

## Interview with 2015 Distinguished Scholar Martha Feldman

Written by Mabel Abraham  
Monday, 07 March 2016 11:36 -

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Below is an interview of the OMT 2015 Distinguished Scholar Martha Feldman, conducted by 2015 Pondy winner Mabel Abraham.

MA = Mabel Abraham

MF = Martha Feldman

MA: You have had a very impressive set of projects, papers, and co-authors throughout your career. I am inspired. Your research on boundary work caught my eye in particular, especially since you have been a boundary spanner in your own career. Could you tell us how your research trajectory emerged?

MF: There's nothing intentional. I could not have planned my career. I didn't even know what the possibilities were. It's really been going where I'm interested and just following what I'm interested in or what I'm passionate about and where the opportunities are. So it's that combination.

MA: It seems that you have always studied organizations. What led you to focus on organizations as a political science student and a young assistant professor?

MF: I started out in political science; in fact, all my degrees are in political science. But when I went to Stanford, I was recruited by Jim March who was in the political science department. He was also in the ed school and the business school and a few other places. His interest had always been organizations. His degree is also in political science, so there was a kind of natural connection.

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I've always been interested in how people get things done. When I was at University of Washington as an undergrad, I was involved in a project, and we ended up writing a book. It's called *Reconstructing Reality in the Courtroom*. That's where I started recognizing my interest in qualitative research and my interest in how people do things. That's what we were looking at ? how are people making decisions about whether somebody is guilty or innocent.

Then I went to Stanford and worked with Jim March. Organization seemed like such an obvious connection for me. I was studying political theory and I was interested in how people do things. I like the combination of the practical and the theoretical.

MA: As I go through your CV, your research has talked about organizational routines, and specifically how routines emerge and evolve over time. How do you see these processes changing in response to technological shifts over the past two decades? How much of what you are seeing or observing in your earlier research do you think still holds today?

MF: It seems like technology is just another location for many of the same issues. There's this pull between people who want to think the routine is something you can put down on paper, and that somehow magically people will do it, and it will be possible to do those steps that are on the piece of paper versus people who see routines as much more alive and having a lot more variation, a lot more unpredictability, a lot more agency involved in making the decisions. The work on electronic medical records is a good example.

Frankly, most of the electronic medical records have been made under the first model, but there's an increasing number of people saying, "You know what? We need to think about the way people actually do the work." To some extent, that's led to research on things like workarounds. So yeah, the electronic medical records force you to do it this way, but people figure out other ways to get the work done.

One of my students was studying labor and delivery routines, and the hospital was instituting an electronic medical record. In order to get certain medicines, in fact anything like even vitamins, the nurses had to use a thumb print to open the machine that would then dispense the correct medication. This is just a little thing, but some people's thumbs didn't work. So they would figure out who had good thumbs and make sure that when they needed to go get the medication, they would basically borrow a thumb. That's a little workaround, but it's indicative of some of the things people have to do. This example is about how the machine produces variation, but of course when you're talking about people in hospitals, and patients with all kinds of different

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presentations, there's a lot of variation in what it is that the patient actually needs. A patient may not need things in the order that the electronic medical records assume the patient needs things. So I think it's still the same theoretical issue. The computerization of the routine makes the issue manifest differently. But it's still basically the same issue.

MA: So the computer makes things even more difficult to change?

M: Sometimes!

MA: Interesting. It's almost as if it these technologies introduce another layer to implementing change. Does that mean change becomes more difficult?

MF: Is it more difficult to do a workaround with a digitized routine than it is to work around your co-worker who is completely inflexible or your boss who is working in a bureaucratic mode? I'm not so sure that that's harder. I think it's just different. I'm not sure it's harder or more complicated with a machine, I think it's just different.

MA: It is just another type of rigidity, potentially.

MF: Yes, or another way of being flexible, figuring out ways around it. You may negotiate with a person or try to manipulate them if you're trying to get the flexibility. If you're doing it with a machine, it may be things like borrowing a thumb.

MA: That is really interesting. Overall, your research does an impressive job of linking theory and practice, which is often a difficult thing to achieve. How have you been able to make that work?

MF: Partly I make it work by revising and revising and revising. And getting things rejected, and I keep revising some more. I wouldn't say it's easy, but it's never made any sense to me to do one without the other. It feels like that is my work, and that's what I have to contribute. I

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guess that's the story behind the revise and revise. I have a vague sense of what I'm trying to say, and people are not getting it. So I keep working on it and working on it, and I don't think the impact of it or the contribution doesn't really come through until I've finally gotten those two pieces to work together.

MA: That makes sense. In business schools, for example, we need to help students convert the theoretical take-aways from research into practical tools that they can apply in their careers. It's definitely a challenge, but important.

M: It's really hard. Monica Worline and I just wrote a piece that's going to come out in the Academy of Management Learning and Education. The title of it is "The Practicality of Practice Theory." We wanted basically to say, "Practice theory would be useful to teach to MBAs." In fact, I don't teach MBAs, but I do teach MPPs (Masters of Public Policy). The way I teach them practice theory is not to explicitly teach the theory, but to teach it implicitly, through the practice. So that's what we were trying to do in writing this piece, and at the same time speak to the people who would be teaching it. So there's a little bit more explicit theorizing as well as some discussion of, not really how to teach, but here are the intuitions of practice theory that are practical. I think that's a really fun puzzle. I agree it's hard, and yet I think it's worth trying to do that because that's how we can make a change in how MBAs go out and do their work.

MA: In addition to your impressive body of research, you have extensive experience serving on a number of different editorial boards. What advice do you have, particularly for young scholars, on navigating the review process from knowing when a paper is ready to be submitted to actually navigating the review process when responding to reviewers.

MF: I think it's hard to know when to submit. One of my colleagues at Michigan had a standard that she called the "embarrassment threshold." She said, "Submit it as soon as you're not going to be embarrassed that you did." That's hard to know, but that's about as good as I could do.

I do a lot of editing for *Organization Science*, and the thing I see that makes the biggest difference is people's willingness to step back and rethink. And to take the reviewer's input as, "Oh, this is the way they understood what I was saying. What did I say that made them think that?" As opposed to, "Well, the reviewers are wrong and I didn't say that." You take that first thought and try to figure out what you said that ended up with the reviewers thinking what they thought, and then step back and think about, "Is that really what you want to say? Are there

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other ways to say it? When you say it other ways, does that help you understand new things?"

Actually, one of the things that drives my co-authors crazy, but has always worked for me, is a phrase I use: "Everything is always up for grabs." Even at the very end of revising something, and it's been provisionally accepted, and we're just tweaking it a little bit, sometimes I'll change things around dramatically because I can suddenly see it differently. I think when you can let the process work on the way you're thinking, and be a learning process, then you get ? well, for one thing it becomes a lot more fun. Of course that's easier to do when you're not under tenure pressure or something like that.

MA: You have hit on a really important point – tenure pressure. To what extent do you see this advice on navigating the review process as applying to pre-tenure faculty who are under that time constraint?

MF: I think it always applies because I think it's much harder to get something published if you have any other attitude. The reviewers are there, so you might as well use them. They're either going to work with you or work against you, so you might as well engage them and make it so that whatever input they're giving you is helpful. Now, I've certainly had reviewers where I didn't feel that way! I felt like I had to figure out a way to get around them. So it's not 100%.

But I do know that I put off a lot of major retooling until after I had tenure. So I do think you make choices pre-tenure about, "How far am I going to go in changing the way I think about this? How much learning am I actually going to do?" If you've got a reasonably good toolkit, then it's better to stick with that than to get a new toolkit pre-tenure. I'm all in favor of getting new toolkits. I think that's part of the fun of our jobs is you get to do that! But I wouldn't mess with it before tenure unless you absolutely have to, or unless you're really quick at doing that.

MA: That's really sound advice. I can certainly imagine how using the review process to your advantage is just a smart strategy. More generally, any other advice you can offer to scholars in our field?

MF: The other piece of advice that comes out of this conversation is to know what kind of scholar you are and know your strengths and weaknesses. None of us does it all. I'm a really slow reader, so I need to make the most of what I do read. But I'm a good field worker, so I

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make more out of that. I think getting past the illusion that we all have to do everything perfectly makes it easier to get on with the job, and finding help from co-authors or reviewers or whatever it is that is going to help you shore up what you're not so good at.

I've come to the conclusion that you just need to do what works for you, and figure out where your passion is. Where the energy is and where the excitement is for you, and go with that, and not wish that you were some other kind of researcher.

MA: I love that an underlying theme to your responses relates to being true to yourself and following your passion.

MF: I think it comes through in the work. If you're bored with it and you're just doing it to get another publication, I think the reader can feel that. The other issue is that there needs to be something that's feeding you. You cannot always be doing things for other people or because you think you're supposed to.

MA: You mentioned working with co-authors as a way to offset weaknesses. What do you see as the greatest benefits or costs associated with co-authorships?

MF: I tend to co-author because I feel like there's more energy and more excitement. When your energy is flagging, somebody else can carry it for a while. I often get energy by seeing how somebody has written something and saying, "Oh yeah, I agree with that, but I don't agree with that." Or, "Oh yeah, that really helps me figure out how to add to this." Whereas if I'm doing that with myself, you have to write it and then wait for three or four months and then read it again. Then you can agree or disagree with yourself, maybe. But you've probably noticed that I have often co-authored several articles with one person. Then it feels like we have a very productive set of conversations. I think of them as conversations, and then at some point we're done, we've played out the conversation. You're still maybe really close to the person, and enjoy talking with them, but you don't necessarily have another idea that you're both ready to play out together. Recognizing when you've come to that point I think is also really important.

MA: That is really interesting. Do you have any tips on how to maintain or sustain this level of energy when you're working on sole-authored projects?

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MF: For me, the sole-authored pieces that I feel I have the most energy around are empirical pieces. I tend to work from the middle, in an article that would be the findings. Work from that empirical piece and then layer the theoretical stuff around it. Again, this goes back to the earlier conversation. It's that practice orientation and then what are the theoretical implications of that. That's what really keeps me excited. To some extent I do the same thing with a solo-authored piece that I do with a co-authored piece. I just have to work harder at engaging other people. I may have to submit it somewhere and get reviews from the reviewers and then I can engage with that conversation.

MA: Right, creating the community. That relates to your point on the review process ? to think of the reviewers as contributors to the development of the work, as opposed to a barrier. I think that is a really nice orientation and way to think about that process.

MF: Yes. I'd say it's engagement with the empirical work and then the engagement with other people.

MA: I would like to shift gears a bit. Before starting the interview you mentioned that you are a mother. Do you have any advice for parents trying to balance the demands of our profession with those of family life?

MF: My work changed a lot when I had a kid. I had been more oriented to writing books. As an ethnographer, that's kind of (at least it used to be) the standard, that you would write books instead of articles. I realized I wasn't going to have the time and the space to keep a book in mind. So I started being more oriented to articles.

The other thing that changed for me was when my son was born, I realized that if I was going to continue working—and that wasn't really an option, I wanted the work to matter—that it wasn't going to make sense for me to spend time away from him if the work didn't matter. So I became much more engaged with the work at a deeper level. It was ironic because I needed that in order to justify the time I was spending away from him.

You really start valuing your time. It's not infinite! It's very, very finite. So yeah, I think there is an

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aspect of just valuing yourself and your time a little bit more.

MA: Given this interview will be shared with members of the Academy, I would like to end with hearing your strategies for making the most of attending the annual meetings.

MF: I really enjoy AOM. I find it completely overwhelming, as I think many people do. For me (and again, this is me), I find it most useful to focus on a few events and networking with a group of people that I want to connect with. I often do work with a co-author while I'm there or somebody I don't get to see very often. For younger people, I think it's good to meet as many people as you can. Where else are you going to be able to meet that many people? I used to do more of that. Now I feel like I know a lot of people and that's a little overwhelming for me. So I tend not to go to big parties or things like that. Or, I'll do just a few of those.

Part of learning what people are doing is the networking. You're going to have a meaningful interaction with somebody. It's not just going to be shaking hands, it's going to be, "What are you working on? What am I working on?" At least have a five-minute conversation where you get a sense of who that person is. It's building that map of who is doing what, who is out there, who has questions similar to yours, who is fun to talk to, and all of those things. I think AOM is wonderful for that.

Where are you going to find the people who you are most interested in meeting and getting to know more about? What part of your map do you want to build? That's one of the ways to think about: which PDWs am I going to go to? Which symposia am I going to go to? Which parties am I going to go to? The parties are more than just people, but building that map of who is doing what and what are they thinking about it. I started going to AOM when my son was quite young. I'd been a few times before but I was definitely in that mode of, "I'm going to be away from home for a few days and I'm going to make the most of it."

MA: I'll ask you one concluding question. If you were able to have some jurisdiction over the location of the next AOM, what would be your request?

MF: (laughing) I don't know. I liked Vancouver a lot. Someplace where it's not really hot. But the next one is going to be Anaheim, so that's close to home and that's always nice too.

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MA: The West Coast crowd is finally getting their turn at having shorter travel for the conferences.

MF: Right! In some ways I don't think it matters where they are, as long as it's well organized. Could be on the North Pole and you're kind of out of space. Maybe have a nice dinner or two while I'm there. Different restaurants or something, but other than that, it's really just to be in that space with those people and taking advantage of having all those people in one place. All those people that you want to talk with.