Center for Research on Women

Sisterhood as Collaboration: The Memphis State University Center for Research on Women

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The University of Memphis
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Center for Research on Women
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Introduction

This essay explores the connections between the development of the Memphis State University Center for Research on Women and the personal biographies of its three founders: Bonnie Thornton Dill, Elizabeth Higginbotham, and Lynn Weber. From its inception in 1982, the Center was distinctive among women’s research centers in several important ways. First, two of its founders were African American women and one was a White southern woman. Second, it was the first center funded by the Ford Foundation at a regional comprehensive state university that was not an established research university. Third, its central mission to examine the intersections of race, class, and gender was a direct outgrowth of our scholarly pursuits, as well as our biographies. Fourth, all three of us are sociologists and have realized the vision for the Center through collaborating on sociological research and teaching centered in an agenda for social change.

We begin this essay with a discussion of several themes which characterize our common scholarly visions, action strategies, and personal histories. This presentation is followed by biographical vignettes and substantive discussions of our scholarly works and our activism through the Center for Research on Women.
Themes in our Biographies, Theory, and Practice. Several themes characterize the collective vision of race, class, and gender that we developed and nurtured in conjunction with many other teacher/scholar/activists around the nation. The themes so powerfully contributed to each of our biographies that when the Ford Foundation presented us with the opportunity to propose a women’s research center in 1982, we had no problem articulating our broad mission and goals. First, we each knew at a deep personal level that race, class, and gender are power relations of dominance and subordination that are socially constructed, historically specific, and primary forms of social organization. We knew this because these truths were central to our lived experiences of multiple dimensions of oppression as African American and working-class women, and to the social histories of the Post World War II period when we came of age as sociologists. In fact, we each pursued sociology to understand and to change the injustices we abhorred. The fact that by 1982 no existing women’s research center or research tradition had yet articulated such a stance only meant we had a greater challenge. We never doubted the correctness of this basic belief.

Second, we knew that in order to understand the nature of race, class and gender we would need to encourage and promote scholarship about oppression by many individuals and groups of people who had faced oppression and been silenced in dominant culture scholarly traditions as well as in the newly emerging scholarship on women. That is, we knew our mission would be to validate and promote the views of women of color, working-class women, and other groups who experienced oppression along multiple dimensions.

To us, gender had always been significant within the context of race and class; that is, gender was never salient in isolation from race or class as a source of our own senses of
what structures our worlds, limits our options, or provides opportunities. The opportunity to establish our Center provides a case in point. In 1981, the Ford Foundation extended an invitation to Bonnie Dill to develop a center for research on women at Memphis State. As you will see, this invitation came not because she was a woman, but because she was an African American woman located in a southern university at a particular historical moment. Notwithstanding the significance—perhaps primacy—of race and class in our world views, our scholarly production and activism has most forcefully affected and found acceptance among the now very large community of feminist sociologists and women’s studies scholars. It is within this gendered context that our articulation of race and class has occurred.

Despite and perhaps because of that context, White middle-class women’s experiences and the scholarly positions articulated from their standpoints rarely resonated with our own. When we found them useful, it was most often as a counterpoint which clarified our own places by demonstrating differences in perspective produced by race and class privilege among women. The preoccupation among many White feminists with finding "common ground" or a set of "universal" women’s experiences to "bind us together as women" was never, and is not now, an exercise we deem worthwhile.¹

We never doubted, however, the necessity and value of working together with many diverse groups to gain scholarly insight and promote social change. We shared a desire to

¹Ironically, it is that very search for a "common agenda as women" that leads many White women to continue to see the inclusion of oppressed groups as necessary at the same time that they cannot fully incorporate those groups. That is the case because the very basis for the inclusion is the search for a way to deny the race and class realities of the lives of women of color and working-class women. Needless to say, these efforts often lead to mistrust and ill will, and certainly no common agenda.
learn from groups different from our own, and a basic mistrust of a power structure whose portrayals of our groups rarely conformed to our experience leading us to question dominant culture images of other subordinate groups.

We are aware of the power of individualism, status rankings, and competition especially in shaping the world views, career paths, and personal goals of the U.S. middle class (Vanneman and Weber Cannon 1987). By the time all three of us met, we had already successfully survived college, graduate school, and faculty status and had been exposed to the reward system in academia which paralleled that of other middle-class occupations. However, our working-class, African American, and female socialization also taught us to value collaboration, collective action, and social justice--values that find few legitimized outlets in academia.

For example, from the beginning, the expectation presented to Bonnie Dill by the Ford Foundation and the Memphis State University administration was that she, mother of a two-year old son and newborn twin girls, would somehow envision and create a unique research center in a non-research university in the South all by herself. These expectations reflected: the tendency on the part of Foundations to fund "people," the "superwoman" image that was held about Bonnie, and the lack of understanding of her and our collective orientation and connections. As we later came to see, they also illustrated the rather low expectations that were actually held for our long range survival.

Instead of acting alone, Bonnie collaborated with Elizabeth and Lynn and they consulted with other women of color scholars and collectively created the vision for the center. Even after the proposal was developed and the center was well-established on the
basis of a strong alliance and shared roles and responsibilities, Ford Foundation officers and the Memphis State University administration continued to see the center as "Bonnie’s shop," not recognizing that the Center was always the product of a collective effort of the three of us, our staff, and our national network.

As illustrated in our biographical statements, all three of us had fairly extensive experiences in crossing social barriers, building coalitions, and standing up for principles we believed in—as presidents of our high school classes and student bodies, and as leaders in many organizations and arenas from civil rights to sports. In those ways, we learned to accept and appreciate difference; to use our marginality, outsider within statuses, and multiple memberships to bridge social divides; and to be especially critical of stances that emanated from privileged standpoints or the stances that each of us might take which emanated from our own privilege.

Finally, while we each experienced painful restrictions on our lives based on race, class, and gender, we also experienced uncommon levels of direct involvement with White middle-class and elite worlds. We not only crossed the race, class, and gender social boundaries that most of our young cohorts did not, we also learned to function very well in those places where we stood out as different because of our race, class, and/or gender.

In the discussion that follows, we hope to illustrate some of the ways that these themes emerged through our lives and shaped our scholarship and the character of the Center for Research on Women that we developed.

**Historical Context for Development of the Center.** In 1982, when the Center was established, there were approximately 25 other women’s research centers nationwide. Most
had been started with Ford Foundation funding as early as 1972. By the early 1980’s, the field of women’s studies had made important inroads into the academy, but its impact had been most visibly and forcefully felt in the humanities, particularly in English through the Modern Language Association. Women of color offered sophisticated critiques of the White middle-class male biases in all fields, including sociology, but sociological scholarship on race relations, social class, and gender continued to develop in almost complete isolation from each other. Race relations scholarship explored race from the perspectives of men, while gender scholarship strongly reflected the standpoints of White women. Sociologists viewed social class through a distinctively White, male, and middle-class lens, obscuring the perspectives of workers, especially people of color and women (Vanneman and Weber Cannon 1987; Fantasia 1987; Lual 1994). The irony of ignoring groups whose experiences typically reflected the confluence of all three major dimensions of inequality was captured in the oft cited title of one of the first anthologies about Black women’s studies: *All the Women were White. All the Blacks were Men. But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies* (Hull, Bell-Scott and Smith 1982).

In the early 1980’s, Black women were beginning to make their voices heard in discussions of women’s lives (Cade 1970; hooks 1981; Rodgers-Rose 1980). Bonnie Dill (1979) was among the first Black women scholars whose critical perspective on race and gender was published in a major feminist journal. Her presentation at the 7th Scholar and the Feminist Conference at the Barnard College Women’s Center in 1980 gained the attention of the Ford Foundation program officer for women’s studies, Mariam Chamberlain. A version of this address later appeared in *Feminist Studies* entitled "Race, Class, and Gender:
Prospects for an All-Inclusive Sisterhood" (Dill 1983).

Chamberlain and Dill began discussions about establishing a research center at Memphis State University, as part of the foundation’s dual interest in developing centers in southern universities and which addressed race and gender. After a small grant to support the work of the Inter-University Research Group Exploring the Intersection of Race and Gender, a group which laid much of the groundwork for the Center, Bonnie and Lynn in collaboration with Elizabeth applied for and received an initial three-year grant from the Ford Foundation for core support for the Center for Research on Women at Memphis State University.2 At the same time, the centers at Duke-University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill and the University of Washington were established with Ford funding. The Women’s Research and Resource Center at Spelman College was established around the same time through a grant from the Mott Foundation. Each of these centers identified race and gender as central components in their missions, but each center developed a distinct yet complementary approach.3

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2This initial research group was composed of Dill, Higginbotham, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, Evelyn Nakano Glenn, and Ruth Zambrana. The grant from the Ford Foundation provided them with funding for books, summer stipends, and travel for three group meetings which were held between 1981 and 1983. Afterwards the group had a Problems of the Discipline Grant from the American Sociological Association in 1984.

Biographical Statements: Growing Up

By the time we met one another, we had each become highly skilled at negotiating the boundaries of race and class. Our biographies are replete with experiences in which we were outsiders—an "other," different from the majority of people in particular settings such as school, work, or sports. Through these experiences, we became adept at crossing class and racial borders and communicating with diverse groups of people, including White middle-class men and women. We were each acutely aware of the pain and isolation that accompanies being seen as outsiders, but also knew the basic human desire for connection and belonging.

When we first sat down to think about this article with one another, we discussed our lives—or more accurately reminded each other of life stories which we had shared over many years of friendship. We did make one rather funny new discovery about ourselves. Bonnie had been the president of her high school senior class, and Elizabeth and Lynn were the presidents of their all-girls high school student bodies. Further, we each attributed those elections at the time, as well as many other leadership roles we played later in our lives, to our marginality and the "border-crossing" skills we had developed to survive on the margins.

Elizabeth Higginbotham. I grew up Black and working-class in New York City. I was the second of five children and the oldest daughter. My mother entered paid employment after I entered junior high. She had a retail sales job at a department store and later was a secretary with the New York public school system. My father was a bartender at a jazz club in the Village and later a waiter in hotels, where he served at various functions,
e.g., weddings, lunches, breakfasts, and dinners. In his younger years, he had been a Pullman porter, riding back and forth across the country.⁴

My father often talked about his work, his working buddies, and the class relationships of the job. When I was in the second and third grades, I vividly remember my father’s friend, Larry, coming by the apartment every day to travel with my father to work. It seemed so nice that I have since always felt that work should be shared with your friends—an aspect of working-class life that I wanted in my middle-class position. In fact, I was shocked by the isolated nature of academic life when I began my first full-time faculty position at the University of Pittsburgh. I made the decision to move to Memphis so that working with my friends, Lynn and Bonnie, would become a reality in my professional life. Lynn shared this distinctly working-class view of work with me, and we often fondly referred to taking our lunch pails to work in the Center’s "factory" together.

My family moved from Harlem to lower Manhattan when I was five. Childhood summers were spent in Pittsburgh with my grandparents and extended family, and later moves (family and individual) took me to other neighborhoods and regions. These moves were important in my life, since they meant entering different settings where I had to learn what

⁴"By World War I, Pullman employed approximately 12,000 Black people, making it the largest single employer of Black workers in the county" (Harris 1982, p. 60). These men were employed as sleeping car porters. Lead by A. Philip Randolph, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters struggled for better working conditions. Many of these men and their wives, often working in Ladies Auxiliaries, became key leaders in their communities and many worked in the early Civil Rights Movement in the North and South. For additional reading on the topic see: Jack Santino, Miles of Smiles, Years of Struggle: Stories of Black Pullman Porters (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); William Harris, Keeping the Faith: A. Philip Randolph, Milton P. Webster, and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, 1925-1937 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978).
was expected of me and to exhibit appropriate behaviors.

My formal education began in a public elementary school on the east side of Manhattan in 1953. This neighborhood, now the East Village, was overwhelmingly working class, but ethnically and racially mixed. Even though I grew up outside the Black communities of New York, I was very aware of race, since I was often the only Black student in my classes. This early experience also exposed me to other people of color (Puerto Ricans and Asian Americans) and a host of first and second generation White ethnic students.

After Thanksgiving in 1960, my family moved to the upper west side of Manhattan where my world grew to include middle-class young people. This neighborhood had a mixture of racial and social class tensions and intimacies. I transferred to Joan of Arc Junior High School and spent the remainder of the seventh grade in a diverse classroom. There were middle-class and working-class students, as well as students from a range of racial and ethnic and cultural backgrounds. I enjoyed this class, where my propensity to challenge myself by reading the longest book, memorizing the longest poems, and tackling major projects was appreciated by all—even those students who selected an e.e. cummings poem, "The Fog" over Robert Frost's "The Wall." Our English/Social Studies and homeroom teacher, Mrs. Witte, made us all feel appreciated and welcomed.

It was in that junior high school that I was "selected" by teachers and administrators for mobility. In eighth grade, another Black classmate, William, and I were taken out of our diverse class and moved to a predominantly White class. For the eighth and ninth grades, William, Evelyn and I were the three Black students in an "enrichment track" class. This meant crossing many borders, but I enjoyed the educational challenges as well as learning
about the lives and families of other students. The classroom was a cooperative setting where we worked together on course projects, committees, and field trips. Even though I was always conscious of representing the race in this very small fishbowl, I appreciated the community of teachers and administrators who exposed us to classical music, museums, plays, musicals and encouraged us to see the city as a resource for us all.

I decided to attend the district all-girls high school, Julia Richman High School, because it was reputed to have a very solid college preparatory program. Over my three years in high school, I watched the high ability academic courses become more White and middle-class, as even I drifted into the regular academic program in my senior year. As a senior, I took advanced placement History and fought to gain access to college preparatory English. In retrospect, I can see that I was disengaged from many courses because of the way they were taught and I, therefore, put my attention elsewhere. I became involved with New York High School Friends of SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) and that made the high school years tolerable and provided me with an important way to connect to race issues. I also developed my leadership skills in this arena. In my high school, I was active in the Human Relations Club and very visible as a political person. As a senior, I was elected president of the student government organization.5

With a mixed high school record and a consistent ability to botch standardized tests, I started college at the Borough of Manhattan Community College in 1966. This was an exciting year, since I was able to connect with students from around the city who, like me,

5Deborah Gray White succeeded me in that position. She is currently a professor of History at Rutgers, State University of New Jersey and author of Ar’nt I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985).
were smart but alienated by the routines and memorization of high school. I had wonderful teachers and often my classmates and I took discussions out of the classroom to the coffee shop, located on the ground floor of the office building which was then our campus.

After one year, I transferred to City College of New York. Open enrollment did not come to the City University until 1971, so during my three plus years on campus, I was one of a few students of color. Again I felt highly visible, but in retrospect I can see that my New York public education and years of working gave me a broad experience—moving into and out of working- and middle-class settings and across racial and ethnic lines. While it generated many questions about social systems, it also fostered a comfort with being different and an ability to build coalitions and communities in different settings.

Bonnie Thornton Dill. Growing up on the South Side of Chicago in the 1950's taught me a lot about race and class. Both of my parents were professionals who grew up in Chicago; like many of their contemporaries, they were the first in their families to have the opportunity to complete college and a professional education. My father was a pharmacist who owned his own business; my mother, a school teacher, later owned and operated an independent nursery school. Although themselves products of the Chicago public schools, my mother's experiences as a teacher there convinced her that she wanted a different kind of education for me. So, beginning in nursery school and continuing through twelfth grade I attended the University of Chicago Laboratory School.

Although my classmates were overwhelmingly White, my neighborhood community, church, and social life were unmistakably rooted in African American culture until high school. Through these sources I learned Black history, culture, and social life. At the dinner
table and at social gatherings, I heard discussions about improving conditions for "the race."
The names of notable African Americans, such as Ida B. Wells, Percy Julian, Benjamin Mays, Paul Robeson, and Mary McLeod Bethune became familiar to me at an early age.

There was no questioning that education was the key to achievement, that contributing to the improvement of the race was expected and that I had a rich legacy to inspire and sustain me.

The nurturance and pride with which I learned about race in my family and immediate community contrasted sharply with the ways I learned about race from living in Chicago. Chicago in the 1950’s was a racially divided city. My parents purchased a home in a section called Englewood in 1944. They were among the first African American families on the block. Within a few years all the White people had moved out. This was a typical pattern in the so-called "integration" of Chicago: block busting, distinct racial and ethnic neighborhoods, and White flight. In fact, the block just north of us was divided in the middle by elevated railroad tracks. Only White people lived on the other side of the tracks.

Interestingly, my mother told me of a conversation she had with a White woman who resided in that area and boasted that the Catholic parish had bought up vacant homes in that neighborhood in order to insure that no Black people moved in. Even if apocryphal, this story conveys the racial divisiveness that characterized the city. I never rode through that neighborhood without feeling apprehensive and a sense of threat. As children out at play, we never ventured over there.

Another incident that is my earliest personal remembrance of racism occurred at the neighborhood swimming pool. I was perhaps six or seven at the time and one hot summer afternoon my mother took me to the local public pool to swim. I joyfully jumped into the
water and soon there was a group of White teens yelling at my mother to get me out of the pool before they threw me out. My mother looked at me and told me not to move--so I didn't--but I must admit that at that moment I would have preferred to be any place else but there. Eventually, we left but that night my mother wrote letters and made phone calls to the mayor and numerous other local public officials. By the following summer, the pool was integrated Chicago-style; Black folks swam there and the White folks left.

There were many aspects of my early life which made me keenly aware of class differences in the African American community. My extended family consisted of mostly working-class and a few middle-class individuals. Those differences were the source of conflict and jealousy within the family at the same time that they were a source of pride and defined patterns of family support and assistance. Our neighborhood, too, although consisting of mostly stable working-class and middle-class African American homeowners was not without tension. The oldest girl from one of the least stable families on the block teased and taunted me about attending a private school. I now recognize this as class anger and resentment, but it sometimes made neighborhood play unpleasant. On a broader scale, many of the problems of joblessness and low income which my parents and their friends discussed and sought to address were problems that were a result of both racial discrimination and lack of economic resources. My parents believed strongly in cooperative economics and had been founders of a consumer cooperative that ran a grocery store, a savings and loan association, and now operates a senior citizen housing complex.

Being one of a few African American students in a predominantly White private school was not as alienating as it might be today, partly because I had such a strong and
rich family, community, and social life—particularly during elementary school. In high school, however, I became acutely aware of the two separate and conflicting worlds in which I lived and the challenges of trying to maintain both of them. My conflict became palpable, as most high school conflicts do, around the lunch table. I had many different friends in high school and ate lunch with different people—sometimes with my African American friends and sometimes with my White friends. One day, however, my Black friends informed me that they were having a private club meeting and I couldn’t join them. After that happened repeatedly, I began to eat lunch regularly with my White friends. While I remained friendly with the African American girls and continued to be involved with them socially outside of school, I was not in their inner circle, nor they in mine.

My access to and engagement with White friends at school exposed me to a variety of life experiences. My best friend’s family was Jewish and had escaped from Poland through France during World War II. Another friend’s father was a Rabbi. Several other friends had parents who were faculty members at the University of Chicago. My connections with groups of both African American and White students was an important factor in my being elected Senior Class President.

**Lynn Weber.** Early in life I developed a strong image of life as the interplay of insiders and outsiders. This is deeply embedded in me as the result of early experiences as an Irish Catholic raised in Nashville, Tennessee; as a girl in an extremely rigid mission elementary school; as a working-class state champion tennis player; and as a straight "A" student and leader in my all-girls high school. Adult experiences—in college and in my career as a sociologist—completely remade my world view in some ways, but notions of power
and privilege, exclusion and oppression were already there to be named and refined, but not denied or doubted.

My daddy was a steam fitter and my mom a secretary at the Internal Revenue Service. Although he was never active in union politics, my father was a union member, a fairly uncommon experience in the working-class South. Both my parents worked very hard to provide an opportunity for me, my younger brother, and sister to "get ahead," and college attendance was the route they encouraged.

Catholics in Nashville were very aware of our outsider status. I grew up knowing that "we" (my family and others) were in hostile territory--surrounded by Protestants (they were generically all alike to me) and a mysterious organization called the KKK that put us in the same despised category as "colored people" (with whom I had some experience) and Jews (with whom I had absolutely no experience).

My schoolmates were all White, though ethnically quite diverse and so were my best friends: Lucia was Irish, Debbie was Lebanese, and Cheryl was Italian. But our greater reality was the common thread of our differentness from the larger community. We went to school on different busses and wore uniforms, so we were easily spotted as outsiders in our neighborhood. But the "outsider" pain of exclusion and derision by the dominant culture was coupled with a strong "insider" sense of community belonging and moral rightness.

Our elementary school was a mission school taught by French Canadian nuns whose only other mission school was in Africa. We observed a strict code of silence. Except when we were outside at recess, we never spoke unless called upon by a teacher and then we were required to stand whenever we spoke. Whenever an adult entered our classrooms, the entire
class stood and remained standing until given permission to sit. Our conduct was constantly monitored by teachers and designated students when teachers were not present. We were punished for ever speaking--on the bus, in the bathroom, in the cafeteria, in the hallways, in the church, and of course, in the classroom. Our parents also reinforced the rigid authoritarianism of the schools. "Screw-ups" at school also brought punishment at home.

During elementary school I wanted desperately to be good, to avoid breaking the rules, and to avoid punishment. At the same time, the system fostered in me an "us" (students) vs. "them" (adults) mentality. To become a turncoat and monitor and turn in fellow students was both the reward for good behavior and a threat to solidarity and friendships. So I walked a fine line between these worlds--to conform, and thus to please teachers, and, when that conformity brought the desired and dreaded designation as monitor, not to rat on my classmates. In contrast, my brother rebelled and faced daily punishment.

Thus, it was very early in life when I began to see that things simply weren't always fair and there was very little young people could do about it. At the same time, the Catholic emphasis on racial and economic justice heavily influenced my world view. In fact, my decision to attend college seemed somewhat like a cop-out, the Peace Corps or direct social service being the more worthy routes (short of entering a convent).

Sports was, for me, a source of great enjoyment, accomplishment, and ultimately a ticket to visit the middle class. I began as the only girl in my neighborhood play group of six. We played all the major sports in season: football, basketball, and baseball. As I got older, even though my father was a coach, I was excluded from Little League Baseball because I was a girl despite several coach's pleas to the national association to let me in.
My family's response was to enroll me in free tennis (a sport for girls) clinics in the public parks. I was good at tennis, too. From the age of twelve, competitions pulled me into a world of rich, White country club people all over the South, and I experienced this world in a very different way than my middle-class contemporaries. My tennis friends and competitors never came to my side of town to practice. Instead, I often rode the bus an hour across town, with Black women domestics, to practice and play. I was city and state champion for several years. This involved traveling and staying with wealthy people all over the region who housed tournament participants for free. During those years from twelve to twenty three, I crossed the boundary from working-class home to middle-class school, home and country club almost daily. No middle-class friend or competitor ever crossed my way.

Biographical Statements: Entering Sociology

We each entered graduate school in sociology in the 1970's to pursue our dual commitments to social justice and to securing decent middle-class employment. We knew, however, from our personal experiences and the social movements of the times that the formal educational system could not be counted on to embrace our perspectives and meet our needs. It would also take actions on our part to make that happen. We each entered our programs with primary interests in race and class. Courses in gender were only beginning to be offered on the graduate level as we pursued our degrees. Bonnie and Elizabeth each took a graduate seminar focused on gender issues. In her course, Bonnie read early feminist literature and realized that it did not speak to women's realities as she knew them. For
Elizabeth, a few of her sociological seminars included feminist social science works. She also participated in a research seminar on gender where other participants studied the lives of White middle-class women, while the two women of color focused on the lives of women of color.

Our graduate schools provided us with skills and credentials, but these were not settings where we flourished. Gender and race barriers were firmly entrenched in our graduate departments which had lifted barriers of admission, but did not embrace the perspectives which women, working-class people, and people of color used to understand social life.

**Elizabeth Higginbotham.** *I felt like I squeezed my undergraduate degree at City College in between the various part-time jobs necessary for my survival. Therefore graduate school was a unique opportunity for me to finally have the time for the reflection and interaction with other students that my peers in graduate school had in their college years. Bringing my skills and interests from my political work in SNCC, in 1971, I organized a racially integrated women's consciousness raising group. Later I pulled together a support group of women of color graduate students in the Boston/Cambridge area. In addition to helping each other survive and write dissertations in overwhelmingly White graduate departments, we openly discussed our families, schooling experiences, upward social class mobility, and relationships across gender, race, and class. In these peer networks I learned far more about issues which were important to me and critical to my survival than I learned from graduate faculty at Brandeis.*

*While many of the White graduate students at Brandeis did not attend regional*
and/or national professional meetings until they were looking for jobs, I was encouraged by an undergraduate professor to begin attending these meetings early in my graduate career. In this way I followed developments in the study of U.S. race relations, content that was missing in the graduate curriculum at Brandeis. I also established a network of relationships with graduate students of color at other institutions and received encouragement and support from senior Black colleagues in the discipline. Their support and encouragement were critical to my survival as a graduate student.

My part-time teaching experiences and interaction with students and faculty at the University of Massachusetts at Boston motivated me to complete a doctorate. But, it was my interactions with other people of color which actually gave me the social, emotional, and intellectual resources to secure that goal. While building and operating within a network of graduate students of color, I met Bonnie Thornton Dill, a graduate student in New York who was also working on Black women. Initially, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, then a graduate student at Northeastern University and now Associate Professor at Colby College, heard Bonnie Dill deliver a paper at the 1975 annual meetings of the American Sociological Association (ASA) in San Francisco (that year my meager earnings did not permit me to travel to the annual meetings). Cheryl, excited by the work of this sister graduate student, made copies of Bonnie’s paper for members in our Boston group. I contacted Bonnie and we met at the 1976 ASA meeting in New York City. Our budding group of Black women sociologists nurtured and guided each others’ work in the absence of senior mentors in our institutions knowledgeable about gender and race. We organized panels at regional and national meetings to present our work and expand our network. In 1979, we took pride as
four in our group completed our dissertations. We continued to support each other as we launched our careers.

**Bonnie Thornton Dill.** I entered graduate school in sociology at New York University in 1972 after working for seven years in New York City. My first job after college was with the federal Office of Economic Opportunity. I continued to work in the War on Poverty at both the federal and local levels for several years. After earning a masters' degree in Human Relations, I became a counselor in the SEEK Program (the special admissions program for African American and Latino students of the City University of New York) at Bernard M. Baruch College. My work in organizing community corporations, setting up family planning programs, and counseling students of color had given me hands-on experience with the problems sociological theories purport to address. I came to graduate school looking for theories that would help me understand and make sense of what I had learned about racism and poverty. I also came to sociology because I knew I had a different story to tell about African American families than the one that was sweeping the country at the time under the title of the "Moynihan Report."

I began my work in sociology as a part-time student, convinced that if I did not like it and if it did not provide me with a way to address the issues I was concerned about, I would not continue. I had been an English major in undergraduate school and was unfamiliar with the discipline of sociology. Once I read C. Wright Mills, however, I was hooked: hooked on the idea that biography and history were keys to understanding people in

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6In addition to Higginbotham, Gilkes, and Dill completing dissertations in 1979, Regina Arnold, now Associate Professor at Sarah Lawrence College, also finished her doctorate from Bryn Mawr.
society. I entered the field when conflict theory was displacing functionalism and that shift explained a lot of the world as I came to know it. It also fit with my desire to use sociological theory as a tool for social improvement and social change.

I entered graduate school determined to study African American families, but I did not expect to find much expertise about them within the institution. I knew from the outset that I would have to build my own support networks. As I became more engaged in the field, I sought other graduate students who shared my interests. Several of my efforts to exchange work and get feedback were unsuccessful, but once I met Elizabeth Higginbotham and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, I found myself among a group of developing young scholars who became career-long allies, colleagues, and friends.

Through graduate school, I learned to be part of a long-distance network and to use the annual sociology meetings as a point of connection. When I moved from New York to Memphis, I took my network and networking ideas with me. From the start, Lynn Weber and I got along. Like me, she had gone to graduate school with interests that could not be fully accommodated there and she had created her own concentration in race. Her scholarly and personal interest in race was our first point of connection and over the years we discovered many others. It was inevitable then, that when Elizabeth came to Memphis in 1979 to visit, she, Lynn, and I would begin to work together.

Lynn Weber. I changed majors eight times in my four years of undergraduate work at Memphis State, trying biology, math, social work, and psychology before settling in on sociology the semester before I graduated in 1971. I pursued sociology to try to understand some of the tremendous social issues of the time: racism, war, and poverty. During work on
my masters at Memphis State and my doctorate at the University of Illinois, Urbana, my attitude toward graduate school was that it was the necessary evil en route to a secure job and decent pay in a field I liked. I looked upon it as an evil because I was acutely aware of the political nature of the process and the way it influenced every aspect of graduate education—from entry to exit.

For example, this was brought home to me early in my M.A. program when the new chair of the department of sociology actively campaigned to deny tenure to a faculty member. Although I was unaware of these men's struggles, I was the only student called by both sides to testify in an appeals committee hearing. I saw the whole sordid affair as an exploitation of relatively powerless students in the petty, foolish, and unnecessary power games that faculty play. I still feel the same way about most university politics today.

My class, region, and gender were each explicitly presented as barriers to my continuing down one path or another throughout my education. For example, my undergraduate professors at Memphis State told me that an undergraduate degree from Memphis State was a liability and so only after completing a master's would I be able to compete with undergraduates from top universities to get into a "good" doctoral program.

When I did enter the University of Illinois, my advisory committee in the second semester indicated that I would need to take more course work than other graduate students because my undergraduate institution was southern and its faculty were "unknown." My faculty advisory committee made this decision after I had completed my first semester at Illinois on a fellowship with four A's, no incompletes, and a part-time job. At the time, I had already begun to systematically study inequities of power within the classroom. As a
participant observer and unbeknownst to the faculty, I conducted a power analysis of a team-taught theory seminar. The results clearly showed the ways that the frequency and content of communications varied with the status of the speaker.

Despite the fact that I was a "straight A" student in graduate school, my educational experiences were never anything I wanted to revel in or repeat, so I set my mind to getting out as fast as I could. Even though I had studied race and worked on a study of social class identification in graduate school, it was not until I met Elizabeth and Bonnie that I first began to see clearly the connections between my work and my self.

I will never forget my deep-seated feeling of liberation soon after Bonnie Dill joined the Memphis State faculty in 1978, two years after me. I came to feel what I had never imagined possible before—that there could be a sociology/professional colleague who frequently shared my views and interests. More importantly, when we did not agree, I learned from her different perspective. She was the first colleague I ever had who related to me as an equal with respect. The relationship meant so much to me that I grew in leaps and bounds—in self confidence, intellectual creativity and risk-taking, and productivity.

The relationship affected me in ways that I did not comprehend. For example, when Bonnie was absent for a semester after the birth of her twin girls in 1980, I carried on my daily work much as I had before she came. I had no soul mate at the office, but I frequently visited her and the children at her home and helped with regular "outings." The first week after her return, we entered the Sociology building after having lunch. An African American woman on the housekeeping staff proclaimed down the entry hall for all to hear "It sure is good you (Bonnie) got back, she was so sad while you were gone! She's smiling again." I
had no idea that my feelings were so different and visible. I had discussed them with no one. Of course, it was not my faculty colleagues, but a member of the housekeeping staff who saw the change in me, and reflected it back.

Points of Connection/Building the Center/Intellectual Vision

As we came to know each other across our diverse backgrounds, our intellectual interests in social inequality, our critical perspectives on power structures, our desire to be scholar/activists, and our multiple experiences of oppression were all central points of connection among the three of us. The people we had become, and the instincts we followed, led us to trust each other in our critical stances toward "the mainstream" of sociology as a discipline and of the academic institutions where we worked.

The Department of Sociology at Memphis State, where Lynn began her career in 1976 and Bonnie joined in 1978 was overwhelmingly White and male and virtually all of the men had wives who bore primary responsibility for their home and family lives. During her first few weeks on campus, Bonnie was invited to lunch by three of her male colleagues. When they arrived at the cafeteria all three of them pulled out lunch bags with sandwiches their wives had prepared. Bonnie recalled, "I was astounded to think this was supposed to be my professional reference group. Every morning before I went to work, I was getting food and formula together for my five month old son and my husband was busy going to work himself. There was no one to make lunch for either of us."

Bonnie and Lynn supported each other in their efforts to manage the demands of
family while maintaining scholarly productivity and quality teaching. Many early meetings to plan the Center’s work were conducted at Bonnie’s house while feeding and caring for babies. When Elizabeth moved to Memphis in 1983, she joined the Center she had helped to frame. As a single woman, she needed support to keep the endless work demands from consuming her entire life. Our everyday life in the department mirrored our place in the discipline and the encouragement we gave each other to value our personal lives while pursuing our careers was so important to our survival that we knew it would be key to the survival of other women. Although we had already become good friends before we initiated the Center, as we shared our work and lives over time, we became sisters.

Our Center’s collective vision was developed through interaction among ourselves and other members of our intellectual and activist communities at Memphis State University, in Memphis, and across the nation. By sharing our individual wishes, assessing our strengths, and identifying our communities’ needs, we set out to nurture a national and local community of scholar-activists working for social change for women of color and working-class southern women. Because we are sociologists, our Center was then, and remains, grounded in a sociological perspective.

The process through which we came to an understanding of our common vision for the Center and for our individual roles within it was much more chaotic and ambiguous than can be aptly characterized here. Because we were very clearly creating a new kind of institution in a unique location, we found no models that guided us very far towards our goals. For example, when Elizabeth and Lynn wrote a proposal to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) for research on upward mobility among Black and White women, no
one at Memphis State had ever before submitted a research proposal to NIMH. The Office of Sponsored Programs gave us the closest examples they had on file: two National Institute of Health grant proposals—one on hearing aids and a second on blood hemoglobin!

At that time, much of what we attempted, either in our scholarship or in other projects, felt like walking into a void. Who knows how you’ll get through it or where you’ll be when you do? Many of the things we did as a nationally focused, externally funded program had never been done before at Memphis State. Often new rules and procedures were developed as a result of our actions. This had advantages and disadvantages, but helped maintain a sense of chaos and ambiguity.

For example, during the first five years of the Center’s operation (1982-1987), the university had no written procedures or standard practices for such common grant issues as allocation of indirect costs, faculty buy-outs, obtaining space, renovating space, and so forth. Each grantee negotiated in private with several levels of higher administration (Chair, Dean, Vice-President for Sponsored Programs, Vice-President for Academic Affairs), and it was never clear exactly with whom we should negotiate. Frequently, we would reach an agreement with the Dean of Arts and Sciences only to learn a few months later that the Vice-President for Sponsored Programs would not carry through on some aspect that involved (or came to involve) his office. Rarely would administrators agree to put anything in writing so this left us constantly facing "crises" as issues we thought were settled arose when someone’s paycheck was not cut, travel not approved, etc. Further, while administrators appreciated the money and visibility of the grants that we brought to the university, they did not believe that our Center, or women’s studies as a whole, would survive for five years. So they were
never willing to "invest" in our "operation" the way that they did for other centers on

campus like the Center for Earthquake Research and Information (CERI) or the Manpower
Research Center. As we sought to figure out how to negotiate the system, the Director of
CERI was in fact quite helpful, but also very frustrated with the uncertainties in the
"system."

Given this high degree of uncertainty, the process we employed to carry on reflects
the creative tension of oppression and activism as we experienced it in individual and
collective ways. In a system that had historically devalued our people and our work, we
acted because our individual and collective survival depended upon it. Regularly sharing our
personal experiences and studying the histories of oppressed groups was one means through
which we found certainty in an uncertain world. That certainty is the necessity and value of
the struggle for justice.

Given the limited resources available to us at Memphis State, we decided that our
mission had to be narrowly focused and clearly defined. We knew that we and others
sharing our vision needed a place that would give priority to a social structural study of race,
class, and gender. We sought to legitimate the academic and activist pursuits that we and
many others had engaged in for so many years.

In 1982, with Bonnie Dill as Director and Lynn Weber as Associate Director, we
formally announced our mission in our first newsletter. "This Center’s first commitment is
to advance, promote, and conduct research on working-class women in the South and women
of color in the nation." We further stated that our enterprise would be defined through our
actions. "Our activities of our first eleven months . . . reflect the ways in which we see
ourselves vis a vis the community of researchers, writers and teachers who make up our
target population, the University community in which we hope to become an increasingly
important unit, and the Memphis community in which we live and work" (Dill 1982, p. 1).

During those first eleven months we hosted a one-day workshop on Women and Work in the South, established a national advisory board, initiated a clearinghouse of scholars conducting research on women of color and southern women, co-sponsored a women and religion conference with local community activists, produced a newsletter and a national and local mailing list, sponsored meetings of the Inter-University Research Group Exploring the Intersection of Race and Gender, planned our first summer institute, hosted our first visiting scholar, Elizabeth Higginbotham, started a series of working papers, established ties with many groups across the country, and began to develop research grant applications. We also provided a "minority" voice in the development of the National Council for Research on Women—a new coalition of 28 centers for research on women.7

On the home front, we also dealt with the institutional bureaucratic and political demands of hiring staff, identifying and renovating space, and getting established as a new unit on the our campus. We also maintained our involvement in campus committees and programs (e.g., Women’s Studies and Black Studies) and taught two courses a semester.

Through the challenges of our first years, our intellectual vision became ever more focused and clear. We maintained our commitment to studying social structural systems of inequality embedded in race, class, and gender relations and their ramifications for social

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7As of 1994, the National Council for Research on Women had over 60 institutional members.
life. Examining the diversity of social experiences across systems of oppression was a natural outgrowth of this focus. Through this process we demonstrated the importance of multiple perspectives representing the views/insights/voices of those in different relations of power for a more complete and accurate understanding of social reality. The basic truth of this principle was reinforced in our everyday lives as we struggled together to develop our careers and build the Center at Memphis State.

**Scholarship.** We wanted our scholarship to reflect the complexities of the social world as we experienced and observed it. We sought therefore to find new ways to develop insights, design and conduct research and write within a perspective integrating race, class, and gender. Thinking and writing together was one of the ways we gained clarity. We did this in an academic environment which favored individual achievement over collaborative efforts.

The Inter-University Group Exploring the Intersection of Gender and Race opened the dialogue about gender and race. Within this group, consisting of Dill, Higginbotham, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, Evelyn Nakano Glenn and Ruth Zambrana, we re-thought the influence of racial oppression on women’s lives by examining various groups of women in different racial-ethnic communities. Lynn was often an informal participant in this group and played a critical role on the faculty of the Center’s first summer institute on women of color in 1983. That summer institute brought together graduate students and faculty, most of whom felt isolated in their respective institutions because they lacked colleagues with whom
to share their work on women of color.⁸

We agreed that in feminist circles, we often found ourselves surrounded by middle-class, White women who were unwilling to confront the racist assumptions of women’s studies. While we had each learned a lot through placing women in the center of scholarly analysis, we were dissatisfied with the position of women of color and working-class women who were still on the margins. Along with Maxine Baca Zinn, a visiting scholar at the Center during the summer of 1984, we wrote a critique of exclusionary practices in women’s studies that was published in SIGNS (Baca Zinn et al. 1986). We hoped that if White feminists were made aware of their biases, it would prompt them to take issues of race and class more seriously.⁹

Extending the critique of White middle-class biases in women’s studies was just one step on our scholarly journey. We also found ourselves critiquing work within several other sub-fields of scholarship. Although we found useful insights in historical and contemporary work in ethnic studies, male biases pervaded these fields. And, while there was a growing scholarship on working-class women, it was mostly historical and focused more on the employment and social lives of White women. Nevertheless, through careful analysis,

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⁸In addition to the members of the original research group and Lynn Weber, the faculty for the first summer institute on women of color were Esther Chow, Professor of Sociology at American University; Leith Mullings, Professor of Anthropology at the Graduate Center for the City University of New York; Maxine Baca Zinn, Professor of Sociology, Michigan State University; and Lea Ybarra who is now an administrator at the University of California, Fresno and also holds the rank of Professor of Sociology.

⁹This article, which was designed to speak directly to White feminists, was encouraged by Barbara Gelpi, then the editor of SIGNS: Journal of Women in Culture and Society.
critique, and selection, each of these scholarly traditions contributed to our work.

We, in turn integrated our focus on race, class and gender into this scholarship. For example, we were not as sold on the critique of the family as were many women's studies scholars at the time, because this paradigm ignored important aspects of family life for people of color. While in some respects our families did constrain women, we often felt more constrained by patriarchy in the public sector. Additionally, our families had often been sources of strength and refuge in a hostile society. Because racism and discrimination often pushed women of color out of the household and into the market place, we became particularly interested in employment--especially the segmented labor systems in which women of color were found. Bonnie's research on Black women domestics explored working conditions as well as the economic survival strategies of these women (Dill 1980, 1994). Elizabeth (Higginbotham 1983) and Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1992) looked at patterns whereby women of color performed reproductive labor, domestic work inside of individual homes and service work in the labor market, especially in laundries, hospitals, restaurants, and businesses. Often the domestic work of women of color enabled middle- and upper-class White women the freedom to do volunteer or paid employments outside their own homes. Through much of this century, domestics and service jobs were the only employment options open to women of color, since they were often barred from clerical and industrial work in regional labor markets. Even when they succeeded in securing the educational credentials to do professional work, women of color are often relegated to public sector positions or to professional work within their own communities (Higginbotham 1987, 1994).

We were also interested in the ways state supports and private sector benefits
extended to families varied by race and class. Racial oppression made the history of motherhood for women of color decidedly different from the restrictions of home and hearth experienced by White middle-class women (Dill 1988, 1994). This thinking provided the intellectual framework for Bonnie’s exploration of female-headed families in mid-South rural counties. Bonnie, along with Michael Timberlake and Bruce Williams, secured funding from the Aspen Institute to examine the relationship between family structure, state supports, and community resources in the coping and survival strategies of low income single mothers (Dill and Williams 1992; Williams, et al. 1992).10

Both Elizabeth and Lynn began to look to sociology to help them understand the upward class mobility struggles that they and other colleagues shared. In her dissertation research, Elizabeth had been one of the first people to study social class differences among educated Black women. Lynn was just completing a major project on American perceptions of class (Vanneman and Weber Cannon 1987).11 Both of those projects--in combination with life experiences--left them with many questions about the ways that race and gender shape the mobility process.

At the time, little was known about the social mobility process for White women and even less for Black women and other women of color. This was the case because they were

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10Michael Timberlake, a professor of Sociology at Memphis State until 1991, is now Professor and Chair of the Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Social Work at Kansas State University. Bruce Williams is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Mississippi.

11This earlier work, The American Perception of Class, was important in clarifying our vision of social class as a complex economic power based relationship with key structural and psychological consequences.
typically either excluded from the research, or race and class were confounded in the same study—most often studies of minorities involved poor and/or working-class populations and studies of White people were on middle-class populations. Elizabeth and Lynn designed a joint research project to explore variations in the process of educational and occupational mobility in a wide range of areas including the current work, family life, and health of Black and White women professionals, managers, and administrators.¹²

They organized a team of graduate assistants and conducted focused life history interviews with 200 Black and White women of the baby boom cohort (ages 25-40) who were employed full-time as professionals, managers, or administrators in the Memphis metropolitan area from 1985-1987.¹³ Successfully completing this project was, in part, possible because the Center had developed such strong ties to our local community, especially among Black women. "As we recruited participants, we called on women contacts and friends across the city to assist us in providing the contacts and assurances that Black women were much more likely to need to feel comfortable in participating," recalled Elizabeth. A discussion of the differences in methods required to recruit subjects is reported

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¹²This research project was supported by National Institute of Mental Health Grant MH38769.

¹³Our institution only offers a masters in sociology and other social sciences. Thus, this study was a unique opportunity for graduate students to actually participate in data collection for a major research project. After training in interviewing and on issues of confidentiality of human subjects, the assistants participated in designing and testing the instrument, the recruitment of subjects, data collection, coding quantitative and qualitative data, and cleaning the data for analysis. Furthermore, the actual interviews with middle-class Black and White women in the city gave them insights into what was behind the success of individual women. Several graduate assistants from the project continued their education beyond the masters.
in "Race and Class Bias in Qualitative Research on Women" (Weber Cannon, Higginbotham and Leung 1988).\textsuperscript{14}

The experiences of these women have certainly painted a different picture from the dominant culture image of the mobility process based on research on White males. First and foremost, these women are not detached, isolated, or driven solely by career goals. Relationships with family of origin, partners, children, friends and the wider racial community significantly shape the ways they envision and accomplish mobility and the ways they sustain themselves as professional and managerial women. For these women, social mobility involves competition, but also cooperation, community support, and personal obligations (Higginbotham and Weber 1992).\textsuperscript{15} Elizabeth and Lynn are currently exploring the mental health consequences of upward mobility for these women including the relationship between mobility, social activism and mental health.

**Teaching.** In addition to our scholarship, our commitment to creating space for multiple perspectives extended to our teaching and relationships with students. We each wanted to make higher education more relevant to people like ourselves. With funding from the Ford Foundation and the Fund for the Improvement of Post Secondary Education (FIPSE) we sponsored two national summer institutes and five workshops which highlighted the new scholarship on race, class, and gender. Participants have included social science, history,

\textsuperscript{14}This article describes a methodology which is a model for conducting research which does not confound race and social class. The article has been reprinted in two anthologies and is widely cited by people interested in multiracial research.

\textsuperscript{15}For a longer discussion of the neglect of race and gender in the traditional social mobility research, see Higginbotham and Weber Cannon 1998.
and humanities educators, scholars and graduate students.

We organized a team to establish an on-line data base of bibliographic citations to social science research on women of color and southern women and made this information available in printed bibliographies. Center staff also maintain resources for curriculum change; publish working papers on curriculum issues; and bi-annually publish a newsletter which seeks to teach people about new scholarship. Center professional staff, primarily Lynn and Elizabeth, consult with other universities, colleges and community colleges to aid in faculty development.

Through this combination of action/experience and research, we aimed to "transform the curriculum," that is, to develop a more inclusive curriculum by expanding the guiding vision; disciplinary knowledge base; and pedagogical strategies. In our work with faculty, we provided: access to the new information relating to race, class, and gender that is relevant to their work; a broad vision of what an ideal, inclusive curriculum might contain; and pedagogical strategies to develop classroom climates that are open and positive for the diversity of students in them.

We recognized the need for strong links among peers, and Elizabeth designed a model for our summer institutes and workshops whereby participants share their research and teaching issues in small groups as well as larger forums. We knew that it was important for people to support each other as they develop research and teaching agendas. This meant facilitating exchanges across race, class, and gender among faculty, so that they could do the same for their own students. In this work, we have been "trial and error learners" who are grateful for concrete feedback from workshop faculty and participants.
Lynn used her long-standing interest in classrooms and power to develop methods of promoting positive race, class, and gender dynamics in the classroom. She began work in this area in graduate school, and extended it early in her teaching career to examine relationships between White faculty and Black students. Building on experience and scholarship on race relations and small groups, she developed a variety of strategies for promoting positive race, class, and gender dynamics in the classroom (Weber Cannon 1990). They include ground rules for classroom discussion which acknowledge the presence of hierarchies in the classroom and ask students to show respect for one another in their communication. This work has helped many faculty around the nation understand how they can use their power in the classroom to establish the type of climate that would support learning across diversity.

**Building an Institution: Collaborative Work and Rewards.** We are committed to work that incorporates the multiple perspectives of those in different relations of power along race, class, and gender systems. Thus, we employ a collaborative model for our practice as well as our scholarship. On the whole, collaborative work is devalued in academia where the ideal typical scholar is an isolated man, working alone, to write some great work or make some discovery. Thus, our collaborative practice is often deeply problematic within university hierarchies where issues of professional recognition and reward are concerned.

In developing the Center, we were committed to sharing power and responsibility; yet, little about the institution allowed for this model of functioning and organization. The lack of fit between our vision and the institution's structure proved to be a constant source of strain and tension. Thus, it was critical that we clarify and resolve issues among ourselves
so that we could consistently present a united front to administrators and colleagues in the
Department of Sociology and Social Work. Our resolve was based on a shared vision of
goals for the Center, our individual and collaborative research, and commitment to our
personal growth. Often achieving unity among ourselves meant challenging each other to be
the best that we could be. For example, submitting grant proposals and being evaluated was
never pleasant for anyone—particularly Lynn whose sense of fatalism made it difficult for her
to believe that major granting agencies would fund us "rookies." Yet, Elizabeth realized that
part of preparing a grant proposal was providing the emotional support to collaborators so
that they could do their best writing. "I often had to find optimism I did not know I had,
since I could see that Lynn’s fatalism was just the fear that we all have about being judged."
Together we pushed each other to do our best work—and as "rookies," we took reviewers’
comments seriously and prepared a proposal which was initially funded for two years. After
we completed data collection, we applied and secured an additional two years of funding.
This commitment to each other—to getting through difficulties by resolving issues among
ourselves—was central to our ability to build the Center within the university.

As we worked together, we watched and learned as each of us faced different
treatment from Memphis State faculty, administrators, and students. Daily we "went out"
from the safe space we created for ourselves in the Center and later reported back to each
other on the reactions we received from all quarters. We analyzed all critical encounters for
their race, class, gender, and regional content, and planned our next actions accordingly.
This process was informal but very systematic. It was necessary to our survival in a system
that was often experienced by us as hostile and obstructionist; it also solidified our
friendships and commitment to one another and our goals.

The tension between our vision for the Center and the structure of the institution played itself out in many ways throughout the years. For example, our institutional location and reporting structure changed four times in ten years. From the beginning, Memphis State University administrators were ambivalent about where our unit should be located. That ambivalence was reflected in the initial decision to establish the Center as an independent unit reporting directly to the Dean of Arts and Sciences and equivalent to departments, and yet, to exclude us from meetings of heads of departmental units and from routine administrative communications on the grounds that "most of what goes on there is not relevant" because we are not a teaching unit. Yet, these action had many ramifications.

It was not until 1987, our fifth year, that we received any base budget from the institution. Annually, we submitted requests for a base budget, but our requests were never seriously considered. We were not told this fact until many years later when we learned that our requests did not conform with the routine budgetary processes. We also later learned that higher administration at the time did not think the discipline of women's studies would last beyond five years, and so they felt it would be a waste to invest university funds in an academic "flash in the pan" (their phrase). Furthermore, they didn't care that we were not even considered with the rest of university units.

From the beginning, Bonnie, the founding director, and Lynn, associate director, attended all meetings with university administrators together. We were the only unit in the institution which did that. This practice was tolerated as long as we received no university funding. As soon as we received a nominal base budget from the university, the Center was
moved into the Sociology Department; and we were told that only one person could now report to the dean. Ambivalence remained. We were not invited to meetings with Arts and Sciences chairs and directors; we were sometimes dealt with directly, sometimes through the sociology chair, and sometimes not at all. This left us much more vulnerable to an increasingly hostile department of sociology.\(^{16}\) We continued to request and receive meetings with the dean but were not invited to chairs meetings and not fully informed of all administrative issues and processes. It took critical changes in higher administration for our status on the campus to improve.

In 1991, V. Lane Rawlins became President of Memphis State University. He recognized the importance of women’s studies as a interdisciplinary field—and as a labor economist, he acknowledged the realities of race and gender discrimination. Because he wants the university to serve the greater metropolitan area, including a central city that is 50% African American, the new administration is more appreciative of our programming, curriculum work, university service, and research publications focused on race, class and gender than past administrations. Clearly more has changed at this institution than just renaming it the University of Memphis. As the climate shifted, we have become more involved on the campus in efforts to recruit and retain more women faculty and faculty of

\(^{16}\)Several members of the department became hostile to many new developments in the field of sociology including the emphasis on improved undergraduate teaching and progressive scholarship in areas like world systems and stratification as well as race, class and gender. While several of our male sociology colleagues left the university, we stayed because of family, friends, and community connections as well as the commitment to the Center. It was only in 1991 that Bonnie Dill left to join the Women’s Studies Department at the University of Maryland-College Park, when she and her husband relocated to the east coast.
color. We have also clarified our administrative location and routinized lines of reporting.

Over the years, our personal and professional issues frequently clashed with the "way we do things" at the university. What made a difference for us in confronting these obstacles is that we were there for each other, thus these struggles were not as isolating and devastating as they could have been--and typically are--for faculty who lack colleagues to communicate with about their problems and who have a structural analysis from which to critique their situations.

In 1993, we received two major awards from the American Sociological Association: the Jessie Bernard Award in recognition for how our collective work had enlarged the horizons of sociology to fully encompass the role of women in society and the Distinguished Contributions to Teaching Award. We were nominated by our colleagues--people who had worked with us and/or attended our institutes and workshops. We were pleased and delighted for several reasons. First, this was an acknowledgment of the significance of our work, research, and teaching on groups which are traditionally devalued and marginalized. Second, this was a recognition of the legitimacy of the collaborative model we had worked so hard to develop and maintain. Third, we appreciated the acknowledgment that we had successfully achieved one of our major goals--to create a place where work on race, class, and gender, was unquestionably viewed as not just legitimate, but crucial to the development of social theory. Unlike the isolation we experienced as graduate students, we are now secure in a large network of scholars who actively support each other in their work.

Just as finding a true voice representing a self-defined standpoint is critical to the survival of oppressed groups, so it is important for the individual members of those groups.
Our own experience of oppression, and the skills we developed over our lifetimes, guided us in our quest to find our own standpoints. We worked together to create a community centered in Memphis. We listened to and worked to help each other find our own unique lenses for viewing the world. We know all scholars, regardless of race, gender, and social class need communities where they are insiders: that is, are cherished for who they are and how they see the world, and encouraged to share that vision and perspective with colleagues, students, and other communities.
References


