
INTERVIEW WITH ELIZABETH LEGERSKI

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY:

POOYA NADERI
Park University

DAVID HEATH COOPER
University of Kansas

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIBED BY:

DAVID HEATH COOPER
University of Kansas

Dr. Liz Legerski is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of North Dakota. She utilizes both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to explore aspects of gender, social inequality, and health and social policy. Her most recent research examines sexual assault and harassment across a variety of social contexts. Her work has been published in outlets such as the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *Social Forces*, *Gender & Society*, *Sex Roles*, and *Health Sociology Review*.

NADERI: In looking back to earlier in your academic career, what factors do you think contributed most to your path and success as a sociologist?

LEGERSKI: I have to start with thinking about my participation in STAR actually, as an editor. In my cohort I was the person who took the lead in that endeavor, and it was a steep learning curve in terms of learning how to solicit manuscripts and get reviewers and then make decisions and communicate with folks and publish. I felt very under qualified when I started that process, but I learned a lot along the way. As someone who then went on to get an academic job and needed to publish I think having that editorial experience was actually helpful because it allowed me to see what editors were looking for, what reviewers were looking for, what kinds of things I liked or they didn't like, or the things that were hiccups in the

publication process, and what kinds of things were interesting and meaningful. In reading other people's work I learned what good work looks like, or should look like, depending on the manuscript. So I think that helped me actually become a better writer and produce better manuscripts.

The other thing that was really helpful about my graduate work, and your question is maybe not specific to that necessarily, but I think the mentoring that I got as a graduate student was really critical in helping me network and meet people and get involved in professional associations, and also just to develop the confidence to work with other scholars. I think that was really critical, and I feel like when I was at KU I had the chance to be mentored by a number of women who were leaders in Sociologists for Women in Society and had been the president of that organization, and others that had been the president of MSS (the Midwest Sociological Society), and so being mentored by them gave me opportunities to be involved with those associations and organizations. I think that helped me to realize the value of those organizations, and gave me the confidence to network in those organizations. So, I think that was something that was really helpful as well. So I think both of those things - that publishing experience and also that mentoring experience - really contributed to my success in those early years, and my ability to move forward and take that next step into academia.

COOPER: If I could actually riff off of that, in much of your research you are collaborating with other scholars. Do you find there's a different kind of sense of self when you are working as a collaborator as opposed to a kind of scholar in isolation that academics are sometimes thought to be?

LEGERSKI: Yeah, I think that's a good question. I learned early on that to be successful in academia it helps to be collaborative. There are people who do it on their own, and more power to them, but I think the best way to be successful and move forward in academia, especially early on, is to collaborate and to work together. I think that opens up your possibilities and your options, but it is also just more efficient, in terms of producing work. If you have multiple people working on a project, you're getting things done quicker. I also think there's an energy and a synergy when working with

others, and there's a sense of accountability when you have other people that you need to get things to.

Sometimes that doesn't always work though. There's definitely good groups and bad groups. I've had experiences working in groups that were not productive and not a good combo. But I learned things from those experiences about what worked and what didn't work, the kinds of groups that I wanted to be in, and what was a productive relationship. And then I've had great collaborative work experiences too, where people worked really well together, they kept each other accountable, and they helped build each other up, and those experiences are great. So, I think that for success in academia, being a collaborative person and collaborative writer and researcher is to your benefit. To make collaborations early on I think this is really important. I highly recommend seeking out those opportunities and trying to do that.

COOPER: As an academic who is also involved in their union, how do you see your academic life/research informing your interest in labor organizing? How has organizing informed your academic life?

LEGERSKI: Yeah, that's a great question. Not to keep going back to grad school, but I feel like I keep wanting to go there because my introduction to labor organizing and unions was as a GTA (graduate teaching assistant), and I remember one of my first experiences with the union at KU was when contract negotiations were going on. I was invited one of my first years to sit in and watch some of the negotiations and it really was eye opening to me to watch that process. My expectations were different than what I observed and it made me realize the importance of labor unions and how powerful they could be in protecting and securing the rights of workers. That experience was transformative for me and so when I went on to get my first academic job, and I found out there was a union at my institution, I was like "Sign me up! I want to be in." I wanted to be in right away because I knew the value of union organizing was so important, so I've been actively involved.

I'm actually the secretary of our local. I have enjoyed being a part of the union so much that even though it is one more thing to do, I find it to be a really valuable part of my work life, and something that I'm willing to dedicate some time and effort to

because I find it to be so important. And one of the things that makes it important and valuable to me is that our union involves all higher education employees across the state. And so it includes both faculty and staff, all within one union, and it gives me an insight into the working conditions and the perspectives of staff in a way that I don't think I would have gotten as a faculty member. I work with staff in my department and you talk to them, and you know about their work, but what about building services folks who are coming in the middle of the night? I don't interact with them. Or those who work in other areas of campus? I don't see them. So, through the Union, I get a chance to meet those folks, and to hear about what's happening in their areas, and some of the challenges that they may be having or some of their concerns and so that has actually been really important.

I think some of my interest in this too is a result of my own academic interests, and one of my areas of research is inequality. I also think being a first-generation college graduate and from a working-class family, I have grown up seeing inequality and how that operates from the perspective of someone who didn't have a background of economic privilege. And so that has set me on a path where I was attuned to inequality in labor, and the importance of unions for helping protect workers. I saw my family working really hard, multiple jobs, the graveyard shift, and demands on the body, the power dynamics of being in a position that doesn't really have a lot of power or authority, the emotional toll of that, and all of those things. I had a dad who lost his job after almost 30 years due to outsourcing and so I was observing, watching inequality at play in terms of work. And I think that that made me attuned to it in my own research and thinking about inequality, and also made me again realize the value of unions and the importance of union organizing.

In the union I am a member of K-12 educators have bargaining rights, but the higher ed employees don't have bargaining rights, and so that's also something that I think makes our union unique in a way in terms of what we do, and how we work, and in our ability to use our union to help draw attention to the issues that are important. We've worked hard to build good communication and relationships with our administrators, so that can be a challenge, but I think it's a really important part of that work. And just having a space where faculty and staff can come from across campus and say, "hey, I have this concern and I don't really want to talk to my boss about it, how

do I handle it?” I feel like the union provides an avenue for addressing issues and making change and making our university a better place. And so I’m an advocate for organizing because I see the value of it, and so it’s been an important part of my professional identity but also just personally really important to me as well.

NADERI: So, in the context of COVID and the large transitions that are taking place in higher education, as well as society more generally, what are your main sociological concerns and observations?

LEGERSKI: I have a lot of concerns, as I think many people do. There’s so many things to think about. We could look at inequality and how the impact of COVID is accentuating inequality in terms of everything from access to healthcare to risk of illness and disease. We’re seeing those inequalities increase as well as access to education and all the disruptions to education, especially with primary education and secondary education. I have a child in fourth grade and a child in seventh grade and as an academic we have a level of flexibility that other working parents don’t have, and we can provide a level of support that other families can’t, and so I have more choices and more resources that I can use to help my kids.

But I’m worried about the impact of inequalities on this cohort of kids right now who are entering school and in those really critical early years of schooling where they’re developing this relationship with the educational system, so I think we should be concerned about how disruptive COVID has been to different cohorts of children. Like we saw with the Great Recession, there were long-term impacts on the cohort of kids that were impacted by employment disruptions in their families. I think if we follow this cohort of kids who have been impacted by the pandemic we’re likely to see something very similar where they’re likely to have some impacts in terms of their educational outcomes and opportunities, and then their work and employment outcomes and opportunities as well. So as a parent, I worry about and think about those things a lot. And as someone who’s interest is inequality, I think about that a lot as well.

I also think it’s important to be thinking about gender inequality too. A lot of my work has focused on gender issues and we’re already seeing work come out about the impact of COVID on

women's careers in particular. All of the work of trying to combine family and work in one place and space is impacting productivity and gender inequalities. This is likely true across all kinds of work, but in terms of academia in particular, there's some early reports that women's research productivity has been impacted, and that will have consequences down the line. I know a lot of universities, my university included, is talking about how when we're doing evaluations of performance over the next couple of years, we need to take the pandemic impact into account and think about how that has impacted productivity and be generous and understanding in that regard. But even despite those kinds of allowances we're likely to see some big impacts on women's careers and trajectories. So there's a lot to be thinking about in terms of the impact of the pandemic on inequality, and there is a lot of work that can and should be done in the years coming.

NADERI: Yes, this situation makes me think of those colleagues of ours that are going up for tenure within the next couple of years. We are going to start to see some gender differences in this process. I really appreciate you speaking to the performance evaluation piece of this, because that is a difficult part of this conversation to have. So, even if we are going to give you [faculty] some flexibility in terms of your research productivity, at the end of the day, at the individual level, we are not just evaluated within our institutions, and I think that is absolutely something to anticipate.

LEGERSKI: On another level too, as someone who's involved in university governance and leadership, I know a lot of faculty are worried that some of the responses that universities have had to take in response to the pandemic could also usher in more long-term changes in terms of how universities operate and work, and there are concerns about that. For example, I think this movement towards online education - which I think is absolutely critical right now - we're seeing how useful and helpful it is. But I think for many years there have been faculty, myself included, who have really resisted some of the movement to online teaching and courses because they value that in-person element of being together, learning together, and discussing together, which I agree is invaluable. But I think we're seeing we can teach online too, and there's some great things

about that, and we can make it work. But there's also best practices in online education that we need to consider. Crisis online teaching is different than elected and intentional online teaching. So there's lots of learning and growth that can happen in that area.

Despite the usefulness of this experiment in online education, I think it's worth being concerned about and thinking about how the pandemic could have long-term consequences for institutions that have been looking for reasons to move more online so that they can teach bigger sections, increase workloads, and reach new markets. Everyone wants to reach a new market so they can boost their student credit hours. And I do worry a little that it has opened the door and made it really convenient for some of that movement, so I think there could be some unintended consequences to that that we haven't really, fully realized or recognized. So I think that's something to watch in terms of the impact of these changes on the academy and on higher ed and how we teach and who we reach and all of these things. So, that's something I know a lot of people are thinking about too.

COOPER: You mentioned the disruptions that women will face as a result of the current outbreak and it reminded me of your earlier work on employment disruptions reinforcing traditional gender roles. Do you see this as a likely outcome of COVID-19?

LEGERSKI: Yes, some of my earlier work was looking at men's unemployment and how that impacted families. We know the pandemic has led to massive unemployment and that will have long-term impacts on reinforcing inequalities. We're already seeing how higher income families have been able to manage work from home. It's disruptive, of course, but they're still working. Compared to lower income families though, the kinds of jobs that they often have they can't bring home necessarily, and so they've been out of work. My previous work shows that when you have forced unemployment, that impacts the dynamics of families. Whenever we see that, there is some solace in falling back on traditional arrangements, and so I could see the pandemic as a situation where that's happening.

Some of my more recent work has looked at the impact of big social disruptions on things like domestic violence, and I see a huge connection to the pandemic there as well. We already know that

we've seen increasing incidence of domestic violence because families are cooped up together, they're not able get out and do the things that they often did and they don't have the social supports, necessarily, because people are more confined, and they don't have those same outlets. So I think there's some real concerns about domestic violence and the long-term impact of domestic violence on families. Whenever there's economic stress we know that that contributes to tension in the home and is a factor that facilitates drug and alcohol use and family violence. So I think there's some real concerns about the health and safety of families that we need to be paying attention to as well. That's absolutely something I think we can and should be thinking about as sociologists.

COOPER: Considering the ongoing pandemic, and the institutional transformations we discussed earlier, what do you envision for the future of academia? What advice would you offer to graduate students and junior faculty trying to navigate their early academic careers during the uncertain times?

LEGERSKI: I know for a long time people have been talking about how we need to re-envision higher education and rethink higher education. I feel like we hear that a lot, especially from administrators. We know that there's a demographic shift coming that will lead to lower enrollments, and that's an issue everywhere and no one can get around that, but we're also seeing the erosion of funding sources for higher education in a lot of places as well, and that's contributing to reduced budgets as well. In North Dakota a lot of our state revenue comes from oil production, through fracking, and also through agriculture. Agriculture is something that fluctuates depending on the weather and climate change and market forces. Oil production also fluctuates based on economic conditions, global changes, and technological innovations. Fracking led to the oil boom in our state, and that shapes how much money is available to higher education. And so when the price of oil falls that really impacts the state budget, and that impacts higher ed. I've seen personally, in my own department, positions not be filled because the university is having to cut back, and I know we are not the only ones grappling with crippling budget cuts, so that's a challenge and it's a big concern. There's concerns that a similar thing will happen—is

happening—with the pandemic in terms of its impact on state budgets, and the long-term impact on faculty positions. I think that’s something important that we have to think about.

It’s hard. I wish I knew the solution to what higher education should look like in this new context and what the future of higher education should be. I don’t think these challenges are going away. I think it’s going to be here for a while, but I do think our challenges will constantly change and evolve and so we have to be flexible and willing to change, but I do worry that the need for flexibility and nimbleness can sometimes be used as an excuse for things like the adjunctification of faculty positions. Institutions think of those workers as flexible workers and so we can increase sections and decrease sections easily with adjuncts. As more institutions move towards that model I think we need to rethink that. How can we provide job security for more faculty in a way that is nimble and flexible? I think there’s a solution to that. I think we’re smart enough to come up with solutions to those things. So we need to be doing that hard work and getting administrators to value that kind of thinking as well, and some of that means shaping public opinion.

We’ve experienced an antagonism towards higher ed in some ways and I think tenure, for example, is misunderstood by a lot of people who aren’t in academia. Many people don’t understand the importance of tenure and why it is critical for free inquiry and for doing research that is meaningful and that moves science and technology and understanding forward. I think we’re seeing an erosion of tenure, and that’s a concern.

So those are all negative things, but I see hope and optimism too for higher ed. I think we know that higher ed is valuable, and it really is. As someone who teaches courses on inequality, I know that education is not a panacea, and it’s not equitably available to everyone, but it can be a life changer, and I feel that way from my own experience as a first-generation college graduate. I’ve seen how Higher Ed has opened my eyes and transformed my life and opened up paths that would not have existed otherwise. I see the opportunity for higher ed to transform lives and provide opportunities and that is something that’s exciting to me. I feel like we need to remind ourselves of the goals and objectives of higher education, and try to reach more students and provide that opportunity to more students, especially students who may never have envisioned themselves on

that path to college. We need to reach out to marginalized and underrepresented populations and find folks and say “you can do this and here’s how,” and help make sure that they have a chance for that if that’s something that they want to do. I think there’s opportunities for growth. But we have to be able to provide support and mentoring. And we have to expand access to our institutions. I think it’s valuable and worth our time and effort to reach out to nontraditional students who never saw a path in higher education for them before.