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"The content varies, the mechanisms don't."

Interview with Sarah Fenstermaker on the everyday practices of Doing Gender

fzg: Professor Fenstermaker, in another interview in the book "Sociologists Backstage" (Fenstermaker/Jones 2011) you stated that you once wanted to become a Stand-up Comedian. Does the study of gender leave enough room for ease and humor? It seems to be something very serious that you ended up doing…

SF: Well, I think there are two ways to get at that question, and it is an interesting one. One is, gender is the reason that I never even fully contemplated becoming a stand-up comedian, because as I say in the book: women didn't do that. So there were a couple of famous women comedians – comedi*ennes*, we used to call them –, but it wasn't until I was well past graduate school that that profession opened up for women. So there's gender discrimination there. But I think one of the reasons why things are funny, and comedians are funny, is that they are able to capture slices of life that generate tension, and if anything generates tension in us, it is gender: gender equality; who we are as gendered people; gender differences; dominance and submission as it is materialized through gender. All of that is really great grist for the comedic mill, and if you look at standard comedians many of them turn to the relationships between men and women, or the way in which gender operates in social life as their material.

I didn't say all this in the book, because I was talking about something else. When Nikki Jones and I asked ourselves that last question, which is "What's the study you've never done but want to", I talked about wanting to look at token leadership in higher education. So I was thinking about four or five women presidents of colleges in Universities, and I wanted to talk to all of them. I didn't but I thought about it. But there was another one I also wanted to do: to study the life of a woman comedian. It is very very rough, because you go from club to club, some of which you wouldn't want to visit, let alone work in. That's another thing that nobody has looked at, and we would do well to, because I think it is a really interesting life for an artist, and very very tough.

fzg: You are one of the founding theorists of "Doing Gender", which has been immensely influential in sociology and gender studies in the past nearly three decades. You suggest we look at gender not as something that one is or has, but rather something one does in interaction with others. Could you illustrate this idea for us in simple words?

SF: We have these ideas in our heads about the right way to be gendered people, the right way to sit, the right way to lift a cup, the right way to carry a stack of

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books, the right way to hold a cigarette, the right way to enter a building, the right way to act in various settings, even the right way to feel under specific circumstances. And that sense of 'the right way' to which we are socialized early on, and to which we keep socializing each other all the time, is what sociologists call 'norms': norms are the 'shoulds' of social life. They are prescriptive. And these are affected by where we grow up, what historical period we grow up in, who we grow up with, who we are, how much privilege our families have, what color we are, etc. etc.; it's influenced by lots and lots of things. It's not a uniform set of shoulds, but it is a constant set of shoulds. And within all those shoulds then, come notions – expectations – about how women and men, boys and girls should act in specific circumstances. We are very invested – I would argue, in all cultures – in distinguishing between male and female. It is very important to us, that we not only see males and females as different, but we see the differences between them as springing from their inherent maleness or femaleness. We act as if we are convinced that those differences don't come from some place else, they come inherently from who we are. That is why we can say to each other "Oh you know men!". That is a unitary notion that inside of men are some essential features that distinguish them fundamentally from women, no matter where we are, or what we are talking about. So all of these ideas about essential, abiding, and transsituational differences and about how we should behave then translate into practice. We translate that into our interactions, our institutions, and our deepest held convictions. And it is there, it is in the real world, in the everyday world, that we get to show, each other and ourselves, how these differences operate. And when men and women behave differently from one another, we say with conviction: "See, they really are different." And the circle closes.

If it were 1790, there would be a lot of things the three of us wouldn't be doing right now, indeed, almost everything. Not only the content of our talk would be different, but also how we talk: how we are dressed, how we sit, how we comport ourselves, how we behave. All of that is changing over time. What I believe is not changing, is how our practices reflect this fundamental attachment we have to the notion that men and women are essentially different. And the way we play ourselves out in the world shows those differences. The content – what constitutes a competently gendered person – varies, the mechanisms – that they are expected to demonstrate that competence – don't. Oops. Sorry if I'm slipping away from simple terms…

fzg: In a recent talk at the ZAG-Symposium "Körpersprache – Macht – Geschlecht" in Freiburg i.Br. (Feb., 2013), you quoted Jocelyn A. Hollander's (2013) elaboration of "accountability", this being a very important and too often overlooked concept within the theory of Doing Gender. What does happen in your view when researchers apply Doing Gender without really understanding accountability? What is the importance?

SF: Accountability is the driving force of what I just described in terms of how we demonstrate ourselves to be appropriately masculine or feminine, that is

essentially male or female, that is, we're in the 'correct' sex category. It is the motivating driver of gender as a fundamental preoccupation of social life. I don't think we would be as devoted to organizing social life around this concept if it weren't for accountability. Accountability involves behaving as if one will be evaluated with respect to the prevailing standards of masculinity and femininity – however they are understood in the particular setting – actually experiencing such evaluations from others, and finally reaping (or imposing) the consequences of that evaluation.

When we depart from appropriate behavior, when we violate expectations about how we should be, there is some sort of response. Ethnomethodologists call these occasions "interactionally notable", and that sounds very tame. It can be a little glitch in the conversation or horrible and extreme violence, where people demand retribution for your violating gender expectations. So we can't comment in the abstract about what the consequences will be of the violation of expectations, but we can say: we hold ourselves accountable and we hold others accountable to the appropriate accomplishment of gender. And when that does not obtain, then there is some kind of consequence.

When we don't look at that, when we don't look at the mechanism that is driving everything, then the study of gender becomes a laundry list of gendered things in the world. Whether it's the tools of the electrician – there is a male plug and a female plug, because the prongs are in or out – or how men and women stand and sit, or the differential character of conversation 'work' by women and men, gender can become just about collecting images and practices, that point to ostensibly neutral differences between men and women. But that means that we're not really looking at the way in which inequality is produced in social life. It is through this accountability system that we get to submission and dominance; that we get to male entitlement, that we get women limiting themselves because it just isn't 'proper' for a woman to do that. All of that comes from our understanding of each other and ourselves, as accountably masculine and feminine.

There is a new book that has been published recently in the US by Sheryl Sandberg, the Chief Operating Officer of Facebook, entitled "Lean In" (2013). It has caused a tremendous amount of stir among young women, especially. One point the author makes is that for various reasons women often elect to remove themselves from real ambition in the workplace – that they seem to anticipate that they won't be as engaged there as the men. By doing this, they hinder their chances for advancement. The author counsels instead to "lean in". Some critics took this as an example of "once again" women being their own worst enemies, that unlike their male counterparts, they just don't have what it takes. So it isn't discrimination, or sexual harassment, or the organization of the work place, but it's something inherent in women that keeps them back. This is a perfect example of gendered behavior, and a perfect example of how we often take sex differences to be inherent. The author didn't intend to imply that at all. What women are responding to is a gendered workplace, infused with a host of expectations about how women should be – as women workers, and a set of strong

expectations about what sorts of wives and mothers they should be. And blaming women for their own rational responses to settings and expectations that is never conducive to gender equality is just another example of Doing Gender.

fzg: West and Zimmermann's groundbreaking paper "Doing Gender" was published in 1987 – but in fact you told us it was written ten years before. Why was the publication delayed for so long? Could you tell us about the academic and political environment within which it was struggling?

SF: It was 1977, relatively soon after I had arrived at Santa Barbara as an assistant professor, and it was Candace West's last year as a graduate student. She was being mentored by Don Zimmerman. Don's office was across the hall from mine. So we were talking all the time. (This was before email, of course, so people had to talk!) Candace was almost finished with her dissertation on conversation between men and women. The two of them wrote a paper about gender that was drawn from her data. She saw the degree of interruption that young men – these were undergraduates – seemed entitled to impose on the conversation they were having with women. The gulf between the level of interruption that men were engaging in compared to women, was just very broad, and also the degree of interruption was different: men were much more likely to engage in what conversation analysts call "deep intrusion".

So from this, Candace and Don, started to ask themselves, what is going on here? Now the moment they asked this question, they took a huge step away from the traditional and prevailing view of what to study about naturally occurring talk – conversation. Every conversation analyst was talking about and searching for the *structural* features of conversation. And the minute you say "Is there some extraneous other thing affecting what is going on?" you are not doing conversation analysis as the practitioners were doing it at the time. So it was a huge move. What Candace West was saying in her dissertation was that we can account for the big difference in interruption and the differential nature of interruption by thinking about how gender is organized in social life; along with conversation and its interruption, it is gender inequality that is being produced.

So that was a big deal, and there was a lot of consternation around that. From that, I think, Candace and Don had to account for themselves by writing about this phenomenon they called "doing" gender. I read the paper drafts very early on, and made suggestions, and this is why, while I'm not an author of the paper, I feel as if I did see it when it was a tiny, tiny thing. And I watched as the conversation scholars weren't embracing it, and there were so few outlets to discuss gender. It is important to say that the journal Gender & Society did not exist at that time. In fact, it was in the first issue that "Doing Gender" appeared, in 1987.

But this was 1977! Nobody wanted it. Then they started send it around to people, and it spent a long while in the underground. People really liked it, and suggested changes, and every once in a while they would take the paper out and work on it again. I read it again in 1983 when I was working on a completely

different project about the division of household labor. I was completely stuck on how to account for my findings. Pretty much regardless of income, education, age, number of children, etc. the national sample of women I interviewed were doing the lion's share of the work of the household. What I saw was this horribly lopsided division no matter what sort of family I was looking at. This was puzzling in some respects, since the microeconomists would say that such arrangements are not rational, and the sociologists would offer the non-answer that people felt as if they should arrange the work that way. But why? I refused to end the book by offering the pat sociological answer that the reason all these people are arranging their work lives this way is: norms.

So I just sat there for a year. And I thought: what is going on here? What is being produced in these households? It was Candace and Don's paper that provided the answer: Not only are school lunches being made, and kitchen counters being washed, and laundry being done and all the other 'productions' of this little factory that is the household, but also the men and women within those households are being affirmed that they see themselves as appropriately masculine and feminine. They were doing gender.

That is the driver to why so many people organized their work lives in this really awful way – where one person gets to sit around when they get home from work and the other person doesn't! So that was my answer, and that ended my writing block, and I was able to finish the book. In so doing, I cited their unpublished article since my entire theoretical frame, and my answer to the puzzling question of why work was arranged the way it was came from their concept of Doing Gender. When my book got published, I was so indebted to West and Zimmerman's work that I urged them to send the article out again. So now it's 1986, and they sent it to the new journal Gender & Society. Sociologist Judith Lorber was the first editor, and she was assembling the offerings for the first issue. It was hugely important that Judith was situated there, at that time. The rest of the discipline had very little interest in such a piece since at that time it resembled nothing that was passing for sociological theory.

fzg: In your book "The Gender Factory" (1985) you wanted to develop a real explanation for what is happening in the households, and you say that norms didn't work as any sort of explanation. This sounds a bit like Harold Garfinkels famous refusal to think of people as "cultural dopes" who unwittingly obey cultural rules. How serious then can and must gender researchers take the actions, feelings and intentions of the subjects they study?

SF: I think that people's points of view and perspectives and how they understand the world are crucially important, but I think you have to know that's what you've got: that you're not getting some kind of objective view, or you're not looking at the only conclusion one can come to. What I do think is very important is a feminist to allow for a kind of primacy of people's voices, particularly women, but also any marginalized person. Dorothy Smith and her standpoint theory talks about shifting – this was a very radical notion in the mid-80s – shifting your beginning point to those who don't have a voice. So she argued that we should

look out at the world from that point, rather than the usual places we come from. These conventional starting places are very often standpoints of power and privilege, which is the organizing locale for most research.

With respect to household labor, trying to make sense of that completely asymmetric division that I found again and again and again no matter what the variables were, I knew what some sociologists would conclude: they are victims. Women are victims of the propaganda, and the feminine mystique. And that is why they not only allow such asymmetry in their household work lives, but they embrace such subservience.

I think that would be a conclusion that male sociologists would had come to at the time if they cared about household labor, or the prevailing views of the family, etc., let alone treat what women were doing as legitimate work. The family literature is a depressing thing to read during that period – I know, I had to read it! As a feminist you have to say: "Wait a minute. These people aren't dumb. They're not crazy. And they are rational." So the question I asked myself – and I do think, if I hadn't been a feminist I wouldn't have gotten that far – was: if we presume the system is rational, then what makes it so? That's a very different sort of question than we usually ask. This led me to understand that the everyday affirmation of who one is and how one is situated with respect to one's partner – we're talking about married couples, heterosexual couples –, that the affirmation of that during the day, might make you rationally say "no honey, you read the paper, I'll make dinner – for the seventh time this week".

I felt very strongly that we can't dismiss the dynamics that we see in life just because people are in them, we can't simply use norms as an explanation, nor can we conclude things about women in that way. Had I believed that people were "cultural dopes" I would have stopped way too early, in trying to figure out, who does what in the household, and why, and how gender is implicated in all of it.

fzg: Which are in your view the most important challenges and changes that the concept of Doing Gender has undergone since?

SF: A couple of articles have tried to analyze how Doing Gender has been used as a sociological concept, and they conclude that it has become superficial, just slapped on when you see a gendered world. So that you say: "well, that's doing gender". There is also a handful of empirical pieces that have really employed it to good effect, and fully. So I spent a lot of time thinking about what it is that has made this inaccessible in some way to people. The first thing I do is, I blame the methodology and the discourse that we were compelled to use. But then of course it couldn't have been produced without that point of view. And the second thing is, it is difficult to use, because you have to be in a particular relationship empirically to your respondents. "Doing Gender" is a very frequently cited article, one of the top twenty or 30 most cited articles in sociology in the last 25 years. But at the same time when you look at how the article is deployed, it's very different from what we expected. And that is why I'm so excited about Jocelyn Hollander's

article which has recently appeared in Gender & Society. It doesn't add anything theoretically new, but I'm grateful for it because it unpacks accountability into its specific aspects and makes the concept as a whole much more accessible. In that, I think it will be a very important contribution to theory. I think it will allow people to really understand how accountability works. My hope is that there will be some kind of resurgence in the meaningful use of the concept.

The other interesting thing is, in the 25 years since the article was published, how little people care, still, about the actual workings of inequality. If you look at literature on inequality, of whatever kind, you basically have descriptions of how bad it is. And I'm not pooh-poohing that. It's all I would ever study. But I have always wanted to know how things work! How do we get to where we've gotten to? How is it that people can claim entitlements in the way that they do, and at such expense to others? And again, if you look at the literature it's this way over here, it's this way over here, and it's this way over here. But the mechanisms by which it is this way are much less studied. That was the driving interest I had in this concept: that it didn't just participate in the inventory of bad things in social life. It really wanted to talk about the mechanism.

fzg: Doing Difference was the next step…

SF: Nobody has asked me that, how did you get from Doing Gender to Doing Difference? It's all about feminist political and intellectual climates; it's all about the conversations we were having at that time. It was all about white feminist sociologists such as myself coming to understand and beginning to teach the connections between gender, race and class. It was the beginning of discussions in feminist circles about so-called intersectionality. So we were in these conversations, intersectionality was in the air, and Candace and I began to talk about if race and class could be seen through the lense of the very mechanism we were asserting for gender. For us, this meant a way to first model and then apply empirically the notion of simultaneity in social relations and the creation of inequality.

I remember working on this paper on Christmas Day of some year – I remember because it was the only Christmas that I hadn't spent with my daughter – and she decided to go to her father's house in Los Angeles because they had just had a baby and my daughter wanted to be with him. There I am at Christmas working alone on this and I'm thinking "OK this will be fine, we'll send this out for review, and they'll give us really great reviews, and then we'll fix this some way, because it is not done." I didn't know how exactly it wasn't done, but I felt that it wasn't done. Strangely enough this was the only paper that I have ever had that was accepted outright. They said "Don't change a word" and one reviewer wrote "It's going to be a classic". Part of me said, that's great! But I have since come to think that we would have profited from a bit more conversation about it. The result was that the conversations that might have happened before the paper was published were had after it was published, including a symposium organized around it in Gender & Society.

One other thing that I regret about that paper was the use of the word 'difference'. It got us into a lot of confusion. Not so much trouble, but confusion, because there was a 'difference literature' out there which we were not participating in and didn't care anything about. And so when we used that word it marked us as somehow part of that other literature which we were not. That was particularly annoying to the feminists of color. While we tried to couple race in partnership with the workings of gender and class, I believe it felt to them as if race was inappropriately elided into dynamics that they believed were quite different from each other. And the article was reacted to as problematic because there was a certain kind of proprietary sense about who should be talking about race. It was as if these two white sociologists of gender just appropriated intellectual territory that they shouldn't have.

fzg: Is there a better other word than difference?

SF: Well I might have said inequality. But the problem was political. So there is no better word, although maybe there are safer ones. As you can see in the Symposium on "Doing Gender, Doing Difference", there was a lot of criticism particularly from race scholars, especially from Patricia Collins. To this day I think she is disturbed by what we did. I believe she still thinks that what we were saying is: "The consequences of accountability for the violation of racial expectations is the same as for the violation of gender expectations." So somebody hanging from the tree is the same as a failed job interview – to be very blunt. I wrote a response, but there was nothing I could write that was going to convince some that we weren't saying that. No matter how much I said: "We're not talking about outcomes", it didn't work. We included all the critiques in our book "Doing Gender, Doing Difference", both her initial comment and my response.

There are race theorists who resist mightily the notion that what has happened to women is anything near to what has happened to people of color. Women are raped and bleeding and dying and burned up, and so are people of color. But the question I have is: what can we know about how that happens so that we can respond with some kind of knowledge of how to resist?

fzg: This relationship between feminists of color and white feminists, has it improved through debates on intersectionality, or doing difference?

SF: I think it's gotten a lot better. We seem to have survived a certain kind of message – legitimate or not – that was given off by Betty Friedan 50 years ago, that the only thing we're thinking about are white privileged college-educated heterosexual housewives and gender is really about them. I think we're getting over that and also I think white women academics may have shown their willingness to be appropriately self-critical, and I think that goes some way, although not the whole way. Also the rise of Latina, Native American and Asian American feminist scholars and their scholarship has made a difference as new voices to be heard and to promote the pluralizing of race studies which was overdue. At

the same time it is still the case that there is some kind of territorial feeling around race, even though there are white scholars of course studying race, but there is still that notion that scholars of color should have a corner on studying people of color.

fzg: You told us about some of the criticism that "Doing Difference" had to deal with, and I think another line of this criticism is, maybe people misunderstood your concept as focusing too much on the micro-level of interaction, and disregarding social structure. Would an analytical framework like "Doing Patriarchy" tackle structure better?

SF: I think that patriarchy is a very fraught term. It would be easily misunderstood and not only by lay people. It implies a certain kind of fixed structure that belies what is really happening. It's not a fluid term at all. I would have a hard time convincing everybody that patriarchy is fluid, ever-changing, processual, and if you blink it's changed already, while it is also deeply situated in historical period and region – the way that I argue about gender all the time. Patriarchy is tougher, it's an old man with a long white beard, bossing people around. It was certainly powerful in 1968, and it really did a lot of great work there. But as a concept describing social processes it's not very apt.

fzg: You recently gave a talk with your colleague Joan Budesa at the ZAG in Freiburg i.Br. (Feb., 2013) on the doing of gender among transgender prisoners in Californian men's prisons. You suggested that in a context "where everybody knows" your sex category, there is no passing. Under these circumstances, contradictory embodiment can shift from problem to resource. You also talked about the conflicts and competition among transgender prisoners. What about solidarity and bonding? Does it exist, or is it a relationship, which is based on conflict?

SF: The data-set comes wholly from my colleague Valerie Jenness, who is the Dean of the School of Social Ecology at the University of California, Irvine, and is a former student of mine. She and her team heroically interviewed 300 transgender prisoners in 27 prisons all up and down the state in a period of six weeks, very likely the entire population of transgender prisoners in California. It was a monumental effort and terrific data-set – this in the context of researchers being basically thrown out of American prisons for about 20 years. She got in there and was actually able to study what she studied, which is amazing. And I am very grateful that we were able to write one paper which is about to be published called "Agnes goes to prison" and then the recent paper that Joan and I presented at the ZAG-Symposium "Körpersprache – Macht – Geschlecht" in Freiburg. It is about the question of what is happening to the binary in this context.

Then the third of this kind of trilogy – getting to your question – is a paper just now brought in draft form, by Lori Sexton and Valerie Jenness, on community and identity among these prisoners. Their insights are based on interview

responses to the question of where the transgender prisoners would like to be housed, with other trans-gender prisoners or with men, as it is now. I thought that was incredibly clever. Sexton and Jenness use the social movements literature to take a look at the concepts of what people call community and how we recognize them. So they've done this analysis of the discourse amongst the transgender prisoners and conclude that there is a very real sense of identity and community – this in the context of competition for scarce resources and in the context of what is arguably one of the most predatory environments in which to live. The visual metaphor for me is that this hint of solidarity and community is a little green shoot coming up through the concrete blocks, that every month or so someone sprays herbicide on. It's that horrible, and yet the little green shoot keeps reappearing and stretching toward daylight.

fzg: Another wonderful piece of your work in the last years is the book "Sociologists Backstage. Answers to Ten Questions About What They Do". Together with Nikki Jones you have interviewed a young generation of ethnographers. When you compare: Do you recognize a mindset of this generation? Is there anything that struck you as new?

SF: I don't know if it is generational in the sense that it's younger people operating in a changed discipline, and in a changed world. One of the things that you'd notice first is that there are women ethnographers. There were so few when I was coming up. It was a kind of a man's activity, because you were hanging around at night, and there was a tradition of studying marginalized populations, and they're very scary and all that.

Now what you see is two things: More questions are being asked ethnographically than before. When I was in graduate school, the ethnographic tradition in sociology was urban ethnography. And when William F. Whyte wrote Street Corner Society literally he was hanging out on the corner. There was also the tradition to study all forms of work ethnographically, generated by Everett Hughes at the University of Chicago. What you notice now, is that more kinds of questions are being asked. In this volume for example, we have Karyn Lacy, who's looking at the housing decisions of middle class black suburbanites, and that was of course a mixed methods study. We have Miliann Kang, who is studying Korean women in nail salons.

So, when you let women into the intellectual playground, other games are played, other questions are asked, and that's very exciting. It's also the case that over the past 40 years ethnographers of color have been operating and they, too, ask different questions. The diversity of who's engaging in this method has really changed the whole scene. Although there is still a kind of a masculinist tradition, primarily in urban sociology. Still the boys are at it.

fzg: In this book, have you come across any typical methodological pitfalls in the ethnographic study of gender, such as for instance the reification of gendered differences?

SF: If we ask people what they do, we are building on the probability that they will give us some description that we have expected. I think this is a problem in all social research, whatever the form – that we will end up finding what we just knew was there in the first place. I work with my students very carefully, particularly ethnographers, because in ethnography there are more spaces for us to confirm what we already know. The reason I mention my students is because students are particularly vulnerable in their choices of what to study, and their motives for electing to study something. Sometimes they want to know what is happening. But sometimes they also want to change the world. They want to 'discover' the world in a particular way so that it can be argued that it is fit subject matter for social change. I think that's why the exercises of searching for disconfirming evidence in the field is such a good one, and I have my students systematically – every two months or so – lay out what they think is going on, and then spend time searching for contradictory evidence.

fzg: When you try to observe the workings of gender, a methodological problem is that, basically, you have a look at differences. Is there an alternative to looking at differences?

SF: I think there is a way. When you look at what people are doing, the interesting thing is to see where gender is more or less relevant to what is going on. Is it receding or is it proceeding into the interaction? When it is receding, or not being done, per se, and then it is proceeding – then the business of the interaction becomes about gender, and that's when you can assert differences being done. The same would go for race, or class, or sexuality.

fzg: Asking the question where gender is relevant leads to another question: What are the criteria to say gender, or race, or anything is relevant or not? Looking at structure may offer a possibility: asking in which way are structural differences connected to situational accomplishment of gender.

SF: Yes, that is a good question. There are some things we wouldn't want to assert as gendered, because we can't show it, we can't really prove it. For example, buildings that look like phalluses: How do we talk about that as pointing to a gender difference? I will leave that to people who are collecting the laundry list of the gendered features of our world, including the symbolic ones. What is interesting to me is how gender intrudes into everyday life, and is present and available as a resource in interactions and all sorts of decision-making. That every occasion could be deployed to accomplish gender, and then the way in which those interactions leave behind an institutional remnant that then becomes instantiated in practice and taken as 'the right way' to do things. For example, not too long ago in the US, when you opened up the newspaper and looked at job advertisements you would see two columns of job listings: one for men and one for women. This meant, of course, that not much more had to be done to sustain American work as the most segregated system in the US. And it was the National Association of Women who got rid of that, it was feminist

activism that ended that practice. Did it stop sex segregation in jobs? No, but it changed the way it was institutionalized from the beginning as a set of expectations about where we think people belong. And that is a way in which the accomplishment of gender flows into an institutional manifestation and then can order interaction thereafter.

fzg: Speaking of the intrusion of gender into all sort of daily activities, into professional life, and into work places: The New York Times has recently reported on a debate in Germany, headlining: "German Politician's Remark Stirs Outcry Over Sexism". In this controversy, German newspapers often portray the US as a negative example: we wouldn't want such a prudish atmosphere at workplaces in Germany. Would you say that the doing of gender difference in the public sphere necessarily leads to sexism?

SF: That is a familiar instance of backlash against social change. And we saw that in the US. Less so now I think, but certainly in the beginning, when issues of sexual harassment were being defined and the public was being educated to how the workplace was a hotbed of male dominance. Then there were all kinds of complaints and expressed fears that we will generate workers as automatons, and people can't be real, and nobody will open the door for anybody anymore, and all kinds of polite manifestations of civility will disappear. And you know, in the main we worked it out. I think the workplace is not so much more prudish, as it is definitely more rule bound with respect to how people should behave towards one another. But it is still an occasion for complaint on the part of people whose privilege feels dislodged! And that is certainly the case here.

fzg: You have worked at the University of California in Santa Barbara for three decades, and are the director of the Institute for Research on Women & Gender at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor since 2012. In Germany, Women's Studies are considered a historical stage, long out of fashion, that has evolved into Gender Studies. How would you characterize the relationship between Women's Studies and Gender Studies in the US?

SF: My own UC Santa Barbara Women Studies Department, founded in 1988, where I served as the founding chair, was called Women Studies and almost everyone was calling such units Women Studies. Then, as time went on, we felt strongly that Feminist Studies might be a better term, a much more inclusive term, even though it was way too scary for the male faculty and administrators for a while. Within our own conversations about it, we rejected Gender Studies – rightly or wrongly – because it dislodged women as the centerpiece of our intellectual interest. And there is an argument to be made that Gender Studies does do that, and women can be lost inside of that. We thought it was a kind of a whitewash in a way. Although, arguably you could say, Gender Studies tells the world that, first, gender is a defining organizing concept, which is at the heart of women's studies, and second, gender is not just about women, which is correct, and right to communicate. But there is still a political point, a historical point:

that women have been excluded forever, and we don't want to do that now in our naming. Hence, in 2010, the UC Santa Barbara Women Studies Program became the UC Santa Barbara Feminist Studies Program. And we felt that was both inclusive, but also outward-looking to questions of all kinds, of interest in dominated peoples, because feminists are politically drawn to carving out a world of equality. That includes far more than anything implied by the words women or gender.

fzg: In the last years, you have worked on transgender, embodiment, and research methodology – which topics will occupy your work in the near future?

SF: I will continue to think about ways to write about methods, and Joan and I will likely publish the embodiment paper that we gave in Freiburg. I also have been working on the concept of passing, and I might want to write about it. It is a very strange concept, it doesn't really have a standing in sociology. It is much more to be found in literature, particularly racial passing during the period of time in the US when things were so segregated. In my seminar we talk about racial passing, and gender passing, and class passing, and what I'm calling "competence passing" to appear to be a competent person. This all stems directly from and is an expansion of my interest in the way in which gender, race and class operate. Ultimately, it is about accountable conduct and the workings of accountability. But I also think that through the trans-experience, as well as the experience of multiracial existence our devotion to strict categories is destabilized, and along with that, expectations about who we are and what we can be. With that, perhaps real social change is made possible.

fzg: Professor Fenstermaker, thank you for the interview!

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