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A Workable Sociology

Alex Boros

... Starting at the turn of the century, the development of sociology included debates about the relationship between applied work and basic scientific theories. One group of sociologists believed in the cooperative contributions of both applied and basic researchers in producing a valid and useful sociology (Ward, 1906). To provide a publication outlet for this integrated approach, Emory Bogardus founded and managed the *Journal of Applied Sociology* from its inception in 1922 until its termination in 1927. During the same period, a major drive to promote an independent scientific sociology was made by a group of sociologists that led to a memorandum distributed during the 1931 Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Society (Rhodes, 1981). From this period on, the majority of sociologists sought acceptability in academia by stressing the objective research aspects of basic sociological theories. With each decade, the basic sociologists in academia became more dominant and applied sociological interests waned. Sociology developed along the lines predicted by Ellwood:

Every historical movement starts with some new enthusiasm, or hope, which reaches out in every direction and brings everything within the movement which may in any way serve its purpose. When the first enthusiasm is spent the movement settles down into fixed habits which are supported by strong traditions. Gradually, there grows up an orthodoxy regarding what the movement stands for, and, in order to hold their lines more securely, some leaders of the movement make the orthodoxy a very narrow one (1929).

By the 1950s the orthodoxy for sociology was narrowed down to the core of basic science objectives, eliminating applied interests as being outside of its

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purview. Applied sociologists became a minority within the discipline that they were instrumental in forming.

In the 1960s this basic orthodoxy came under attack by prominent sociologists such as Paul Lazarsfeld, C. Wright Mills, Alvin Gouldner, and Irving Horowitz. Olsen (1981) summarized their criticism:

- a. Much of what passes for basic empirical research in this field is merely trivial data manipulation.
- b. A great deal of our "theory construction" is really just meaningless categorizations and other mental gymnastics.
- c. Pursuing pure science without any concern for its applied relevance is intellectually and morally indefensible.
- d. The public will not continue for much longer to tolerate or support a field that makes no appreciable contribution to the welfare of society. . .

. . . Even though from its beginning sociology was an interventionist discipline (Bailey, 1980), today's sociologists have to defend their craft against charges of irrelevancy for solving problems of social life. It is not until people are convinced that the products of sociology are relevant to their concerns that they will begin to worry about whether they are true. To be relevant, sociology has to be workable. Who could provide better feedback on the workability of sociological perspectives in producing social betterment than applied sociologists?

In its present operational mode, our discipline, along with other social sciences, has been found inept in practical problem-solving for the following reasons (Special Commission on the Social Sciences, 1969):

1. Most professional social scientists are employed in academic institutions where their nonteaching activities are focused on basic theoretical research.
2. Empirical research tends to be exploratory, or for the purpose of testing theoretical propositions, rather than for practical problem-solving.
3. Even when social science work is directed to application, it often produces fragments of knowledge that need to be joined with other fragments to present a program of action.
4. Social scientists fail to communicate effectively with laymen about their expertise.
5. When faced with a specific problem that has no ready-made conceptual answer, social scientists frequently retreat to the laboratory for more research and more facts.

To overcome these criticisms, it is obvious that applied sociologists are the best link between their discipline and the policy makers. However, Denzin (1970) identifies major limitations of current applied sociology in the connector role:

1. Much of applied sociology is not theoretical with little lasting impact upon the discipline.
2. Applied sociologists are apt to become supporters instead of critics of social policies.
3. The applied sociologist has little control over the work he or she does.
4. Applied research is often just data collection for "program justification."

In the fifteen years since Denzin published his critique, applied sociology has become more professional in outlook, with better opportunities within the discipline to provide feedback to colleagues on the workability of sociological propositions in real-life settings. Much more has to be done. . . .

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