

[Welcome to Column 4 of Hey Jane! This is a project of the SWS Career Development Committee. Questions and answers are generated by the committee and SWS members. Answers are compiled from several anonymous sources. All columns are archived on our committee's page on the SWS website.]

December 6, 2004

HEY JANE!

"How can I meet more scholars in my area of specialization? How can I get my name known among scholars in my area?"

JANE SAYS:

As you know, networking is important for your own intellectual stimulation, finding collaborators, contributing to your field, and of course, for obtaining good outside letters for promotion and tenure. Additionally, senior scholars often move into new areas of specialization and they need to meet other scholars in these new areas and can't depend as heavily on their old networks.

Basically, the best idea is to be brave and introduce yourself to people, whether it is over e-mail, at academic meetings, or through other resources such as described below. Don't be scared to initiate a professional contact with a researcher who does similar work! People are generally very nice! Networking with those more senior to you is not the only goal: juniors should remember that it is just as important to network with people at their own level; you never know what great fellow juniors you will meet. Many faculty advisors help their students network, but many do not. Regardless, it is your responsibility to get out there!

What follows is a longer-than-usual response, but (as one reviewer of this edition noted) it is chock full of good ideas for SWS members at all levels!

Things to think about:

* Be brave: E-mail interesting scholars! *

When email first developed, some suggested it would be bad for departmental relationships because scholars could join a national (even international) community with ease and thus they wouldn't need to talk to the person in the next office. Turning this thought around, email can indeed make it possible to link with others doing similar research. Instead of focusing on the downside of email (it controls our lives!!), use it to achieve goals that will benefit you and your research.

With this in mind, contact the scholars that you most rely on for the conceptual basis of your research or who are doing similar research to yours. You can locate their emails and information from their university web sites by simply going on google.com.

* What would I ask? *

There are many reasons to contact scholars! Perhaps there is a theoretical, conceptual development of theirs that you would like to clarify or apply, or perhaps you want to request a copy of a paper that they recently presented at a professional meeting. You might ask about any forthcoming related work of theirs or others that they know about.

Unless they are very busy or asocial, scholars are flattered by the query and will respond. The connection may result in further interaction. If your work relies heavily on the person's work they may even be willing to read your work.

* Attend and speak up at presentations *

When attending academic meetings be sure to attend the sessions relevant to your topic. (I know, but everything sounds so interesting in sociology!) Arrive early and stay late at the sessions. Be prepared with questions that you might discuss with presenters by reviewing the program or just being a good listener as they present. If the presenters have arrived early, talk with them before the session in case they need to rush out at the end. Ask questions when the moderator asks for them (other scholars are in the audience and are paying attention). If the presenters stay around after the session, be prepared to introduce yourself and talk with them then. Don't just ask the question; identify yourself clearly in the conversation (perhaps with a business card). Presenters present at meetings in order to have conversations about their research – the whole point is to network and share ideas. They are waiting and hoping that someone like you will engage them in a conversation! How flattering for presenters when someone comes up to chat about their research!

* Get involved in ASA section activities *

Be sure to join the ASA section(s) that represent your specialty(ies). Attend the paper sessions, the roundtables, the business meeting, and the reception. Attending the business meeting can be an excellent way of getting involved (they are always asking for volunteers for committees or tasks). Many of the top scholars in your field are on section councils or are section officers and will be at these events. Often, awards are handed out at the business meeting or section reception – you can meet the latest and greatest award winners. Note that receptions can be less important for networking because all the advanced scholars may be trying to talk to their old friends and former students. Section roundtables are an easy and less intimidating way of being able to meet the presenters and talk about their research. At a roundtable, you are guaranteed to meet people interested in the same things you are!

* Move beyond your comfort zone at conferences *

Many people treat conferences as a class reunion or a time to hang out with colleague-friends they only see once a year. This is great, but in order to network in your area, you need to set aside time away from your buddies to meet new people.

* ASA is not the only sociology association! *

If you are interested in gender, then getting involved in SWS should be top on your list (luckily, you are already a member if you are reading this e-mail). All of the regional associations (Midwests, Easterns, Southern, Pacifics) have annual meetings and many of the state

associations do as well. Since these are much smaller than ASAs (thank goodness), they are a great way of meeting other scholars in a smaller, less intimidating environment. There are also many smaller topical conferences where everyone attending is interested in your area.

*** Get involved in conferences ***

Be sure to submit your own work to meeting sessions for presentation! It is not just to pad your CV, but you can be the one everyone is vying to meet at the end of your presentation. Chat with the other presenters in your session – they have related research to yours and some of the most exciting research-relationships can develop here. Offer to organize sessions in your area. This way, those doing similar work will come to you! Calls for session organizers occur a year or two in advance of the meeting and are generally open. Anyone can organize a session, including graduate students. Offer to be a discussant when you know about a session that is being organized (session organizers can have a hard time finding a good discussant – your offer will likely be very much appreciated!).

*** Use your graduate school networks: You are not cut off! ***

When you leave graduate school, you are not left alone in the wilds of Sociology to fend for yourself with no one to help! If your research interests have been influenced by your dissertation committee chair, be sure to stay in touch with her or him. Many of your other graduate school mentors are still available and interested in your work.

Some successful scholars retain a long-term research relationship with early mentors. Anecdotally, these collaborations may produce some of the most productive careers for both mentor and mentees. (Of course, for promotion and tenure you do have to demonstrate some research productivity that is done independent of an early mentor.)

Additionally, former graduate students can be a great resource for networking. It is easy to meet scholars when you have a shared graduate school affiliation, even if those scholars graduated 10 or 20 years ago. Even if your own advisor does not introduce you, your advisor's former graduate students will most likely have a lot in common with your own research.

*** Seek out and join mentor programs ***

Many universities, departments, and professional associations (including SWS!) have mentor programs in place and these can target graduate students and all faculty ranks. Sign up!

*** Offer to review manuscripts ***

Send offers to review manuscript submissions to the journals that most often publish in your specialty. Journal editors are always looking for good and timely reviewers (with at least 3 reviewers per submission, editors need to find a ton of reviewers!). Describe your research competencies to demonstrate why you should be invited to be a reviewer. If the articles get published, you will then learn the authors' names and can contact them with questions about their work. Also, it helps to be known as a good reviewer by the journal editor.

*** Be nice to everyone! ***

Don't snub anyone just because you don't know them or their research! The world of Sociology is small and courtesy is most valued.

CAVEAT to all professional advice: Always check with your departmental colleagues, chair, dean, etc. to find out what the norms and expectations are in your institution.

I hope this helps! Stay tuned next month for Question 5!

-- Jane