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Applied Sociology

Herbert Newhard Shenton

Applied Sociology and Other Applications of Sociology. The term *applied sociology* as used in this treatise refers to a systematically organized body of sociological knowledge which is practically useful for human, social and societal engineering. It is regarded as a sub-division of sociology. It is not a new science but a development and exploitation of the practical possibilities of objective and quantitative observational sociology. . .

Applied Sociology and Social Arts. Applied sociology is a science and is distinctly different from social practice which is an art. Those who actually apply sociology to the solution of social problems and the effecting of social change, are professional social workers and social artists. Each social art and social profession will undoubtedly develop its own scientific technique. Applied sociology, as herein conceived, is a body of sociological knowledge especially selected, presented, interpreted and organized for those who are endeavoring to use sociology effectively for the achievement of proximate social ends. There may be a general applied sociology and a specialized applied sociology. The former should include such sociology as is generally useful for the solution of all social problems, and the latter will be more intensive and elaborate statements of sociology which are especially applicable to a limited number of specific problems.

A distinction must be made between the development of an applied sociology as an organized body of knowledge and the application of sociology as practice. The former may grow out of the latter and the latter may increasingly depend upon the former but there is need for careful discrimination in the interest of clear and constructive thinking. Both the scientist and the practitioner, under certain circumstances, may lay good claim to the title sociologist;

Excerpts (pp.28, 31-32, 99-108) from Herbert Shenton's *The Practical Application of Sociology: A Study of the Scope and Purpose of Applied Sociology*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1927. Reprinted with permission of Columbia University Press. Copyright by Columbia University Press.

and functions of research and of practice are often performed by the same person. This, however, in no way invalidates the contention that they are two distinct processes. Much harm has resulted from the confusion of the subject and of its practical use. . .

Applied Sociology. The term most extensively used to denote those productions of sociologists which were attempts to make sociology applicable, or actually to apply it, has been *applied sociology*. As early as 1898, Edward Payson wrote *Suggestions Toward Applied Sociology*, an unpretentious volume, but suggestive and not insignificant when the time of its publication is taken into account. The classical work to date with the title *Applied Sociology* is that of Lester F. Ward, of Brown University. Although this work did not appear until 1906, it was almost predicted in his *Dynamic Sociology* in 1888. In 1920 Ward's colleague and successor, James Q. Dealy, published his *Sociology, Its Development and Applications*. In 1916, Henry Pratt Fairchild of Yale produced his *Outlines of Applied Sociology*. These works although they all purport to deal with applied sociology, are varied in subject matter and diverse in their treatments of the subject. Charles R. Henderson used the terms "applied sociology" and "social technology" interchangeably.¹ Although he wrote no books designated as applied sociology, his activity at the University of Chicago and most of his publications dealt with the application of sociology. For several years Emory S. Bogardus of the University of Southern California has been publishing a *Journal of Applied Sociology*.

Edward Payson. This little volume by Edward Payson published over twenty-five years ago is a move in the direction of applied sociology. In his discussion of the nature and function of applied sociology, he writes as follows (p. 143):

Having dislodged old and faulty assumptions, the business of applied sociology as a theory is to replace these with new assumptions, and as rapidly as may be, follow this by a readjustment of practice to theory making use of such deductive and inductive proofs as may speedily show either the uselessness or advantages of the changes proposed.

He makes a valid and necessary distinction between (1) applied sociology as a body of usable sociological knowledge and (2) the applications of the theory (a) to the readjustment of prevailing social practices and (b) to the practical sociological analysis of proposed social changes. The latter chapters of his book are devoted to a "demonstration" of how "criminal law, education and public philanthropy may be taken to illustrate the possibilities of an applied science of sociology, under which these branches may be made to depend upon sensible fact instead of upon fact and assumption inextricably woven."

Lester F. Ward was one of the first and foremost of optimistic American sociologists. He continually and indefatigably urged the possibilities of the modification of social conditions, relations and processes.² The fact that we disagree with his idea of the mutual inclusiveness of ethics and applied sociology must in no way be interpreted as an effort to discredit the fact that Ward has made a valuable contribution to the development of applied sociology. His *Applied Sociology* continues to be unique and widely read. It is regarded by many as the outstanding work on this subject. His discriminating use of the term "applied sociology" as distinguished from "pure sociology" seems to have commenced about 1898 or 1899. Some sociologists contend that he was the first American sociologist to make this distinction. In the opening sentence of his *Pure Sociology* he declares that the terms "pure" and "applied" may be used in sociology in the same sense as in other sciences and that "pure science is theoretical, applied science is practical." With this distinction it seems impossible to find fault. The difficulties come with his actual extension of this idea. No more explicit and condensed statement of his conception of the nature, scope and function of applied sociology can be given than that contained in the following excerpt from the *Applied Sociology*.

Just as pure sociology aims to answer the questions What, Why and How, so applied sociology aims to answer the questions What for. The former deals with facts, causes and principles, the latter with the object, end or purpose. The one treats the subject matter of sociology, the other its use. However theoretical pure sociology may be in some of its aspects, applied sociology is essentially practical. It appeals directly to interest. It has to do with social ideals, with ethical considerations, with what ought to be. While pure sociology treats of the "spontaneous development of society" applied sociology "deals with the artificial means of accelerating the spontaneous processes of nature." The subject-matter of pure sociology is achievement, that of applied sociology is improvement. The former relates to the past and to the present, the latter to the future. Achievement is individual. Improvement is social. Applied sociology takes account of artificial phenomena consciously and intentionally directed by society to bettering society. Improvement is social achievement. In pure sociology the point of view is purely objective. It may be said to relate to social function. In applied sociology the point of view is subjective. It relates to feeling,—the collective well-being. In pure sociology the desires and wants of men are considered as the motor agencies of society. In applied sociology they are considered as the sources of enjoyment through their satisfaction. The distinction is similar to that between production and

consumption in economics. Indeed, applied sociology may be said to deal with social utility as measured by the satisfaction of desire.³

If the ethical implications are eliminated from the above statement there remain some very real contributions to the fundamental difference between "pure" and "applied" sociology. Men's "desires" are not necessarily idealistic or social-ethical. Man may desire to use scientific methods for very selfish and perhaps even anti-social ends. As he desires to use chemistry for wanton human slaughter, so, he may desire to use sociology to devise more efficient collective procedures by which to effect the slaughter. Either individuals or groups may desire to use applied sociology for anti-social purposes and for the immediate satisfaction of self interest.

Sociology, developed and organized so as to be practically useful, will undoubtedly make possible "production" and increase "achievement" and "improvement." But the social "product" may be anything good or bad for which there is sufficient demand. It is true that demand and desire can themselves be changed. This, however, is the task of ethical, educational and religious institutions. These institutions will find general sociology useful for the determination of their objectives, but they will need a specially organized "applied sociology" to work out ways and means of achievement.

Ward's statement that applied sociology relates to the future and that pure sociology relates to the past is even more significant if it means that pure sociology is primarily historical and descriptive and in that sense deals with the past and some of the present (or immediate past), while applied sociology is a science of probabilities and in that sense deals with the future. This interpretation is in direct line with Ward's general practice throughout his writings. Ward also claims that applied sociology deals particularly with artificial social processes. However, his "pure sociology" is primarily a *description* of these artificial social processes and ways and means of accelerating them. Therefore, when he states that applied sociology *deals with* the means of accelerating social processes, it is evident that *deals with* is not the equivalent of *describes*. A general perusal of his works justifies reading into the phrase *deals with* such ideas as *makes possible* or *is practically useful for*. To the extent that these inferences are correct, Ward maintains the thesis that applied sociology must serve the social arts.

In summary, Ward's conception of applied sociology, independent of its ethical connotations, is that it must be practically useful in bringing to pass deliberate artificial accelerations of social change based upon the prediction of the future in terms of probabilities scientifically ascertained from studies of the past and present.

James Q. Dealey, who succeeded Ward at Brown University, and who collaborated with him in publication, does not make a similarly clear distinction

between *pure* and *applied* sociology in his *Sociology, Its Development and Applications*. He speaks of the application of sociology to practical problems as the application of general principles (p. 44) or of teachings (pp. 49–57) of sociology to studies of social conditions. He writes:

If one knows quite fully by observation and comparison a field of social phenomena, and is familiar with the law of its development or evolution, and in addition, comprehends the principles underlying such phenomena, he would then be prepared to go one step further and to show how such principles may be applied in studies of social conditions, so as to produce modifications in these in any desired direction. Like the formulae of chemistry, certain combinations under certain conditions should produce such results. . . . When in any science desired results can invariably be attained at the will of the scientist he has reached the acme of scientific accuracy.

In this statement his use of *desire* carries no ethical connotation. He regards the relation of applied sociology to pure sociology as the relation generally existing between the pure and the applied sciences. His idea of the development of an "applied science of sociology" appears to be limited to the application of the teachings of general sociology to present conditions. On this point he is not clear, for he considers it to be part of the task of sociology (general or at least undifferentiated) "to work out empirically improvements in the situation." A science (pure or applied) does not work out improvements. It may be *used* to work out changes which may or may not be in any ultimate sense improvements.

Henry Pratt Fairchild in his *Outline of Applied Sociology* calls attention to the danger of working out social problems as if each problem were detached. He has endeavored to show the "interrelationships" of social problems and thereby make more of general sociology available for their study. He also takes the stand that the same relation should exist between "pure" and "applied" in sociology as is common in other sciences. He does not distinguish between applied sociology as a specially organized body of sociology and the application of sociology as a practice. Following Ward's suggestion he describes the function of applied sociology in terms of good and bad, better and pernicious. Thus, in a strictly scientific sense, he mars his otherwise excellent statement of the function of applied sociology: "It is not so much concerned with finding out why society is as it is, as with determining how society can be made different from what is—better than it is." There is a nice and fundamental discrimination in this presentation, but it is weakened by the addition of the phrase "better than it is." Applied sociology cannot be limited to producing such changes as are better. Even wishful thinking cannot change the function of the applied sciences.

Journals of Applied Sociology. Three periodicals are now being published, each of which is an effort to work out effective relations between the theory and the practice of sociology. The oldest and the first in the field is *The Survey*.⁴ The other two are recent, and, although originally intended to deal primarily with regional social problems, they have already assumed national importance. One is the *Journal of Applied Sociology*⁵ and the other is *The Journal of Social Forces*.⁶ All three of these periodicals have been and are edited by sociologists who are endeavoring to make sociology practically useful and at the same time to enrich and perfect sociology generally. Various journals, sociological, psychological, anthropological, statistical and ethical and especially the *American Journal of Sociology*⁷ deal occasionally with the numerous problems of the application of sociology. There are, in addition to these, many periodicals treating the application of sociology to particular problems such as the family, community, child welfare, women in industry, etc. Certain of these will be reviewed in the following chapter which is devoted to the formulations of sociology for use in specific problems. The journals mentioned in this paragraph should be considered as factors now effective in the integration of a general applied sociology.

The *Journal of Applied Sociology* is a product of the activities of the Southern California Sociological Society, organized in 1916 for "the increase and diffusion of sociological knowledge through research, discussion and publication." It is edited by the head of the Department of Sociology of the University of Southern California and the associate editors are members of the regular staff of the department. It is a distinct effort on the part of a university department of sociology to develop an applied sociology. According to the president of the Southern California Sociological Society, the journal takes its name and function from the usage of "applied sociology" established by Lester F. Ward.⁸ It is a deliberate "striving to bind all persons who are interested in applied sociology into a closer union," and, as such, is, of course, an active agent for the promotion of research in applied sociology and the assembling and exchange of practically useful sociology.

The *Journal of Social Forces* emphasizes social movement, action, processes and forces. The scope and grasp of its work is contained in its "effective objectives" appearing among the editorials of the first volume.⁹ "The Journal," writes Professor Odum, the editor, "seeks to obtain effective objectives, some more specific, some more general. To make definite, concrete and substantial contributions to present day critical problems of American Democracy, and to make usable to the people important facts and discussion of social life and progress is one purpose." Stating it otherwise, "the *Journal* will seek to contribute something in theory, something in application toward making democracy effective in unequal places." It promises to attempt to discover and to emphasize wherever possible that social theory "which has a content that is

institutional—such theory draws the sociologist, the historian, the economist, the modern psychologist and the modern student of ethics together.’’ This periodical is an attempt by the sociology department of the University of North Carolina to make sociology practically available especially in North Carolina and wherever similar social problems are found.

The Survey has met an extensive and growing need. The size of its subscription lists (general and student) is a manifestation of the desire for an effective medium for the exchange of practicable sociological information and for a medium of interpretation between the theorizers and the practitioners in the field of social problems. It has aimed to fulfill a synthetic function in the field of applied sociology, (1) by conserving those integrations which are the natural results of the exchange (equilibration) of experience and (2) by relating particular social empiricisms to the theory of sociology. On the occasion of its tenth anniversary, the *Survey* attempted to appraise and to describe its function. This description represents ten years of intimate experience with the problem of using social theory for the analysis and treatment of concrete social situations and is, therefore, worthy of special consideration as an index to the trend of the application of sociology during those years. The following two paragraphs from the *Survey's* description of its function are especially suggestive:

It is often easier to visualize what is at once a prospect, a problem and a project—by means of comparison. Let us turn to the field of engineering in this instance. There are civil engineers and mechanical engineers, electrical engineers, mining engineers, chemical engineers, industrial engineers. No doubt others. Each branch has its own concerns; all have much in common; and the public has a stake in the larger bearings of the engineering.

The Survey long since gave up endeavoring to serve as a trade journal in the specialized fields of social work comparable to the specialized divisions of engineering which have been named. To do so would have been to attempt the impossible—like an omnibus trade journal specializing at once in chemistry, mechanics, electricity, coal-mining, metallurgy and architecture. Perhaps fifty separate technical journals have grown up to meet the need in our own broad field—Industrial Hygiene, Mental Hygiene, Social Hygiene, the Modern Hospital, the Journal of Nursing, School and Society, the Family, the American City, the Journal of Criminology and Criminal Law and so to the end of the list. . . .

What we seek to do in the *Survey Mid-Monthly* is to serve as a common denominator—to do a synthetic job. . . .

In other words *The Survey* is a journal of general applied sociology (including of course applied psychology, economics, politics, etc.), contributing to all the variegated activities of what is commonly designated as social work. Its experience tends to substantiate four generalizations; first, social work, like all other social art, must be put on a basis of engineering; second, there is a difference between *general* applied sociology and *specialized* applied sociology; third, there is a difference between applied sociology and that technology of social work which depends on the application of many special sciences; and fourth, there is need for "common denominators" that will enable social workers, technologists and sociologists to clear their information.

All three of these magazines stress the need of sociological research for the building up of a practically applicable body of sociology. Their activities in stimulating research and disseminating its results will undoubtedly aid in accumulating sociological data for organization into an applied sociology.

Thus within the last twenty-five years and especially within the last few years notable efforts have been made both to publish in book form and to accumulate in periodicals the data of usable sociology, often with the avowed purpose and generally with at least the implied purpose of developing between the generalizations of pure sociology and the specific and concrete needs of social work that which has been described as "applied sociology."

Practical Sociology. About the same time that the phrase *applied sociology* came into vogue in this country, the term *practical sociology* was used by each of two distinguished statistical sociologists—by Richard Mayo-Smith at least as early as 1895 and by Carroll D. Wright as early as 1899. This practical sociology was another effort to work out a scheme for the use of sociology. Just which of the two terms, *practical* or *applied*, will ultimately prevail is probably a matter which will have to be determined by usage. Both may continue in good use. The really exact term for this body of knowledge would probably be *practicable sociology* but there are too many usages to the contrary to permit the use of this term.

NOTES

1. "Applied Sociology (or Social Technology)," *American Journal of Sociology*, 18:315. Also, "The Scope of Social Technology" in 5:465. Compare Albion W. Small, *General Sociology*, part 9.
2. Even Ludwig Gumplowicz confessed after Ward's visit to Graz in 1903 that he was compelled to admit, on account of the force of Ward's argument, that "the eternal iron laws" of the "social nature process" are modified by the help of the human intellect, itself "also a natural force." See Ludwig Gumplowicz, "An Austrian Appreciation of Lester F. Ward," *American Journal of Sociology*, 10:643-53.
3. Lester F. Ward, *Applied Sociology*, p. 5-6. Compare this concept of "utility" with the discussion supra, p. 71.

4. *Charities Review* (1891) monthly. *Charities* (1897) weekly. *The Survey* (1909). At present, *The Survey*, semi-monthly, as "A journal of social, civic and industrial welfare and the public health" and *The Survey Graphic*, monthly, "An illustrated magazine of social exploration, reaching out to wherever tides of generous progress are astir."
5. First published (1916 to 1921) as *Monographs and News Notes*. Since October 1921, 6/1, published bi-monthly as the *Journal of Applied Sociology*, University of Southern California Press, Los Angeles, California.
6. First published November 1922, and by The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Published quarterly since September 1925.
7. The official publication of the American Sociological Society, published bi-monthly since July 1985 by the University of Chicago Press.
8. *Journal of Applied Sociology*, 6/1: 1-2.
9. *Journal of Social Forces*, 1/1: 56-7.