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The Secret Garden of Sociology

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In 1909 in an American magazine there appeared for the first time what has now become a classic in children's literature, *The Secret Garden*. Written by an English immigrant to the U.S., Frances Burnett, the book tells the story of an orphan girl, Mary Lennox, sent to live with her rich uncle on an English country estate. Ten years before Mary's arrival, the uncle's young, pregnant wife has had a freak accident in the rose garden of the estate. This accident causes her to give premature birth to their son. The mother dies in the childbirth. The uncle is filled with grief and orders the garden closed and its gate locked. He also rejects the son born in the tragedy and has him confined to a remote section of the mansion in which they live. When Mary arrives, the garden is overgrown and the gate hidden behind a wall of ivy. Thus it has become a "secret garden." Also, the rejected son, Mary's cousin, has become an emotional cripple using temper tantrums and hysteria to manipulate the servants assigned to take care of him. The remainder of the book is the story of how Mary discovers the garden and her cousin, and how working together they restore the garden. In doing so they learn how the quality of their lives and of the lives of others can be enriched by efforts to improve the environment in which they live.

There are some parallels to this story, I think, to be found in the history of sociological practice dating from the creation of the first department of sociology at the University of Chicago in 1893.

The "Chicago School of Sociology," as it became known, set the tone for sociological study for much of the rest of the country for the next fifty years. The emphasis was on "social problems." No doubt this problem orientation reflected major historical currents of the time, including the disappearance of the frontier, the increasing industrialization and urbanization breeding tenements and slums, the women's suffrage movement, the temperance movement which gave rise the Prohibition and gangsterism, the Great Depression and the accompanying New Deal, two world wars and their impact on American provincialism, large scale immigration from Eastern and Southern Europe challenging the WASP dominance, the migration of blacks from South to North, and clashes between reformed-minded modernists and status-quo fundamentalists in American Christianity.

Is it surprising then that those attracted to sociology in this period were interested in social problems? I think not. Moreover, students of sociology to mid-twentieth century were motivated by commitment to at least three core beliefs drawn from the European roots of American sociology. These were: (1) a conviction that social change can result in social progress, meaning an improvement in both the material and non-material quality of people's lives. (2) a commitment of social reform efforts as the means to secure that social progress. And (3) a belief that natural laws govern social behavior, that these laws can be discovered, and that when found they can be used for social planning to achieve desired social changes in society.

As sociologists sought to improve their search for natural laws, they became more and more disillusioned with traditional research methods. Increasingly, library research, case studies, and participant observation, were replaced by surveys and quantitative analyses of gathered data. Between 1940 and 1960 the so-called scientific method employing statistical analyses came to be the preferred research approach. This emphasis on scientific research brought concern for objectivity, and was reflected in a commitment to the idea of value-free sociology. Knowledge for the sake of knowledge, at least in academic sociology, became the guiding principle.

Value-free sociology did not mean, however, that interest in social reform, social change, and social progress had been abandoned by American sociology. But it did mean for the majority of sociologists that social activism was suppressed, for some even repressed, but still influencing choices of research topics and the subjects of the sociological curriculum. Thus advocating social reform in the interest of social change

and social progress became the “secret garden of sociology.” This would pretty much remain the situation until the late nineteen seventies.

But beginning in the 1960s and continuing throughout the 1970s and on into the 1980s, the U.S. began to experience a series of social upheavals that would strikingly change the social fabric of the American community. These events included the Vietnam War, the anti-war protests, student challenges to the existing order that sometimes included terroristic acts, race riots, the civil rights movement, integration — including integration of schools by busing, white flight to the suburbs and the growing problems of the inner city, the feminist movement, the changes in sexual behavior dubbed the Sexual Revolution, higher rates of divorce and the increase in single parenting, the decline of factory jobs and the emergence of a new underclass of displaced workers, the burst of computer technology and disruption of the ranks of the white-collar class caught in downsizing, greater exposure to sex and violence in the mass media, waves of non-European immigrants and illegal immigration, the problems of substance abuse, and an increased awareness of violent crime in the cities.

As these social forces battered the American culture in the late nineteen-sixties and gained momentum in the nineteen-seventies, student enrollment in sociology dramatically increased. Students sought enlightenment and direction on the problems and changes confronting our society. Many of these students became sociology majors and minors with career goals of becoming change agents. They sought jobs not in academia but sometimes in business and especially in government positions and social service work. They wanted to bring about social change through social reform efforts which they believed could improve the quality of life of people. They were opening the gate to the “secret garden of sociology.”

Given the occupational goals of great numbers of undergraduate sociology majors in the nineteen-seventies and the immense social instability of the times, it is not surprising that some academic sociologists began to rediscover the “secret garden of sociology.” Renewed interest grew in the practical application of sociological knowledge, an interest which in 1978 became formal in the creation of the Sociological Practice Association. The next important step in the revival of practical sociology was the emergence of Applied Sociology as an undergraduate degree program in U.S. colleges in the 1980s. Undoubtedly, some of the credit for this development in American sociology should be given to a new generation of sociologists who had grown-up and

studied in the context of the social fire storms blazing across American society in the 1970s. Incidentally, when the Applied Sociology degree program for sociology majors at Southwest Texas State University became a fact in the 1980s, it was the first of its kind in Texas.

Today I think it is safe to say that the sociological garden is no longer a secret but is once again open and resplendent. The reformist, activist, socially critical side of sociology as well as its scientific side is once more acknowledged. However, the end of a self-imposed detachment from society does not mean that sociological research and the reporting of its findings be any less objective than in the past. On the contrary, it means there is greater obligation than ever that social planning and social reform efforts be based on the best, objective knowledge available.

What then does all this mean for you as sociology majors and minors? First, I think this is a great time to be toiling in the sociological garden. There is no need for embarrassment or apology in wanting to make the world a better place in which to live based on the best, objective knowledge available, for this represents none other than the traditional goal of American sociology. Second, you don't have to be a fanatical revolutionary or a full-time social activist to make practical use of sociological knowledge to bring about social change and some degree of social progress.

You can be a business employee trying to make your work setting not only more efficient but more responsive to the human needs of fellow workers.

You can be an employee in a private or public social service agency who tries to bring about changes that will facilitate the recovery and rehabilitation of your clients.

You can be a social researcher in an organization dedicated to improving some social aspect of people's lives.

You can be a member of a city council or of a school board or of some other public committee, who will use objective knowledge and not prejudice, rumor, and hearsay, to define and implement policies to improve the quality of life in your community.

You can be a teacher who tries to increase tolerance and a sense of social responsibility among your students by exposing them to sociological knowledge about multiculturalism and social organization.

You can use your sociological training as a volunteer worker in an organization dedicated to improving some part of your local community.

You can be a citizen, whatever your job, who is concerned about improving the quality of life in your community, your region, your nation, and who tries to vote for each office, each proposition, on the ballot based on the best, objective data available and not just as a response to political propaganda. After all, isn't this a core lesson learned in the study of social research?

In sum, like the children in *The Secret Garden*, we can find meaning and purpose in life by trying to improve the quality of the conditions in which we find ourselves, and in so doing we can enrich not only our own lives but the lives of those who share our social groups.