

Nancy Cantor: A View From The Chancellor's Office

March 07, 2011

As a distinguished social psychologist, Nancy Cantor is revered for her work on how we perceive our social environments, pursue goals, and adapt to changing and challenging social settings. She now brings her perspective as a psychological scientist to her current role as President and Chancellor of Syracuse University. Throughout her distinguished career on both the research and administration sides of academia, Cantor has received numerous honors.

The following interview was conducted after Cantor received the 2008 Carnegie Corporation's Academic Leadership Award, given for her "uncompromising commitment to academic excellence and bold, visionary leadership in establishing new standards for U.S. higher education." She also was recognized as "an advocate for racial justice and diversity in higher education." While Provost at the University of Michigan, she led the fight "in the defense of affirmative action in the cases Gutter v. Bollinger and Gratz v. Bollinger, decided by the Supreme Court in 2004." APS is proud to claim Nancy Cantor as one of our founders and a member of the first elected APS Board of Directors.

In this conversation in late 2008 at Lubin House, Syracuse's home in New York City, Cantor and her mentor, APS President Walter Mischel, briefly reminisced about their collaborations at Stanford University and talked about the state of academic psychological science today and the choices and challenges being faced.

The Early Days

MISCHEL: Thirty years ago, you graduated from Stanford. You came there fresh from Sarah Lawrence College with a liberal arts education you were so effusive about. Can you look back and try to reconstruct what got you into psychology?

CANTOR: Psychology at its best is an understanding of how to create opportunity for people and environments. I was always a very social activist kid, kind of rebellious and always doing things against the status quo and norms. And I saw, in the traits work so popular in psychology at the time I was an undergraduate, that understanding human behavior could be about growth and possibility, not just a way of proving who's good and who's bad and who's smart and who's dumb.

Sarah Lawrence had a huge effect on how I took to Stanford, because I was used to very close collaborative relationships and in-depth thinking with faculty across disciplines. Psychology was attractive at Stanford because it was multidisciplinary and that's what I was able to capture. For me it was all about the collaborative relationships.

I got hooked on your work, Walter, when I got interested in social context, and our collaboration really flourished as I understood a lot more about interactions and the pull and tug between people and their environments.

MISCHEL: And that they change each other.

CANTOR: Exactly.

MISCHEL: My memory is that you were sampling almost everything in psychology at Stanford in your early days, working with people doing heavy mathematical psychology, working with people in developmental, working with people in straight cognitive, and then you drifted down to see what was happening on the first floor, where Al Bandura and I were working. And we got connected and it took. You were a messenger who brought in concepts on prototypes and related work that fit very well with the kind of work I was doing with my group at the time on the nature of the consistency and variability that characterizes individuals and the reciprocal interactions of persons with their social contexts and relationships. We were really trying to rethink human nature, and it was thrilling. And it was wonderful to see you take off and fly with it.

Drifting To Administration

MISCHEL: Within a dozen or so years, Nancy, you were already at the height of a great science career within psychology — getting all the accolades and all the honors — at the same time you were drifting towards department chair at Princeton, then to dean, and provost at Michigan, then on to Chancellor of University of Illinois, and now President and Chancellor at Syracuse. What happened in your interactions with the world of psychology that produced a change?

CANTOR: People say to me, “So when did you decide to become a college administrator?” But I never decided. For me it was about having more and more institutional impact. I didn’t see it as leaving my passion for psychology, for social psychology and personality psychology, and for the ways in which individuals grow and adapt and the role of environments. I increasingly saw my institutional roles as understanding groups within a complex environment, understanding the culture of an environment and giving people opportunity. All the issues around diversity that I became more and more engaged with and passionate about were really issues about the scholarly work that you and I and others did — about how you get adaptation to environments, how you create the possibility for change, what it means to hold somebody firmly in a stereotype, and what it means to let them go.

Public Scholarship

MISCHEL: You have just been recognized by the Carnegie Institution for your contributions in this regard. The award is given to college and university leaders who are committed to equity, diversity, and innovation. Do you want to give us some examples of specific ways in which you’re doing this in the context of your community and your university?

CANTOR: At Syracuse, we think of ourselves as an anchor institution in the city. The city of Syracuse is a fascinating place. It’s an older industrial city that has hit hard times economically as the industrial base has moved, but it has the core of a potential revival as a very multicultural city. We have Latino and African American and Native populations with great cultural richness and artistic work that have flourished through grassroots organizations, neighborhoods, and such. So, now what we at SU have developed are strategic collaborations and partnerships in these areas creating sustainable programs that are addressing pressing issues and would both revitalize the city and change our institution.

There’s nothing in my mind more important for this country than solidifying the pipeline of students in what are now the populations so often left behind. So an example would be our involvement with the Syracuse City School District’s Say Yes to Education Foundation. In a massive reform movement that is very much along the lines of psychology in action, we are creating, from kindergarten on, individual

growth plans around every child, addressing social, emotional, and academic dimensions, issues of health and well being, what's happening before school — we even sometimes provide pro bono legal work for families. To give the expectation and the incentive to graduate from high school and go to college, these children will get free college tuition if they graduate and are admitted in one of 26 private institutions, including Syracuse, and hopefully the New York state system as well. The point of this, at every instance along the way, is using both science and art to get there.

MISCHEL: Is the psychology department at your University actively involved in this?

CANTOR: Yes, particularly in the health and well-being piece of it — we have a large behavior and health group in psychology — and the social psychologists are working on intergroup dialogues in schools, shaping the ways we deal with issues of race and groups.

The lead on this initiative is the School of Education, which is very psychologically “savvy” and interdisciplinary, and they are doing work in cultural foundations and inclusive education and development that in other places would be in the psychology department.

MISCHEL: It sounds like translational work that has a basic component to it, work that has the consequential outcomes that one hopes would come out of psychological science and that is at the same time science-building and, therefore, career-building.

CANTOR: Absolutely.

New Ways Of Evaluating Excellence — The Tenure Question

MISCHEL: I sense that we've got in APS, and in psychological science more generally, the most remarkable crew of young people I have ever seen. By young, I mean under 40. I base it on the young people in my own department, and I don't think my department is unique, and those I have met and heard from in my APS experiences. They are super smart, super good, and super ready to be interdisciplinary. They are mastering the new genetics while also being psychologists studying attachment, mastering brain scans, and being true social cognitive neuroscientists, while also studying consequential problems.

But they also are sensitive to the academic pressures of having their publications counted and deemed newsworthy and too often forced to come up with an “original, new” theory rather than something that connects to the core of psychological science that has been building over many years — problems I've discussed in my *Observer* presidential columns. Is there a way to reverse the trend I just described in order to create a cumulative science, or is it insurmountable? What's the message that you give to these smart young people and deans and department chairs about this situation in terms of tenure?

CANTOR: I meet with all the new faculty, many of whom are junior faculty eventually coming up for tenure, and I tell them that they're going to get a lot of pragmatic advice: “Do things to produce a lot of work. Do things that you can take credit for. Do things that slice the world in simple ways that you can get a handle on.” In other words, mostly telling them to *not* do what they thought they were getting into their field to do. And yet I always say: “Look, you are going to work really hard. Don't you want to be working really hard for something you believe in? If six years from now you wake up with tenure in an institution that you have not tried to engage and shape in very profound ways, in a field that you don't feel terribly excited by, is it worth waking up day tenure plus one? Because you're really going to have

to live with that.”

As for what I would tell a department chair or a dean — that’s where I see the real action. We put too much focus on the junior faculty and the young scholars coming up, and on the decisions they need to make. The real onus should be on us; it should be on all of us to say “in this world, what do we want our young scholars to look like? What do we want them to be working on? Where do we want the intellectual capital to be placed?” Do we want them to look like we looked? Or to be newly experiencing and shaping the field as we did?

There’s a new path towards excellence, we just have to find a different way to evaluate it and think about it. How do you get public scholarship evaluated in terms of excellence and given the recognition of tenure? My frustrations are enormous when we make these rigid distinctions between scholarship and service or community work.

The notion of psychology in the public interest is a rich and fertile opportunity because it will, by necessity, redraw the lines of who’s collaborating with whom and what problems are being addressed. What I say to people on our campus when we pursue a vision of scholarship in action is “Don’t always look from your field out to the world, look from the world into your field. Go the two-way street of scholarship in action. Think about how things present themselves in the world and who you would want at the table to try to address that.” Sometimes it won’t be the person in the office next to you at the table; it may be someone in a different department, even a different field.

MISCHEL: You’re talking about collaborative work, integrative work, interdisciplinary work, work that doesn’t parse fundamental science in advance from fundamental psychological processes *in vivo* as they play out in the contexts that matter, such as schools. The enormous talent that’s out there is waiting for cues: “Do I have to reinvent the wheel? Do I really have to work solo and disconnect myself from everything? Can I do an honest review of the literature that shows how my work connects? Can I work in a collaborative team? Can I come to my chair with publications that have six authors or seven authors and I’m not always the first?”

Transforming The System — Toward Quality, Courage, Thinking Big

MISCHEL: One of the themes that has marked your work is not only the power of the situation but the power of the individual to make a difference in transforming the situation. What can be done, at all ends of our field — whether we’re talking about administration down or scholars up — to not be the victims of the context, the system?

CANTOR: I’m very optimistic about possibility and change and the power of people to change context, especially collectively. But it’s up to the leaders in the field. It’s not up to the junior faculty to be able to withstand that, particularly junior faculty who are women or people of color who are not in critical mass at least in certain fields; you can’t ask them to start being the ones who shoulder changing the culture and changing the discipline in that sense. It’s very much up to those who are established, both the scholars and the academic leaders and administrators, to own up to the quality of the field, to its ability to address the important work that requires a cumulative sense, collaboration, sharing of credit, and batting around messy theories and looking at a lot of footnotes.

MISCHEL: There are huge pressures to strip the complexity, to not have “too many notes” — which was

the criticism of Mozart — and to get to the newsworthy message and the novelty. But first-rate scholars are going to want to have lots of notes, they want to have complexity, they want to look at thick data, and they are going to want to connect their ideas to relevant work. But in order to have the President sign off on their tenure, they have to have novel newsworthy new theories that are not connected to mentors or anybody. This is a fundamental career issue for the young people in our field.

CANTOR: A good example is your delayed gratification work. That was very complicated, intensive work. The theory was complicated; there were contentious issues around it; some of it was cross-cultural and some of it was longitudinal. It involved all kinds of issues of multiple comparison sets, all kinds of things that are very hard to pull off now. And yet that's work that changed not only the field but the public. But you couldn't have a junior faculty member do work like that now because it might not give him or her the right rewards. At its core, it was public scholarship — public scientific scholarship — and that is so hard to get tenure for.

MISCHEL: So what do we do? How does consciousness get raised on this?

CANTOR: Fundamental change in a culture has to start with those in the dominant place. The best departments in the country need to start making tenure decisions around quality, courage, scientific voice, the ambitions of the work. You asked me what I would tell a department chair and dean. What I do tell them all the time – (laughing) I don't think they listen to me, I'm just the president — is “look for ambitious work, look for people who think they can make a profound difference on a very hard problem.” That's one of the most attractive features about some of the work in the life sciences. They aren't thinking just about producing another paper, they are thinking they are going to cure cancer. They haven't, but they are thinking big. Or look at the work being done on global climate change. The work is motivated by addressing bigger questions. As a field, psychology must also own those big questions. When you ask about changing psychology and its role, we should not reduce the analysis to how to make sure that the absolute stars and pioneers can survive. We should put it in the drinking water. We should change the culture of what we're doing. At the core I am a social activist, I believe in trying to change culture and make opportunity, and I didn't want to keep doing the Noah's Ark version of that. We're not going to change this world two by two.

The Wish List — Engaging The Large Issues

MISCHEL: You were a founding leader of APS, the Association for Psychological Science.

CANTOR: And proud of it.

MISCHEL: How can the Association be a force for the things you're talking about?

CANTOR: Many things should happen, but as a personal take on it from my passions and framework, let me give my wish list. First it would be that psychological scientists are at the table in the most pressing issues of our day. That when the president thinks about reforming the education system or when the Supreme Court rules on a case on affirmative action, the data and theories we are best suited to present are at the table. Psychology is potentially at the center of so many of the big issues facing this country, never mind this world.

What comes under that on the list is that I wish that our field would make a concerted effort to be

engaged in those big issues, to see the synergy between fundamental work and scholarship that pushes the field forward, the science forward, and makes real progress in our world. I think APS can trigger that kind of role or centrality for psychology in the public interest and in the public sphere.

Then going deeper, the wish would be that we would create a culture of reward, not exclusively for that kind of work, but certainly hand in hand with other kinds of work that we're more likely to reward.

MISCHEL: So how can we make a transition from wish list to reality more possible? How do we create conditions within universities that facilitate the things you're talking about for our science? It seems to me you are in a unique position to lead other universities in rethinking what the tenure requirements and expectations are when dealing with psychological scientists and in deciding what the structure should be for evaluating this at-the-frontier work that doesn't fit old models and generates new ones.

CANTOR: I co-chaired something called the Tenure Team Initiative, part of Imagining America, a consortium of colleges and universities with humanists and artists in public life, the people doing public scholarship. We produced a report on how public scholarship in the cultural fields can be evaluated for excellence and rewarded in tenure (Editor's Note: For more information on the Tenure Team Initiative, see www.imaginingamerica.org/TTI/TTI.html). It would be extremely interesting to do the same kind of thing for psychology or for the behavioral sciences more generally. And going back to a comment I made earlier, I think the dominant groups have to take that on; it really should be the best psychology departments in the country that work with APS on how to reform tenure policies.