



Scholar Profile for the 2014 Winter issue of *e.polis*

Dr. Paru R. Shah - Assistant Professor of Political Science and Urban Studies

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This is a scholar profile of Dr. Paru R. Shah one of UWM Urban Studies Programs newest faculty members and urban scholars. Dr. Shah received her undergraduate degree in Philosophy, a Master's of Public Health, and a Ph.D. in Political Science. Her main interests center around urban politics in general and the issue of race in politics more specifically. Throughout the following interview Dr. Shah shows her passion and interest on the study of urban issues. She discusses her scholarly trajectory, how to pick a research topic, and her methodology. She also shares her thoughts on the Milwaukee experience, the urban aspects of politics, and her previous research studies. Finally, she shares a bit about her own teaching techniques, some tips for graduate students and her reflections on the changing urban environment and what she sees for the future of cities.

Interview Transcript:

Katie Witz: So first of all can you explain what drew you into Political Science?

Prof. Shah: Oh sure, so I actually have kind of a not very straight trajectory towards political science. I have an undergraduate degree in Philosophy and then I was actually thinking of going to Med School (laughs). So then I decided to go get a Master's in Public Health and decided not to go to medical school, but one of the things that came out of getting a Master's in Public Health was that I really wanted to work as a community organizer. So I worked for a year in an AmeriCorps program doing health education and to low-income schools in Chicago. And then I got a job for the AmeriCorps program, it was called Chicago Health Core. And I think being in that position of working really on public policy more than political science I think at the time, really interested me. I loved working with people from different backgrounds and problem-solving and community organizing. And so I decided to look into degrees really that looked at policy issues and that's what brought me to political science. And so I'm still really interesting in public policy especially around urban issues like education, and immigration and I spent a lot of time recently looking at minority candidates running for local office and things like that. So...yeah it

wasn't really that I loved elections right off the bat it was a bit of kind-of a zigzag to get here.

K: Why didn't you go to Med School, why did you decide against that?

P: I just really liked public health...I felt like I didn't want to do like individual medicine. I don't know it just, it stopped being interesting to me, I guess. Public health I think is really fascinating and I think at the time I felt really strongly, and I still do. I mean I think I would have enjoyed medical school but I like other aspects of like this job I get to do teaching and being around lots of people and being involved in communities.

K: Sure, sure. So what is the connection between policy and community organizing? Cause I know there is one, but I think often times that connection is missed. And like even for me I really like the community organizing part, but then policy is so...I haven't found the interest there yet. So how do you connect the two?

P: As a political scientist I'll often study policy in terms of the people who are elected officials who make the policy. But I do think communities and the people within communities can have a strong direction in how those things actually happen. And so part of it, a lot political science looks at the fact that if you don't have a voice you're not really going to be able to make change. And so I think community organizing is about getting people to help, to help them find that voice and organize around this common goal of keeping a school open or making sure people understand that, yes maybe this school is failing, but it's part of this community and so what does that mean to actually close it. So it's a lot, I think, of bringing attention to the facets of a problem that I think in other situations nobody's really paying attention to. And in some situations I think communities are involved in policy-making and community groups, you know, but not always, I think your right. But I do think it's an interesting way to kind of incorporate more stakeholders in the conversation. And I think what's great about AmeriCorps is that, which is the national service program here in the United States is that it's really focused on developing community and trying to make change that's sustainable. So I think that was a huge part of me kind of shifting gears because I think a year of doing community organizing and education just kind of changed everything for me.

K: I like what you said, how a school may be failing, but then to close it has a lot of implications for the community involved.

P: Yeah.

K: And I think you're right that a lot of people miss that point, it's just easy to you know condemn or close a school or want to do that without taking consideration into...

P: Yeah, exactly.

K: Um, so how did you narrow down a topic of interest? I guess this is more a question for researchers...

P: PhD students...

K: ...becoming researchers and how did you...

P: So I always think that most of us who study, who get a Ph.D., have to be pretty passionate about a topic because it's going to have to sustain you for a very long time. And I often find that people have some kind of sort of personal story, or something that triggers for them...oh you know I'm interested in that topic. So my main interest in urban politics is really race and politics. And I think as someone who was often the minority in the situation I was really interested in how other people, both viewed racial minorities and how that kind of played into political power. And, you know I come from...I'm an Indian-American and so it's like I remember being very young and being very cognoscente of being you know one of the only Indians in certain situations and I always wondered what it would be like to, you know how people would relate if I saw somebody, like today, right. And now my kids see lots of people on TV who are Indian actors and you know Miss America was Indian this year, and like things like that, so. I always wondered how people think about race, how is going to, perceptions or race are evolving essentially and, so that's kind of how I got really interested in race and politics and then I kind-of focused that on, cause I was studying political science on people who run for office. What is that like, and why do they run and what happens when they run, and how do people who voted for them feel about it when they run and things like that.

K: And that was your dissertation topic?

P: Yeah, so I looked at actually Latino's on school boards and I looked at school boards because I'm interested in local politics, and most minorities run first for local office. I was interested in the immigrant experience and I think people often ask well why didn't you just look at Asians? Well there are just not enough of us running at this, I mean this is what like 10 years ago. So I wanted to do this kind of really large, I do mostly quantitative work. So school boards, there's a lot of school boards in the United States so that kind of helped me as well.

K: I have a question about your methodology. So I looked at your C.V. and it looks like you use a lot of previous data sets. Is that your only method?

P: No...

K: Or is that your preferred?

P: Yeah, I mean since I do a lot of large studies right, I often look to see if people have already collected some of this information and then maybe use it in a different way. So a survey that was actually originally you know meant to get at, just count you know, to get at some...like a directory of cities gives me a lot of information potentially about how many African American and Latino, Asian council members there are. So the one for my dissertation was an original data set and I do create other original data sets, but I think when you're doing large studies it's helpful to not have to do that all by yourself and start from scratch. And you know survey research has become so expensive over time that it's become less feasible. Even though you can do some things free now via email, you don't get a lot of results all the time, so I use, I think I do mostly probably, I would say I do maybe half and half. Try to create my own data set and other times use what's already out there.

K: Are there any cons to using previous data sets?

P: Oh yeah, lots, I mean the biggest con is that they haven't asked the question you really want to know. You know so right now, my research is kind of really focused on what we call candidate emergence. So those people who run, figuring out why people even run for office, particularly minorities. There is no data set on this. So myself and other co-authors have [to] just go and figure [it] out. So there's 35 people running for Mayor in Minneapolis this year, right, but the only way you would know that is if you followed the newspapers or followed the media. And so we started trying to create our own data set based on that. We focus a lot of attention on the winners, but my guess is, and this is shown to be true, that minorities and women often run and lose. And so there's like this whole pot of people who haven't won that are actually really interesting to study.

K: Sure.

P: Because they did, they put their hat in the ring, you know. So you still want to know something about what motivated them to get that far.

K: Right, right. I'm really interested in something you said earlier about how there isn't or at least 10 years ago there wasn't a lot of Asian-American's running. Asian-Americans are kind of the model minority or the model immigrant. So how does that, that they aren't running in larger numbers, how does that work with this idea of the model immigrant stereotype?

P: I can only speak like really anecdotally about this. I think for a lot of Asian-Americans whose parents...so my parents were immigrants so I guess I'm first generation. You know in their home countries politics is not seen as a prestigious job or anything that people would necessarily want to do, they see themselves as small business entrepreneurs or maybe some other sort of professional career and politics was never part of that. And so it really has been a shift for people of my generation and after who've been like, no I want to be

involved in politics. And I think the model minority status comes from you know being focused on education, on supporting themselves and less about, their political engagement necessarily. They've actually continued to be, I just showed this in my class, one of the lowest as a whole [levels of] political engagement.

K: That is interesting.

P: Yeah

K: Very interesting. So how is political science urbanized, is it always urbanized and is there a need to make explicit the urban nature of politics?

P: Hmm...That's an interesting question. So [in] political science I would say there was a time when some of the major works in political science were really focused on the city and local politics. And I think we've really moved away from that now within the discipline of political science. Even though I argue, and others like me argue, that the city is a really great place to study. Even questions that affect all levels of government, so questions about elections and questions about voter biases and because there's just more things happening at the city and there's such a diversity between cities. So there's an urban politics section of the American Political Science Association and it's small, and I would say there's probably 10 of us who are under 40. I mean it's a very old you know white men kind of and their leaving and so the question is how are we going to rejuvenate it. And there aren't really places anymore that, like you know UWM doesn't specialize in urban politics there's very few places that do that now. And so I think there's going to be a shift in how urban politics kind of maybe is enfolded into other types of American politics or you know a lot of us will study race at the local level, so...yeah to me there's like a natural connection there, but it's not always the case. I would say more people who study urban studies understand that there's a political aspect to it. Versus people who study political science understanding that there's an urban component to it.

K: Interesting. What about how like when there are maybe even more local like Governor elections, but at least Presidential elections it seems like the rural areas are the ones that determine the result or is that not true?

P: No...I mean Wisconsin is a good case where there's just like two urban areas and I mean that carries the state essentially. So population size still really matters. I mean in some ways you could argue that the people in the rural areas are not getting their voices heard as strongly anymore because there are just fewer of them. But metro areas still really matter. And I mean that's the thing the city, state and metro, I think again Milwaukee's a great place where you can look at a lot of interesting political dynamics, between Milwaukee county and the surrounding counties and debates about who's going to pay for what and what

matters. So I think the urban area matters, but the urban plus all the suburban areas become a really important political force.

K: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. Um, so like I said, I looked at your C.V. and I'm really interested in the parental involvement studies.

P: Oh, yeah.

K: Can you briefly summarize your findings?

P: Sure, so some of that came out of my dissertation. I wanted to look at how having people in the school who were of the same race impacted parental involvement. So there's all this literature that says there's been this kind-of shift to get parents involved, we've got to get parents involved, and the reason why minority students are failing, or performing more poorly, is because their parents aren't involved. And you can believe that or not believe that, but I wanted to be like, Ok, what gets parents in the door? And one of my hypotheses, and one of the things people think about in political science is that representation matters and that if there's more principals and teachers who are of the same race the parents would feel more comfortable in that school. And so I wanted to look at if there was a correlation between those things. So for my dissertation I looked at Latino's and I did a survey of Latino parents and asked them how they felt about being in school and I was able to look at those answers as they really correlated to the percentage of Latino teachers and Principals in the school. And I found there was a relationship, that they felt more welcome, they felt that their needs were being met. I think parental involvement, the way I've tried to define it is that it's, another way of thinking about political participation and it's a really important way of thinking about that groups that often don't participate in more mainstream ways because of a variety of reasons. Because they can't, maybe because they're not allowed to vote, or because this is their first encounter with the American political system in some ways of being in a school where there's rules and you know things like that. I think it provides evidence to suggest that you should continue to try to recruit teachers and principals from the communities that there in because that actually has an impact then on these student outcomes. I think there's lots of good reason to have teachers and principals from the community, but I think it also means that the bottom line [is that] most [people] will look at [if] student outcomes could actually influence that. I haven't actually done anything with parental involvement in a while now, but I do still think that I'm really still interested in education politics and how the relationships between schools and parents and what that really means.

K: Yeah, I think that is a really interesting connection to. So do you, do you not get into the debate if like say one way or the other if parents are involved it will make or break? 'Cause it sounds like your results say that there is a positive benefit.

P: To the parents. I personally think as a person with kids in school that there's lots of, I mean I totally believe the research suggests that the number one reason students achieve, do well in school is mother's education and what happens from 0-3. And so those things have all happened by the time the 5 year old shows up to the door. So I don't want to blame the parents, I don't want to blame the teachers, you know I think there's a lot of things going on, but I want to see us attacking this from very different angles and so part of this is, I think troublesome that we have a hard time getting minorities to become teachers anymore because of a lot of reasons with the teaching profession. I hope one of the things that comes out of that research is that, it matters. Like it matters that we should still be trying to target and influence people [saying] this would be a great profession for you and it matters for your community.

K: One of the things that I appreciate too is that even if it is maybe the parents fault, we're [just] going to say that right, you're not necessarily blaming the parents, but there's more structural reasons.

P: Yeah, exactly. You know it's funny I always talk about this in my urban politics class, I come from a place, and I think again this goes back to being in AmeriCorps, I come from a place that you're going to be hard pressed to find a person in a school who doesn't want the best for that kid. You know, but they just have different ways of understanding how to get there. And I think for parents, especially immigrant parents [I mean] I think about my own parents they didn't know what they were doing. So it's like if there's like no way for them to connect to the school, I mean even now, I moved to Shorewood two years ago and very little was told to me. I had never been in the school district before and so my first child was going to Kindergarten there. There's a lot of learning, and I mean I consider myself a pretty well educated person who can probably figure these things out, but you have to be that kind of personality in some ways. And if you're not or your used to being much more submissive in a situation where the teachers like the authority and you're not, you know all these things play out. I just think it's important to be aware of that. So even in a place like Shorewood that I think would do more, and you know we've talked about how we need to do more outreach to the English as a second language parents cause they don't really understand this is a complicated system. Schools here are very complicated in some ways. It's not just like you send your kid and ok see ya.

K: Sure, absolutely. I don't have immigrant status and I don't have the language barrier, but navigating the school system with my son I think, and we're in MPS and that's a whole...

P: Yeah, it's really complicated.

K: The fact that we have so many choices is so overwhelming.

P: Right.

K: And like that really floored me from the beginning.

P: Yeah, I remember. Well I looked at MPS when we moved here too and I remember they sent me this thing and I was like, Oh my goodness this is a lot to like figure out. And choice is good, I think in some ways, but if you don't understand what those choices really mean or how to do it...

K: Absolutely.

P: Yeah, it's just hard.

K: Absolutely. This is kind of a fun question, what was the most fun article that you have written?

P: Most fun article? (laughs)

K: Or is there one?

P: See your early in your PhD so I don't want to make it sound like it never gets fun. I like writing things, you know, co-authored things. Um...fun is a hard word, I mean I enjoyed working with friends, I think writing and publishing is difficult (laughs) so it's hard to remember the fun times. You know it's one of those things that can take years, that's the other thing that is so, so hard about it. Probably the first thing I wrote, because I was still in graduate school and I wrote with my graduate school advisor. It was in policy studies. It was looking at the ideas of civic capacity or social capital, which I'm really interested in, I was really interested in. And so you know it was nice to see that first thing with my name on it. But yeah, I think it's hard it's (laughs) it's really hard to remember the fun parts, even if your happy to get it done. It's just that it's a pretty strenuous sprint to that point and then you're just like, ok good (laughs).

K: This summer I wrote, I finished my Master's paper and it was...it was one of the hardest things I've had to do. It was so much revising...

P: Yeah...

K:...and so much, you know trying to please different people on the committee. But it was really humbling. I think I learned so much, and I don't think I went into the situation thinking that I was really great or anything, but it was just really humbling. And at the end of it...like I doubted myself throughout it and then so like having stuck through it...

P: Yeah, exactly. There is that feeling of...it's relief essentially (laughs) that it's over.

K: Right, yeah...

P: Versus, joy (laughs).

K: What do you like about UWM? I saw you came here in 2011.

P: Yep. So yeah I taught for five years at McAllister College which is in St. Paul, it's a small liberal arts College. There's lots of things I like about UWM. I like that we're in a big city, I like that we're in, I'm from Chicago, so being in the Midwest is nice. I like that UWM has a mission to be an urban school that often sees a lot of minority and first generation college students. I think their providing opportunities for students who don't get those opportunities elsewhere. I have great colleagues, there's a great urban studies program so there's lots of things I think that are such a great fit for me.

K: What is your favorite class to teach?

P: Um...so I teach urban politics and race and politics pretty much all the time and I like both of them equally because their just what I do. I like them both for the same reason essentially. People I think feel like they know already a lot about those things; race and politics because we're been kind of inundated by some of that stuff in the news. Everybody has some sense of what that means. And then urban politics because we all live somewhere where we've been living with that, you know they've lived in a place or a space where they have something that they can relate to. And so it's nice because I feel like one of my challenges in these classes is to really not think about politics but about political science and how as a social scientist you understand those relationships and what you see, versus your own individual kind of experiences of those things. And so I like that. I think it like provides a nice avenue to open up the world of being a social scientist and how to understand data and how to ask questions and how to understand what people are telling you when they give you information.

K: Yeah, yeah...in both of classes that I've taught, right now I'm teaching Urban Studies 250, exploring the urban environment. And then in my Master's program which was Women's studies I taught Intro to Women's studies. In both of those classes I really emphasize the students' personal relationship to the topic. So I say you know to various degrees they are experts, you know, on some level to what we're talking about. They all have been to cities, or your know seen cities or have an idea of cities and to use that and then...to not stay there though...cause I think some people want to stay there you know, this is my experience so it must be the experience, but to go further.

P: Yeah, I think it's a great way. Cause I think it helps people kind of find their buy-in to find their connection to the topics. Yeah.

K: So any advice for students in the crunch time of the semester, or for grad students writing their thesis or dissertation?

P: (laughs) Um, let's see...besides the obvious, like don't wait till the last minute. So the crunch time of the semester (pause) yeah, that I think you've just got to get through, that's part of being a graduate student. But in terms of writing your thesis or dissertation I think it's smart to be getting feedback along the way. I think one of the things that you have to learn if you're going to be an academic is that people are going to not like everything you say. I feel people are not generally mean about it, but you have to be able to take criticism and be like, this is criticism about something I wrote, not about me. It's a criticism about something I did on this paper, not necessarily about my own understanding of things. And so the more you get, don't be afraid of feedback, I think some students wait, and wait and wait cause they think it's going to get perfect and be perfect as some point, and then when it's not their crushed. Or at least not what they thought it was going to be. So it's better to get feedback earlier on and for me, that's what I love to do...I like to get. You know as you were saying, you wrote your paper lots of times, iterations. You know I think about what things looked like at the beginning and what things looked polished and I'm like, wow. You know it's pretty impressive how far you can come. Be like, your right I need to think through these things some more or...

K: I think those are really good tips. And that was something that I struggled with writing my paper...like I did it...I took the feedback but I wasn't very good on reaching out you know and asking for it. So that was, that was a good learning experience.

P: Yeah, and I mean that's essentially what our job is, so people aren't going to be like, oh no. I mean we want to help you succeed.

K: Mmmhmmm, yeah. And then this is the last question I have. So this upcoming year of 2014, Urban Studies is celebrating its 50th anniversary. So in honor of the anniversary do you have any reflections on how cities, or the urban environment or academia in general have changed in the last half century? So kind of a really broad question.

P: Um, wow, yeah. Um...ok...so let me think about this. I mean I think cities have definitely changed a lot, probably academia even more than I realize. I haven't been an academic maybe long enough to know. I do think what's really interesting about cities now is that, there's these interesting dynamics that happen that we never thought would happen in cities, like cities going completely bankrupt. I'm interested in the kind-of racial changes that are happening in cities in these really vast ways that are really making them really diverse places and what's that's going to mean as we continue to move forward. I mean it's going push us to really think about what race means in the United States, and cities is where it's going to happen first and it's already happened in some cities. And so I think that kind of interaction has like a lot of positive potentials, for building coalitions and kind-of moving beyond some of the racial divides that we've had. But I think it's going to be a struggle to get there and we're going to see some of these struggles I think play out a lot

more in the next 50 years. But I mean thinking back, I'm also interested in how cities are becoming revitalized again. I think about how lots of people want to move back into the city now and you know how it's seen as great to actually live in the city versus it used to be very much like you want to live in suburbs. I think people want different things now and I think that also is going to really change the landscape of the city, in really positive ways potentially. So that was a very vague answer (laughs).

K: Well it was a broad question.

P: Yeah.

K: Well, those are all the questions I have, so unless you have anything else to add that's all I have.

P: No, I think that's good.

K: Ok, well thank you very much for your time.