

American Sociological Association Opportunities in Retirement Network Lecture (2015)

Earl Babbie

Introduction by Tom Van Valey: As Roz said I'm Tom Van Valey. And this evening, I have the pleasure of introducing someone who really does not need an introduction. So I'm going to keep it short and very much to the point. If you want to know more, and there is a lot, simply googling or for that matter looking him up on Wikipedia. He was born in Detroit and grew up in New England. He went to Harvard and then to Berkeley for his MA and PhD, ended in 1969. He taught at Hawaii and Chapman, retired in 2006. He now lives in Hot Springs, Arkansas. I have had the pleasure of working with him on a number of occasions. I'm pleased to claim him and his lovely wife as friends. He is going to present our inaugural presentation in sociological life. I give you Earl Babbie.

Lecture by Earl Babbie: Wow. I should quit at that point. First, let me say, I'm just really honored to be able to give this talk and I'm honored by you being here. I know many of you and some I don't. And I thank all of you. I'm also aware that I'm the only thing between you and refreshments.

However, the title I chose for my talk is not the one in the program. I chose "An Accidental Career." Some of you who know me know that I'm probably the most organized person you know, and yet my career follows no pattern whatsoever. So let me just tell you a little bit about that. I'll start in ninth grade and I had the experience that many of you had, I'm sure, when the teacher said, let's go around the room and what do you want to be when you grew up. And I said I want to be an auto body mechanic because my single mother had just

remarried to a man I just idolized. I took his name. I wanted to be like him and I couldn't think of anything more noble than that.

And my teacher to his credit, he said, "Well, that's very good. But, you know, you do so well in school. Maybe you should go to college." I never had that thought. I suppose I knew that there were colleges but I never thought of going. I went home and told my parents. And they said, "Wow, that's great. Well, if you think so, yeah. We hope it doesn't cost anything, but that would be just wonderful." And so that's where it begins.

And I would just mention to you, a few years earlier than that, the same thing happened in Chicago. They went around the room and a young man, Malcolm Little [Malcolm X], said, "I want to be a lawyer." And the teacher said, "Well, you know, for a colored boy, it's probably better if you'd be a plumber or a carpenter or something like that." The playing field has never been level and isn't now. I was throughout just supported by everybody I knew. They were so pleased that I might do this.

Well, anyway, then skipping a few years ahead in a new high school, senior year, it was time to apply to college and I was absolutely clueless. But I had a good friend who knew more than I did and he was applying to Harvard. So I applied to Harvard. I know it sounds arrogant; it was not. That's the only place I applied. I didn't know you should apply to more than one. I suppose if I thought about it, I think it's like proposing to lots of girls and seeing which ones accept. Well, anyway, I blessedly was accepted. And so I went off to Harvard to become an engineer. That's what my teacher said. "Why don't you go to college? You can be an engineer. That's probably a lot like auto body mechanic." And so I went off to Harvard.

We found out where it was. My parents drove me there. And quickly I discovered they didn't offer engineering. My adviser, who turned out not to be totally apt, he said, "Well, why don't you major in physics? That's a lot like engineering." I was like, oh, physics. I always did really well in physics in high school. So I became a physics major. I was going to be a nuclear physicist. I signed up for the introductory physics course and that wasn't too bad. I probably got a C or maybe a B.

Calculus just escaped me. I always was very good at math. But I won't go into everything that's wrong with Calculus but I could not connect. And in a passive/aggressive move, I guess I showed up two-and-a-half hours late for the three-hour final. So I failed Calculus.

I took German, a full year course, okay? And I know I'll offend people here if I say I really think German should be outlawed as a language. Not the German people. They're wonderful. But the language, boy. But I got a C, I think. And so by the end of the semester, things were not looking really good for me going to college.

And my adviser said, "Well, you know, maybe physics isn't for you. And so you can drop the German course at midyear because you got a C." You still, you know, you get a credit for that. Nobody else knew that because I lost credit for that. And so by the end of the first semester, I mean I was about ready to flunk out but they allowed you to do the second semester.

So I think I looked around for courses at pleasing times. You know, 10:00 in the morning or something like that. I ended up in the course on Cultural Anthropology taught by Doug Oliver. I have to tell you, I just sat there the entire semester. My head must have been

spinning. I had never thought about the things that he was talking about, the kinds of cultural differences of human beings. And you could study that. That could be your job. You could study that.

Well, I ended up then and I switched majors, and ended up in what has to be the greatest of all times undergraduate major with the worst name, Social Relations, okay? Sociology, anthropology, and social psychology taught by the leading people in the country. And this just astounded me. And I was quickly becoming one of them.

The person I took the most courses from was Talcott Parsons, whom I still couldn't understand when I read him. I think he kind of talked the way he wrote. But somehow sitting in class, he was just amazing. He would teach, give you a concept of a social role like a father and mother. Okay, so I understand that, you know. And then he'd say, "But it could also be like plumber or carpenter." Whoa, you have to reconstruct your understanding of that concept. But it could also be a conservative or liberal. Wow. And he just had this ability. I wish one of my students from 40 years of teaching would say what I'm about to say and that is, I came out of every one of his exams smarter than I went in. I mean, he would say, let's put together these two things from the course. And I'm, wow. I never thought of that. But I would think about it and it was just wonderful.

So anyway, I had decided I wanted to be a sociologist. Well, I screwed up my courage and I went to his secretary, Helen, and made an appointment to meet with Talcott Parsons in his office. I went in and said I wanted to talk to him about the career or the profession of sociology. And I think it was the first five minutes, he thought I was writing a paper about professions and was interviewing him as a sociologist. So I finally just blurted out, "I want to be

one.” “Oh, well.” He said, “Then you should go to graduate school.” I said, okay. And I wrote that down. And I said where should I go? And he said, “Somewhere else.” I think he saw the expression on my face and he said, “Everybody should go somewhere else. You shouldn’t do all of your studies in the same place.” And I said, okay. Well, where should I go? “I don’t know. Go to Berkeley.” So I wrote that down. I didn’t know where that was either.

So anyway, I completed. I actually graduated from Harvard and owed the Marine Corps three years of service. I had to pay for my scholarship that I had to go there. So I spent three years then mostly in Asia just as the Vietnam War was starting. And so as my three years were coming, you know, two years into it I guess, I said, well, I should apply to graduate school, I guess. So I wrote to Berkeley and I received this packet. And I saw the deadline and it was, I think, a couple of months away. So I just put it away.

And then as I later remember, well, gee, the deadline is just a few days. So I opened it up again and found they wanted letters from my undergraduate professor. Oh, God. So I just tried to write to people back in Cambridge. And they wanted samples of my undergraduate term papers. Wow, I said, “Well, I’m one of our young men serving on the front lines. I didn’t bring my term papers.” But I said, “You know, while I’ve been in the Marine Corps I’ve been thinking about a lot of issues - sociological issues. And I’ve actually written some essays about some of those to try to get my mind clear.”

So as I recall, I think I bought a bottle of scotch and saved up all my writing essays on sociology. They weren’t bad. And so anyway, I sent all of this off. The people who are writing letters said, “Well, if you don’t get in this year. You know, we can write next year.” They thought this wasn’t going to work. But lo and behold, I got accepted.

So I had to find Berkeley. I remember arriving at South Hall where sociology was at that time. And I came in to the office and two secretaries there at the counter. I introduced myself. And they said, "Well, who do you want as your adviser?" "I don't know who's here. I only came because Parsons said that this is where I should go." And so they said, "Well, what are you interested in?" "Sociology of religion." That was something I was interested in. And I always remember this, I can say it verbatim. I quote them verbatim, they said, "Let's give him to Glock." And I said, "Glock? Charles Glock? Is he here? I read something he wrote." And so, Charlie Glock became my mentor, my employer, my PhD adviser. And so I went up to meet him. And he hired me to be a reader in his course in Sociology of Religion, paid \$200 for the semester. That was good.

I got to give a lecture. That was the first time I'd ever done that. And then we came up to the final exam. He got sick. And so, suddenly, I was grading the whole of the exams. And there was some question on Durkheim that all the students were getting it wrong. I couldn't figure that out. So I called my friend, Rod Stark. Some of you may know Rod. He was my best friend in graduate school. I said, "I don't understand it. All these kids in the class seemed to think that Durkheim was saying blah, blah, blah." And Rod said, "But that's what Charlie said he said." "Oh, okay." Anyway, so I made it through that. The \$200 just about got me through the semester. And I was out of money.

So I went to Charlie and really learned that he was the founder and director of the Survey Research Center at Berkeley. And so he hired me as a research assistant. And I just started learning research methods as an apprentice, you know. And I did that throughout the rest of my graduate training and ended up as Assistant Director of the center by the end of this.

As I was getting ready to graduate, well, I'd given Charlie the first of five or six drafts of my dissertation. He keeps saying, "I think you can do better." As I was finishing that up, Professor Doug Yamamura from the University of Hawaii came to visit and went to Charlie and said, "We want to set up a Survey Research Center. How do you do that?" And he said, "Well, you should hire some young person just graduating who knows about it. And they'd be cheap, you know, somebody like Earl." And so then I ended up in Hawaii to set up a Survey Research Center and teach survey research methods.

I look back on it now and that was it. I taught one course a semester - survey research methods. The first semester, I had six students in a room this size with a little platform up here and a desk on it. And I think it was four weeks before I stopped sitting behind the desk. And said, "Look, let's meet in my office. I have books there and things like that."

So anyway, so I was teaching survey research. And the big problem I had and everyone else I met, a lot of people come through Hawaii. They have to come there for some reason. I talked to people teaching survey. Everyone would say there were two things that would always come up - John and probably others of you would relate to this - one, "Are you doing a student survey this year?" "No, God, no. I'm not." That was common. "And what are you using for a textbook?" And the answer would vary. But it was always accompanied by "I don't like it. But that's the one I'm using." I was using a British textbook by Moser, if I recall correctly. It wasn't terrible but, you know, they can't spell. And it's Ministry of this and Ministry of that.

And so one day, I found myself just jotting down a table of contents for what I called a Survey Research Cookbook and Other Fables. I thought that was so good. I never yet picked the title that ended up on the book. But the next day, I got a letter from Wadsworth Publishing.

They said, "We want to do a textbook on survey research. Somebody, [it was actually Rod Stark] suggested you might be able to do it." And so by return mail -- God, I wish we had email then, they would have wet themselves. But by return mail, I gave them a table of contents and a discussion of what it should be.

And so, the next thing I knew I was writing a textbook in survey research. And then we discovered two very interesting things. One, nobody in the country teaching survey research used anything else. I mean it's nearly as we could tell, this was *the* most successful textbook. The other thing was not many people were teaching a course in survey research. We got them all but there weren't that many.

But faculty started saying, "Why don't you get the same guy to write a broader methods book?" So we got field research and experiments and all the things that I didn't know much about. And so I said, sure. Why not? So I went to work on that. It came out as *The Practice of Social Research* two years later. My career has been largely a matter of writing textbooks.

And I'll tell only one other story. I'm reluctant to say it because it's nicer if somebody else said it. But I'll tell you. In 1949, Mao eliminated sociology in the People's Republic. That's not the thing that I don't want to tell you. And then 30 years later, 1979, China decided to reintroduce sociology. They found a prominent sociologist professor, Fei Xiaotong who had been a student of Malinowski, who had during these 30 years he kept doing research. He'd go into the peasant communities. He studied the problems they had.

Mao would announce, let a thousand flowers bloom and self-criticism. And Professor Fei would be the first person to step forward and say, "Well, here's what we're doing wrong." And then he'd be off to a reeducation camp for a while. And then he'd go back to doing his

research and that. Well, they said this is the guy. And so they created the Chinese Sociological Association. They made him president and they said your job is to restart sociology.

And so they sent him to the United States on a tour. He went to Harvard and Stanford and all the usual suspects. And I gather, everywhere he went, they wanted to set up exchange programs and research projects and like that. I was his last stop. Not because of me but because Hawaii, he was halfway home. And so I got to spend the day with this man that just, you know, really is something.

Anyway, I think I heard the question he had been asking all across the country and no one had heard the question. And that was, "What do you teach in intro?" He had the job of restarting sociology in the universities where they hadn't taught it for 30 years. I said, "Well, if I understand you correctly, maybe I've written an introductory socio textbook, *Society by Agreement*. Would this be of any help?" I remember he just grabbed it with both hands and said, "Can I keep it?" And I said, "Whoa, I did one on research methods, too." So he went home with these books. And after a few years, we had a Beijing addition of *The Practice of Social Research*.

And then five years ago, I got an email from a professor in Shanghai who said, "We've created this Chinese Survey Research Association. We're having our first convention and we would like you to come and give the keynote address." Already I'm going. And he said, "We hope you'll do it because we're all your students." Holy crap. And so I went to Shanghai for the convention then and we really got that sense. I mean, I'm just meeting people from Singapore up to Mongolia. You know, everyone who had read the book, had used it, had learned from it. It just floored me.

And so that's what I mean by an accidental career. This is just a kid who wanted to be an auto body mechanic. But I worked with my dad on that, I wasn't that good. But things just kept like that. And here I am. Thank you very much for inviting me to come.

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