Reflections on the Ostroms' Contributions to the Social Sciences

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Michael D. McGinnis

I want to thank you for inviting us to say a few words about our dear friend and colleague Lin Ostrom. I am sorry she could not be here in person, but at least the excerpt from her Nobel speech gives you some sense of what she was like—she was energetic, funny, a great communicator. She could also be very demanding of her students and colleagues, but even that was done in a nice way. And she worked incredibly hard.

I know she would have loved to speak at this setting. Her life was dedicated to interdisciplinary work and to enhancing communication across disciplines. I understand from Professor Rao that it took some time to get this event scheduled, but I can say that I know Lin was saying no to many speaking requests, and the fact that she said yes in this instance demonstrates her serious interest in being here. She was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer almost exactly a year ago, and during the last eight months of her life, she continued to travel and work—her oncologists had to schedule chemotherapy around her travel schedule! At the time, I was serving as Director of the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis that she and Vincent Ostrom established over thirty years ago, and I am glad that Professor Rao and I were able to arrange this memorial event, and especially pleased that my colleague Bill Blomquist is able to join us as well.

Bill will be highlighting some of the fundamental insights of Lin's research, and I would like to say a few words about the overall approach to research that made Lin and Vincent so unique. To understand Lin, you need to understand a bit about Vincent as well, for they were a team, married and collaborating for nearly 50 years. Their research approaches were quite different, but complementary, and they shared a unique approach to research.

To begin with, they were both genuinely interested in people. They were always ready to learn from others and to listen carefully to what others had to say. Bill and I had the good fortune of accompanying Lin on her trip to Stockholm to receive the Nobel, and we both had the experience of dragging her away to the next event because she wanted to

keep talking with the students who were gathered around her, telling her about their own research.

Lin and Vincent's research was problem-focused from the very beginning. They dealt with practical policy problems and always began by speaking with those most familiar with this problem rather than immediately giving advice. They wanted to identify the full set of institutions that were involved in this situation, including political, economic, social, and cultural factors that shaped the situation this community was confronting. The breadth of their interest seemed unlimited, except by the bounds of the problem at hand.

As a consequence of this openness, Lin and Vincent's work was radically interdisciplinary. They would learn from anyone familiar with any aspect of the problem. If someone mentioned that there was some work in anthropology dealing with a relevant issue, their response was to ask whom they should talk with to learn about this work. In recent years, interdisciplinary research has become very important in academia, but they were doing it decades ago, long before it was cool.

They did not find it easy to be so interdisciplinary in the context of a modern university, and in 1973, they decided to set up their own institution, a place where they could do the kind of research they had in mind. It was more than a research center or institute. They called it a workshop because they envisioned it as a place where students and junior scholars from different disciplines could work in close conjunction with senior scholars, in much the same way as apprentices learned from master craftsmen. In their spare time, Lin and Vincent built furniture and did so with a master carpenter. Those of us who have worked with Lin on a research team know how much she treated every participant as a full and equal partner in that collaborative effort—and she insisted that we all treat the staff with the respect they deserved, because she knew that their contributions were also critical.

It was not always easy to protect the space needed to do interdisciplinary research, but Lin was really good at it. Watching Lin negotiate with deans or other administrators was an incredible learning experience, a practicum in management skills. She knew what she wanted from them, and she knew how to get it and how to let them feel good about giving it to her. And then she sent them memos afterwards reminding them of what they had committed to her, so it would be there on the record.

It also wasn't easy to do interdisciplinary research in practice. We are all trained in our own specializations and come to discussions with our own sets of technical terms and preferred conceptual understandings. Much of the time at Workshop colloquium sessions was devoted to making sure we truly understood what the presenter was saying. Out of this process of contestation emerged the Institutional Analysis and Development framework, or IAD, as we summarized it. This was our effort to establish a common language for interdisciplinary discussion of policy problems. It focused primarily on the social and psychological sciences although also included critical aspects of the nature of the physical reality with which communities interact. In the latter part of her career, Lin

innovated a broader framework for the study of social-ecological systems (SES), and this SES framework gave equal billing to social and biophysical processes.

These frameworks emerged from a long process of contestation, with Lin playing the leading role in facilitating those discussions and in bringing them to fruition in a particular format. We use these frameworks as the basis for asking good research questions and developing more specific theories and models, and as a way to bring some structure to the concerns likely to be raised by colleagues coming from different perspectives. Both will continue to change, because there is nothing static about the way Lin and Vincent approached research. For them, and especially for Vincent, contestation is the essential core of the human condition. By contestation, we mean an open-ended process of intense dialogue with others, with all parties paying careful attention to understanding what the other is saying, in hopes of moving towards a common understanding. This kind of deliberation is sadly missing in our contemporary political context so dominated by partisan bickering.

For Lin, our responsibility as scholars and policy analysts was to find and maintain an effective balance between scientific rigor and policy relevance. Her work combined both in a truly unique way. She insisted that students adhere to principles of good research design, making sure to select cases in a way that ensured that they would be able to arrive at valid inferences from their research, yet the research questions remained relevant to practical policy concerns. Very few scholars have been so successful at balancing these often contradictory concerns.

I would like to highlight two aspects of the unique balance between rigor and relevance that Lin exemplified in her work. On the research side, she was always willing to draw upon any kind of research method that would help her understand the policy problem she was studying. Again, multiple-methods research has recently become highly valued by political scientists, but it was not always so. When Lin began her career, this profession was split between advocates of contrasting forms of research, with quantitative methodologists squaring off against those who focused instead on more informal aspects of culture or historical context. From the very beginning of her career, Lin cut across this divide and encouraged her students to do likewise. Of course, no one person can become expert at all methods of doing research, and this is another reason why Lin was so often engaged in collaborative projects. If she didn't have time to learn a new method in detail, she sought out good people to work with and proceeded to learn with them.

On the policy side, Lin's single most enduring message is this: No panaceas! Too often, policy analysts become enamored of a particular form of policy intervention, such as increased competition in markets or more tightly targeted government regulation, and offer that solution to any problem that arises. No one policy solution can be relevant in all circumstances, however, so we should not keep searching for that one panacea. Instead, we should remain open to the deep rethinking or reconstituting that is so often necessary to address particularly difficult problems.

Humans naturally seek simplicity, but Lin knew full well that this is the wrong kind of simplicity. There are reasons why humans have created and worked within so

many different kinds of political, social, economic, and cultural institutions, and we need to embrace this institutional diversity. We need to examine each problem honestly and to remain open to creative ways of devising solutions to that particular problem, and especially as academic researchers, we need to remain open to learning from the experience of those people who are most directly affected by that problem.

Finally, we return full circle to people. Lin always wanted to communicate the results of her research to ordinary people, and to do so in a way that they can understand. Her research teams wrote reports or discussed their findings with the subjects of that research, and I don't mean just sending them a copy of the professional article or book that was published at the end of the process. Ideally, each project was part of an ongoing relationship of mutual learning.

For example, consider the five "intentional communities" in central and southern Indiana that Lin and her colleagues have studied as part of their project on community-based forestry management. Each of these communities has a unique origin and historical trajectory, but they share one aspect, namely, that each developed a form of collective management of resources shared in common by members of that community. Teams of Workshop faculty, students, and visiting scholars have returned to these communities several times to keep apprised of new developments, and especially to learn from community experiences at managing both their forests and their communal relationships.

At the very heart of Lin's work, and Vincent's, is the normative value of self-governance. Together, they teach us a critically important lesson: If we continue to rail against "the government," we will forget that we, as citizens in a democracy, are supposed to govern ourselves. Yes, there are constraints on what we can and cannot do, but we should never underestimate our collective ability to improve the settings within which we live and work. Lin and Vincent warned us that we too easily fall into the trap of thinking that we have all the answers, when what we really have is an exciting opportunity to learn from the new institutions that are being created around us all the time. It is our job as citizens to participate fully in our own governance, and our job as scholars and policy analysts is to better understand the conditions under which this kind of self-governance remains sustainable.

William Blomquist

I echo and underscore all of what Mike McGinnis has said about Lin's approach to research, to work, to people, and to life. I'll add some further observations on her contributions to the social sciences, many of which she made either in coauthorship or in conversation with Vincent and almost all of which she made through the Workshop and its faculty, staff, and students.

A consistent theme of Lin Ostrom's research and writing, and the core of her contributions to the social sciences, was how human beings create and transform institutions and how institutions affect human decision making and behavior. These topics span all of the social sciences—they are relevant to political scientists, economists, anthropologists, geographers, sociologists, legal scholars, communication scholars,

linguists, and historians. As Mike McGinnis has stated, Lin and her husband-colleague, Vincent, understood this multidisciplinary nature of their work, embraced it, took it seriously, and invited and treasured collaboration with scholars and students from all these fields of study.

Within the multidisciplinary study of institutions, Lin Ostrom's contributions were theoretical and empirical. Her principal theoretical insights, in my view, were these:

1. Institutions are composed of rules and are configurations of rules.

2. Seeing institutions in this way opens up opportunities for analysis across diverse institutions and settings. We can identify key and common types of rules that are present—explicitly or implicitly—in any institution:

    a. Rules that define how one enters or exits a situation, i.e., who is "in" and who is "out" with respect to that institution (boundary rules);

    b. Rules defining what positions or categories of membership exist within the institution (position rules);

    c. Rules indicating what actions are authorized (required, permitted, or forbidden) with respect to each position, i.e., what a person holding a particular position within the institution can do (authority rules);

    d. Rules marking out the domain or jurisdiction of the institution itself, i.e., what human affairs or matters in the world this particular institution can touch or affect (scope rules);

    e. Rules specifying what information participants may or may not have access to and what or how they may or must or must not disclose or share that information with others (information rules);

    f. Rules defining how group decisions and/or decisions on behalf of the whole institution are made, including rules that define how many participants may or must agree for a decision to be regarded as having been made and made legitimately (aggregation rules); and

    g. Rules specifying how the benefits and costs of decisions and actions are to be captured by and/or distributed among the participants (payoff rules).

3. Many institutions are nested within other institutions. Nearly all institutions are linked with other institutions. People are involved in and affected by multiple institutions.

4. People operate at multiple levels when they interact with institutions.

    a. Sometimes we are rule-takers, making our choices and undertaking our behaviors within the institutionally

   defined and recognized rules. Lin and her colleagues termed this the operational level of action. (One might think of drivers dealing with traffic laws and ordinances.)

   b. Sometimes we are rule-makers, taking decisions about what the rules governing our behavior will be. Lin and her colleagues referred to this as the collective-choice level of action. (One might think of a city council setting or modifying speed limits on city streets.)

   c. Sometimes we make rules about how the rules should or can be made. Lin and her colleagues termed this the constitutional-choice level of action. (One might think of legislators deciding what rules city councils can make, how many members a council will have, how council members are chosen, and so on.)

   d. The most important but easily overlooked or misunderstood insight about the multiple levels of action, however, is this: All of us operate at all of these levels. The levels of action don't equate to different human beings; human beings are capable of operating at all levels and often do. The traffic examples I used for purposes of illustration demonstrate this. At one moment, I am a driver operating according to the traffic laws, but I might also be a council member or a legislator at another moment, making rules about what the traffic laws should be or how the traffic laws should be made. People make rules as well as respond to them.

5. Institutions are not just constraints on human behavior. Institutions are also means by which people act and innovate. People create and modify institutions in order to address and to try to solve problems or achieve desired goals. This is another way of saying that a basic presumption of Lin's work on rules was that people are rational beings—they have reasons for the decisions they make and the actions they take.

6. It is important to be clear about this way of defining rationality. It is a very limited definition. People are not presumed to be correct in all of their reasoning, or to always accurately design institutions to achieve goals and solve problems, or to always choose the best actions or alternatives. In the work of the Ostroms, human beings are seen as rational but fallible problem solvers—their behavior is intentional, not random, but they can be mistaken about the nature and causes of problems, the set of options that are available, the likely outcomes of pursuing those options, the likely actions of others, and many other conditions and contingencies.

7. Similarly, the presumption of rationality does not equate to a presumption of benevolence. The goals people are trying to achieve are not necessarily benign or desired by others. People may create or modify institutions for purposes of self-aggrandizement and oppression or exploitation as well as to do good.

8. Individual choices and collective outcomes are not shaped only by the effects of institutions. Characteristics of the physical world shape the problems people face, the ease or difficulty with which they may be able to perceive and understand those problems, and the options and actions that are available to them. One can fence a patch of grassland more readily than one can fence the atmosphere. One can perceive a rising or declining water level in a lake more easily than one can perceive the amount of water stored in an underground aquifer. Intellectual-property infractions became harder to identify and resolve once human beings were networked in global and nearly instantaneous communication webs. And so on.

9. Cultural traditions, norms, and values also shape what situations people perceive to be problems, what options or actions they believe to be available, the likely actions of others, the valuation of costs and benefits, and a host of other considerations that factor into people's beliefs, perceptions of the world, and actions. Recognizing the powerful influences of culture and community does not mean abandoning the presumption of rationality. People are still intentional, fallible problem solvers, but their intentions, their identification and assessment of problems, and their views and valuations of options, actions, and outcomes are shaped by the attributes of their community and culture. One of the most important attributes is the level of trust that individuals have in one another, which will vary greatly from one setting to another and can strongly influence the choices they make and the actions they take in anticipation of how others will behave.

10. Learning is not only possible but ubiquitous. Most problems are not *sui generis*, and most interactions are not once and for all. In any given community, people encounter one another repeatedly, or at least expect that they will. People also encounter the same problems over and over, or at least encounter similar enough problems that they can reason by analogy and can adapt actions taken in dealing with one problem to their choices with regard to another. People generally have opportunities to experiment, learn, adapt, and do better at solving problems or achieving goals over time. Of course, there is no guarantee that they will do better—people are fallible and learning is not automatic—but learning is possible, happens all the time, and therefore must be acknowledged as one of the important drivers of changes in institutions and behavior.

11. Opportunities for learning increase as the diversity of institutions and experiences to which people have access increases. At the extreme, if every individual and every community took the same decisions in the same ways

and had the same options for organizing and conducting their social actions, opportunities for learning what works well and what works poorly would be severely truncated. All other things being equal, social environments that allow people to try a greater variety of actions, and make it easier for people to see and learn from that variety, provide significant advantages for rational but fallible problem solvers to generate better outcomes. Institutional diversity maximizes the opportunities for effective learning and adaptation.

These are key theoretical contributions that Lin and Vincent Ostrom made to the social sciences. They made vital empirical contributions, too. As Mike McGinnis noted, Lin and Vincent believed that the world in all its diversity and complexity is filled with lessons to learn, and they put that belief into practice. They were willing to go anywhere and study anything if it seemed to offer the prospect of adding insight about people and institutions, about problems and solutions, about failures and successes. From the decades of their research, we have gained insights into everything, from how different patterns and practices of policing are connected with public safety and citizen satisfaction in American metropolitan areas, to how diverse ways of organizing the management of water resources yield more and less sustainable outcomes around the globe; from the harvesting of fish to the transitions of regimes; and more. Research methods are tools, and researchers should have as full a tool kit as possible. Similarly, humanity and history are full of cases and data, and researchers should be willing to gather all that we can beneficially use.

The Ostroms had the intellectual habit of seeing horizons where others saw boundaries. They did their best to inculcate that habit in their students and colleagues. That is one of the most important legacies with which they left us. It's been a privilege to share some of that with you here at the Indiana Academy of the Social Sciences.