



# Who Gets to Be a Theorist? The Oppression of Marginal Theories

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Dr Kimberly Kay Hoang

# WHO GETS TO BE A THEORIST? THE OPPRESSION OF MARGINAL THEORIES

Who gets to be a theorist? What kinds of theoretical work get marginalised in academic research? And how does this oppression play out in the peer-review process? **Dr Kimberly Kay Hoang** is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Chicago. She has explored how difficult it is to get your sociology research published if you are not using research deemed to be legitimate by reviewers. She brings awareness to these issues and argues for change amongst scholars so that new forms of knowledge are not missed, especially regarding feminist, minority and racial theories.

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## **A Tribute to Lewis and Rose Laub Coser**

Conflict sociology is a paradigm-shifting framework for research that emphasises the role of power struggles in shaping societal change. One of the founding members was Lewis A. Coser, and his wife, Rose Coser, was a passionate feminist and a strong defender of affirmative action and social justice. Dr Kimberly Kay Hoang, Professor of Sociology at the University of Chicago in the USA, was so inspired by their work that she decided to explore what it means to theorise from the margins.

Mainstream sociology theory typically involves research in Western countries aiming to ascertain causal relationships via quantitative research. Marginal theories, however, involve critical studies that harness empirical evidence, like ethnography, which emphasises the importance of understanding a given individual, group, culture and so on, within their own specific context.

Lewis Coser was a refugee that fled Nazi Germany and, at 41 years old, began a doctoral program in sociology at Columbia University. It can be argued that Lewis and Rose Coser benefited from their marginality early in their careers, which gave them a unique lens to develop theoretical insights about conflict, authority, and institutions. Through illuminating the Cosers' life story, Dr Hoang teaches us that 'the process of arriving at one's theories is just as important of a story as the theoretical contribution itself'.

## **The Marginalisation of Women and Feminist Theories**

Lewis Coser went on to be a highly regarded sociologist and served as the 66th president of the American Sociological Association in 1975. Despite having an influence on her husband's research and producing important theoretical work that bridges different subfields in sociology, sociology still fails to recognise the innovative contribution of Rose Coser. Dr Hoang was surprised that no photos of Rose Coser could even be found online.

As she reflected on the influence that Rose Coser had on her husband's ideas, Dr Hoang questioned why the award is not named the Lewis and Rose Coser Award. She elaborated, 'Why do men tend to get recognition and respect as theorists while the women who theorised alongside them and propped up their careers are labelled as empiricists, not theorists?'

Women are often underrepresented in scholarship, often due to the gatekeeping within academia via journal reviewers, editorial boards and book publishers, which, as Dr Hoang explained, hinders the impact that female scholars can possibly have. Dr Hoang pointed to a personal example, in which an article she submitted to the American Sociological Review received feedback that she should abandon a woman theorist whose theory focused on gender, because the reviewer did not view it as theoretically sophisticated. As such, the reviewer encouraged her to cite two men instead.



*Rose Laub Coser – German-American sociologist, educator and social justice activist. Credit Andrew Perrin at John Hopkins University, Department of Sociology*

### **Highlighting Publication Biases with Data**

The data collected by Dr Hoang showed that two mainstream journals seem to be closing the gender gaps among authors, with 60% of papers published by men, 39% by women authors, and 1% by non-binary authors. She further explained that 29% of papers were on gender, while only 4% of all articles engaged with feminist theory.

These data affirm the hypothesis by earlier scholars that only certain types of papers on the topic of gender make it into mainstream outlets. It may be the case that feminist theory gets relegated to the subfield sociology journals, like *Gender & Society*. This led Dr Hoang to question what counts as general sociology with a larger appeal for the top journals and, importantly, who decides what counts.

Dr Hoang highlights that the effort to bridge marginal sociology with mainstream sociology is most often carried out by scholars of colour working at the margins of the discipline. Dr Hoang thus makes the case that the burden of doing bridgework should apply to all researchers – and not just scholars working on the margins.

### **The Dominance of American Sociology**

Dr Hoang also highlighted the oppression of scholars outside the Western hemisphere. For instance, she noted the continued dominance of North America and Western Europe as regions of substantive research. Indeed, Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa accounted for only 2% of all articles, moving Dr Hoang to comment that ‘the erasure of people of colour in the creation of knowledge is a form of political domination.

The lack of research in the top journals using case studies outside the USA highlights the continued provincialism of American sociology. Dr Hoang explained that nearly all papers published in American journals on topics outside of the Western world must go through a painstaking effort to justify their case by explaining why we should even care about a country or place in the first place.

### **The Marginalisation of Qualitative Work**

Qualitative approaches such as participant observations, interviews, and ethnography have long been associated with feminist theory building through emotion and self-reflection. In many ways, important dimensions of women’s lives are best understood through qualitative methods. However, quantitative methods have been prioritised since the mid-1980s.

Dr Hoang found that the qualitative and quantitative divide was vast, with papers using quantitative methods making up over 63% of all papers. In contrast, less than 24% of papers used qualitative methods involving interviews or ethnographic data, and only 2% relied solely on ethnographic data.

The overwhelming dominance of quantitative methods inevitably leads to a problem where qualitative papers must force themselves into quantitative logic, which values causality and generalisability. The missed opportunities of this approach, explained Dr Hoang, is that it loses thick description and storytelling that can inform theoretical frameworks.

### **Let’s Celebrate Marginal Work!**

Although sociology as a discipline has made some advances in recognising the theoretical contributions of women like Rose Coser, Dr Hoang believes there is still a long way to go ‘because the center is Anglo and masculine’, with editorial boards underrepresenting women and people of colour, thus reinforcing research that maintains the status quo.

Although there is a rapid rise in Asian economies and a declining significance of the West, Sociology as a discipline still doesn’t have theories to explain a new global order beyond paradigms such as Global North/South. In tribute to Lewis and Rose Coser, Dr Hoang urges us not to oppress the view from the margins but to celebrate it and make room for it because, in the margins, the most paradigm-shifting work may emerge.



# Meet the Researcher

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Dr Kimberly Kay Hoang is Professor of Sociology and the Director of Global Studies at the University of Chicago. She obtained her PhD from the University of California Berkeley in 2011 on women, gender, and sexuality. Her current research examines deal-making in frontier and emerging economies, and she is particularly interested in the sociology of gender, global sociology, economic sociology, and qualitative/ethnographic research methods. Dr Hoang is the author of two award-winning books: *Spiderweb Capitalism* and *Dealing in Desire*. Between 2017 and 2020, Dr Hoang was an associate editor at the *American Journal of Sociology*, and over the years, her work has been published in highly rated academic journals. Her books and peer-reviewed journal articles have been awarded over 26 prizes from several different professional associations, including the Association of American Publishers, Sociologists for Women in Society, and the American Sociological Association.

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## FURTHER READING

KK Hoang, [Theorizing from the Margins: A Tribute to Lewis and Rose Laub Coser](#), *Sociological Theory*, 2022, 40(3): 203–223. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/07352751221106199>

