

Reflections on the Importance of SSS to the Discipline and its Members

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Abstract:

Way back in 2001 when Pat Martin was President-Elect, she asked me to write a piece for TSS reflecting on what the Southern Sociological Society means to me. I am just now getting around to it. I realize that I am at risk of getting a reputation for writing more about procrastination than about any other topic (see, for example, my SSS Presidential Address, 1998, *Social Forces* 77(1):1-25), but there are a couple of reasons I have not put fingers to key board to write my assessment of SSS before now. When Pat first asked me, it was so soon after my SSS Presidency that I could not imagine that there was anything I could write for TSS that I had not already communicated to SSS members. I wrote to Pat, “they can’t possibly want to hear anything else from me!” To know Pat, however, is to know how persistent she can be. So after we exchanged a few more email messages, I reluctantly agreed to write this piece—“eventually.” After some time had passed and “eventually” seemed to be “now,” I encountered another mental barrier. My relationship with SSS is complicated and therefore difficult to describe. Excuse me for resorting to old-fashioned, basic jargon, and let me say that in my life, SSS does not only play the role of a secondary organization, but also of a primary group.

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Article:

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communicated to SSS members. I wrote to Pat, “they can’t possibly want to hear anything else from me!” To know Pat, however, is to know how persistent she can be. So after we exchanged a few more email messages, I reluctantly agreed to write this piece—“eventually.” After some time had passed and “eventually” seemed to be “now,” I encountered another mental barrier. My relationship with SSS is complicated and therefore difficult to describe. Excuse me for resorting to old-fashioned, basic jargon, and let me say that in my life, SSS does not only play the role of a secondary organization, but also of a primary group.

There are certainly important professional reasons to be involved in SSS. In my opinion, our discipline is becoming increasingly stratified and differentiated. Regional organizations, such as SSS, mediate this trend. Given the structure of our discipline, with the American Sociological Association dominated by elite, primarily Northern schools, and with the state associations struggling to survive where they exist at all, SSS serves as an important link in our intellectual food chain. Without SSS, many of our members would never attend a sociology meeting. Furthermore, it is at SSS meetings that Southern sociologists who never attend a meeting of the ASA or of a state sociological association interact with those who do. Yes, we have journals, newsletters, and the Internet to keep us up-to-date, but it does not take a network analyst to know that there is still no replacement for face-to-face interaction. Furthermore, regional organizations such as SSS provide opportunities for the exchange of ideas across sub-areas. ASA meetings, where interaction increasingly takes place within sections, and meetings of specialty organizations, whose members are dedicated to the study of a narrow subtopic or the use of a particular theoretical perspective or methodological technique, simply do not typically foster spontaneous discussions among people whose interests initially appear to be unrelated.

SSS not only serves a vital function for the discipline as a whole, but also, because its’ members form a relatively less stratified and less differentiated cluster in the network of sociologists, it also serves an important role in the professional lives of Southern sociologists. Put simply, any member of SSS who wants to make a contribution to the collective enterprise can easily get involved. All it takes is sending an email message or making a phone call to the President-Elect! Volunteers do not have to be at the “right” school, to specialize in the “right” sub-area, or to know the “right” people.

Now, I am quite sure that some of you are probably thinking my assessment of the SSS social structure is a bit naive. My own first impression of SSS was not as positive as it is now. Actually, to be honest, it was quite negative. I thought that a tight-knit elite of Southern good ol’ boys ran the organization and that there was no way a Northern, female assistant professor with a job at a mid-level university was ever going to feel comfortable attending the meetings. This was somewhat of an issue for me, because I had pretty much been told that members of our department were expected to be involved in Southerners. Fortunately SSS has changed since my arrival in the South 20 years ago, and I now also realize that my initial interpretation was somewhat unfair. Yes, during my first experience attending a series of receptions and after-hours parties at SSS, I encountered tight-knit clusters of sometimes tipsy and primarily male faculty

talking enthusiastically amongst themselves. What I now realize is that these clusters were not particularly homogeneous or impermeable. In other words, I mistook solidarity for exclusiveness. Thank goodness someone (whose last name is spelled “B-U-R-G-E-S-S”) pressured me into attending the meetings until I felt part of the all-inclusive in-crowd. I hope current junior faculty are being encouraged to attend our regional meetings, but I worry that SSS’ers have ceased to be advocates.

So, upon reflection, I realize that the same structural characteristics of SSS, low internal hierarchy and relative lack of differentiation, that make it important professionally also make it possible for it to serve as a primary group. SSS members not only served as agents of socialization as I became acclimated to my professional role, they also taught me what it means to be a Southerner. Members of Southerners have supported me personally and professionally, and we have celebrated triumphs and lived through tragedies together. I belong to no other organization whose meetings I will (probably) continue to attend after my retirement, no other organization where my reason for attending sessions is often personal rather than merely professional, no other organization in which the members of my personal network occupy such varied positions in the disciplinary hierarchy and have such disparate research and teaching interests, no other organization in which I have close friends whom I have learned to respect over the years in spite of my disagreement with them on a wide variety of issues, no other organization in which my fifteen year-old daughter is routinely recognized at meetings by members who have seen her at them since she was a baby, and no other organization of which I could have been elected as President.