

# Cooley-Mead Award & Voices of Experience: Murray Webster, Jr.

## As interviewed by Sharon C. Doerer

*Murray Webster is Professor of Sociology at UNC-Charlotte. His degrees are all in sociology from Stanford University. In August, he will receive the Social Psychology Section's Cooley-Mead Award.*

*Sharon C. Doerer is a Manager in Talent Management at TIAA-CREF. She earned her B.A. and M.A. in sociology and her Ph.D. in Organizational Science from UNC-Charlotte. Her dissertation research, which was supported by an NSF Dissertation Improvement Grant to her and Webster, adapted Martha Foschi's application folders design to study racial double standards in hiring.*

### How did you get interested in sociology and social psychology?

It was just luck. In high school I took a one-semester course called sociology, and all I can remember about it is thinking "How could anyone want to study this?" The textbook gave the impression that there was no knowledge in the field, only conflicting opinions with no way to decide among them, and moral injunctions that lacked empirical support. You couldn't design a better way to turn off a teenager.



My first year of college I enrolled in an introductory sociology course taught by Sandy Dornbusch because the student course review book described him as "ebullient." He was, and is. His impression of evangelical preachers is classic. He assigned a paper he had published with S. Frank Miyamoto testing predictions regarding the importance of specific others and the generalized other in forming the self-concept (AJS 1956). That paper got me thinking about the significance of social structure and the importance of interaction in creating and maintaining the social world. Remember, I grew up in rural Illinois, a stable society with few people around, an only child, and in a culture that promoted individualism and self-reliance. I wanted to understand how social structures get built up and maintained and the place of interaction within structures.

My term paper for that course was on race and intelligence. It could easily have degenerated into moral platitudes—as in my high school class—but Sandy only accepted evidence. I learned that the research showed lower mean IQ scores for African American kids than for white kids. But every time you control a factor—parents' income, teacher's experience, rural vs. urban school, section of the country, summer classes, etc.—the gap lessens. I concluded that if we knew and controlled all the social factors affecting test scores, the group difference would disappear. I'm pleased that I figured that out before I learned statistical regression modeling.

### Where did you spend the early years, student and faculty member?

After the Intro course, I enrolled in more sociology courses, becoming a major and entering the small honors program. The honors students—there were four of us—met weekly in Sandy Dornbusch's office and discussed topics in theory and research. I also took several psychology courses, but the psychology department was overreacting against the complicated non-empirical formulations of the psychoanalysts. Instructors said "There's no such thing as theory; all we have are findings." I know that's hard to square with Leon Festinger's presence as he published his theories of social comparison processes and cognitive dissonance, but it's what I remember. Without theory to organize findings and show their interrelations memorizing them all seemed hopeless. The sociology department, in contrast, emphasized developing general theory, and findings were important only as they helped to assess theories.

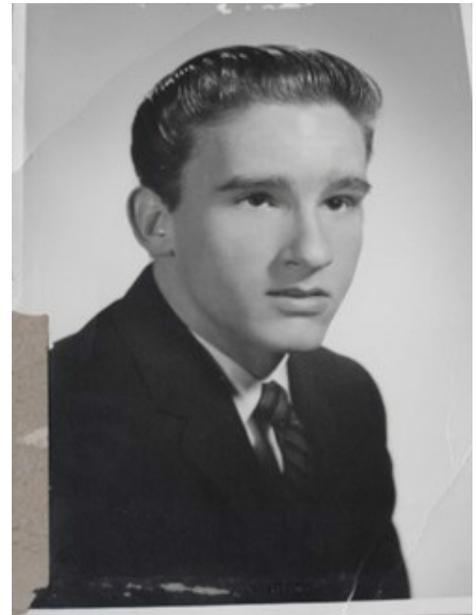
To earn money, I got a job as an experimental confederate in Bernie Cohen's conformity experiments, which used the basic Asch situation. At the end, an experimenter would ask the group, among other things, whether they thought anyone in the group was pre-instructed to behave in a particular way. One time, he asked specifically about me. The high point of that career was when an actual participant replied "Not him; he looks really confused." Joe Berger also was beginning the earliest expectation experiments using machine-controlled disagreements, and with a recommendation from Bernie, I began working on those. The experience of experimental sociology was eye-opening because of the quality of data. You cannot take on too many research questions in a single experimental condition, but usually you can be quite confident in the findings and less troubled by alternate interpretations than with other designs.

For graduate school I wanted to learn other kinds of sociology and applied to the program at UCLA and was accepted. At UCLA

I became an r.a. for Oscar (Ike) Grusky and Lindsay Churchill, who were conducting Bales-type discussion groups. We coded speech and gestures. A raised middle finger is category 12 “seems unfriendly.” I studied classical theory, survey design, and culture and personality. I also worked as an r.a. in Public Health, where I learned about differences in design and interpretation of applied and basic research. But I missed the experimental laboratory, so applied and returned to Stanford the next year.

Joe Berger accepted me as one of his students. That lucky event shaped my intellectual life for all the years since, and Joe has become my best friend as well. I worked on several different experiments, the most memorable being with Staff Sergeants at Travis Air Force Base that was used to hone the theory of status characteristics and expectation states (ASR 1972). The space that the Air Force gave us to work was close to a runway with planes taking off every few minutes headed for Vietnam. Everyone, experimenters and Sergeants, wore headphones so we could read the instructions and communicate.

My first job was at Johns Hopkins University where Pete Rossi took a chance and hired me. A huge benefit of being at Hopkins was knowing Doris Entwisle, with whom I did several experiments in school classrooms. We showed that we could raise children’s expectations for success, and those changed expectations affected behaviors that improve learning. My biggest regret when I left Hopkins for South Carolina in 1974 was leaving the research program with Doris. We saw each other only rarely for many years, but a few years ago we reconnected when Hopkins established a graduate fellowship in her name. The wonderful thing about friendship is that it resumes at the same place where it left off. Doris and I were laughing at the same things as before, and finishing each other’s sentences. Friendship may be unique in that way. Certainly status relations, dominance relations, romantic relations, and other types don’t resume unchanged after a long period.



Murray in his Elvis phase,  
About 1960

### I know you love theatre. Tell me what draws you to live theatre.

Live theater is an astonishing art form. Unlike movies, every performance is slightly different so the experience of watching also is different. The performance vanishes the instant after its creation, and it never reappears in exactly the same way. That evanescence is what I think people mean when they speak of the magic of theater.



Murray, Kenita & Sharon

I am in awe of the performers. On Broadway, they create characters and relationships eight times a week. Most of the audience will see a show only once, and it always has to look fresh for them. Actors have to love their work for it’s hard, there is no job security, and, with few exceptions, they aren’t paid much. For many actors, TV shows—The Good Wife, Law & Order, the soaps—pay the bills when they aren’t on stage. One of my New York friends used to ride two different subways to get to the TV studio for 6 a.m. call.

Bob Shelly likened pretesting an experiment to a dress rehearsal of a show, and the metaphor seems apt. Both efforts involve creating a short-term alternate reality, and you always have to see how others interpret the experience. However there are limits to the metaphor. An experiment is a very simplified situation and usually it should not remind anyone of any real social situation to avoid bringing in unwanted suppositions.

### What is your favorite show? Why? What show have you seen the most?

*Xanadu*, which opened in 2007. Believe it or not, I saw it 80 times on Broadway, plus a dozen or so times on tour. I can’t give a rational answer to why I love it, but I always walk out in a good mood. They use stage seating, and you can see me on YouTube with Mary Testa turning my head. Not surprisingly, I got to know the actors. One, Kenita Miller, later came to Charlotte as lead in *The Color Purple*. After the show you and I and your husband Brian spoke with her and he took the picture.

### What advice would you give to a graduate student? To an assistant professor?

I feel presumptuous giving advice. (People usually stop listening after “If you ask me....”) For whatever they’re worth, though, here are some thoughts.

Graduate school is tough and every student feels at some point as though she or he is not going to make it. Remember that everyone around you often feels the same way. Help each other. Sociology, like the world, is not zero-sum. Some of the most valuable experiences of graduate school come from talking with other graduate students. A fundamental decision is whether you aim to work at a four-year college, a university, or a research institute because that affects the distribution of skills that you

want to acquire. Four-year colleges want faculty who teach well, so practice as a teaching assistant and consider taking a course from the school of education. Universities and research institutes want research, so make sure you are as good at it as you can be. Consider taking a course in advanced statistics or in modeling from the mathematics department.

When it comes to picking a dissertation topic, there is no shortage of advice. Here's mine: A good research question is one that sociologists want to know the answer to. Notice I did NOT say to choose something you're passionate about. Passion is OK but optional. (Passionate interests often reflect your own life. Tell your therapist but don't write it for publication.) Attracting the interest of sociologists is crucial. How do you know what questions sociologists want to answer? Read the journals. Most articles state "next steps" or "further questions" in the discussion section. Those are guaranteed to be of interest to at least a few sociologists. Please do not try to justify a topic with "Nobody has yet studied..." There are plenty of topics that nobody has yet studied for the very good reason that they are silly topics. Remember that the goal of a dissertation is to show that you can formulate and conduct an investigation of a good research topic. The goal is not to radically change everyone's thinking. That's delusional, and if you take it seriously, you will find yourself becoming the world's oldest graduate student. Not a pretty picture.

Assistant professors should emphasize research. You don't want to generate complaints from students (and nowadays, from their parents), but teaching really isn't the central focus of your job. Research matters. When you go up for promotion, the p & t (promotion and tenure) committee will scrutinize your research productivity, and probably from only the first four years, so don't waste time getting started. And of course if you look for a job elsewhere, they have no reliable way to assess teaching or service, so it's all on your research record. Teaching and service can be seductive and demanding, yet nobody is likely to tell you "Put a little more time on your research today." You have to tell that to yourself.

If you have an opportunity to work with a more senior member of your department, that can be valuable. You can learn new research skills and you will have someone to ask for advice and to help with writing for publication. Collaborating with another assistant professor can be almost as valuable. Teach yourself quickly how to write research proposals. There are many benefits of this—you learn to express ideas clearly and you begin to integrate with the community of researchers, among them—and also, p & t committees smile if you get grants or at least show that you are trying to do so. Stay open to new ideas and research topics, talk with as many people as you can at meetings and through email. Especially in the social psychology section, there are many more smart people who are generous with their ideas than you might imagine. You will find time spent with them to be exciting and enormously satisfying. Enjoy your work.

If you ask me.

## **Webmaster Needed**

Our section is in search of a new webmaster to handle our section's website. It's a very simple job that requires no coding skill or computer expertise and takes less than an hour every month or so. The page is currently quite simple, with section officers, awards, and other basic information, but could certainly be spiffed up if our new webmaster was so inclined. This would be a great way to get involved in the section with very little commitment and lots of flexibility. The current site can be seen at: <http://www.asanet.org/socialpsychology/social.cfm>.

Please send enquiries to: Tim Owens, Chair, Section on Social Psychology, at [tjowens@kent.edu](mailto:tjowens@kent.edu).

## **Newsletter Editor Needed**

Three times a year our section sends out a newsletter. Being the editor involves you: (1) Putting out the call for included information; (2) Selecting & arranging an interview with the featured "Voice of Experience; (3) Contacting the SPQ editors to find out about any information they would like to share with the membership of the section; and (4) Formatting and double checking all included information.

You work closely with the section chair to make the newsletter as interesting and informative as possible. You also get to talk to a lot of social psychologists and even interview your personal heroes.

If you have questions about the position, please email our current editor, Bridget at [Bridget.K.Welch@usd.edu](mailto:Bridget.K.Welch@usd.edu).

It is our hope that we will have a new editor in place for the Fall newsletter.

