Review Essay

Sociological Reflections on Objectivity, Voice, and the Body

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For years, critical sociologists have questioned the need for and the possibility of remaining objective, value-free, and distant from the subjects of social science research, in the design of studies, collection and interpretation of data, and the representation of results. Each of the books reviewed here shares these questions. In each, the subject of the investigation is also one author of the text. Trained as a phenomenological sociologist, Marianne (Tracy) Paget was never “a detached observer attempting to understand objects or things” but “an experiencing subject, methodically attempting to understand other subjects and a subject matter” (p. 7). In Complex Sorrow, she simply turned herself into the subject both experienced and understood. In Cancer in Two Voices, Barbara Rosenblum “went inside [herself] and wrote about [her] life and feelings” (p. 54), instead of using traditional “sociological data” to build an interpretation.

Each of the books reviewed here also has a particular twist. In each, an author/subject turns to her sociological training to make sense of living with cancer and of coming to terms with repeated errors in diagnosis.

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The texts are constructed quite differently, and reflect not only dramatically different ways of interpreting "error" but dramatically different relationships to work, friendships, and life itself. Rosenblum agonized about why her cancer was missed for so long. Despite repeated visits to at least three different physicians in the Kaiser (HMO) system after she discovered a lump in her breast, and even though she noticed the lump growing, her breast swelling, and finally the skin around her nipple puckering, cancer was not diagnosed for almost a year. She attributed these errors to "mass medicine" and her working class background: "I never learned to recognize a good doctor. Public medicine was all I had ever experienced. Despite my 'class travel,' I still went to clinics, just as I had when I was ten, waiting for my glasses to be given to me for free" (p. 24). Rosenblum believed that had she known how to recognize bad medical care, and gone to a private physician in a private hospital, mistakes would not have happened.

Paget is much less sanguine. For Paget, mistakes made in her own life mirrored and gave support to her work on medical error. Even the title of her book is a concept she developed in previous work to define medical mistakes: "complex sorrows of action going wrong" (p. 14). According to Paget, errors are endemic to medicine. When Paget first noticed back pain, she was on a postdoctoral fellowship at Northwestern, where she had access to the student health services. There, her cancer was misdiagnosed as an injured back muscle. The mistake was compounded by two other errors in diagnosis. By the time her cancer was diagnosed, it was so far advanced that the prognosis was dire. For Paget, the question was not "why did physicians make mistakes about me?" but "why shouldn't physicians have made mistakes about me?"

And finally, each book concerns representations of someone's life in several different genres, or voices. In the past decade, feminist scholarship has attended not only to questions of objectivity, distance, and meaning, but to those concerning language and representation: In social science accounts of life experiences, whose story is it? To what extent are accounts attentive to the voice of subjects and to what extent do they represent the voice of the scholar? How does the way an account is told and represented shape its meaning? The two books reviewed here present different, but related, ways of addressing these questions.

*Complex Sorrow* weaves together Paget's scholarship, her translation of scholarly work into an artistic performance, and chronicles of her life in journal entries and a "newsletter" to her friends. The book represents Paget's work, put together with her friend and colleague Marjorie DeVault, who spent the last week of Paget's life printing out a copy of the corrected manuscript of the book, responding to Paget's "passionate