

**ON BEING PRESIDENT OF THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF CRIMINOLOGY: AN  
INTERVIEW WITH RUTH D. PETERSON BY REBECCA D. PETERSEN**

REBECCA:

**What was the main impetus for beginning your work in the criminology field?**

RUTH:

I gradually came into criminology after earning a Master's degree in Sociology at Cleveland State University (CSU). While teaching at a junior college, I began to feel like I didn't have enough knowledge for my role, and so decided to pursue a Ph.D., and did so at the University of Wisconsin (UW). However, because I already had a master's degree, I had to take my first preliminary Ph.D. exam early during my second year in the program, when I still didn't know enough. Because of courses I had taken at CSU, I felt comfortable with crime and justice issues, and decided to take the first exam in that area. John Hagan's appointment to the UW faculty solidified my decision to have crime and justice as a specialty, and I have never looked back.

REBECCA:

**How has being a female in the field of criminology both helped and hindered you?**

RUTH:

I am not sure how much my academic accomplishments or challenges have depended on being female versus being African American. I assume that these two statuses have combined to play a role in each. For example, as an African American woman, I was able to become an American Sociological Association Minority Fellow, which provided both funds and mentoring for my graduate training. I also suspect that many of the opportunities that I have had to engage within national criminology circles have come in part because I am perceived as able to "represent" gender and race perspectives. But the combination of statuses has a double-edge. Being a relatively successful Black woman criminologist has also meant having far too many "opportunities" to contribute administrative or service work, compared to some of my counterparts. I admit that I have not always been as judicious as I should in "just saying no," probably reflecting my own interest in making sure that diverse perspectives are taken into account. But, I would advise younger women and underrepresented scholars to choose wisely, and with an eye to self-preservation, when considering which service roles to take on.

REBECCA:

**When did you become actively involved in the ASC?**

RUTH:

Actually, I can hardly remember *not* being actively involved in ASC. Of course as a graduate student, I merely attended occasional meetings. One early meeting stands out to me because I met Joan McCord, ASC's first woman president. She complimented me on the first paper I presented at a meeting. Her presence and her words at the session were encouraging and helped to sustain me during discouraging moments. As a young faculty member, I joined ASC's Division on Women and Crime (DWC) and became involved with the founding of the Division

on People of Color and Crime (DPCC). These divisions remain second (and welcoming) homes for me within ASC and the profession. Most notably, I was selected by John Hagan to serve as the program chair for the 1991 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Meeting of the ASC. Back then being Program Chair was very hands-on. Thus, you got to: know many members of the organization (and they you); interface with the Executive Board; and, become familiar with how the organization works. Undoubtedly, being program chair set the stage for holding other positions within ASC, including, being elected to serve on the Executive Board, as Vice President, and ultimately as ASC President.

**REBECCA: Discuss some of your experiences as being one of the few female presidents of the ASC.**

RUTH:

I am very proud to be in the company of the other ten women who have been elected as President of ASC. However, I was persuaded to run for this office because no person from an underrepresented race or ethnic group had held the position. Trusted colleagues thought that I might have a reasonable chance of filling this void. As president, one of my main goals was to bring attention to the contributions of underrepresented race and ethnic scholars to criminology and to the Association. The Program Chairs and I did a lot to meet this goal through the theme we chose for the annual meeting, the presidential plenaries we organized, and my presidential address. In making committee assignments, I tried to increase the visibility of the growing diverse population within ASC, while imbuing committee discussions with additional points of view, by making sure that all the committees were diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender. Finally, several of the initiatives that we implemented for the ASC program were personally gratifying and also fun. We: included local and national policymakers in our presidential plenaries, often having them interface with the academics; presented the President's Award for Distinguished Contributions to Justice to Jody Owens; and, raised funds from the ASC membership to make donations to justice serving organizations such as "Women with a Vision;" and provided books to help start a law and justice library for Smothers Academy for K-12 boys.

REBECCA:

**What type of work (teaching, research, field experience, practice experience, service, etc.) have you done with regard to women as offenders, victims, and/or workers in the cj system?**

RUTH:

When I first joined the sociology faculty at Ohio State University (OSU), I developed and taught a class on "Women, Crime, and Justice" that is still a part of the curriculum. Also, early in my career, I conducted studies examining (1) the relationship between women's social and economic status and levels of female rape and homicide victimization, and, (2) how family roles affect the sentences received by women and men for similar crimes. My practice work has mainly involved efforts to facilitate the success of women and other underrepresented scholars in their academic pursuits. In collaboration with several other women members of ASC, for several years I helped to organize and facilitate an annual tenure workshop during the ASC meeting that was sponsored

jointly by the DWC and DPCC. More recently, I co-founded the Racial Democracy, Crime and Justice Network (RDCJN), which among other activities sponsors an annual Crime and Justice Summer Research Institute (SRI) designed to facilitate the success of young faculty from underrepresented groups in their pursuit of academic success. Over sixty percent of SRI participants have been women from all race-ethnic backgrounds.

REBECCA:

**Describe the importance of mentorship, that is, both from a mentor and mentee perspective.**

RUTH:

Mentoring is essential to academic success. From a mentee's perspective, it provides information that you need for success, feedback on your progress and how to improve the quality of your research and teaching, and sponsorship into organizations and activities that matter for visibility and career mobility. In my case, I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to my dissertation chair, John Hagan, and countless senior and peer mentors for the success I've had. Being a mentor is also fundamental and indeed an inherent part of our work as academics. Mentoring is also rewarding. I have been fortunate to engage in mentoring of individuals at all levels of academe. Witnessing their success is intrinsically rewarding. I have also been involved in more formal mentoring activities at the organizational level. I mentioned the tenure workshops that colleagues and I organized and facilitated on behalf of DWC and DPCC. More continuously, since 2006, I have had the privilege of helping to coordinate and participate in mentoring activities for the RDCJN, including its Summer Research Institute. This experience has facilitated successful career activities for both mentees and mentors. In my case, these organizational mentoring activities have brought recognition from (1) the ASC Board, which in 2015 designated the ASC minority fellowship as the Ruth D. Peterson Fellowship for Racial and Ethnic Diversity, and (2) two sections within the American Sociological Association (Crime, Law, Deviance and Sociology of Law), which jointly established the Ruth D. Peterson and Lauren J. Krivo Mentoring Award.

REBECCA:

**To what extent do you define yourself as a feminist scholar?**

RUTH:

As I mentioned earlier, I have made a few contributions to the women, crime, and justice literature. The models examined in these papers all drew on themes from the then-growing body of feminist criminology, including arguments from other former ASC Presidents (i.e., Freda Adler, Candace Kruttschnitt). That said, my primary research agenda has focused less on gender issues and more on issues of race-ethnicity and crime, with attention to the roles of racial residential segregation and other social conditions in neighborhood crime levels across communities of different colors.

REBECCA:

**As you have been one of the few female ASC presidents (but within a great majority the past six years), what are both challenges and benefits of your presidential position, especially from a female perspective?**

RUTH:

Your two main duties as ASC President are staffing and overseeing the work of ASC committees, and preparing the program for an annual meeting. There are lots of committees to staff and many rules to apply in doing so. But, the two jobs overall are not so overwhelming because members say yes quite readily, and you get much help from the committees that you put in place and from the ASC staff. Of course you have to write your talk and get it in to the editor of *Criminology* by a specific deadline, which can be a challenge. The changes that I sought to help bring about (more recognition of the contributions of scholars from underrepresented race and ethnic groups, and more attention to scholarship with race at the center) during my tenure as president are the types that take place incrementally. I suspect that challenges would be greater if your goals require changes in organizational structure or process, or could not be implemented gradually. This is because you have a very short time to make your case and an existing structure to penetrate.

REBECCA:

**How have you been able to balance work-life and how do you perceive this to be different for males and females?**

RUTH:

It's important to have, but difficult to achieve, a good work-life balance; for sure, I have not been successful in doing so. My approach has been to "work hard, retire, and then play hard." Unfortunately, life events outside of your control may occur such that this type of plan doesn't work out. That has been my reality. Thus, I would advise younger scholars to make work-life balance and its components an integral part of your academic plan from the very outset. Even with a plan, it could be hard to achieve a proper balance. And, for a variety of reasons, it may be especially hard for women and scholars from underrepresented race and ethnic groups to stay on track. Still, it is important to cultivate non-academic aspects of your life (e.g., family, play, health, etc.), even as you work hard academically. So, build life plans into your *on-going* schedule, review and make adjustments to the plan along the way making sure that you attend to all its component parts, and whenever possible choose options that are rewarding and likely to facilitate your overall well being.

REBECCA:

**Thank you very much.**

RUTH:

My pleasure. Thank you.