



Scholar Profile for the 2017 Fall issue of *e.polis*.

Dr. William Vélez- Emeritus Professor of Sociology and Urban Studies Programs at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

Interview conducted and transcribed by Tathagato Chakraborty, UWM Urban Studies PhD Student

This is a scholar profile of Dr. William Vélez, faculty member of the UWM Department of Sociology and Urban Studies Programs. He holds a PhD in Sociology from the prestigious Yale University and his research includes sociology of education, social stratification, race and ethnic relations, and sociology of Latinos. Dr. Vélez is also the recipient of the 2010 American Sociological Association's Latino/a Sociology Section Founder's Award. He also acted as the Vice President, Puerto Rican Studies Association (2015-2017), Member of the Editorial Advisory Board of the *Journal of Latinos and Education* (2012-2013) in addition to holding different positions in the American Sociological Association at different point of time in his career. Dr. Vélez also acted as a consultant for Murphy vs Village of Ashwaubenon, WI (2004-2005), Latino Police Officers Association, Milwaukee (1999-2001), Brisbane Co. vs. Village of Brown Deer (200-2001), and with the Milwaukee Public Schools, Evaluation of Title VI Program (1997-2000).

Tathagato Chakraborty (TC): So, to begin with, Prof. Vélez, I would not start off with the current time. I'll take you back to your Yale time. So how was your experience about Yale and why did you decide on doing a PhD to begin with?

William Velez: Well, my undergraduate majors were in Psychology and Sociology and when I finished my Bachelors' degree, I worked first as a school teacher in a very tough area of San Juan and the following year I worked as a research assistant in a place called Centre for Social Studies. I was the research assistant for a psychologist who was doing research project on moral stages. So, I also had a mentor who was an anthropologist and he had a degree from Cambridge and was very tough. He was the one who supervised my senior thesis. And he was encouraging me to go forward and continue my graduate studies. So, the time came to apply, and I was ready to apply for different programs, I applied to a program in clinical psychology which I got in. Then I sent like six applications to different places in the U.S., including an application for a fellowship, the American Sociological Association Minority Fellowship, which if I was going to get the fellowship it was portable, so I could take it to any university. Anyway, I got accepted to several institutions including Yale, UMass, Amherst, and Fordham and I asked my mentors, you know, which is the best one to go to and they said, well there are pluses and minuses. Yale is an Ivy League school and there's a halo effect. If you come from an Ivy League school, there's a gold standard or whatever you call it. So, I went to Yale. Also, I received a telegram. They don't exist anymore. So, I get this telegram saying that I have been awarded the fellowship and of course that helped a lot.

TC: Which year it was?

WV: 1974. So, off I went to here in Connecticut where I spent following six years in Yale. And you know, Yale was, first, it was very tough because I could read very well English but my writing was not the best. And I remember, one of the first papers I wrote, I wrote for a very famous professor named Holinshed. And when I got the paper back from him, it was full of red

marks. He was correcting my grammar, you know, left and right, left and right. And finally, he said, well your grammar is terrible but what you wrote makes sense so I'm going to give you a A-.

TC: So, any more memories of Yale? Doing a PhD, how tough it was, how did you cope up with the pressure and the gold standard as well?

WV: Well, I feel the first year was the toughest because I had to learn how to write better papers!

TC: So, when you were studying in Puerto Rico, what was the language, the medium of instruction?

WV: Well, it was mixed. All of them used English textbooks, but the actual class was conducted by professors in Spanish. There were a few Anglo professors who teach their class in English and so that's why I said, we could read in English very well but we were used to writing our papers in Spanish, most of them. So that was the hardest transition. Now going back to Yale, the advantage of Yale is that they only accept a few people. I think my class was only 11 and their attitude is, once you are in, we want to see you graduate. So they kept close tabs on me and my classmates. The other thing that helped was that my classmates were very supportive. I made some good friends with some of my classmates and basically some of them helped me very much adjust to the US and so that was a very positive experience.

TC: That was nice! What was your PhD topic about, because you shifted from psychology to predominantly sociology, and what I read from your CV, it's more of sociology of

education and the Puerto Rican, the race and ethnicity? So, what was your PhD topic all about?

WV: Well, one of my professors at Yale was James Rosenbaum and another one was Burton Clarke. I think Burton Clarke is deceased now but James Rosenbaum is still a professor at North Western and they were both sociologists of education from different perspectives. But Clarke was much more the global view of higher education as an institution and the different types of higher education. Rosenbaum was much more concerned with the processes like tracking, for example. He made his fame by writing a book on tracking. So, those were the two guys who influenced me to go into sociology of education which was basically when I defend my dissertation I study the college attainment process...and I was basically able to access a very large dataset called the High School Classes from 1972 and they follow these high school seniors for like 12 years. So, they have all the information, whether they went to college, when/whether they finish, what happened after they finished. I had enough information to basically write a dissertation about the processes of getting into college, then transferring from a two-year to a four-year college was a chapter, and finally finishing college. My initial emphasis in my research stem from the interest on the whole educational attainment process.

TC: That's nice! So then, once you graduated from Yale, how did your journey begin as a teacher, as a UWM professor?

WV: Well it was tough because I had only taught one class at Yale. So my experience in teaching was very limited. I had taught at a middle-school level but the college-level teaching was a different story. So, the first year I had to struggle to create my syllabus, find my books, my

assignments, and I was probably a pretty lousy instructor for a couple of years until I got myself more oriented.

TC: So, your teaching has always been in line, in accordance with your research?

WV: Yes, my teaching has always been in areas of sociology of education, certifications, racial and ethnic relations.

TC: Ok! When did you start teaching, it's been like 30 years?

WV: 35 years. Yes, since 1981 to 2016 was 35 years.

TC: 35 years! So, you have moved from being a novice teacher to a Professor Emeritus, how does it feel?

WV: it feels like I accomplished a lot. That I have helped a lot of students, I could conduct a lot of research with colleagues, and branch out into the different areas. So, to me it has been very satisfying to see my career develop and going in different directions and get exposed to students from different countries, different interests, and different methodologies. So, it's been very fulfilling, very rewarding!

TC: Okay! So, my next question is about methodology. I believe there is a strong argument, or rather I'd say discourse, that's going on around the social science theme/scene, which methodology? Is it mixed, is it qualitative, is it quantitative? And there are thousands of other ways to do it. I am talking about the methodological philosophies of doing research. What did you do? How did you figure out your methodology, or did you continue to shift

from one methodology to other, how did your methodology develop concerning a particular research question that you were asking? How did you define it?

WV: Right, so initially all my research was quantitative. It was very standard status attainment approach of sociology in those days, in the 70s and 80s, and it's all you see is regression logistic, using big datasets most of the time. Up until the late 80s my publications were all based on datasets and quantitative analysis. Then, in the early 90s, I teamed up with a professor, Rene Antrop Gonzalez, who was also interested in educational processes. But he was much more focused on qualitative methods. And then we started to look at some of these processes from a qualitative point of view. With a number of studies, we went to two traditional high schools. One was a specialized high school for students who were having disabilities. Then, lastly, because he left for another university, we went to a Catholic school that rely on vouchers, so it's basically what we call in Milwaukee a 'choice school', and there we, what we score, is that the catholic voucher school was serving 100% Latino population. But none of the teachers were Latino, the principal was Anglo, even though he was bilingual, the only staff member in the school that was Latino was the secretary and she was frequently asked to be our interpreter. So what we discover is even though they had good intentions in helping these Latino kids, they were not in sync with our culture and they were not welcoming. They wouldn't welcome the parents into the classroom. So, there was an alienation that was being built up between the teachers and parents and as a result the children were suffering. The children were not achieving as they should, they were against bilingual education. So, I was invited be a judge for a science fair and as a part of the judging all the projects, I was allowed to interview every student who submitted a project privately. So I would take the student down the hallway, we would go his science project and I would ask him to explain to me how it worked. Well, couple of times I noticed that some of the

students were stumbling with English, and I said, “Well, I understand Spanish. You can speak to me in Spanish.” At one point while that was going on the teacher came to the hallway and she said, “Oh no, oh no, we don’t allow Spanish in this school. He has to do it in English.” I was almost kind of taken aback by that. It was like a cold approach to teacher-student who were basically English learners. So, from that point I sat to have a conversation with a school teacher who was very supportive of his students. I asked why don’t we study all the parents and how they see the school and they basically gave me entrance to the school and I conducted a study with Antrop and other professors in the School of Education, Tatiana Jones, which was published recently. Basically, we reported this alienation between the parents and the school staff for these reasons, why they are not culturally sensitive to the needs of the parents and the kids.

TC: True, interesting! So, you have in the course of time mentioned what made you interested in studying sociology of education. What made you interested to study the racial and ethnic side of the story?

WV: Right. So, to be honest with you, at Yale I got very little background or any classes on race and ethnicity. Only indirectly will they speak about race, for example, about Black and Latino kids but it was never part to the curriculum in the way that it is nowadays in sociology. Then when I came to UWM, there were two colleagues here who inspired me. One was Joan Moore, who is now also retired Emeritus and she was an expert on Mexican-Americans. So I studied some of her writings. And then there was another professor, Gregory Squires, who also left to become the chairman of the department of Sociology at George Washington University and he was interested in processes of redlining. So we started analyzing some data from Milwaukee on mortgage redlining and insurance policies redlining. And we were to publish, I think, four...

TC: You have a number of papers on mortgages...

WV: Yes, and it really opened up the world of institutional discrimination because I didn't know that banks and insurance companies will do this and as part of process of teaming up with Gregory we were contracted by American Civil Liberties Union to analyze dataset from an insurance company, American Family and so I said that they don't sell policies in the inner city. They basically try to avoid selling policies in the zip codes where Blacks and Latinos are living. So I presented that to the ACLU and basically to the judge as part of the evidence. On the other side, their lawyers were defending American Family Insurance, who also hired a professor, a guy from the Economics department. He reanalyzed the same data that I was analyzing and said, "Well yeah, he made a small mistake because he forgot to add weights to the size of the zip codes with more population. Once you correct the mistake, his conclusion becomes even stronger that there is discrimination. He basically confirmed what I said with even higher effects. Squires was the one who opened up my eyes to racial discrimination and then Joan Moore sort of pushed in me in the direction of studying Latino populations.

TC: And then what about understanding the cities? Why particularly urban scenario?

Why not any other scenarios like the countryside?

WV: Well, I think that I had access to dataset for Milwaukee and metropolitan Milwaukee where at that time the populations of African Americans and Latinos were concentrated and some of these processes were not only sociological, they were political and having to do with the allocation of resources and the election of officials, so to me, the problem was in the urban area...

TC: If I ask you to kind of sketch out a trajectory of your research, the point you began and the point you are now, do you see changes in there, do you see development, do you see you were more concentrated on something or now you are widespread and with many other topics, how do you define the trajectory?

WV: Well, I think in the beginning I was much more interested in the specific outcomes like, say, finishing a college degree. So I was interested in calculating the effects of independent variables on the outcome. More recently, I am much more interested in looking at the bigger picture, like if we do a meta-analysis of all these studies, what can we conclude? Let's say we took about segregation. If you only look at specific outcomes, then you can compute some equation that will give you more or less a result statistically significant. But that doesn't give you the global perspective of what are the models that really explain why we have segregation. Is it because discrimination? Is it because people are making individual choices that have these consequences? What about the local conditions, say the economy and the jobs? So what I decide in my later years, we really need to develop models that help us make sense of the numbers. It's not just looking at a bunch of studies and saying, "Okay, according to this study, this is what is important" To me what has become more relevant is how do we theorize about some of these processes. What explains residential segregation? For example, the last studies that I conducted with Prof. Goldsmith, who was also in the sociology department and left. Rubio Goldsmith, he is now at Texas A&M. We also studied the process of selection of neighborhood. So, we had this dataset that followed these kids from the time they were 16 till the time they were 26. And the question was, if you are in high school and move to a better neighborhood, shouldn't it help you obtain more education in the long term because that's what the common wisdom of sociologists

and economists say. Better neighborhood means better outcomes. And our whole history of looking at the segregation including what the HUD does to encourage families to move to mixed income areas. So we have this dataset and we are pushing to this new technology where you basically compute probabilities of being in the control group and in the treatment group. So we have all these different ways of looking at who moves and how far away they move and how good the new neighborhood is? And what we find is, to our surprise, African Americans moving to a very good neighborhood doesn't really make any difference in terms of getting into and finishing college. Why, because the trauma of changing schools negates or cancels the advantages of moving into a better neighborhood. Something about a child or a teenager who has to or was forced to change schools and the negative effects of that neutralizes the good effects of moving to a better neighborhood. However, for Latinos and Asian students, we detected has a positive effect. So, what that teaches me is that you have to be really very specific and look at different ethnic groups because in some groups the wisdoms do not apply in the same way as it does for all the groups.

TC: This is very, very interesting! You have worked with several other federal agencies as a consultant and with different other bodies like American Association of Sociologists, etc. How has been your experience with them? Do you see that my question basically refers to the point that we have a very utopian idea about an academic journey verses something which is non-academic, does have a political impact, other impacts, other factors that associate your decision making. So, as an academician you have propounded something for the solution of some issue and then when you go and try to implement it as a professional in

those organizations, you find there are difficulties. So, did you see a mismatch between these two paths or they were in sync with one another. How do you define them?

WV: Well, I remember working with MPS (Milwaukee Public School) at one point in producing a report on dropping out. And what I felt/faced was that we recommended to allow so else who moved to stay in the same school for at least one year, so to finish out the year. In some cases, you stay in the old school even if it meant travelling back and forth because we discovered that changing schools was a very traumatic experience for students. And I think MPS for a while allowed that to happen. That was a good experience to do as a consultant and I also worked for something called the Latino Police Officers Association and that was a very enlightening experience as we were dealing with access to Police Academy. So, one thing I discovered that was hurting Black and Latino applicants is the credit report. And we discovered that if you take away the credit report requirement, the Latino, African American candidates had actually better chances of getting into the Academy. Because the credit report can negate in many cases for Blacks and Latinos because when you are poor, you are going to get into debt, you're going to miss some payments and your credit history is going to suffer. So, that was interesting to see how your research has actually some impact on something tangible, that you can see, as any situational change. The other thing we did, and I was indirectly involved, is study how it affected women candidates. They had this wall that you had to jump over, I believe it was like an 8-foot wall, and of course, women, on an average, are shorter than men, so they had a harder time jumping the wall. So, we lower the wall, and we see more women are passing the exam. So that to me was a couple of instances where working with a government agency was actually turning to something tangible. While also working with the American Family Insurance case with the courts and these lawsuits against the American Family, they ended up settling the case and

paying off some of the claimants, some of the people who were suing them, the plaintiffs. As a result, they opened a number of offices in Milwaukee. I think exactly double the number of offices inside the city of Milwaukee as a result of our efforts. So, I saw some tangible results of my research, some publication in some journals.

TC: Did you concentrate on Milwaukee? Because I see a number of research on your webpage that talks about almost all the metropolitan cities of the U.S.

WV: Some of my studies more recently have included Puerto Rican income attainment and we looked at the largest 250 metro areas. So, it was not all urban areas but it basically covered the largest metropolitan areas. So yeah, some of my studies have a much more global approach.

TC: Okay and what about Milwaukee, because it is a very segregated city, that's why it became a very important spatial unit to study? Or just because you are based in Milwaukee you gave it a thought?

WV: Well it obviously has to do with my location and workplace and access to the dataset, Milwaukee is the first or second highest segregated city in the country. So we were going to find a single case study, this is a good case to study. It is also a city with a long history of activism. I don't know if you are aware of this book, *Selma of the North*, by Patrick Jones. He basically follows the history of 1960s and how they fought the incredible amount of institutional racism in Milwaukee, not only from the police department but the housing providers, banking system, and the schools. I mean the schools are very segregated. It took more than 10 years of court case to force Milwaukee to come with a plan to increase integration. I think as a result of that pressure they passed Chapter 220 which was a voluntary magnet program where they attracted white

students from suburban areas to come to Milwaukee and Milwaukee students to study in the suburban high school system or sub-urban school system. At some point, chapter 220 had had about 11000 students placed around the metro areas in different sub-urban systems. There is a lot of history in Milwaukee in housing segregation, school segregation, police discrimination. So it's a perfect laboratory to study this.

TC: You've almost explored all possibilities of a research question of Puerto Rican lives in Milwaukee. Given a chance, what other places would you like to discover?

WV: To study?

TC: Yes. Which other cities? Because you have kind of an overall U.S expertise in this area but Milwaukee has definitely been very segregated. But what about the southern cities?

WV: Well one city where I did conduct research was Orlando, Florida. Orlando has become a multi-ethnic city and Florida in itself has always been a magnet for Latinos, not only Puerto Ricans but Mexicans and Cubans. So, to me Florida is a fascinating place to study and I hope that in the future I can go back to Orlando and study some more nuances of the Orlando situation.

TC: You've studied the Puerto Rican study of marriage, school, higher education, mortgage, housing segregation, so far so I can recall. What else did you not study? What aspect didn't you touch upon? You have even studied religion and its effects on education.

WV: Right, well if there is a weak spot which I have not explored further is the gender angle. Yes I did discover some, for example, one explanation why Puerto Rican students do well; they have strong mothers who are advocates for them and who push them to study hard and are very

supportive. But I think that sociologists in general tend to be weakest when it comes to studying gender issues and how these things work differently for men and women. So it would be, I would say, one area that needs more exploration.

TC: Your path of research, if you need to make a strong case of argument, how is it related to the urban studies program because you are an affiliated professor in the program, how does it work? And how do you ignite as well?

WV: In the past, I have chaired dissertations where students were studying segregations patterns in Milwaukee. Most recently, there was a student who for his dissertation studied how parents chose MPS schools. I had students who have studied food desserts in Milwaukee. So to me it's amazing how many of my students have dealt with different topics dealing with the processes of attaining by racial groups in Milwaukee. And all of them are based on urban scene. So I think that the USP attracts the kind of students who are interested in many of these processes and that to me is very rewarding.

TC: A life, an academic life that spans for 35 years and ongoing, so what would be your suggestion and advise to the budding urban scientists. Last few golden words

WV: I recommend, you follow your passion. There is always a topic that for every student that has this primacy the first place that really possesses your heart. It is also important to identify one professor who shares the same interest and you get a mentor who can guide you with the problem and identification of the literature and construction of the methodology. Follow the passion and identify a problem that is relevant and has a policy implication, doable and what I mean by that is finding the data and finish off within a timeframe. So, find something relevant

and something that is of interest to you and that keeps your passion alive for research and be persistent. 90 percent sweat and 10 percent aptitude!

TC: Anything that you want to add that I haven't asked you in this interview?

WV: I think network is important. You need to develop a network within your department, across the university and in your discipline. You need to get to know who the leaders are. Exchange emails and phone calls and exchange conversations in conferences. Going to conferences are very important to make networks. That's what I found not only rewarding in terms of conducting research and publishing, also to develop friendship and in some cases I ended up publishing with my own student. So, that is what I recommend that earlier you should recognize the important of networks.

TC: Thank you very much Prof. Vélez for your time!