

## The privilege of consciousness: an interview with Sol Levine

*Interviewer: Anne Brunner, MD, MPH*

### About Sol Levine

Sol Levine, PhD, was a well-known researcher in society and health. He endeavoured to examine the building blocks for a social science of health, building on Aaron Antonovsky's concept of "salutogenesis" as a positive approach.

Trained as a medical sociologist, Levine began his affiliation with the Harvard School of Public Health (HSPH) in 1956 as an associate in social psychology. Over the next decade he was promoted to be associate professor, and directed School's Social Science Program. In 1990, after numerous other positions, he returned to HSPH and served as interim chair of the department of Health and Social Behavior at Harvard School of Public Health from 1993 to 1995, before he was to assume emeritus status on July 1, 1997.

Sol Levine grew up in New York City, graduated from Queens College before going on to New York University for his PhD in sociology. In 1966, Levine assumed a professorship at Johns Hopkins School of Hygiene and Public Health, where he eventually founded and chaired the Department of Behavioral Sciences and directed the Center for Urban Affairs. In 1972, Levine became a university professor of sociology at Boston University. In 1976, Levine rejoined the HSPH community as visiting lecturer in the Department of Behavioral Sciences. In 1988, he served as Vice President of the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation for two years. He returned to HSPH as professor of Health Behavior in the Department of Health and Social Behavior.

Levine's scholarly accomplishments were numerous. He was one of the first sociologists to conduct research on health and stress, now considered a core area. He was a major innovator in measuring the quality-of-life consequences of medical interventions, which had been previously thought to be too elusive to properly quantify. He showed how quality for life measures could be used in health services



research and in clinical trials. His research drew attention to professional and organisational barriers to the provision of health care and to the necessity of humanising health care. Levine was looking at the important effects of community structures and social networks on health and how people sought help for their problems. He became a scholar of the social determinants of health, i.e., how race, class, education, income, and gender all influence health status, emphasising social inequalities as a leading cause of ill health. Lately, Levine was involved in developing a national and international programme in society and health, through which he stressed the need for a multidisciplinary approach incorporating medical sociology and epidemiology in the formulation of health policy.

Levine had been elected to the Institute of Medicine and the National Academy of Sciences, and had received the Leo G. Reeder Award for Distinguished Contributions to Medical Sociology and a Certificate of Appreciation for a Career of Distinguished Service to the Medical Sociology Section. Major foundations as the Kaiser Family Foundation and the

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation sought him to play a leading role in their research programmes. He held numerous consultantships, visiting professorships, grants, and contracts.

Levine died unexpectedly of sudden cardiac arrest on Sunday, November 17, 1996 at the age of 74. Colleagues praised his “seminal teaching and writings” which “framed the essential terms of some of the central debates that will surely continue to animate our work for a very long time”. The dean of academic affairs at HSPH at that time recalled that “Sol’s wisdom, wit, and depth of spirit were an inspiration to us all. He was loved and admired by all of us who had the privilege to work with him.”

To commemorate Levine’s life and work, the Boston faculties he served established the Sol Levine Lectureship on Society and Health, where each year a distinguished scholar will deliver a lecture on a relevant topic in the field. A special section of the journal *Social Science and Medicine*, celebrated “the life and work of Sol Levine, a central figure in medical sociology” who was “concerned with making the world a better and more just place, and in increasing health all around”. (1999, 48: 709).

### **History of the interview**

*The interview originated on 12 April 1995 at Harvard School of Public Health in Boston, when Sol Levine served as interim chair of the Department of Health and Social Behavior at Harvard School of Public Health.*

### **Information about the interviewer**

*Anne Brunner, MD MPH, studied medicine and specialised in psychotherapy, before her postgraduate study in Public Health at Harvard School of Public Health in 1995. Currently she is teaching at the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt (near Munich, Germany), where she is professor of social medicine and public health at the Faculty of Applied Social Sciences.*

“That is a great testimony to the human spirit to transcend physical limitations”

*AB: I know you have thought a lot about health and the social determinants of health. If you could give a definition of health, how would you define it?*

*SL: I would go along with René Dubois a lot who said: What is health? What is it really? It is really the ability to do the things you want to do, and to be the kind of person you want to be. So it is a question of being able to live according to the rhythm you want and to have a sense of buoyancy and a sense of potential capacity to do things and a sense of feeling challenged and having a sense of initia-*

*...tive and interacting with the environment and other people. And I guess the term “sense of well-being” which we use so much now is certainly operative, and of course to some extent these lean on physical states. They also depend upon the social environment in which you live. It is very hard to be healthy in an unhealthy environment. And so you assume some degree of relationship, some degree of constancy and symbiosis between the environment and the individual. So it would be very hard to think of a person being a healthy individual when he is imprisoned and restrained from expressing himself.*

*Some people like Mandela were able to maintain health because of an inner set of beliefs and ability to transcend self and connect self with a larger idea and with a larger future destiny. So it’s possible to do that, but that requires an unusual psychological strength of a part of a person, and that is a great testimony to the quality of the human spirit to transcend even physical limitations. So Mandela even when he was imprisoned was able to change the environment in which he lived so that the jailers started being nice to him and he could get some things he wanted, like books and so on. But he was able in a sense to relate himself psychologically with the destinies of his people and in that sense was able to be healthy in a very unhealthy immediate environment.*

*“I think that happiness and health are very much related”  
AB: You also thought a lot about happiness. How do you think is happiness related to health? What is human happiness for you? When is a human being happy?*

*SL: I think that happiness and health are very much related. That the happier a person is the healthier that person is, almost by definition, but also causally. ...They are both prerequisites for each other and they are both in a sense part of the same thing. I think each human being has a certain style, a certain way of thinking, a certain way of working, a certain way of creating, a certain way of loving. And I think that the ability of that person to pursue his style, a person develops a style over time, to pursue his style, especially in a sense of a healthy style, a style that works for the individual. I think that contributes to happiness. For example, let’s assume that a child has a way of working. If the teacher can find that child’s way of working and make use of it creatively, instead of superimposing a format upon the child, that would be better. That same principle I think operates in life in terms of happiness.*

*And secondly, I think a very important component of happiness has to be embedded in the nature of social relationships, the nature of the quality of the marriage, the quality of friendships, the quality of your relationship with people*

in the community or in your work setting. Sometimes the structure of the situation produces competition between people, and makes it hard to them to like each other and relate to each other properly ... And so you have to pay attention to structures that don't allow relatedness, that's very important. The way even, for example, the things that we take for granted, that the best students do so and so, and get certain kinds of grades, and people who apply ... that the nature of the structure has a competitive relationship, that doesn't do good. The competition is a good thing in many ways, it also is a bad thing, it also distorts relationships, it makes people more distant from one another. The whole notion of looking at people as commodities that you can purchase or buy or use for your purposes. So it takes away the possible joy of real relatedness. Relatedness is a very important thing in the writings of Erich Fromm and other kinds of writers, Buber has spoken about that. The nature of relatedness is crucial to happiness.

"It's that kind of relatedness which contributes tremendously to happiness"

*AB: How would you describe the nature of relatedness? How would an 'ideal' relatedness look like?*

SL: It looks like that ... you are not an object, but you are ... in a sense we are part of each other, in a way; in a certain sense we are part of each other. And the relatedness is certainly egalitarian, A is interested in the welfare of B, and A is really hearing B, and talking with, not only to, but with B. And they have communion, they communicate really, each one is not just making his point, and the nature of relationship is not a competitive one, but it is being on the same tune, one the same wavelength. And feeling into the other person, it comes back to the point about playing the role of the other, that is in a sense knowing the other, and knowing the other in a way that ... words become difficult ... the relatedness is of such a nature that one does not feel apart from the other person, but one is in a sense ... it is a very interactive kind of thing and that two people are part of the same kind of system for a while. It's that kind of relatedness which I think contributes tremendously to happiness. Now, some people because they have distorted personalities to begin with, only know a kind of relation in which they can be dominant, in which they can use somebody, and they have a certain kind of joy, or a certain kind of pleasure, it isn't joy, they have a certain kind of pleasure. But the pleasure relates to an unhealthy quality in them in the first place. And that kind of pleasure is not a sustainable pleasure, is not a creative pleasure. It is a kind of pleasure that momentarily releases a certain kind of distorted anxiety in the part of the individual. And the person

may feel a certain sense of pleasure, but that's because the person hasn't risen to the level of pleasure, of the level of joy or happiness or true contentment that comes with the more healthy kind of relatedness. So there are people who have pleasure, and I think they are having a lot of fun, and maybe some people who really are very mean to other people and dominating other people, for example a jail-keeper working in a prison who is mean to somebody, they feel a certain kind of pleasure and control, but he has forfeited the joy. And the real joy of relatedness, the kind of joy you have when you love a friend and a friend is a fulfilled self, when you love a husband or a wife and he or she is happy. When you identify with that other person, it's a much more beautiful thing, in other words joys that are not zero sum situations, the joys in which we are all part of the same thing, I think. Not easy to achieve!

*AB: Would you say that this is what life is all about, having good relationships and being in relationships?*

SL: Oh yes, absolutely. People need each other, and they need each other in the most healthy related ways. And the greatest pain comes when people are cruel to each other, and people sense the cruelty of the other person, and sense the inability to reach the other person, and sense the fact the other person does not really care for self.

"I treasure the privilege of consciousness"

*AB: As time goes by and with growing age, what is getting more and more important to you? And on the other side, what is getting less and less important?*

SL: I would say, less and less important are sort of prestigious achievements, you know, another article, or a speech here, or an award here, or something. Those things mean very little to me. ... What's more important is the chance to have your own rhythm, and your own time, and your own opportunity to use the time the way you want to. That can be writing, that can just mean take a walk with my wife ... I treasure that.

I treasure the privilege of consciousness, the privilege of consciousness, that's my term. ...

*AB: Is it like being more aware of being alive?*

SL: I think that's a good way of putting it, yes. For example, not to become numbed. What happens if the world numbs you. The world numbs you by putting you into a routine, in which you're no longer a conscious ... Now, that's a terribly important notion, and I once said that one of the most obscene comments is: "This is a good way of killing time". You don't kill time. Now that's obscene ... ! You think, you remember, you have fantasy, you recall, you aspire, you enjoy, you relax, you meditate ... You never kill time! I don't think I have ever killed time in my life. I think if

I ever had any time I had been able to remember, or to think, or to aspire, or whatever... And I love to use my mind, I love to recall, I love to think...

“To know what’s important to you is extremely important” Historically, there was much more need to impress other people, when you’re young and so on. And now you don’t care, I mean for some years you don’t care, you have it internally. So, it’s more, as you get older, and more secure, and you know what’s important: to know what’s important to you and to the world, that’s extremely important. Like being connected to something bigger than yourself, and having your own style, and so on. To know what’s important is extremely important. Many people don’t know that, they merely respond...

*AB: How can people differentiate what’s important for them?*

SL: I think it works differently for different people. I think it may be the goal of improving the world, it may be science, it may be religion, God, it may be sense of communion, it might a Buddhist notion of just being in communion with other things, it could be a large, extended family, it could be a country... I think that some things are better than others. But I do think that it is important that an individual doesn’t only stop with “Where am I, and what am I getting” and so on, I think that’s death, that’s a bad death.

*AB: If you compare your life earlier at a younger age, and your life now at an elder age – in which lifetime have you been happier?*

SL: I am much happier now, oh I am much happier, much less plagued. I had a lot of fun, I had a lot of joy... But the equanimity, and the “at-oneness” and the peace – Socrates writes about that... But now at the same time I enjoy life tremendously. But it’s a very different thing, I don’t get involved in forced games, in competitive games. And the ego, the ego is so powerful, and so dominating when you are young, and when you get older you free yourself of that. You free yourself of the wrong fights, the wrong pursuits, the wrong issues.

“I am worried about the survival of the human race”

*AB: What is your current main interest, your current main focus of work, and may be your main worry?*

SL: Well, I am worried about some things, and my main interest to some extent is based upon things I am worried about.

I am worried about the survival of the human race, I am worried about the destruction, the warming of the earth, destruction of plankton, the fact that no one is really

watching the entire picture, no one cares in a certain sense, but people define their problems in very restricted ways. And I am worried about the fact that just the nature of living that we take for granted has consequences and nobody... I would love to see the Pope be very powerful today and speak out and say: “You’re violating God’s earth, you are creating something terrible morally! This must all stop!” I’d like to see some people with enormous stature who can shake the world into some attention, so that’s what I worry about. And I am an optimistic person, but I am pessimistic about that dimension, about the deforestation of the area, the areas becoming desert-like, the destruction of the jungle, of the Amazon-areas, and so on. I think that is terrible for all kinds of reasons. And I don’t see any rectification. I know there are a few things we do well, we stop pollution in certain areas, and we cut down on some things, we improve gasoline, but those are very local, local things. So that’s what I worry about, that occupies me.

Now, intellectually, I am very interested in how the status of inequality has negative consequences, healthwise, how that happens. So that’s a major concern, right now. Just by being unequal, and being not treated by the same deference that we should receive, how that itself has negative consequences. I have some notions about that, but I think of that.

I am also interested in how I can develop a notion of happiness, without reference to the fact that there are different parts of the world where the notion of happiness isn’t even a luxury you can permit! There is such an enormous deprivation in the world, where people live in fright, the Ruandas, and the Hutu, and the ... terrible, the operation of madness in the world. I am frightened by madness! Madness in the part of the extremists of all sides, madness in the part of people who only know one single truth and inflict that truth on other people. And the fights between the Moslems and the Serbians in Bosnia, similar fights in Afghanistan, India and Pakistan, Palestinian and Israeli, Hutu and Hutai... All over the world you have that kind of thing. And what bothers me, it’s done by people with a great sense of being right! So I am worried about that, I worry about that a lot!

So when I think of my own interest in happiness, I wonder: Do I have the right to work on this happiness? Is it a legitimate kind of question to raise?

Sure, I can start portraying a very liberated, egalitarian, humanist person in the United States here, who might be moving toward happiness. I could spell that out and say some of the similar things I said before to you, but I wonder if I have the right to even think about that kind of a topic. And even if I were able to, that the topic is so

restricted to the cultural setting, to the particular set of circumstances, what relevance would this have for mothers and fathers who are walking in Ruanda, escaping the Hutai, or people who experience enormous poverty in Haiti, or other places in Latin America, or Africa.

“I think that is the mission that has to be fulfilled”

*AB: Where would you see the greatest need of our world? Where would you like to make the greatest contribution if you were young today?*

SL: I would say to transcend the hostilities, and the “We” and the “They”, the “We” and the “Them” notion, that we are ok, and we’re good, and we are entitled, and them, they mean nothing, they can die, and their kids can be killed, it’s part of the same kind of thing I was talking of before. I think that is the mission that, I think, that has to be fulfilled. Overcoming the tremendous ... the fact that human beings are able to relate to other human beings in an inhuman way, and to – in a sense – create a kind of collected humanity that recognizes the fact that we are all brothers and sisters. That’s where I think the action should be.

“I would tell her that the other person is in many ways like her”

*AB: If you could leave a message for your grandniece and her future life: What would be the most important message you would like to give to her?*

SL: Let’s see. I would tell her to listen to her inner voice, to listen, to really listen to how she really feels. And I would tell her to try to understand that the other person she is talking with is in many ways like her: feels the way she does, and so on. And for her to look at the other person as very important and very worthwhile in the same way that she wants to be treated. I would teach her what Jesus said: “Treat others as you want others to treat you.” I would tell her that she should fulfil herself by happiness, but it should be in a manner that is consistent with other people’s happiness.

*AB: Thank you very much for this interview, Sol Levine.*

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