the substantial committee obligations (i.e., tenure and promotion committees, faculty searches, college level committees, committee work for the national organization) that new scholars usually do not face. Although the hours vary, there exists a gap of at least 10 hours a week tied up in obligations as one's career develops. Ironically, then, the very realization of the desired goal—national recognition—severely erodes one's ability to continue a research agenda.

### The First Few Years

Although it is of questionable morality and fairness, the priorities for tenure are

essentially, research, teaching, and service (in that order). The only time committee work really settles a tenure case is when there is a skimpy pattern of publishing and the teaching is very weak. In an academic career, my advice is to reflect on your priorities in light of institutional priorities. See if you can manage, and even limit, your committee work in the first two or three years of your career. There are non-negotiable demands, particularly at the departmental level. Nevertheless, in many institutions you can turn down very time-consuming appointments at the college and university level without reproach. Requests intrude on many junior people to serve on a large number of service committees in order to provide diversity of perspective; this problem is common to all but particularly keen for persons of color. Committee work will not help with tenure and, for example, one committee meeting in the middle of the day without teaching, can severely disrupt a writing schedule. Before accepting an assignment immediately, ask for a day to think about it and consult with a respected member of your department.

Management of teaching is more complicated. Make sure that you prepare your classes especially well in the first year. New teachers experience a learning curve, and it is very steep in the beginning; most people will not expect you to get research done the first year of teaching. After you get settled into a routine, you might explore regularly teaching the same course or teaching two sections of the same widely offered course in one semester, including Introduction to Sociology, Men and Women in American Society, or Race and Ethnic Relations.

In terms of research, one piece of concrete advice deals with scheduling. Find a time when you can think and write and systematically protect that time from departmental and university encroachments. (Family obligations are a different matter.) Time to write is so limited that you need to control your schedule to maximize the time to be productive. Unfortunately, you are the only person who can protect your writing time. No one will do it for you. It takes determination and control to carve out time to write, but it is essential at all stages of a career.

Find time also to talk to people and hear talks; even if it means driving two hours each way. You should also get out to conferences at least twice a year and, in the beginning, you should expect to pay expenses for the conferences (which can be as much as one-quarter of a month's take home salary). These conferences can provide intellectual stimulation and help build a network of colleagues who can possibly write letters of support down the road.

#### The Issue of Balance

Finally, reflect on the long term. Looking around the academy, I often feel as if I see a sea of shipwrecks. Many faculty are bitter and disappointed. Although wildly successful according to any scale of social prestige, many academicians seem themselves as insufficiently recognized or unappreciated. For some, who felt they gave too much of themselves to their work in graduate school and in the first five years of their career, their angry insistence of "getting a life back" or doing something besides work can be fatal to intellectual pleasure and growth. In the coming years, it is important to sustain intellectual pleasure, for example, by always choosing topics you care about. A topic that appears to be an "easy publication" but provides little intellectual stimulation rarely turns out to be easy.

Another factor to consider in building a career is one of balance, of always taking a bit of time off to relax and enjoy life, and trying to not invest more in one's career than one can manage in the long run. I do not skimp on regular bits of leisure time. Similarly, if there is a trip you would like to take, a family party you would enjoy attending, or something that will take you away from your work and slow you down, I would also, in almost all instances, encourage you to take it. At times, the transition between work and leisure can be awkward. Your family and friends outside of the academy may be perplexed about your choices. They may ask uncomfortable and difficult questions at a gathering (i.e., "are you still in school?" "what are you ever going to do with that much schooling?" or "what is it you are studying, psychology?"). They may never truly understand key moments of the process including comprehensive examinations, a dissertation defense or tenure. Nevertheless, in terms of your overall life satisfaction, your investment in your career should not be more than, it turns out, you can afford. Your parents will not be alive forever, many of you will move to other parts of the country away from people you care about, and ideally, in ten years, while having spent huge amounts of time working, you want to have a sense that you were still able to do many of the things you care about. Only you will know where the balance should be and, obviously, it is different for all of us.

Thus, the formidable costs to being early in the career stage can be outweighed by its unique benefits. When one is relatively unknown, greater opportunity exists to engage in serious intellectual work; the peril of unending committee meetings and reviews which often characterizes the life of a more senior sociologist has not yet arrived. Early in a career, one can discover the pleasure of beginning and of building, as well as the pleasures tied to the opportunity to think, read, and talk. I encourage you to reflect upon, and if possible enjoy, the gift of obscurity early in your academic career. □

*This table provides an estimate of time obligations for tenured faculty. It does not include time for carrying out research or writing up and publishing research results. The time sociologists will devote to these activities during the semester will probably range from 0-80 hours per week. Not included in the schedule are the additional psychological pressures on junior people. Nor does the schedule note the considerable time devoted to the "learning curve" of becoming a faculty member. The time allocations presented are obviously rough estimates.*

### Typical Schedule 10 Years After PhD

Teaching: MWF 10:40-11:30;M4:40-7:00 6 hrs x 14 wks= 84semester hrs

Office hours: W 2-4 pm 2 hrs x 14 wks= 28semester hrs

Preparation/grading/meet with ta's 10 hrs x 14 wks=140semester hrs

#### Obligations to Students:

	<u>Semester Hours</u>
Requests to write letters of recommendation @ 1 hour per letter x 6 per semester=	6
Meetings with two students where you are directing the dissertation @5 hours per semester x 2 students	10
Meetings with other graduate students @1/4 hour x 20 students	5
Occasional problem students, incompletes, requests for advice, etc	5

#### Department Obligations:

Committee meetings/faculty meetings @2 hours each x 4-6 per semester	12
Department Colloquia @2 hours x 10 weeks	20
Lunch/Entertaining visitors @2 hours x 5 times	10
Talking with colleagues/lunch with colleagues @1 hour a week x 14 weeks	14
Tenure/promotion cases @2 hours x 6 preparation/meetings	12

#### College/University Obligations:

Standing college committees (2 committees) @2 hours x 4 per semester	16
Special commissions/program reviews @1.5 hours x 6 sessions	9
College/University Functions @1.5 hours x 4 per semester	6

#### Professional Obligations:

Review manuscripts for journals @2 hours x 4 per semester	8
Read and comment on draft manuscripts of others @2 hours x 8 per semester	16
Serve on Section committees @1 hour x 4 issues	4
Organize panels/symposium for meetings @4 hours x 1 every other year	2
Review manuscripts for sessions for meetings @20 hours x 1 every 3rd year	7
Go give talk/serve on review panel in another state (excluding prep time) @25 hrs in travel, meetings x 4	100
Organize an edited collection @3 hours per contributor x 15 contributors	45
Attend a regional/annual meeting during semester @40 hours in travel, meetings, dinners, etc.	40

TOTAL = 599

#### Obligations for a Tenured Person not Including Time to Read

##### Journal Articles, Books, Collect Data, Analyze Data, or Write:

599 hours divided by 14 weeks= 43 hours per week

Additional hrs usually available to junior people

204 hours in a semester divided by 14 weeks= 14 hrs per week more time