Dr. Linda Waite is the Lucy Flower Professor of Urban Sociology at the University of Chicago. She is also a Senior Fellow of the NORC and Director of the Center on Aging at NORC/University of Chicago. She received her doctorate in sociology at the University of Michigan in 1976, and taught at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign from 1976 to 1980, at which time she accepted a position at the RAND Corporation in Santa Monica, CA, where she became Director of the RAND Population Research Center. In 1991 she moved to the University of Chicago, where she has been since.
**HODGSON:** This is May 2nd, 2015. We’re at the PAA meeting and we’re going to do an interview with Linda Waite, who is the past PAA president from 1995. Currently she’s the Lucy Flower Professor of Sociology at the University of Chicago. We’ve got lots of other things you’re currently doing. We’ve got director for the Center of Aging at NORC [National Opinion Research Center], Chicago. We have senior fellow at NORC. We’ve got chair of the Committee on Demographic Training at Chicago. Co-director of the Program in Medicine, the Social Sciences, and Aging, School of Medicine, University of Chicago. We could spend half the interview just telling people what you’re doing right now. But our task is to come up with an interview in which basically—we have presidential interviews all the way back to 1947 to the present. And we found that it’s interesting to ask you to go through a little bit of an intellectual biography, in terms of how you got into the study of population and demography, and a little bit about your experience when you were PAA president. And really, in your case, I think it would be a wonderful insight, in terms of what you think of the changes you’ve seen happen to the field of demography and where you think we’re headed. So that’s our game plan for an hour.

**WAITE:** Okay. Given how terrible demographers are at prediction…. 

**HODGSON:** Well, who knows? You might be different on that one.

**WAITE:** You might be better than Richard Easterlin.

**HODGSON:** So can we go back in time? Let’s see, [you were] an undergrad at Michigan State. You graduated in 1969. Can you tell us, did you get interested in population back then, in terms of what was your major?

**WAITE:** No. When I went to college, I thought that I would maybe teach. I thought I would maybe teach home economics. I was very interested in clothing construction and clothing
design. And somewhere in there I realized that it wasn’t the kind of intellectual challenge I wanted. And I took a sociology course just as an elective, and I loved it. So I took another one, and loved it. By that point I was finishing college in three and a half years, and I had time to take enough courses for a major, but I didn’t have enough time to take what they called the cognates—the anthropology and the psychology that you needed—so I actually graduated with a degree in, what was it called, human ecology or something like that.

Then I applied immediately to graduate school, because I had terrific grades and great test scores, but not the right background. And I think it was just lucky for me that the University of Michigan in that cohort over-admitted. There were fifty people in my entering graduate school class.

HODGSON: Wow.

WAITE: And people fell by the wayside pretty quickly. There were seventeen women, and two of us finished.

HODGSON: Finished in terms of getting the Ph.D.?

WAITE: Right. And at that point I was committed to sociology. But I had never even heard of demography.

HODGSON: Even in grad school?

WAITE: No. When I started grad school, I was committed to sociology. But I didn’t actually know so much about it. And maybe my second year I enrolled in Ron Freedman’s population class, and then the light bulb turned on, and I fell in love.

HODGSON: He was doing all the Taiwanese fertility stuff?

WAITE: IUD retention in Taiwan, which actually did not light me up. [laughter]

HODGSON: That didn’t light you up?
WAITE: But the approach did. The topic did. It turned out I loved the data, the quantification, being able to have something to compare that you could actually, I don’t know, sink your teeth into, get your arms around.

HODGSON: And you came up with a dissertation topic that was demographic?

WAITE: I did. In fact, Ron Freedman was my chair, because he’d done a Detroit-area study project on women’s work. So though he wasn’t working on it, he had a data set. And he agreed to chair the dissertation, just out of the goodness of his heart, though he wasn’t interested and wasn’t working on it and really couldn’t give me much direction.

HODGSON: But he gave you the data?

WAITE: He gave me the data. And there was a wonderful professor in economics, Malcolm Cohen, who had written a monograph on women’s employment. And he was unfailingly supportive and really extremely helpful.

HODGSON: I did notice that you got your undergraduate degree in ’69. And then you got a master’s degree one year later. And then I think you spent two years at the Census Bureau.

WAITE: I did.

HODGSON: And that was ’74 to ’76. Were you doing women’s labor force in the Census Bureau?

WAITE: Sort of. I was in the education and social stratification branch, so that did include some of that. And I got to work on some things that were fun. But what was nice is they let me do some of my own work with some of the data sets the Census Bureau was collecting. So the Census Bureau did the data collection on all the NLS [National Longitudinal Surveys]: young men, young women, older men, older women. Since it was a Census Bureau data set, I
actually got my first grant while I was a Census Bureau employee, from NICHD [National Institute of Child Health and Human Development].

**HODGSON**: And this was before your Ph.D.?

**WAITE**: Well, I finished my Ph.D. while I was at the Census Bureau. That was actually pretty common at that time. People really finished graduate school in four years. Bob Hauser, for example, went to Brown and finished his dissertation. Jim Sweet and Larry Bumpass went to—

**HODGSON**: Some of us did take longer.

**WAITE**: Yeah. I found that what I had to do is, I had to go part-time. So I got permission at the Census Bureau to go part-time. And I took every Tuesday and every Thursday—

**HODGSON**: And you flew back?

**WAITE**: And I worked on my dissertation.

**HODGSON**: But you physically left Michigan? And you were living in DC?

**WAITE**: Actually, in Baltimore.

**HODGSON**: Wow.

**WAITE**: And what I found is, if the house was quiet [and] I had nothing to do—I knew I was investing at that point fifty dollars net a day in this effort. I basically didn’t move the whole day and in six months I got it done.

**HODGSON**: Wow. That’s impressive. And then your first academic job was University the Illinois.

**WAITE**: University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana.

**HODGSON**: And you didn’t stay there very long. But can you say anything about that?

**WAITE**: Four years. It was a very good place. I have very nice memories. My colleagues were terrific. They were very supportive.
HODGSON: Did you teach population or demography?

WAITE: I did. I taught population and the family and wrote a couple of proposals. I already had, I guess, a couple of publications. But I wrote a few things from my dissertation. One an AJS [American Journal of Sociology] piece on women’s employment from the ideas from my dissertation. And then a demography piece that was completely different. And a couple of other things.

HODGSON: I did interrupt you when you were going to tell us about colleagues.

WAITE: They were wonderful. Ken Land.

HODGSON: Oh, Ken was there at the time?

WAITE: Ken was there at the time. Joan and Bill Huber. Rita Simon.

HODGSON: So there were a lot of—

WAITE: A lot of excellent people.

WAITE: Did you overlap with Bob Shone?

WAITE: Oh, yeah. We’re still friends. I see him at the meetings. Absolutely. And he was a wonderful colleague. Harvey Choldin. And everybody was very supportive. So if I wanted to write a proposal they didn’t know so much about it, because, you know, if you’re not at a pop center, then you have to rely on the university. And they don’t tend to know, especially if you know the social sciences as much as about NIH or NSF as grantors. So especially if you’re a junior person, it’s hard. You don’t have anybody to ask, because there’s nobody else who is doing that sort of thing.

HODGSON: And then we have, I think, eleven years at Rand?

WAITE: Eleven years at Rand.

HODGSON: And at this stage, the focus seems to be women and work.
WAITE: Right. Except that I got there in 1980. Peter Morrison basically recruited me. I don’t know how he decided I was the one he wanted, but he did. And I was excited at the prospect of having colleagues, a lot of colleagues, who were doing the same kind of work. And when I went in the summer of 1980, Fran Goldscheider, who was then Fran Kobrin, arrived at the same time for a sabbatical with her teenage daughter, the same exact time. And we became friends immediately. While she was there for that year, we wrote a proposal on living arrangements, basically, changes in living arrangements. And it was funded. So then we had a three-year project that we did together that resulted in the book *New Families, No Families?*, an ASR *American Sociological Review*, an AJS, [and] two *Journal of Marriage and the Family* [articles].

HODGSON: Lots of Rand publications I’m looking at.

WAITE: And a lot of Rand publications. So it was very, very productive. We’re still very close friends. It really transformed my career. And then I worked on some projects that were already ongoing. That’s the one publication I have on Malaysia.

HODGSON: That’s true. I was going to ask about that. So that was in the pipeline?

WAITE: That was already a funded project, ongoing.

HODGSON: In the context of those eleven years at Rand, it sounds like you could sort of direct the areas of your research by getting grants.

WAITE: That’s right.

HODGSON: And so you’re making decisions about what you want to study.

WAITE: That’s right.

HODGSON: And is there a switch more towards the family? Or at least looking at work and family?
WAITE: I was always looking at work and family. My dissertation was on—I don’t know what it was called, something like working wives in the family life cycle. The big question then—and I got just by accident in at the beginning of it—was why do some women make the choice to work, and under the same circumstances more or less, other women don’t? Because it was pretty clear that it was a time of transition. Women were moving into the work force, but everybody didn’t. And I was really interested in, always have been, why do some people make some choices and other people make—basically why doesn’t everybody do what I see so clearly as the right thing to do? Which is of course ridiculous. [laughter]

WAITE: And do you have an elevator speech that explains that?

WAITE: Well, you can’t do it. It’s not doable, because people actually see things differently. It’s not just that they’re differentially situated, which they always are. But they see things differently. They want different things. They have different capacities. They come with different backgrounds. They have different vulnerabilities.

HODGSON: Now, if I remember at the time, since I think myself, I’m just having our first kid, so it’s the end of the ’70s, early ’80s, and the controversial issues about women—my wife is a professor, and it was, what to do with small children and working wives? That seemed to be, at the time anyway, a more debatable point than perhaps it is today.

WAITE: But in addition, most universities had nepotism laws. So when I was a graduate student, Dudley Duncan worked at Michigan. He was a full professor. And Beverly didn’t have an academic appointment, because she couldn’t. And then those barriers fell and the department made her a full professor. So there were these structural impediments to women’s equal careers.

HODGSON: That was a little bit of a legacy, but then things began to change.

HODGSON: What I find in the context, looking at what you’ve done research-wise, is that you’re sort of following along with all these relatively controversial things at the time, and making them the central point of your analysis. Looking at kids and then looking at teenagers.

WAITE: Looking at marriage versus cohabitation, looking at divorce, looking at the consequences of marriage for individuals.

HODGSON: So now, what made you leave Rand and go back to academics? I think we’re up to ’91 now.

WAITE: Right. So my husband at the time was unhappy where he was, and he wanted to move. I didn’t actually want to move.

HODGSON: Oh, okay. So you would be staying there at Rand?

WAITE: I was very happy. It was great for me. The move was great for me because at Rand, you do have to have money to do whatever you want to do. So if you have, and I’d become now senior, so what that meant was I could write proposals for big projects. But I was sort of too expensive to do the work.

HODGSON: Oh, okay. So you got the money?

WAITE: I got the money. And then somebody else, not entirely, but too much, somebody else got to do the work. But it was also the period at Rand was an extremely productive time for me. I was just publishing like crazy.

HODGSON: Sounds like you really liked that.

WAITE: I did. You’re not pulled in as many ways as you are in academia. In academia you’ve got a hundred masters, especially if you run a grants program.

HODGSON: Right. And that wasn’t something you missed, having a hundred masters.

WAITE: So I never taught.
**HODGSON:** I noticed that. And then obviously you would have stayed there. So what was it like then finding yourself all of the sudden in the department of sociology in Chicago?

**WAITE:** The hardest part—well, I loved my colleagues. I love Chicago as a city. I love the university. It took me about five years to put my grant portfolio back together.

**HODGSON:** So it did take time to recover, because you all of the sudden found yourself having to teach and grad students?

**WAITE:** Well, it wasn’t that. But a lot of the stuff that I had was institution-specific.

**HODGSON:** Okay.

**WAITE:** There was an aging center. That stayed at Rand. There was a training grant. That stayed at Rand.

**HODGSON:** It took until 1994. Then you became director for the Center of Aging at Chicago.

**WAITE:** Right. And wrote a training grant, wrote a center grant, wrote some other grants. Got, eventually, the Sloan Working Families Center [established]. But it took a while. It takes a while.

**HODGSON:** And in terms of those, it looked like a lot of administrative positions you took in the context of—were they just misusing you, or was this something that you wanted to do?

**WAITE:** No, no, no. And if you’ll notice, it’s all research administration. I have never been department chair.

**HODGSON:** Okay. What’s the Institute of Mind and Biology?

**WAITE:** The University of Chicago has departments and then it has centers and institutes. And the Institute for Mind and Biology was established when my good friend and close colleague, Martha McClintock, had an offer elsewhere. And she really works at the intersection of biology
and psychology. So the university established this institute where she could do her work. It’s now many people working—

HODGSON: And so you inherited it?

WAITE: Not me. They just asked me to be a member.

HODGSON: So it wasn’t a move to biosocial research on your part?

WAITE: No. I was just asked if I would.

HODGSON: And then you became chair of their committee on demographic training?

WAITE: Right. But that’s been around in Chicago for a long time. So when I wrote the training grant in the demography and economics of aging, that with the training grant from NICHD, which we then lost and still haven’t recovered, though I hope we will, were the committee and demographic training. So the aging center, the pop center, and the two training grants were like a coherent whole.

HODGSON: That sounds like a lot of work.

WAITE: It’s not bad, actually.

HODGSON: Okay.

WAITE: It’s not bad.

HODGSON: How about a little bit more on the Sloan Working Families Center?

WAITE: Yeah. So the Sloan Foundation was very interested in middle-class working families and the challenges they face. So they decided to fund a series of centers. And they came to Barbara Schneider, who was working at NORC at the time, and told her to come to me. So she had done a lot of work on education with Jim Coleman, written a number of books, and is a wonderful scholar and a good friend. And so she came to me and said, “They want the family part. They know you do work [in this area]. Are you interested in this?” And I said,
“Absolutely.” And we wrote a proposal to the Sloan Foundation, which they funded. And we did a big data collection effort where we interviewed, using a lot of modalities, 500 working families around the country. We picked cities and interviewed the husband, the wife, the teenager, and in some other families, got information on a kindergartener or a first grader. We did experience sampling data collection, which is, basically you give people a beeper watch and a log, and when the watch beeps, they fill out the log. And it gets a lot of emotional [data]: how stressed you feel, how happy, are you in pain? What are you doing? What else are you doing? Who is there? How do you feel about it? There were about thirty questions. And then we did an in-person interview, qualitative intensive interview. And then we gave them a questionnaire. So the data collection was all done with graduate students. Data entry was all done with graduate students. All the coding, everything.

HODGSON: So really it’s a continuation of all those topics that you had been doing, a lot on work, a lot on gender, a lot on family.

WAITE: Right. And it was a lot of fun.

HODGSON: It was? Now, all this that you’ve been doing up to now, it seems like you’re taking a good, close, empirical look at significant, relatively contemporary trends that seem to attract attention that have perhaps a potential for problematic aspects. And if I remember, I took a look at your PAA presidential talk, which is “The Case for Marriage.” And it was sort of funny because it was 1995. And all the things that were problematic, we would be so happy if today’s statistics were anything like those.

WAITE: Right.

HODGSON: And so maybe a little reflection on your part about how you view that sort of connection between the research you’re doing and the desire for coming up with at least policy
suggestions or policy recommendations. I imagine that the nature of the research is one where you’re going to be solicited about your ideas about, well, what can we do about this?

So how do you feel about that advocacy/policy component to what flows from the kind of research that you were doing? And Rand always had a policy component, too.

WAITE: Right. Absolutely. So I think it’s Daniel Patrick Moynihan who is quoted as saying, “Demographers don’t care what you do as long as you let them count it.” And that’s sort of always been my view. But I also think there is an overlay, especially in sociology, of political correctness, that you don’t talk about or don’t work on certain things.

HODGSON: Moynihan is a good example of that, too.

WAITE: That’s for sure. And I think as a demographer, I’m more willing to go where the facts as I can unearth them take me. Even if it’s not—I mean, I don’t notice that it’s not politically correct until it’s too late. Even the stuff on marriage. And I can tell you the history of that—

HODGSON: That would be great.

WAITE: —you, know, how I got to that. I really never had necessarily a policy or political agenda. I thought where we, as a society, were making it harder for people to get married, to stay married, through various policies, especially income-transfer policies, and that we ought to at least make it neutral, that we shouldn’t be punishing people for getting married. And that is especially the case for poor people. A lot of the programs we have, the Earned Income Transfer Credit, some of the Medicaid policies on spending down assets, you know, we should at least be neutral.

So how I got to work on marriage as a social institution, Lee Lillard and I got funding for a project on the relationship between marriage, divorce, widowhood, and mortality. It was part of an aging center. And the first paper we did used the Panel Study of Income Dynamics.
And we created histories, marital histories, for everybody from age fourteen that we saw in the twenty years of the PSID, and looked at changes: when people got married, when they got divorced, when they got widowed, when they became separated, separately men and women. And then we looked at the probability that they died in the future.

Lee had this wonderful event history, a very complicated model where you could use time-varying covariates. It was very complicated. And what we found—and this is the first paper we published from this—was that if you looked at the same people over twenty years, the chances that they died in the future changed very significantly when they got married. For men, the chances that they died went down immediately. And for women it took a few years, but then the chances that they died went down. If people got divorced or widowed, the chances that they died went up for the same people. It was really pretty compelling. So then Lee did these fabulous estimates. We had it all out there. And I had to figure out what’s going on that’s changing life chances for both men and women when they got married? There were differences between the genders. Any unmarried state was terrible for men. And actually, widowhood was not so bad for women. Being never married, separated, or divorced was pretty bad. But widowhood wasn’t so bad. So then I had to dig into the literature on marriage and what? What was killing people? And it had to be health, right? Something about health.

HODGSON: And you were pretty convinced that there was no subtle activity factor?

WAITE: I knew for sure it wasn’t, because they were the same people. So it was what happened to them before, and what happened to them later. So then I dug into that literature. I looked at living arrangements. I looked at finances. I looked at what we knew about physical health. Turned out there was a huge literature. I started looking at what we knew about mental health. And so I sort of got this whole picture.
HODGSON: What to do with it?

WAITE: I looked at earnings. But I didn’t actually look at earnings. I looked at the literature. Turned out there was a huge literature on each of these things. But they didn’t ever speak to each other. So economists all knew that men made more money when they got married. There’s a huge literature. The psychologists all knew that mental health was different for people. But they didn’t talk to the economists. And then there’s a huge literature on health, on physical health. And physical health differences, starting with Jessie Bernard. But they didn’t talk to the economists.

HODGSON: So nobody was bringing all this together.

WAITE: Everybody knew one of the dimensions, but nobody had ever put it together. And then I started doing some work on sexuality using Ed Laumann’s National [Health and Social Life] Survey.

HODGSON: This was right there in Chicago.

WAITE: Right there in Chicago. And I started doing some work on sex. And then this stuff on sexuality popped up. And I did some work on domestic violence. The stuff on domestic violence popped up. I read Sara McLanahan’s work on family structure and children’s wellbeing. There’s a huge literature on that. There was a huge literature on all of this. Some of the stuff on domestic violence and the stuff on sex was original work. The rest of it was all really—except for this work with Lee which got me into it—surveying this other literature. But then this pattern emerged [sound mimicking explosion] that was so consistent.

HODGSON: Was this before 1995 when you made your PAA talk?

WAITE: Yeah.
**HODGSON**: Okay. Because I see do remember in that PAA presentation, “Does Marriage Matter?” you have this neat comment. You were saying that biomedical researchers, when they find something like smoking causes cancer, they go out and tell people to stop smoking. And if they find that exercise improves health, they tell you to go out and exercise. So here you are, you’ve found all this evidence, empirical evidence, about marriage having these positive impacts on the individual, and you’re convinced now that maybe we should, as demographers, sociologists, tell people at least the facts.

**WAITE**: For sure, at least the facts.

**HODGSON**: And maybe the suggestion, get married. So you’re feeling more comfortable coming up with a more specific recommendation.

**WAITE**: Well, I sort of see myself more as the biologist who can say, look. You can see these cellular changes, gene expression changes, for people who smoke. And these receptor changes, so then the body can’t fight off the mutations that lead to cancer. And then you pass it to the people who do the policy stuff, and let them figure out what they want to do. But on the behavioral [level], change is hard. NIH has a whole effort on the science of behavioral change, a whole initiative, because there’s so many things where the health issues are caused by behaviors. So how do you get people to exercise more, give up smoking, eat a healthier diet, give up those ultra-hot Doritos, turn off that Kindle an hour before they go to bed. All of that stuff.

**HODGSON**: Your big 2000 book, *The Case for Marriage*: were you thinking that you were going to make this message more broadly available, not just to an academic audience?

**WAITE**: I actually didn’t think anything about it. No. So I gave the talk. I did the demography paper. I didn’t really know what I was going to go with it. Michael Aronson at Harvard
University Press called and said, “I heard your talk. I loved it. What are you going to do with it?” And I said, “I don’t know.” And he said, “Do you want to write a book?”

HODGSON: So somebody came and said, write that book.

WAITE: And I said, “Yeah. I think I do.” So I wrote him a proposal. He wrote me a contract. And then I started working on the book. And what I discovered was while I think I’m a good academic writer, I’m only an okay journalist. It’s a whole different set of skills. So [while] I could make it clear [and] I could be absolutely sure of the science, I couldn’t make it sing.

HODGSON: So you needed excitement.

WAITE: And I worked. And I went over it and over it and over it. And I still couldn’t make it sing. So somebody came to me and said, you know, because I had been presenting this stuff all over, “Love the idea.” It was the Institute for American Values. “We have a contributor who would pay for, basically make a contribution for you to work with this journalist, if you’re interested. She’s done other work on marriage.” So I met Maggie Gallagher, and we hit it off. I read her other work, which I thought was very respectful of the science. And basically she took my chapters. I drafted all the chapters. And we decided to add in vignettes from elsewhere. And she wrote them to be better written. And that’s how that all went.

HODGSON: It did sell, didn’t it? I think it was quite a popular book. A big splash.

WAITE: Yeah. We’ve sold about 35,000 copies. And we were on Good Morning America.

HODGSON: I remember that.

WAITE: Yeah. It was like four minutes. We did this whole media training thing. And I spoke to my mother later and she said, “It wasn’t very substantive, was it, Dear?” And I said, “Mom, it was a four-minute book commercial.”

HODGSON: And how did you like that experience of trying to get out there in more public—
WAITE: I was happy to do that.

HODGSON: Was it fun?

WAITE: It was fun. I wouldn’t want to spend my life in it. They really want you to come and spend a couple of days. And I really like doing the work. So it started getting in the way of all of that. I mean, you do have to do it. But I like writing the stuff better than I like the talking about it. But it was fine. It was fine.

HODGSON: Have you had any other experiences like that, where you got out there and sort of popularized research? It’s the only one I can think of to ask you about.

WAITE: So there have been a couple of other things where I published a paper where there was a lot of press response. It tends to last about a day. There wasn’t the big splash with the book on the family, though. It’s had a lot of staying power.

HODGSON: Did you get any negative feedback from academics?

WAITE: You know about this.

HODGSON: I’ve read some reviews.

WAITE: I think the reviews were fine. Really there were two awful experiences. And they were at different ends of the spectrum. So when we published the book, the New York Times contacted—Maggie and I were on a book tour—contacted us and said, “Would you write an op-ed piece?” This was when something had happened with the Clinton marriage. “Would you write an op-ed piece on why Hillary Clinton hasn’t kicked the guy out?” Basically, why she might want to stay married.

HODGSON: That occurred to me when all this was happening. I was wondering.

WAITE: So we did and they published it. And it was fine. You know, while certainly marriages can have rocky periods, we see in the book that most people recover from them. And
here are the benefits of a long-term marriage. And here’s why she might stay with him, though he’s clearly not perfect.

**HODGSON:** That was neat. There was sort of a lesson to be drawn from this.

**WAITE:** Right. Then I get a call from Bill O’Reilly’s show. I never watch TV. I don’t know.

**HODGSON:** You didn’t know what was going to hit you?

**WAITE:** I didn’t know who Bill O’Reilly was. But they said, “We’ll pitch your book.”

**HODGSON:** So you said sure.

**WAITE:** I said sure. And there’s a Chicago studio. So there’s a backdrop of the city of Chicago and a chair and a TV and a cameraman and that’s it. You don’t even see a thing of Bill O’Reilly.

**HODGSON:** Oh, you don’t? But you hear him, though?

**WAITE:** Uchhh. I sat down. And all he did for the 10 minutes or 20 minutes I was on, because I said in the op-ed piece that—did it come up? No. The person who previewed me said, “Well, what do you think of Hillary Clinton?” And I said, “Well, I don’t vote in New York.” And she said, “Well, what do you think of her as a political candidate?” And I said, “I think she’s a good political candidate. I think she’s what you want for somebody as the senator for the State of New York, somebody who has good legal training and good political skills.”

**HODGSON:** And who is smart.

**WAITE:** And smart. I think she’s a good candidate. I don’t know that they asked. All [O’Reilly] did was attack me on support of Hillary Clinton. That’s all. He just yelled at me for ten minutes. You’ve seen the guy, right? I don’t vote in New York.

**HODGSON:** So he didn’t want to talk about the family.
WAITE: No. He didn’t want to talk about the book. He didn’t want to talk about the family. He wanted to talk about my political support. And then I got back to my office that night, and the hate mail.

HODGSON: From the right?

WAITE: From the right. “You crawled out from under a rock and you should crawl back in.” It was unbelievable.

WAITE: Even though the message of the book is inherently conservative.

WAITE: Right. In fact, it was picked as the—

HODGSON: Family Values Book of the Year.

WAITE: Or something like that. One of them. Sure.

HODGSON: That’s funny. It’s not funny.

WAITE: It wasn’t funny. Right. So that was the attack from the right. But it wasn’t actually about the book. And then Arland Thornton, who is as clueless as I am—he’s not more, but he’s as clueless—asked if I would do an author-meets-the-critics session at ASA [American Sociological Association]. He called me up. We’re good friends. And we went through the people who would be invited. It was Suzanne Bianchi, Scott Coltrane, and Pepper Schwartz. And Scott Coltrane got up and said, “You know, there’s some things I don’t like about this book. I sort of liked the family book better. Here’s what I would have done a little differently.” You know, it was that sort of thing. Pepper Schwartz got up and started spraying vitriol. She said, “This book is a conservative tract. The findings are cherry-picked to meet a conservative agenda. It’s politically motivated. It’s terrible science.”

HODGSON: So you met your critics?
WAITE: And afterwards I got up and said, “Thank God for the University of Chicago. And thank God for tenure.” It’s my feeling that if we take taxpayers’ money to do research, we have an obligation to share the results of that research with the public. I stand behind every single one of these conclusions. And I had sent every single chapter to somebody in the field to say, What am I missing here? I sent the whole thing to Arland. I sent the whole thing to Fran Goldscheider. So I had, from Janice Kiecolt-Glaser, who does the psychology, that I wasn’t missing or misrepresenting anything on the psychology. I sent to an economist, Shoshana Grossbard, who went through the economics. I had Ed [Laumann] look at the sexuality and I published it. I had Debra Umberson look at the physical health stuff. Somebody looked at every chapter.

HODGSON: You didn’t leave out all the negative things that marriage does to the individual.

WAITE: What I said is, have I missed anything? Have I misrepresented? Is this okay? So I felt completely comfortable with all of that. And after the session, Arland and I looked at each other and said—

HODGSON: What just happened?

WAITE: What just happened? Where did that come from? And you know what? It affected my career in sociology. So I was on the council of ASA at the time. And I’ve never been nominated for another position. And I think I was on track to be president of ASA. And that completely derailed it. Thank God it didn’t affect my funding and the University of Chicago didn’t bat an eye.

HODGSON: That’s impressive.

WAITE: Shoshana is a colleague of mine. And it seemed to me that maybe she was the one that was telling me that more recently, within this last year, the evidence is that the liberal
academic community has come to your point of view, has realized that what you were saying actually is correct.

I would say maybe. But what I would say is from that, there’s been a lot of work on the nuance of this broad brush. So Debra Umberson, Kristi Williams, a number of other people have looked at things like age differences, gender differences, race differences, and marital quality, especially, marital quality differences. So it’s more that, I think, the findings have been elaborated. It holds here, it doesn’t hold there. Or it holds for a high marital quality, it doesn’t hold for poor marital quality, that sort of thing. So I don’t think anybody’s found that any of the conclusions were wrong. But they were broad-brush, and there’s more nuance than people knew at the time. It’s not that I left anything out. We just didn’t know this.

**HODGSON:** Did you have a chance to listen to Steve Ruggles’s presidential [talk]?

**WAITE:** Oh, yeah.

**HODGSON:** Now, it seems that if I were looking at what’s going on in the context of the family, it looks like in [Andrew] Cherlin’s new book [*Labor’s Love Lost: The Rise and Fall of the Working-Class Family in America*, 2014], there’s a recognition that there’s an explanation, a structural explanation for the decline in the family. That is sort of a different way of approaching the topic. Why is this happening? Why are people finding it so difficult to get married or stay married? And it sort of removes that focus on the individual. Marriage might be unbelievably useful and beneficial for the individual. But we’re coming up with a structural explanation for that decline of marriage that takes it out of the hands of the individual. And is there a way of bringing together—I mean, most of your evidence is individually based. And it’s empirical and it’s real. And you’re coming up with a recommendation that says, look how
useful this is for the individual. Go out and get married. And then you’ve got this other stream of more structural analysis—

WAITE: It’s hard.

HODGSON: —that looks at what’s happening in the economy. And Steve Ruggles [in his PAA Presidential Address last night] is blaming it on the one percent and income inequality and globalization. And the individual is just being hit with these forces that they really can’t control.

WAITE: So both things are going on. But if you think about any of the other large social changes, look at what’s happened to student debt and college. That’s a structural change. It hits individuals. Or the change in the structure of higher education. I’ve been reading some of the stuff. It’s pretty scary. There are huge structural changes that affect life chances of individuals. And the ones who are lucky and the ones who make good choices and the ones who have abilities that fit in with the structure are the ones who win.

HODGSON: Steve Ruggles was predicting that by 2050, only 20 percent of people will have jobs.

WAITE: Right.

HODGSON: Now, the 80 percent are not just unlucky. He’s making an argument that this is going to just be something overwhelming.

WAITE: Right. The world as we know it will change. I was thinking about that. Unless we stop educating children, we’re going to need teachers. Unless we stop providing medical care, we’re going to need a whole, huge industry. Unless, I guess, a robot could cut people’s hair. Maybe a robot could fix people’s teeth. But still, things we’ll have to do for the population. We have haven’t done so well with having robots prepare food.

HODGSON: That’s true.
WAITE: There are certain things, personal services sorts of things or, I don’t know, design and planning things. It’s hard to imagine. But we were talking about it last night at dinner, a group of us. And you know, how do you structure a society like that? And we were talking about jobs. What kind of jobs would people have? And so what would you pay them for? Well, you’d have to pay them to exercise. Right? You get $10 an hour for being on the treadmill for whatever. Maybe you’d pay them to learn something, a new skill. Maybe you’d pay them to do some kind of psychological meditation, stress reduction. You’d pay them to do something social.

HODGSON: Pay them to be nice to each other.

WAITE: There you go. To develop interpersonal skills. To take care of people who need taking care of. While robots will be able to do—I heard the Japanese are working on some kind of elder-care robot.

HODGSON: They have a great robotic dog right now. That would be very nice to have.

WAITE: Is it very nice? Do you get the same decline in blood pressure and heart rate?

HODGSON: That I don’t know. I don’t have empirical evidence of that.

WAITE: And we do have machines for sex, right? But they don’t really make do.

HODGSON: Do we have empirical studies on that?

WAITE: I don’t know. Well, we certainly know that there’s differences in the physiology of orgasm depending on—

HODGSON: How it happens.

WAITE: Yeah. Whether you’re with another person.

HODGSON: We’ll probably need to see if we zoom and get some of your big overall thoughts about what’s happening with respect to, sort of, the field.
WAITE: So since I’ve been a demographer, which is getting to be now a long time, what’s happened—and I think it’s wonderful—is that now demographers work on a whole bunch more topics than we used to.

HODGSON: Fertility, mortality, and migration?

WAITE: Fertility, mortality, and migration. And when did labor force participation come in, for example? When did health? What happens to you in between? What about living arrangements? What about gender differences? What about abortion, I guess, family planning?

That’s happened pretty early. But so did labor force participation. What about occupational segregation? What about a lot of the international stuff, which isn’t necessarily about fertility, mortality, and migration. It’s women’s care of infants and domestic violence and pollution. Some of the stuff that economists have brought in has really been transformative.

HODGSON: So you like this now?

WAITE: I do. Because I think we bring a certain perspective, which is a show-me-the-facts perspective. Let’s get the numbers right. We have to think about them the right way and be very thoughtful about what they mean. But demographers don’t do big theory unless it’s big theory about the numbers, right?

HODGSON: When it comes to the numbers though, when I was a grad student in demography, we had this definition of demographic data, census and vital statistics, demographic techniques which were peculiar, different. And to a large extent, many countries now have given up census. And basically the data source is the same now as economists use.

WAITE: Sure.
HODGSON: And you’re responsible for all that wonderful panel studies data and survey data. And it becomes more generic. So if you had a Ph.D. in economics, you could easily produce a study that would fit very nicely in PAA.

WAITE: Sure. Absolutely.

HODGSON: And you might not actually think of yourself as a demographer. You could think of yourself—and is that at all a worry?

WAITE: No.

HODGSON: That’s not a worry?

WAITE: No. If we’re doing things the right way that have an appeal, then we want more scholars to do things in a way that meets our standards.

HODGSON: So there isn’t a worry about how we identify? Do we identify ourselves as demographers, or do we identify ourselves more thematically, like I’m studying inequality. And my community is economists and sociologists and maybe a demographer. But my community is a thematic community as opposed to a disciplinary community.

WAITE: If you’re studying inequality by talking to poor people. I mean, you still might have a demographic perspective, but it’s less likely to appear at PAA.

HODGSON: So definitely the change you’ve noticed is obvious and big and significant.

WAITE: Yeah. I mean, for heaven’s sake, I’m working on sex. That’s not fertility, mortality, and migration. Because now in the United States most—

HODGSON: It’s less and less connected with fertility, that’s for sure.

WAITE: Right.

HODGSON: How about the future for the field? I think you’re on a committee.
WAITE: Right. So I think the big thing is that we’re going to have different kinds of data, certainly in the short run.

HODGSON: So not just survey and panel study data?

WAITE: Google and Facebook and Yahoo are hiring our students, because you can learn—and people are using Google and Facebook data to understand demographic [information], to understand disease transmission, to understand mood and geographical differences in mood, to understand social networks. To understand things we can’t even think about. So that’s going to be a huge change. The other thing is, as a survey researcher, standard survey research of the kind we’ve been doing, where you go and visit somebody, is unbelievably expensive. And more than that, people are more resistant to answering those questions on the phone. For heaven’s sake, United Airlines gives me a survey every time I fly with three questions, right? So there are surveys like crazy. Every time I make a purchase on the web, somebody gives me a survey on how I liked the website. Surveys are all over. How do we distinguish ourselves as a scientific as opposed to a marketing survey? How do we fit in knowledge networks and these internet panels where the response rate is like 5 percent? For a demographer, that’s laughable. But how do we make sense of that? How do we evaluate that stuff as science, as access to knowledge of human behavior? What do we do with administrative records? What about all those photos that all those security cameras are taking? How do we put that together to map people’s movements around social spaces and social interactions and to what extent can we? There are huge new opportunities. There are probably new opportunities about how we think about things, too, that will appear when we have different perspectives.
HODGSON: All this, though, is an emphasis on sources of data and kinds of analysis. Now, if you think in the context of is there a population component to it? In some ways, there’s a methodological component to this.

WAITE: For heaven’s sake, you can do Google stuff on the population of U.S.—

HODGSON: Yes, you can. When I got in demography, it was in a context in which there was a worry about fertility planning.

WAITE: Right.

HODGSON: And there you are at Michigan. And you’ve got all the money for those population centers.

WAITE: Now it’s aging.

HODGSON: Now it’s aging.

WAITE: And how we’re going to pay for all this.

HODGSON: In the context of that, there’s a demographic component to aging. There’s no doubt about that.

WAITE: Are you kidding?

HODGSON: Is there a potential population problem that will be a 21st-century one, beyond aging?

WAITE: Yeah. If I had to say, it’s population and what I’d call world health, by which I mean the health of the world, this environment we live.

HODGSON: So we’re talking climate change.

WAITE: Climate change. There was something in the New York Times about evolutionary—something like astrophysics, theoretical physics. This group was doing simulations of energy use and systems collapse, and basically had reached the conclusion that any energy-producing
society was bound to collapse. And the fact that we don’t see life on a lot of other worlds is probably because there was and the systems collapsed. And they pointed to Mars and Venus and how energy use, energy extraction and energy use, upsets the ecological world, ecological bounds.

HODGSON: It limits the growth.

WAITE: But it’s bigger than that. Just even the extra energy put into the system causes the system to basically get out of whack, and pretty fast. And then basically it all incinerates.

HODGSON: [pow] That’s a great ending.

WAITE: So that’s the stuff I worry about.

HODGSON: Well, that’s good.

WAITE: You know, the big, big—what are human populations with the social structures, the institutions, what are out limits? There was also something on, again, in the New York Times science section on how human beings consistently destroy resources and species. Talked about the carrier pigeons and when the last—in Michigan this was—the last colony of 100,000 carrier pigeons were wiped out by a group of guys in the 1800s. [Talked about how] we can go back to the large mammals that were wiped out by humans when they came across the Bering Straits and down. In a thousand years they wiped out all the horses that used to be native to the U.S., the mammoths, the bison, the mountain sheep, giant sloths. They just wiped out everything. The only reason we have horses here is that somebody in Europe didn’t wipe them out. So what kind of species are we? And what’s the population of the world going to do to manage this resource?

HODGSON: That sounds 21st century. Now, do you have any questions?

WAITE: I think that’s an excellent place to end it.
WEEKS: Is there something we forgot to ask you that you would like to be included?

[Waite shakes her head in the negative] Well, this was actually quite a lot of fun.

WAITE: It was.

HODGSON: Thank you so much for coming.

WAITE: Sure. My pleasure.

Interview recorded and transcribed by Nicholas P. Steckel, a Shorthand Reporter and notary public working for Esquire Solutions.

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