

Interview – Sandra Weissinger

Written by E-International Relations

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Dr. Sandra E. Weissinger is an internationally recognized scholar in the areas of inequality and violence. Specifically, her work seeks to uncover the various ways racism and inequality have usurped every aspect of society and important societal institutions. Though she uncovers the grim realities of our times, her work is not without hope. People make institutions. Therefore, people can change the marginalizing practices which shackle us all and leave us limited, wanting, and unable to reach our highest potentials. Weissinger holds the position of Professor of Sociology at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. She has several publications, including *Violence Against Black Bodies* and *Law Enforcement in the Age of Black Lives Matter*. Her current work addresses inequality in academic spaces and is funded by the National Science Foundation.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

This is not the answer you are looking for, but it is the one I am prepared to give. Higher Education has been at a crossroads for some time. Insiders, and cultural critics alike, consider the state of institutions regularly: are they economically viable? Is it reasonable to produce the number of PhDs, considering the potential earnings, considerable debt, and available jobs? Even with policy and procedures, why do faculty appointments and promotions still illuminate great disparities across race and gender? Further, what actions can be taken to make campuses spaces where diverse faculty can thrive? This debate is compounded, as we consider what can and cannot be taught in the classroom (as politicians and societal members alike question the validity of topics such as critical race theory and inequalities) and the enduring impact of COVID-19.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

My thoughts about society are always changing. Recently, my understanding of the world has been impacted by the aftermath of COVID-19. Returning to the classroom has come with its challenges. People are still scared. Some are traumatized. Student engagement has changed. These shifts do not happen in isolation and create new challenges to old ways of academic engagement. For example, lines of study I would have (in the past) investigated (violence and social inequality) now move forward with greater empathy for participants and learners alike. Rather than research for empowerment of participants, I now consider how research projects can embody acts of kindness for those navigating times of compounded and intersecting inequalities.

News events underline how racism is still very much embedded in the American law enforcement realm. Has this changed since the advent of the *Black Lives Matter* movement? If so, how?

Very rarely does the underpinnings of racism (or any inequality) change. Certainly, a different level of awareness is brought to readers of the text. But we, as a society, are still left with the roots – the power imbalances that lead to the outward manifestations addressed in the text. These roots are left undisturbed because this is the nature of humanity. Try as we might, every social issue gives way to the next spectacle or social disaster. The problems do not go away, they just change form. The more they change, the harder it is to detect them. For example, many institutions are having conversations or making statements about diversity now. That is the result of activism by adherents of *Black Lives Matters*. But we are also seeing a backlash to such campaigning. More menacing, we can observe spaces

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where lip service is paid to diversity, but structural changes are still lacking.

In your 2019 book, co-edited with Dwayne Mack, you analyze some of the findings of the Forward through Ferguson Report. What changes has this document brought and do you think they will have a long-lasting impact?

As mentioned in my answer to the previous question, the report puts on paper the issues facing the Saint Louis region. Leaders certainly attempted to make sense of the calls to action. But understanding does not always lead to action. This may not be the result of a failed will. Calls to action without direct routes to fund them means that inequalities remain. Further, these issues are made more difficult with each additional social disaster. COVID, for example, became the priority even as COVID had (and continues to have) impacts on the population that sought relief via the calls to action.

In the book chapter “Gender Matters, So Do Race and Class: Experiences of Gendered Racism on the Wal-Mart Shop Floor”, you present an analysis of the interrelation between different factors of discrimination in the workplace. Can you tell us more about the case study you analyzed and its importance?

A key to this chapter is understanding that every institution and/or group is a microcosm of the larger society. Regardless of size (and size often indicates success), work must be done to ensure that all workers have an equal opportunity to succeed. The women involved in this class action suit did not win in the courts, but they did call the company to accountability – creating pathways for promotions and trainings that had not previously been in place.

How is the realm of higher education affected by racial discrimination?

Please see my answer to question one. Please also consider the works published in the *ADVANCE* journal, *Presumed Incompetent*, and by author Tressie Cottom. The answer to this question is complex, but a fair answer is this: all institutions are plagued with inequalities, even spaces where people have proven their capacity to learn and address hard problems.

In a chapter of the book *Research Justice*, you address the analysis of micro, macro and structural discrimination from a methodological standpoint. Which method is most suitable for each of these categories?

I am a qualitative researcher by training, with a focus on ethnography and participant observation. My work often uses these methods. However, I believe that questions about inequalities and violence can be addressed by any number of methods. Said differently, a quantitative study can just as easily unveil the inner workings of power if the research asks questions that lend themselves to uncovering such answers.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

Please gain as much experience as possible while in school. Do internships. Network. Learn about the types of jobs that interest you. Most importantly, travel to see how others do the work and to see who you become in spaces that are different than what you are accustomed to. Additionally, be ok with the possibility that you will have many careers in your lifetime. Be open to learning new skills and/or returning to school when needed. The world is always changing. Your perspective will change too. Lean into these changes. Do not run from them.