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EDITED BY Syed Ali and Philip N. Cohen

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the **contexts** reader

third edition

edited by SYED ALI, Long Island University–Brooklyn

and PHILIP N. COHEN, University of Maryland

with help from LETTA PAGE

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preface

Sociological writing is a kind of storytelling—empirical and theoretically driven storytelling. Or at least it should be. Most sociologists (and academics generally), however, do not tell stories; they report data. That's the bread-and-butter approach of academics, and it is required practice at journals.

Contexts is different, which is why we love *Contexts*. It is a place where sociologists, and non-sociologists, can come to tell their stories in a clear, concise, and simple way—remember, kids, simple is not simplistic!—but without sacrificing the scholarly rigor. Our articles teach readers new stuff, and they help us think differently about the world—they look at why the world is the way it is and how it came to be that way. Basically, *Contexts* articles make you go, "Huh. That's pretty cool. I never really thought of that." The magazine appeals to anyone who's interested in insightful social analysis but not so interested in wading through that most boring language of academese. That includes educated "lay" readers such as parents-in-law, policy professionals, activists, and the occasional academic. And you, the undergraduate student. Why should you have to suffer poor and turgid writing to get to someone's scholarly point? You shouldn't. So this book's for you. (You're welcome.)

The selections we've chosen for you for this Third Edition of *The Contexts Reader* reflect topics that are most often taught in intro sociology classes, but, because they're *Contexts* readings, they're far more interesting than things you're usually asked to read in such classes. (We refuse to apologize for this. And sociology instructors, you're welcome as well.)

And how do the articles here end up so well written if they're largely written by academics? Well, the two of us spend a lot of time editing. Seriously, a lot. We're pretty good at it, but we're not pros. The one to thank for the pretty prose is our senior managing editor, Letta Page. Letta goes through every word in every issue. A professional editor, she helps authors develop their ideas, then takes her red pen and cuts and crafts until that article reads something fantastic. While some of the articles here are from the early years of *Contexts*, the vast majority of articles we've chosen for *The Contexts Reader* have gone through her hands. And the articles are the better for it, and you, the reader, are happier for it. We hope you enjoy reading these articles as much as we enjoyed bringing them to you!

Syed Ali
Philip N. Cohen

acknowledgments

Making a magazine is a huge undertaking and there are lots of folks who have a hand in it. Members of our editorial board review a ton of articles for us, and many of them write a lot for the magazine. We're indebted to them. Margaret Austin Smith was our managing editor, and she did a great job of keeping us organized. Our section editors are the best and are responsible for most of the content in the magazine. Szonya Ivester brings us great book reviews, Andrew Lindner finds fantastic trends pieces, Shehzad Nadeem wins an award for organizing brilliant viewpoints forums every issue, and Nathan Palmer gets us lovely teaching and learning articles. Allison Pugh and Kristen Barber edited the culture section and brought us really great stuff. Our magazine is a work of art because of all the work our designers at ThinkDesign put into it.

We'd be remiss if we didn't acknowledge all the work Karen Edwards at the American Sociological Association has put in. The *Contexts* editors change every three to four years, but she's always there to help support the magazine and help the editors to make it better. And we're really happy that Sasha Levitt, our editor here at Norton, was just as excited as we were to put out a third edition of the reader. She's great and made the process go really smoothly.

And most of all, we thank our senior managing editor, Letta Page, for all the amazing work she does not only editing, but finding the images, dealing with layout, and making the magazine pretty, and pretty spectacular.

And, of course, we thank our families: Syed's wife, Eli Pollard (who did an interview for the magazine and helped get lots of articles), and kids, Sami and Noura; and Philip's wife, Judy Ruttenberg (who was really helpful in figuring a future direction for the magazine), and kids, Charlotte and Ruby.

Soon we'll no longer be the editors, but we're really excited to watch how *Contexts* grows and continues to be fantastic.

the **contexts** reader

part 1

How to Do Sociology

joel best

sociologists as outliers

1

spring 2009

when the american public wants to understand social behavior, they turn to economists instead of sociologists. to regain their place in the public consciousness, joel best argues sociologists could do worse than learn from author malcolm gladwell's popular books, which translate sociological knowledge and information.

Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers: The Story of Success* (2008) was itself marketed to succeed. Gladwell appeared in numerous television interviews. *Outliers* was immediately reviewed by major newspapers in the United States, England, Canada, and Australia. Leading bookstore chains discounted the book and displayed it prominently. When I checked the day after it was released in November 2008, it was already fourth in Amazon.com's rankings.

Gladwell is the twenty-first century's preeminent popularizer of sociological research. He won the American Sociological Association's first Excellence in Reporting of Social Issues Award in 2007. Well-known for his earlier bestsellers *The Tipping Point* and *Blink*, he has been contributing articles (archived at www.gladwell.com) to *The New Yorker* since 1996. He specializes in provocative interpretations of work by social scientists, including psychologists, economists, anthropologists, and—yes—sociologists. *Outliers* is Gladwell's most sociological—and in my view his best—book. His theme is that success is socially patterned, often in subtle ways.

Gladwell is the twenty-first century's preeminent popularizer of sociological research. *Outliers* is his most sociological—and in my view, best—book.

Why, for instance, do a disproportionate share of hockey players have birthdays in January, February, and March? Answer: Canadian youth hockey programs are organized by age cohorts, and each cohort contains kids born in the same calendar year. Thus, a boy born in January will be placed in the same program as a boy born in December of the same year—they are, for organizational purposes, considered to be the same age. But of course, just by virtue of being older, one boy is likely to be bigger, faster, stronger, and better coordinated.

Children start playing on hockey teams before entering elementary school—young enough that being a few months older can make a real difference. So, when the best players are picked for all-star teams, the kids born early in the year have an advantage. And, being on an all-star team means kids get more coaching, more practice, and more experience playing, so they become increasingly better players than those not selected for all-stars. So they begin to accumulate advantages.

The irony is clear: social arrangements designed to make youth hockey fair—by having kids compete with others of the same age—actually work to the advantage of those kids who have the earliest birthdays.

Americans tend to attribute success to the personal qualities of individuals. They think of

those who make it to the top as having worked especially hard, as having sacrificed, as being determined, dedicated, and therefore deserving. That is, they view success as a product of good character, of particular personality types—the result of psychological differences among people.

This makes intuitive sense. Ask successful people—and this certainly includes successful sociologists—what it takes to succeed and they will almost invariably talk about the importance of working hard. Success, whether in ice hockey or academia, rarely comes to those who don't work for it.

But, Gladwell argues, hard work isn't the whole story. Timing matters. It turns out that Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and a large share of the other people who amassed vast fortunes when microcomputing began were all born around 1955. That meant they were about 20 years old in 1975 when microcomputers first emerged—old enough to have acquired considerable experience as teenage hobbyists working with computers, but not yet old enough to have completed college and taken jobs with IBM or other "real" computer companies. Being born in 1955 meant they were at the right age to take advantage of the historical moment when it became possible to build careers and make real money in microcomputing.

In other words, Gladwell argues, success isn't simply a product of individual character, it also depends on social context—the eligibility rules for youth hockey participation, technological developments in microcomputing, and so on. Reviews of *Outliers* often invoke the notion of luck (for example, the *Newsweek* review was titled "Maybe Geniuses Just Got Lucky"). But invoking luck, like emphasizing hard work, invites us to view success as a product of individual differences. Just as some people work harder, some people have more luck.

In Gladwell's universe, luck isn't some random outcome. Rather, luck takes the form of social arrangements that work to the advantage of some more than others.

However in Gladwell's universe, luck isn't some random outcome. Rather, luck takes the form of social arrangements—including cultural legacies and historical circumstances—that work to the advantage of some more than others. These may not seem advantageous on the surface. Gladwell shows, for example, how the anti-Semitism rampant in midcentury New York's leading law firms forced Jewish lawyers to join newer, far more marginal firms that practiced the sorts of law elite, white-shoe firms spurned, such as proxy fights. This turned into an advantage, though, when the business environment changed and hostile takeovers became commonplace. Those new firms and their partners, with their suddenly invaluable expertise, wound up making colossal fortunes.

In the course of this well-written book, Gladwell frequently refers to sociologists. Robert Merton, C. Wright Mills, Pitirim Sorokin, Annette Lareau, Erwin Smigel, Stephen Steinberg, Louise Farkas, Charles Perrow, Karl Alexander, Orlando Patterson, and Fernando Henriques are all mentioned in *Outliers*, and not just in the endnotes. How often does a best-selling author invoke sociology, let alone name sociologists?

These days, when the public wants to understand social behavior, they seem to turn to economists. Consider the remarkable number of recent successful trade books extolling the value of economics for understanding the social order, books such as Steven D. Levitt's and Stephen J. Dubner's *Freakonomics*, Tim Harford's *The Undercover Economist*, Stephen E. Landsburg's *More Sex Is Safer Sex*, Nassim Nicholas Taleb's *Fooled by Randomness*, and James Surowiecki's *The Wisdom of Crowds*. Meanwhile,

the sociology sections in many bookstores seem to be shrinking.

Explanations for sociology's low status often mention its fondness for jargon, for using an unnecessarily pompous vocabulary to describe the everyday world. And no doubt sociologists often commit the sin of jargon. But that hardly explains the vogue for economics. Does anyone believe the typical economist's prose is clearer, more readily comprehensible, or less jargon-ridden than most sociologists' work? Nor should we blame sociology's growing dependence on abstruse statistics. If anything, economics is far more quantitative, and less readily accessible, to nonspecialists.

Well, perhaps economics is seen as more practical, as linked to business and making money. Certainly Gladwell writes books considered relevant to business; *The Tipping Point* and *Blink* both seem to offer insights for marketing, while the examples chosen to illustrate success in *Outliers* often involve business careers. But *Freakonomics* and other economics-based best-sellers draw many of their examples from social behavior and public policy in order to show how rational choices and markets influence many aspects of our lives. The economists who write for the public certainly don't restrict their focus to moneymaking.

What both Gladwell and the pop-star economists share is a fondness for surprise, for the unexpected revelation. For example, economists favor a plot line that goes something like this: although at first glance some aspect of the world may seem confusing, even chaotic, once we understand that the people involved are making calculated choices in their own self-interest, we can recognize how their individual choices create consequential, often unexpected, patterns in behavior. Thus, the most notorious section in *Freakonomics* argues that the declining crime rates in the 1990s were an unanticipated by-product of liberalized abortion policies, which led to fewer unwanted children being born and going on to become delinquents. "Ahh," the reader is supposed to exclaim, "now I understand!"

Sociologists used to be in the surprise business, and we used to attract our fair share of public attention. Back in 1937, Robert and Helen Lynd made a splash with *Middletown in Transition*. *Life* covered the study with photos showing the distinctive lifestyles of different social classes expressed in, for example, living room decor. In the aftermath of World War II, David Riesman published *The Lonely Crowd* (the all-time best-seller by an American sociologist), which argued the United States had experienced a profound cultural change.

> Does anyone believe the typical economist's prose is clearer, more readily comprehensive, or less jargon-ridden than most sociologists' work?

By the late 1950s, Vance Packard was preceding Gladwell as an author who translated sociology into the best-selling *The Status Seekers*. Just a few years later, Tom Wolfe was making frequent references to sociologists while showing the importance of status for everyone from car customizers to modern artists to astronauts. In each case, sociology seemed to shed new light on the everyday and, in the process, offer surprising revelations. Sociology was entertaining.

It's worth appreciating that sociology has had a noticeable effect on Americans' thinking. A remarkable number of sociological terms have crept into everyday speech: lifestyle; upper-, middle-, and lower-class; charisma; status symbol; gender; self-fulfilling prophecy; role model; even significant other. It isn't clear that economics has had such a favorable reception. Still, sociology doesn't get much credit for these contributions. Once its concepts enter common parlance, their sociological origins tend to be forgotten.

Contemporary sociologists in particular seem to have trouble getting noticed, probably because they sound self-righteous. Economics may be the dismal science, but today's sociologists often describe a grim world governed by cruel, grinding inequalities of race, class, and gender. They portray a world of alienation, of lonely people living meaningless lives. Their idea of surprise is to expose the sexist imagery in advertisements and music videos. They seem to scold. The arguments seem familiar, predictable. Not surprisingly, they go over about as well as scolding usually does.

It isn't that inequality is unimportant, or that sociologists need to communicate via some sort of happy-talk. After all, much of *Outliers* concerns how social arrangements foster unequal outcomes. But Gladwell directs our focus toward success, rather than failure. The cover of the British hardcover edition of *Outliers* describes him as an "inspirational bestselling author." Rather than issuing blanket indictments of the social system, he identifies other non-utopian arrangements that might offer more equal opportunities: "We could set up two or even three hockey leagues, divided up by month of birth. Let the players develop on separate tracks and then pick all-star teams."

Later in the book he praises the KIPP schools, which give low-income middle-school children intensive training that boosts their math skills and opens doors to better high school and college opportunities. Success—even among those who seem predestined to fail—can, in Gladwell's view, be fostered by being alert to how social institutions work. In the chapter titled "The Ethnic Theory of Plane Crashes," he points to the once-alarming tendency of Korean Air jets to crash because their cultural obligations to be deferential kept Korean first officers and flight engineers from bluntly warning pilots about hazards. After Korean Air instituted a training program designed to change communication patterns among cockpit crews, the airline achieved an admirable safety record. Still, one can imagine some sociologists squirming at this example, explaining that we need to appreciate—not judge—diverse communication styles.

But of course it does matter if some cultures are ill-suited to producing the sorts of quick, appropriate decisions among cockpit crew members needed to keep airliners from crashing. And not all the patterns identified by Gladwell are subject to social engineering. Doubling or tripling the number of youth hockey leagues in Canada may give more kids with late-in-the-year birthdays a better shot at developing their skills, but it won't change the size of NHL rosters. Lest this example seem a little arcane, Gladwell reminds us that U.S. schools are also age-graded (so that school districts define one-year spans of birthdates that make students eligible to enter kindergarten), and those with earlier birthdays prove to have an advantage of maturity that carries right through college admissions. We might reduce the impact of age differences by placing students with similar birthdates in the same classroom. And perhaps schooling isn't a zero-sum game. Perhaps more students would excel if they learned alongside others of comparable maturity, so that more would take to school and seek higher education.

Social arrangements and historical processes shape individual's prospects for success, but they can't tell the whole story. Those born in big, baby-boomer birth cohorts find themselves in tougher competition than those born in birth-dearth years, just as those who enter the workforce in good economic times have better career prospects than those who look for work when jobs are scarce. We can't choose our birth cohort or our society's economic circumstances. Yet, within those larger arrangements, people do make consequential choices that also affect their prospects for succeeding.

Sociologists often call for appreciation of diversity, for recognition of the talent, skills, and resilience demanded to live in disadvantaged

circumstances, and for understanding why some people make choices others condemn. They invite us to understand why some youths leave school, why some people act violently, and so on. They have a point. People have their reasons for doing things, and not everyone has the same reasons.

But sociology has to do more than endorse differences. Maybe we ought to appreciate different modes of communication, but also that all modes are not equally useful for, say, landing an airliner safely. Understanding the range of human behavior doesn't require that we endorse the full range.

In order to regain their place in the public consciousness, sociologists could do worse than learn from the remarkable resurgence of economics, and from Gladwell's ability to translate sociological findings into popular books. We can't expect to influence public debate if we can't get people to listen to us. Contemporary sociology has become all too predictable; successful bids for public attention require arguments that are themselves outliers—surprising, interesting, and compelling.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCE

Malcolm Gladwell. 2008. *Outliers: The Story of Success.* New York: Little, Brown and Company.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. The author says that we can't explain sociology's loss in popularity only by the discipline's fondness of jargon, use of statistics, and pompous vocabulary. Given this, how can we understand economics' popularity and higher status, despite its lower accessibility?
2. The author argues that sociologists need to make more efforts to regain the public consciousness. He provides some suggestions, for example, shifting gears toward "success" rather than "failure." Do you agree? Why or why not?
3. What are your suggestions for the revival of sociology?

viewpoints

how to do ethnography right

2

spring 2016

qualitative research offers rich insight and can illuminate processes. how can you make the most of qualitative data?

Ethnographies are works of deep research based on in-depth, open-ended interviews and keen observations of how people go about their lives in different contexts. Researchers often spend years in their research sites to get to know the people and places they study in a way that can't be done using other methods. Ethnographies are (arguably) the most visible and relatable research products that sociologists have to offer the general public. They tell stories about our social world backed up by rigorously gathered data. That's pretty cool.

While ethnographers are very much expert in their research domains, their work is increasingly subject to public scrutiny. It is important for sociologists to develop and maintain professional standards that allow them to conduct the best research without compromising quality in the face of potential criticism and controversy. Recent conversations about the practice of ethnography have been spurred by the responses—public and academic—to high-profile books in the past few years. But that is just the current manifestation of an evolving dialogue about the best way to do ethnographic work. A number of important issues have been featured in this conversation: data preservation and sharing, replicability and confidentiality, peer review, funding and research support, and others.

Ethnographies tell stories about our social world backed up by rigorously gathered data. That's pretty cool.

At the suggestion of the American Sociological Association's Council, we organized this special forum with some of the top practitioners in the field. Here you'll find three papers that lay out "best practices" for ethnographers to follow.

We start with Dana R. Fisher's paper, "Doing Qualitative Research as if Counsel Is Hiding in the Closet." Whether you study elites or study the poor, Fisher says you should do your research as if the group you're working with has legal representation. It could save you headaches (and money, and even your reputation) down the road.

Ethnographers for the most part work alone, and they use convenience sampling, that is, they talk to people who are conveniently located for them to talk with. Stefanie DeLuca, Susan Clampet-Lundquist, and Kathryn Edin argue in their essay, "Want to Improve Your Qualitative Research? Try Using Representative Sampling and Working in Teams," that ethnographers can, and should, well, use representative sampling and work in teams. This will improve the depth and reliability of your data and your story.

The last paper here is by Annette Lareau and Aliya Hamid Rao, "It's about the Depth of Your Data." They remind us that ethnographers are not quantitative researchers, and that the small, nonrandom sample ethnographers usually have actually isn't a problem—in

fact, that's a selling point for ethnography. The ethnographer is telling the reader a story, and Lareau and Rao tell us that detailed field notes, lengthy interviews with smaller numbers of people, smartly developed themes and analyses, and crisp writing are the key to good ethnographic storytelling. Sometimes ethnographers forget these things. It's good that Lareau and Rao are reminding us.

Taken together, we shouldn't consider these as a blueprint for criticism-free research or a set of "how to" papers. But it's close. So read, learn, enjoy—and if you're an ethnographer, go forth and do your thing!

dana r. fisher

doing qualitative research as if counsel is hiding in the closet

march 29, 2016

A lot of my research studies political elites. As such, I am frequently conducting participant observation and open-ended, semi-structured interviews in the halls of the U.S. Congress, offices of various federal agencies, political consultants, lobbying firms, and organizations that aim to represent the public's interest. In other words, my data are collected from a highly educated group of people, an overwhelming proportion of whom have law degrees. Moreover, most of these offices employ some sort of "corporate" counsel that monitors access—or what I think of as my field site and my research subjects. As a result, I have learned to be extremely careful since these lawyers have made it clear to me on a number of occasions that I can lose access and be booted from my field site at any point.

In the 15 years since I completed my PhD, I have been challenged by research subjects regarding my use of their names or the data I collected from them in two particularly anxiety-inducing cases. In the first, a subject of an interview who worked for a Congressional committee found a draft of a paper online that directly quoted him. While I was making the final edits on my first book, which named this subject and quoted him directly, I got a very aggressive e-mail from him. In response, I passed on a copy of the transcript of the interview that included an exchange during which I asked if I could use the subject's name and he affirmed. His concerns were alleviated after receiving the transcript that included his consent. Nonetheless, I removed direct reference to this research subject in my book. I also adapted the way that I approach political elites whom I study.

Although these interviews are usually seen as exempt from IRB requirements because I am asking about subjects' political work and not anything personal, I have found I get better data (and avoid such interactions with JDs working in the political arena) if I grant all subjects confidentiality. When providing a description of my research before I begin an interview, I hand my subjects an IRB-approved information sheet about the research and tell them that nothing they say will be directly attributable to them. In journalists' parlance, the interview is "off the record." I state that I will e-mail them directly for approval if I find there is any segment that I would like to quote directly in my work. Because so many of my subjects have experience speaking with journalists, I find that following similar norms about attribution puts the subjects at ease. Although this process adds some