

The  
**Sociologist**

January 2019



On the Cover: Immigrant Dutch family, early 20th Century Ellis Island Photos. Source: United States Citizenship and Immigration Services History Office and Library.

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### We bring Sociology to the Public.

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# Sugar Puffs or Frosties? *Bandersnatch*, Interactive Content, and Active Engagement

Briana Pocratsky

Over the winter break, I spent time with loved ones and we collectively watched holiday staples for the umpteenth time. I also organized my holiday around my Netflix queue. Given the degree of social media buzz surrounding recently released Netflix Originals, it seems that I was not alone. Everywhere I went online, I encountered people talking about *Bird Box*, a post-apocalyptic Netflix Original film starring Sandra Bullock. Another widely discussed Netflix film was *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*.

*Black Mirror*

Netflix describes *Black Mirror* as a “sci-fi anthology series [that] explores a twisted, high-tech near-future where humanity’s greatest innovations and darkest instincts collide.” The title of the series alludes to this convergence of humanity and technology. According to *Black Mirror* creator Charlie Brooker, the title refers to the reflective black screens of smartphones, televisions, tablets, and laptops.

Similar to *The Twilight Zone*, *Black Mirror* episodes give you that sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach and often suggest that we’re doomed. *Black Mirror* first aired in 2011 on Britain’s Channel 4, before Netflix picked-up the series and produced the third and fourth seasons in addition to the latest installment, *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*.

*Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* is a standalone film that Netflix categorizes as “interactive content,” or “a fun new way to experience Netflix” in which users “can make choices for the characters” and shape the narrative (Netflix 2018). Netflix describes the film this way: “In 1984, a young programmer begins to question reality as he adapts a dark fantasy novel into a video game. A mind-bending tale with multiple endings.” The viewer plays a role in the fate of the film’s protagonist.

The viewer is presented with choices throughout the narrative that result in various endings. Viewers are prompted to select one of two available options on-screen. The content of the timed prompts ranges from which cereal the main character will eat for breakfast to deciding whether the character will “bury” or “chop up” his dad’s body. The film is (unsurprisingly) self-aware, and there are various narrative branches, endings, and over 300 minutes of footage (check Reddit for flowcharts, Easter eggs, and theories) (Kleinman 2018).

This presentation of narrative and interactivity isn’t a novel concept (some overlapping and related examples include gamebooks, hypertext fiction, interactive DVDs or videos, video games, and “gamification” in general). More specifically, *Bandersnatch*’s basic premise that allows the user to select an option out of two possible choices in a film or television show, which affects the narrative in some way, has been around for decades.

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...it presents “interactive storytelling” to millions of users on a streaming platform. This has implications for a highly individualized and private media stage...

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For example, *Kinoautomat*, “the world’s first interactive cinema,” debuted at the 1967 International and Universal Exposition in Montreal. Chris Hales (2015:38), who specializes in “the interactive moving image,” explained how this pre-digital interactive cinema worked.

“It involved live actors performing in tandem with a projected nonlinear film entitled *One Man and His House* in a custom-built 123-seat cinema with a red and green push button box attached to every seat. At several times in the performance audiences were offered a choice of two narrative alternatives and could push either button to indicate their choice, the

sequence corresponding to the majority vote being subsequently projected.”

Recent examples of interactive film and video have utilized advances in technology. *Late Shift* (2016), which marketed itself as “the world’s first interactive cinematic movie,” asked movie-goers to influence the storyline by voting for options using their phones (Farokhmanesh 2017).

Another recent example is Youtuber Markiplier’s “A Date With Markiplier” (2017) which, like *Bandersnatch*, allows the user to make a decision between two choices throughout the narrative. *Bandersnatch* is significant because it presents what Netflix refers to as “interactive storytelling” to millions of users on a streaming platform. This has implications for a highly individualized and private media stage that reaches large numbers of people where any and all interactivity could be collected as user data to gauge preferences and get to know the user better.

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## While selecting one option out of two possible choices is “interactive,” does this by default make for “active” audiences?

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### *Netflix Programming*

Currently, Netflix has over 137 million (paid and free trial) subscribers worldwide (Disis 2018). The streaming service is known for offering a variety of programming that attempts to tell largely untold narratives and tap into the sociocultural moment while suggesting titles to users based on preference.

On the surface, Netflix’s venture into interactive storytelling content is an example of a streaming service trying to cultivate a new market. However, interactive content could also provide another way for Netflix to better understand its users beyond television and movies: “Where the company previously focused its data gathering on the ways users

engaged with its content—what they watched, when, and for how long—this new data is indicative of real-world decisions like product preference, musical taste, and engagement with human behavior.” (Damiani 2019, para. 3) Interactive content could also allow for programmatic product placement in the future (Damiani 2019).



Source: [www.pixabay.com](http://www.pixabay.com).

*Bandersnatch* isn’t Netflix’s first go at interactive storytelling. In 2017, Netflix formally announced its launch of interactive storytelling content, starting with children’s programming. On interactive storytelling, Netflix said “the objective has been to bring something completely new that pushes the boundaries of storytelling and the way you engage with it” (Netflix 2017, para.9).

Netflix currently holds five titles categorized as interactive content: *Puss in Book: Trapped in an Epic Tale*, *Buddy Thunderstruck: The Maybe Pile*, *Stretch Armstrong: The Breakout*, *Minecraft: Story Mode*, and *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*. Four out of the five possible titles are children’s programming, but the streaming service has promised more interactive content.

### *Interactive Storytelling = Active Engagement?*

While researching *Bandersnatch*, I regularly came across the idea that interactive storytelling implies that the consumer is somehow more actively engaged than a “passive” consumer using non-interactive content.

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## Maybe popular culture and technology have given us false choices...

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While selecting one option out of two possible choices is “interactive,” does this by default make for “active” audiences? The presupposition of a passive audience is problematic.

Research on fandoms has shown that fans actively engage with media by consuming, reinterpreting, and producing cultural texts (see Jenkins 1992). *Bandersnatch* is certainly another potential way to engage with media, but it doesn't by default suggest increased active engagement simply because it is interactive.



Source: [www.pixabay.com](http://www.pixabay.com).

While I watched *Bandersnatch* and made choices throughout the film, the writings of theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer ([1944] 2007) came to mind. I started to wonder whether, like the character in the film, I wasn't *really* in control of the narrative. Maybe popular culture and technology have given us the distraction of false choices regarding who was really in control of the narrative? Is the illusion of choice the film's point?

I'm left with more questions than answers after watching *Bandersnatch*. If this format becomes more popular, what are the implications for collective viewing, whereby audiences experience the same narrative? Should we think of interactive storytelling primarily as

narrative, gameplay, or something entirely different?

As advancements in technology continue to offer new and more sophisticated ways for users to interact with media, it is important to keep a critical eye on how companies such as Netflix collect and use user data. It is not clear to us yet whether interactive storytelling will catch on, but Netflix may already know the answer.

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# The Legacy of Devah Pager

Maria Valdovinos

I was walking into my kitchen to get a cup of coffee, head deep into my phone, scrolling through tweets, when I learned of Devah Pager's death. A wave of sadness immediately came over me as I encountered a series of tweets from the academic community mourning her loss.

Although I never met Devah Pager personally, her body of work documenting the impact of the criminal justice system on the labor market opportunities of individuals after incarceration has had a profound impact on my own work studying the dynamics of reentry. Before learning of her untimely passing, I thought surely I would meet her someday, at some conference, somewhere.

Unlike many scholars who make their key contributions to the field over the course of their entire professional careers, Dr. Pager began hers with a landmark contribution which she produced as a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. At a time when many considered the playing field to have leveled or were beginning to level for both whites and blacks, a young Devah was able to show in her dissertation project, "The Mark of a Criminal Record," that this was not the case. Pager used an audit study design within a larger experimental design in which she sent young men, both white and black, to apply for entry level jobs while varying their criminal histories. She set out to answer the question: *All else being the same, to what degree does a criminal record affect employment opportunities in the United States?*

It turns out, profoundly. What Dr. Pager found was that a job seeker with a criminal record had worse job prospects than a job seeker without a criminal record. This finding is to be expected. However, she also found that when race was a factor in the job prospects of applicants, the impact was especially significant for black job applicants. Specifically, Dr. Pager found that a white job applicant with a criminal record had a 17 percent callback rate while a

black applicant with a criminal record had a much lower callback rate of 5 percent. Her finding that white job seekers with criminal records stood a better chance of getting a job callback than black job seekers without criminal records [1] took many by surprise. Had it been bogged down in jargon and technical writing, this finding could have easily been overlooked in a 250-page dissertation report.

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...her findings also helped shape the public policy debate on race and the criminal justice system for the next two decades.

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Her simple and yet elegant prose combined with rigorous scientific methods painted a compelling picture of the racial disparity and social inequality associated with a criminal conviction in the United States, and many took notice.

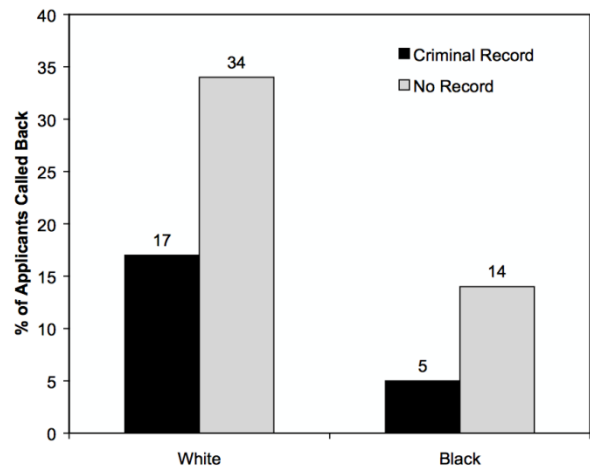


Figure 2. The effect of a criminal record in the Milwaukee audit sample.

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Source: *Effect of a criminal record*. Devah Pager 2003. "The Mark of a Criminal Record." *Focus*, 23(2): 44-46.

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Dr. Pager's collective body of work has raised the consciousness of scholars and policymakers regarding the stratifying effects of the criminal justice system...

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Devah Pager's dissertation was selected by the American Sociological Association as the best dissertation of 2003, and her findings also helped shape the public policy debate on race and the criminal justice system for the next two decades. In the years since her dissertation was published, Dr. Pager's collective body of work has raised the consciousness of scholars and policymakers regarding the stratifying effects of the criminal justice system, and in particular, the stigma of a criminal record. Her work has encouraged the design of policies to minimize these effects, including a four-year plan proposed in the mid-2000s by the Bush administration to help the formerly incarcerated get work [2] and later, "ban the box" [3].

It has also had the sobering effect of showing us just how entrenched these inequalities in fact are. *Yes, everyone may deserve a second chance but can everyone get one?* In the late 2000s she replicated the findings of her initial dissertation project, this time in New York City [4]. The year before she passed, Dr. Pager and colleagues showed that despite decades of interventions to level the playing field, "there had been no change in hiring discrimination against African Americans over the past 25 years" [5].

Dr. Pager was the Peter and Isabel Malkin Professor of Public Policy and Professor of Sociology at Harvard University. She passed away at the young age of 46 after a battle with pancreatic cancer.



Devah Pager. Source: Harvard University Department of Sociology.

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# Diversification: Conference on Gender Equality Reimagines the Purpose of Economics

Amber Kalb

In Grossman Hall in the law building of American University, was a sea of diverse women chatting with one another, laughing, snacking on cheese cubes and patiently waiting in their seats for the main event to begin. From undergraduate to senior scholars wearing yoga pants or pant suits, a diversity of women seemed to be represented among this energized crowd.

On November 2, 2018, I was one of the presenters at “Pathways to Gender Equality: Economic Gender Analysis Addressing Current and Future Challenges,” a conference hosted by the Economics Department of the American University in Washington, D.C.



Concurrent Session 1.2: Gender and Development attendees.  
Source: <https://www.american.edu/cas/economics/pathways/>

The opening and closing plenary consisted of an all-star group of women economists including Cecilia Conrad, Bina Agarwal, Janet Yellen, Nancy Folbre, M.V. Lee Badgett, and Maria Floro (among many, many others). The opening plenary was entitled:

“Diversifying Economics” and rather than asking the age old adage, ‘What can you do for the economy?’, the speakers at this conference flipped the script, asking: “How does the discipline of economics change when reoriented to address questions of gender equality and inclusion?” (Speaker Mieke Meurs).

While the issue of increasing diversity in higher education (in terms of representation of women and minorities) has long been an institutional goal of U.S. colleges and universities (albeit, a contested one), the discipline of economics has somehow averted these pressures. To that point, the conference began by citing some discouraging statistics, reporting the percent of PhD women graduates and full-professors in economics in 2015 was 31 percent and 12 percent respectively.

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**This interest in diversity has important implications for the discipline and the public.**

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The number of minority PhD graduates reported was even lower. From 1995 to 2015, only 3 percent of PhD graduates in economics were minorities (as compared to 13 percent of doctoral graduates in sociology). But, the issue of diversity in economics is more than simply numbers deep, a sentiment shared by Maria Floro, a professor and co-director of the Graduate Program on Gender Analysis in economics at American University.

Floro noted that the meaning of and implications for diversity reaches far beyond that of simple numerical inclusion, but also includes an explicit understanding of representation and its relationship to creativity, innovation and insight in economics’ theoretical and empirical frameworks, models, and methods, especially when it comes to reducing economic inequality. This interest in diversity has important implications for the discipline and the public.



Floro explains, “The way we depict the economy... the exclusion of experiences and interests, of needs of certain groups, now this has a fundamental impact. It is not just an issue of body of knowledge because economics is highly influential in policy-making. Therefore, the economic policies that come out from that framework that tend to be exclusionary... can represent only and support only the interests of certain groups often at the expense of those excluded.”

To this point, American University has recently inaugurated a new research center: Care Work and the Economy, an interdisciplinary effort to create public and economic policy aimed at reducing inequality produced by the chronic public underinvestment in care provisioning that often directly impacts women’s careers and life choices ([CWE](#), 2018).

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## “Why don’t we think about economics as the study of social provisioning?”

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In order to further diversity economics, Floro provides yet another imperative for the economics program at American University: “A multidisciplinary approach and methods is pivotal in understanding how human behavior and decisions are made... we see the need to learn from other social scientists and we make use and encourage our students to diversify in their methods and ask questions that have not been asked before... we, as economists, cannot learn by solely looking and using standard conventional economic tools.”

Sociologists should see this as an exciting development in our sibling discipline, and an opportunity for meaningful collaboration that would contribute to the public good. A diversity of perspectives concerning public issues of economic inequality would lead to better understanding of the complex relationship between economic outcomes and the social conditions and processes that give rise to them. This synergy would also contribute towards

effective public and economic policies for groups and economic activities that have historically and traditionally been marginalized or devalued. To wrap up the closing plenary, Heidi Hartmann, president of the Institute for Women’s Policy Research, proposed a reconceptualization of the discipline of economics.

Rather than the traditional conceptualization being a zero-sum game concerning the allocation of scarce resources in a society, she posed the question, “Why don’t we think about economics as the study of social provisioning?” She suggests that if we come to see the economy as a social good, the question then becomes, “How do we make sure everyone is provided for?”



Opening Plenary (from left to right): Bina Agarwal, Nancy Folbre, Cecilia Conrad, Janet Yellen, Maria Floro, and Lee Badget. November 2, 2018.

Now, I think this is the conversation *public sociologists* are having, in existential synchrony with some economists, about producing knowledge for the good of the public interest. The *public economists* are asking themselves: economics for what and for whom?

### *Post-Script*

If you are interested in learning more about economic gender analysis research in social and economic policy, especially those located in the DMV (District of Columbia, Maryland, Virginia) area, American University has now

launched the first U.S. graduate program dedicated to the study of gender and economics.

Please visit

<https://research.american.edu/careworkeconomy/community/> or

<https://www.american.edu/cas/economics/news/research-seminars.cfm>

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Tuesday, April 30, 2019

and

Wednesday, May 1, 2019

**Social Science Advocacy Days**

Join DCSS and COSSA for the annual coordinated advocacy days in support of all social and behavioral sciences.



*What's next?*

ASA President-Elect

Christine Williams

DCSS Address

The #MeToo Movement:  
Implications for Sociologists and  
Professional Societies



Thursday,  
January 24, 2019

7p.m.

ASA Headquarters  
1430 K Street, NW  
Suite 600

Hosted by ASA and DCSS



## *Data Watch*

### University of Maryland College Park Tops list of Area Schools\* Receiving Federal R&D Funding\*\*

Rank		
4	University of Maryland, College Park	\$42,681,000
41	Johns Hopkins University	\$12,136,000
46	George Washington University	\$11,572,000
50	Virginia Commonwealth University	\$10,806,000
57	University of Virginia, Charlottesville	\$10,053,000
69	Georgetown University	\$8,199,000
70	Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University	\$8,189,000
82	University of Maryland, Baltimore County	\$6,860,000
87	George Mason University	\$6,028,000
89	University of Maryland, Baltimore	\$6,000,000
96	American University	\$5,538,000
97	College of William and Mary and Virginia Institute of Marine Science	\$5,478,000
130	University of Baltimore	\$3,311,000
136	Howard University	\$3,034,000
140	Hampton University	\$2,543,000
163	Old Dominion University	\$1,729,000
208	Gallaudet University	\$816,000
221	Catholic University of America	\$633,000
231	University of Richmond	\$511,000
257	Virginia State University	\$343,000
304	Morgan State University	\$167,000
318	Salisbury University	\$140,000
439	Towson University	\$14,000

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\*Area universities include institutions in the District of Columbia, Maryland and Virginia. This list excludes federal service institutions.

\*\* Data compiled by COSSA (Consortium of Social Science Associations). Data come from the National Center for Science and Education Statistics' Higher Education Research and Development (HERD) Survey for fiscal year 2017. The "Federal R&D" column lists combined federal research and development expenditures for social sciences, psychology, law, communications, and social work.



**Punishing Trauma  
Institutional and Individual Responses and  
Consequences for Children's Adversities**

**A Conference at Columbia University in the City of New York  
Friday, April 26th 2019**

**Call for Papers**

Although the problem of mass incarceration has recently received more wide-spread scrutiny, the negative consequences of incarceration on children, families, and communities receive less attention and remain under addressed and poorly understood. Punishing Trauma aims to provide an interdisciplinary space for conversations between graduate students, faculty, and members of the community who work with, study, and confront these pressing concerns. Academic perspectives must be in conversation with community perspectives for justice to be truly served. To this end, we invite submissions from doctoral students in any discipline on topics examining the impact and consequences of punishment and surveillance, broadly conceived, on children, families, and communities. We also invite community organizers and activists, policy-makers, and individuals directly impacted by mass incarceration and mass supervision, who are currently working to mitigate these impacts, and who bring invaluable experience and critical perspectives, linking academic and community perspectives. Equitable responses to mass incarceration and mass supervision require transdisciplinary and community-based solutions. Punishing Trauma intends to serve as a venue for these crucial connections and conversations.

We invite submissions on topics including, but not limited to the following:

- Race, gender, sexuality, and class dimensions of intergenerational trauma
- Causes and consequences of housing instability on children/the homeless-to-prison pipeline
- Health effects of stigma on children and over the life course
- Racialized othering and the criminalization of students of color
- Schools and other institutional responses to trauma
- Adaptation and resilience to intergenerational trauma and onslaught
- Institutional responses in education to promote empathetic school environments
- Community and youth responses to urban adversities

Please submit extended abstracts (500-1,000 words) and contact information to:

<http://bit.ly/punishingtrauma>

**Deadline January 25, 2019 at 11:59 PM**

Successful applicants will be informed by February 11th.

Limited travel grants will be available to select conference participants

**Questions or Inquires?** Contact [punishingtrauma@gmail.com](mailto:punishingtrauma@gmail.com)

**In Memory of Devon Tyrone Wade, PhD**

*At his untimely passing, Devon Wade was completing his last year as a doctoral student in the Department of Sociology at Columbia University. An accomplished scholar-activist, Devon's research was borne out of, and driven by, community needs. His dissertation examined how schools develop responses to children impacted by trauma, such as having incarcerated parents. Devon was posthumously awarded his PhD by Columbia University in May of 2018. Punishing Trauma is organized in his memory, in order to bring together like-minded scholars and activists to address the pressing issues to which Devon dedicated his life.*

