

Visions in Methodology  
“Distinguished Senior Scholar Address”  
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### **USING TENSION TO ADVANCE YOUR CAREER**

Thank you very much for that welcome and this invitation. I’m tremendously pleased to be here with you, although I’ll admit it’s not without some trepidation on my part. Being invited to be a “Senior Distinguished Methods Scholar” at an event of this caliber has produced a bit of an “imposter syndrome” effect in me because I do not feel senior enough, distinguished enough, or methods enough to be able to possibly fulfill that title. Several colleague friends of mine had to practically read my own CV to me to help me see that I could fill this role. Plus, if I’ve learned anything in the course of my career it’s don’t say “no” to Janet Box-Steffensmeier—not because you’ll suffer some consequence for doing so, but because her instincts are so on-target that she’s basically always right.

Part of my privilege and honor for giving this talk is that it’s giving me the opportunity to reflect.

I’ve been asked to give a talk about my career. The challenges, the triumphs, the things that helped me to become successful, and the obstacles I’ve overcome. I was at the first and second VIM conferences 10 years ago and at those conferences I experienced the benefit that comes from the sorority of women facing similar challenges, but not exactly the same, but who were all there to build one another up. To support one another. To promote one another. And to provide not just encouragement, but tangible support to advance our goals. I was tremendously privileged to attend those first conferences and they made a profound impact on my career in a couple of ways, both pragmatic and emotional.

Pragmatically I received advice and mentorship at those conferences about the projects that I was working on that became published projects that have been important parts of my academic portfolio. And the feedback I received and advice I got at those conferences were pivotal in making those things happen.

Emotionally, I developed stronger relationships with a number of women in the field. Some were my peers, many of whom I’m still connected with, and some were senior mentors I interacted with. In particular Janet Box-Steffensmeier and Elisabeth Gerber, who were already my heroes and champions in many ways, at those moments became my active champions. They both read my papers, gave me advice, offered opportunities to me, and helped me to get things published. They helped introduce me to people who could advance my work, promoted me to people who could advance my career, provided recognition for me, met with me and provided advice of both professional and sometimes personal nature that were tremendously useful to me. Without Jan and Liz it’s quite possible I would not have made it where I am today. The interactions at VIM 10 years ago played a part in that.

### **REFLECT**

In reflecting on my career in preparation for this talk I’ve been thinking about talks of this type, and what they tend to be; the themes they tend to hit. Talks of this type present an opportunity to create camaraderie with fellow women scholars. It’s an opportunity to create a sense of motivation, and ambition, and bonding. It’s an opportunity to coalesce over challenges we may share as female scholars who work in a male-dominated technical field. In short, these talks often focus on struggle. And

challenges. And how we overcome those challenges. They frequently turn into things about work life balance that many women struggle with, whether they are my mothers or not.

But I don't want to give a cliché talk and I don't want to focus too much obstacles, although I'm happy to talk about them later. I want to share that in my process of thinking about these things and what would be appropriate to speak about today I've had what felt to me like a somewhat profound revelation. And before I set my own bar too high, I mean to say that the revelation has been profound for me, and it may not be for you, but I'm going to share it anyway. I say that it is only profound for me because actually what I'm about to do is to take an incredibly old idea that's been around for centuries and repackage it for my own purposes. In other words I'm going to do what many of our colleagues have been doing their whole careers.

## **TENSION**

The theme I want to focus on is TENSION. I don't think I'll be going on a limb to suggest that your life is probably a lot like my life—it's filled with a lot of tension. Being a PhD student is very stressful, and being a faculty member is like holding three full-time jobs at once. There are constant demands on our time and attention, whether it being pulled by students' demands while trying to draw an inward focus to your own writing, or the tension of being a good professor or a good partner or mom-but never feeling like you're doing a good job of both at the same time. It's the urgency of the emails and meetings that take your attention and time away from investing in the work products that are more meaningful for your advancement. Some of this tension comes from the multiple identities we all have, and how they conflict with one another. This tension is ever-present, and it's classic.

This tension is the yin and the yang that ancient eastern thinkers developed long ago. Because what we're often doing in our multiple roles of being parents and scholars and having all of these identities that we hold that battle with one another and frequently make us feel incompetent at any one thing, the common thread is the tension that is there. It is the stress that is caused by two opposing forces.

The tension is also in our politics. It's political polarization. It's opposing partisan forces that have generated such tension and animosity between them that it has outsized repercussions for our elections, our political norms. The tension is disrupting personal relationships and friendships and families, as we struggle to view those who hold views opposite ours as being not just different, or maybe morally compromised, but sometimes even dangerous, and threatening to our well-being. And this incredible tension that has developed in our lives our society and our politics is a part of the same yin and yang that we have in our personal and professional balance that is ubiquitous in the universe.

And once I started thinking about this as tension I saw it everywhere. It's in my yoga practice, where the opposing forces of heat and calm produce a particularly rewarding effect. It's in the deliciousness that comes in a salted caramel cookie that combines a sweet and savory sensation. It's the forceful waves of an ocean crashing on a beach creating a sense of calm and peace in its vastness.

My observation about the tension, is that we tend to focus on it negatively. We tend to recognize that the tension has significant consequences. When I'm being a good professor I'm not being a good mom. And sometimes we make professional choices based on this negative tension. I spoke with a friend recently who felt that she couldn't justify taking a retreat to work on writing because she would feel too guilty about leaving her family. And our focus on that tension and the negativity associated with whatever the other side is, leaves us sometimes with a sense of dread or want or despair.

And while that maybe true, I want to offer another perspective. Because if we look at opposing forces from the perspective of networks science I get a completely different view. Some networks, for example are made up of communities or clusters. And between those clusters are often bridges that connect communities. Work by the sociologist Ron Burt shows it is the bridges between these communities that create powerful brokers who can control the flow of information, help to establish new relationships that might lead to innovation. Or alternatively the presence or absence of these bridges may determine whether or not a disease becomes a viral outbreak or simply an isolated event. And the difference between whether or not the connections are positive or negative has to do with how they are connected and what flows over them. So it's the connectivity or the tension between the component parts that determine its value.

To see that tension has value look no further than the Ohio State/ U Michigan collegiate gear vendors, capitalizing on the rivalry to advance their sales.

I want I want to put forth is that the tension that we feel in our lives and in our politics is a ubiquitous tension that can work for our betterment. Because there are things that exist due to that tension that would not exist in its absence.

I want to put forth two specific ideas about things that are good about this tension. I'm going to call them **appreciation** and **innovation**.

### **APPRECIATION**

Appreciation comes from a recognition that something exists that may have value for you even if the thing itself is not valued. Good and evil. War and peace. Hot and cold. The opposing forces that have tension that I mentioned before many of them include individual forces in which one force is intrinsically good, and the other intrinsically bad. This isn't always the case but let's consider the extreme case of good and evil. Would we know what peace is if war didn't exist? Would we be able to value peace and happiness in the absence of violence and sadness? Maybe this isn't valuable in all cases. If the Holocaust never occurred I don't think any of us would be worse off without some recognition that genocide is bad. However when things are good for too long we take them for granted. It becomes impossible to appreciate them because they always exist. And while it may be OK for somethings never to be missed, I think there's a valuable human experience in gratitude. Here are two ways in which tension can lead to appreciation that makes us better off.

First, social psychologists have shown that people who show gratitude are happier people. The ability to develop appreciation, graciousness, thankfulness for things helps one to be positive and satisfied. So if we seek more happiness or positivity in our lives it may actually be a good thing that some evil exists because otherwise it would be harder to appreciate the wonderful things around us.

Second, sometimes in life we regret choices. Or we wonder if we've taken a wrong path at a fundamental juncture. My role here is the mid-career scholar puts me in a perfect position to offer the perspective of the dread that can plague this stage of life or a career. Midlife crises are made over the stuff of regret and wonder— wondering how things might be different had do you made a different choice at a critical juncture in your career or your personal life. Lives can be ruined over ruminating over this sense of regret and curiosity about the paths not taken. But one way out of that funk is to develop an appreciation for what you have.

Maybe you wonder if you picked the right career and if you had only gone to law school instead you be making more money and be less stressed right now. But then you realize that the choices you made led you to the relationships that you have, or the path to your children, or to the home that you own, or the community that you live in that you value or some other thing that's really important in your life that quite possibly would not exist had you take another path. The idea is that by focusing on a sense of gratitude and appreciation for things, we can improve our perspective and relax our consternation about the world and our choices.

## **INNOVATION**

The other potential upside of tension is that it establishes the conditions for innovation. While our psychological focus may often be on the negative consequences of polarization, or the guilt associated with not being all identities all the time, I want to put forth that there is great value in the tension itself. The establishment of the connection between the parts that oppose one another creates intrinsic value that cannot exist without that connection and without the tension. You see, the tension only exists if there is some force between them. And this force is a form of connectivity that produces affects that don't exist in the absence of the tension. Network scientists call this "emergent properties."

When chef creates a dish, she takes individual ingredients and combines them in a way that produces something new. These emergent properties don't exist until you connect them together. It's the idea that the whole is worth more than the sum of its parts. Butter and sugar and flour on their own aren't that great. It's not satisfying to sit down and eat a pound of butter or a cup of flour. But when you cut the butter into the flour and add just the right amount of sugar and salt, then make a chemical reaction by baking the combination at a perfect temperature— you create a perfect scone. The perfection of the salty sweetness of the scone cannot exist except through the combination of the individual components.

Do you know how a battery works? I don't really, but my rudimentary understanding is that when two opposing magnetic forces are connected by an electrical circuit, it generates electricity. Political reform and social movements have mostly occurred at times of incredible tension. Physical reactions. Chemical reactions. Political reactions. These occur due to some form of tension that is essentially a connection between opposites. When we have tension and opposing forces it has the ability to generate emergent properties, or characteristics that wouldn't exist in the absence of those forces.

How might tension in politics be positive? I see our political parties, and all the various components of these parties (the activists, the wealthy donors, the voters, the interest groups, the incumbents, —all of them) as the connective tissue in our politics. These actors and the connections between them create a web of associations between longstanding American and International institutions. The particular means and pattern of these connections have consequences for the types of political outcomes that they produce. As long as we see this connective tissue as polarized to the point of damaging, the future is bleak. But what if the tension in that connective tissue allows us to appreciate things we couldn't previously appreciate? Or what if it leads to innovations we hadn't previously seen? One could argue that the recent rise of participation in young people is an emergent property of the tension in our politics that may not have come about in its absence.

It could be that I just have a Pollyanna-ish view of the world and I have an overly optimistic attitude about trying to see the bright side of things. But I believe in the ubiquity of networks, and I believe in the possibilities of creation of emergent properties that come from the combination of forces that are intention with one another.

I think I'm supposed to be less esoteric and more practical in this talk, so let me end with some practical advice that goes beyond, "do what Jan says."

Be the bridge.

The value in our lives, our politics, and our careers is largely based on the series of connections between important elements. Rather than struggle with the multiple identities, embrace it. You have more superpowers than the privileged others who have fewer dimensions, therefore fewer identities, and fewer opportunities to make connections. Accept that this can be your strength rather than your overburdened weight to bear.

Do this by seeking mentors. VIM is a good start. I never had good mentors at my home institutions. I sought mentorship elsewhere actively. It didn't always pan out, but often it did. The resurgence in feminism and women supporting one another works to our advantage because we're good at making connections with each other and we can use these connections to get hands-on advice about our work, our goals, our priorities, and how we spend our time.

Build your network. Use your network. Appreciate the value of the tension in your personal, professional, and political life.

I have found that appreciating that I have multiple identities and that this is part of my super power, rather than my great burden, I can be more present at all the things I do. When I'm in the classroom, or in a meeting, or doing some writing, it's easier to accept that role at that time without the guilt of not being all the other things I am.

I have also found that this appreciation helps me with transitions. This is something my seven year old struggles with. Moving from one activity to another, or a change in his expectations about how the day will go can send him into a literal heap on the floor. While I completely empathize with him about how hard it is to be flexible, I find that my appreciation for the tensions in my life helps me to make the transitions more readily. Like with the opposing forces in a yoga practice, it leaves you more flexible.

A bit of Zen attitude can go a long way in a stressful, overcommitted academic's life. But I will add that I'm also continuously working on my workflow and organization habits. My mother still makes fun of me because at 6 years old I organized my sock drawer. By color. And Size. And I still do this in my life. I'm constantly reinventing ways of organizing my work and my life to seek efficiency. And while I still feel that email will cause the destruction of the world, I cannot emphasize enough the importance of planning. Plan your projects. Set deadlines. Tell people what your deadlines are, even if you've just made them up. Amy Erica Smith, who is here I believe, told me that Lisa Baldez once gave her truly profound advice about finishing her dissertation. She said, pick the date that you'll be done. Be ambitious but reasonable about the date. Develop a work schedule for yourself working backwards from that date, and then tell EVERYONE you meet what your date is. Your chair. Your spouse. The bus driver. Everyone. Using external commitment devices can be very useful for keeping yourself on track.

I decided I couldn't give a talk about all the challenges, because it would focus too much on negative things. I'm here to be positive, supportive, and give as much feedback as I can to help you appreciate your gifts and generate your innovations.