

Nothing Taken for Granted: An Interview with Kyoko Sato

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Dr. Sato is the Science, Technology and Society Associate Director and Honors Program Director at Stanford University. She earned her PhD in Sociology from Princeton University, MA in Journalism from New York University, and BA in English from the University of Tokyo. Before coming to Stanford, Dr. Sato was a postdoctoral associate at the Institute for the Social Sciences at Cornell University, and taught for Harvard University's Committee on Degrees in Social Studies and Department of Sociology.

Personal STS Connections

MDE: You have gone from studying English to Journalism to Sociology. What brings you to STS? And what do you see as your relationship as an active scholar within the field of STS?

KS: I grew up reading literature and one of the things I really liked was reading about other countries and different customs and things like that. And then, I was particularly drawn to American literature. And reading literature really closely, you realize that some of the things you take for granted are not taken for granted in another culture. You really see how different the world is. And then I studied to complete my journalism degree in New York. That was a very exciting, eye-opening experience. I realized, this time at first hand, things that I considered to be very natural or obvious, were not really obvious. So that was always at the bottom of my scholarly interest. When I wrote a lot of articles for a newspaper in Japan,¹ I enjoyed interviewing sociologists the most, as they explained to me why things are the way they are... and then I thought maybe this is something I want to do. So I quit my job as a journalist and travelled the world for two years—during which I applied to [graduate] schools.

I wanted to study this question: how do we come to take things for granted—what is the mechanism? Cognition can be very different in different cultures. Some categories in one culture don't exist in another. Categories as a concept have always interested me. I pursued these issues through cultural sociology in graduate school.

¹ [*The Japan Times*](#)

I wrote my dissertation on genetically modified food because it's a category that is recognized differently in different contexts. It doesn't exist as a salient category in this country. So, it's there, but it's not there. It is very saliently there for the Japanese, partly because you are constantly seeing "non-GMO" labels in tofu and other soy products, which we eat regularly... But in the United States, it is much more prevalent and yet it is not highly recognized. So, on one level, it's an issue of category for me. I wrote my dissertation about, ok, what is the role of policy? It is a technology policy. What is the role of social movement, culture, politics...?

But then, I realized that there was this field called science and technology studies, which I didn't know about until after I started doing my dissertation research. Then I discovered that that science and technology—something which I had thought was more stable and universal, is really not. How technology is perceived, how it is practiced, what kinds of assumptions go into it—are completely different in different cultural contexts. I realized that there is a whole field where people look at the very complex relationships between science, technology, and society—and that it is something you need to look at critically, rather than saying "it's great to have progress!" So that was the sensibility I developed as I was writing my dissertation and started reading more STS works. I continued with my independent STS studies during my postdoc at Cornell, which has one of the best graduate training programs in STS... Gradually, I was able to connect to STS scholars and learned much from them.

STS is connected to something that I was always interested in: critically looking at that which you have taken for granted. Even science and technology, which can be seen as very linear and universal, those assumptions don't hold for me anymore. There are many ways to do science and technology, and none of it is independent from culture—culture is built into it.

MDE: Do you foresee STS as remaining your home discipline in the future?

KS: Yes. Since it is interdisciplinary, there are many things you can do... There are so many exciting studies in the field. And science and technology will never be dispensable.

My newest project focuses on Fukushima. I am amazed at how I had never questioned – or even thought seriously about nuclear power, before the disaster. Where does such blind acceptance come from? Until the 2011 meltdown, opposition was very marginalized in Japan. I was always a progressive, left-wing environmentalist, and yet, this issue was completely outside of my purview. For me, it is an amazing achievement to get citizens to become oblivious to – or take for granted – a particular technology. And look what happened!

I think STS can open up important conversations about where our society is going, given that science and technology are so constitutive of our society. These conversations should involve scholars, peoples, and lots of different points of views. It cannot be reduced simply to cost-benefit analysis, for instance. So in that sense, I think that it [STS] is always going to be an important field, where I will continually find something to pursue.

The Interdisciplinary Discipline of STS

MDE: The typical role of departments is to produce students with mastery over a specific discipline. Being interdisciplinary, what common thread do STS departments produce within students?

KS: I think the way in which science, technology, and society interact with each other is one of the key things. You don't look at society as independent from science or technology and vice versa. This worldview is not necessarily shared by everyone. So this awareness, combined with concrete skills to look at these important STS intersections, is a strength of this discipline. Professor Turner has used the word "intellectually bilingual" to describe our department. This buzz-word highlights what I am talking about. You can have technical skills, but also have an awareness of how social factors affect your technical domain, and how the domain affects society. Even if you might have very different approaches, methodologically or analytically, you can share the general ways of critical thinking. There is a very wide range of applications that STS students can contribute to, because this STS sensibility can be productive in any field. What do you think?

MDE: My concentration is chemistry. I am about 3 or 4 courses short of a chemistry degree, but instead of taking those courses I get to take the core STS courses. These courses make me think critically about my studies. So, I bring my concentration and I incorporate it into society and make it more active and more of a conversation than a strict discipline; for me, this method of study is highly applicable to the current demands of contemporary society.

Moving on, which STS scholars have you most closely followed?

KS: I have been tremendously influenced by Sheila Jasanoff, Bruno Latour, and I also love Wiebe Bijker's work.

MDE: What five books/films/or multimedia projects do you consider mandatory for every STS student?

KS:

1. Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined Communities*. Brooklyn, NY: Verso Books.
2. Foucault, Michel. (1995). *Discipline and Punish*. New York, NY: Random House, Inc.
3. Latour, B. (1987). *Science in Action*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
4. Jasanoff, S. (2004) *States of Knowledge: The Co-production of Science and the Social Order*, New York, NY: Routledge.
5. Wiebe, B., Hughes, T., & Pinch, T. (Eds.). (1989). *The Social Construction of Technological Systems*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

MDE: As the STS Honors Program Director, what do you see as the goal of STS honors theses at Stanford?

KS: It really gives students an opportunity to pursue an intellectual interest at a level that they cannot accomplish within quarter-length projects. I see honors students start with some questions, and they have some hunch, and as they go into it, good research often comes back with an element of surprise. There is such joy in discovering how things work in a particular area that you are interested in. And that joy of research, in my opinion, is a pretty rewarding experience in and of itself.

But it is also great in that it gears students to develop a transposable skill set. They learn how to formulate a question, and how to tackle the question in a variety of ways, and also how to make sure that their argument is solid, by looking for evidence and examining counter-arguments. That is a skill set that you cannot teach in workshops—it is something you can acquire only by doing. Once you learn to do that, you can do another project with that skill set... It almost doesn't matter what you produce in the end—it is the process itself that is a learning experience. How was your experience with the STS Honors Program last year?

MDE: I found that the STS Honors Program was very much open to student creativity; it was not very restrictive to students. It is open to you—your advisor can be anyone from any department. That creativity is a great challenge and if students rise to that challenge, they can reap immense benefits. That I see is a huge benefit that the STS honors program allows for. I think the demands of the program are very unique and the program fosters incredible work from highly innovative students. The students work on completely different projects with varying sources of literature, and yet, they support each other by fueling strong analysis and creativity.

KS: Absolutely. And that leads to very unique projects. You have to be very proactive and approach many people, and that initiative is part of the honors project. There are many ways that students are supported here. Students have to be independent, but they still have a support network that enables that independence. I am always happy to help.

MDE: What can other universities learn from the Stanford STS departmental structure and goals?

KS: We are growing rapidly, and we are also extremely diverse. We allow the B.S. and the B.A. with a variety of concentrations. In a way, to have a program this size and this diverse, we have to be highly dynamic. We had 50 students or so several years ago and now we are 200 plus. How do we maintain the quality of education? One of the things that we are trying to keep is our very hands-on advising structure. Peer advisors, Colleen [Stanford STS Undergraduate Program Advisor], and faculty affiliates—are involved in student curriculum in a way that would not be possible if our curriculum was rigid or only catered to narrow types of STS. That is something we are very proud of. We have a very unique, dynamic program.

MDE: What changes/developments do you look forward to for the Stanford STS department?

KS: Those are the big questions we are discussing right now, especially in the face of the recent rapid growth. Since we are interdisciplinary, we can take very different directions. I think that we are trying to make it even more interdisciplinary by involving faculty members from more departments. Obviously, you can't include everything in the same way, but at the same time, we don't want to be rigid at this point. We're actively exploring which directions the program can take in the years to come. It's an exciting time for us.