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# Overview of the Field: Definitions and History

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# Overview of the Field: Definitions and History

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Sociological practice has been part of American sociology since the beginning of the field in the late 1800s. The first American Sociological Society meetings were attended by university teachers as well as sociologists with a variety of jobs in practice settings (Rhoades, 1981). Most of the early sociologists, whatever their affiliations, were interested in social progress and in finding ways to put their knowledge to use within the society (e.g., Diner, 1980:199; Barnes, 1948).

Despite its roots, somewhere after World War II, the main thrust of the field of sociology began to shift away from application and intervention to theory and statistical testing (Franklin, 1979). There were a number of influences involved, but both Mauksch (1983:2) and Gollin (1983) have noted that one important reason was the desire to be accepted as a science. According to Gollin (1983:443):

The search for scientific legitimacy led many sociologists in the early decades of the society to want to put as much distance as possible between its historical roots in social reform and its aspirations to status as an academic discipline.

While the emphasis turned toward science, the field has always included scientists who were interested in application. The articles and excerpts included in this section were selected because they provide a great deal of information about that history. Before reading them, it would be important to understand the meanings of sociological practice, clinical sociology and applied sociology.

## Defining the Field

The “practical sociology” of the early 1900s (Barnes, 1948:741) is now referred to as “sociological practice.” This general label includes two areas, clinical sociology and applied sociology.

*Clinical sociology.* Fritz (1985) details the history of clinical sociology by examining the work of individuals who combined "a scientific approach to social life with an involvement in intervention work." She states (1985:14):

The first linking of the words "clinical" and "sociology" in an important journal occurred in 1931. Louis Wirth's (1897–1952) article "Clinical Sociology" appeared in *The American Journal of Sociology*, the most prestigious sociology journal of its day. Wirth, writing about sociologists working in child guidance clinics, made a strong case for the role "sociologists can and did play in the study, diagnosis and treatment of personality disorders because of their expertise about the varying effects of socio-cultural influences on behavior."

Fritz and Glass (1982:3) also note that Wirth thought the roles of practitioners and researchers were "equally valid and envisioned that both researchers and practitioners would benefit from the emergence of clinical sociology."

In 1944, the term became more firmly established when a formal definition of "clinical sociology" (written by Alfred McClung Lee) appeared in H. P. Fairchild's *Dictionary of Sociology*. Following Wirth's usage and Lee's definition, the term has been used to refer to sociological intervention in a variety of settings. It is the application of a sociological perspective to the analysis and design of intervention for positive social change at any level of social organization.

Clinical sociology is not meant to indicate primarily medical applications (the word "clinical" originally meant "bedside"), nor only a microsociology perspective such as individual counseling or small group work. Instead, it is essential to recognize the numerous roles that the clinical sociologist can fulfill and to recognize that the role of the clinical sociologist can be at one or more levels from the individual to the inter-societal. In fact, the translation of social theory, concepts and methods into practice requires the ability not only to recognize various levels, but to move between the levels for analysis and intervention (Freedman, 1984).

Clinical sociologists have specialty areas—such as organizations, health and illness, forensics, aging, and comparative social systems—and work in many capacities. They are, for example, organizational development specialists, psychotherapists, conflict interventionists, social policy implementors and administrators. In their work they use qualitative and/or quantitative research skills for assessment and evaluation. The field is humanistic and interdisciplinary. Important publications about the history and scope of the field include those by Glass (1979), Glassner and Freedman (1979), Straus (1979, 1985) and Fritz (1982, 1985).

*Applied sociology.* The applied sociologist is a research specialist who produces information that is useful in resolving problems in government, industry and other practice settings. According to Olsen and Micklin (1981), applied sociologists generally use one or more of the following methods: problem exploration, policy analysis, needs assessment, program evaluation, and social impact assessment.

The term “applied sociology” was used frequently at the turn of the century. In 1906, Lester Franklin Ward, the first president of the American Sociology Society, published a book entitled *Applied Sociology* in which he distinguished between “pure” and “applied” sociology (1906:5–6):

Just as pure sociology aims to answer the questions what, who, 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 program. 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, and with what ought to be.

Early publications in the area of applied sociology include Herbert Shenton's 1927 book entitled *The Practical Application of Sociology: A Study of the Scope and Purpose of Applied Sociology* and the *Journal of Applied Sociology*. The journal was in existence from 1921 until 1927. After that time, the name was changed to *Sociology and Social Research*.

Contemporary sociologists continue to examine the meanings and forms of applied sociology (e.g., Boros, 1980; Olsen and Micklin, 1981; Freeman and Rossi, 1984; Iutcovich and Cox, 1984). According to Mauksch (1983:3):

In one sense, applied sociology refers to technique and methodology. Unlike the inquiry model which governs pure research, applied sociology starts with the definition and exploration of a real problem or mission. While pure sociology, like all other pure science, seeks to test hypotheses and proscriptions and other abstracts from reality, applied sociology confronts the methodological requirement to translate complex, pluralistic situations into sociologically manageable questions. . . . Applied sociology includes the research model of problem-solving, the research model of formulating and testing action options, and the research model of evaluation.

## Overview of the Section

The documents selected for inclusion in this section provide detailed information about the history of the field of sociological practice, suggest a variety of additional sources and/or are not well known. There is an emphasis on contemporary sources because of the overview they provide.

Because of limited journal space, and because they are so readily available in other publications, we did not reprint Louis Wirth's 1931 article "Clinical Sociology" or excerpts from Lester Ward's well-known book *Applied Sociology*. We anticipate persons interested in the history of the field of sociological practice also will want to read those publications.

The items presented here are arranged by date of publication beginning with 1916. We start with excerpts from an article by Albion Small, head of the University of Chicago's graduate program in sociology and the founding editor of *The American Journal of Sociology*. Small (1896, 1913), had written about the importance of sociological practice as early as 1896, had considered moving the University of Chicago's Department of Sociology in the direction of sociological practice and had asked Jane Addams, a well-known community activist, to consider a faculty appointment teaching graduate students in sociology.

Other documents, by Herbert Shenton (1927), Alvin Gouldner (1956), Paul Lazarsfeld and Jeffrey Reitz (1975), Jonathan Freedman (1982), Albert Gollin (1983), Alex Boros (1985), Alfred McClung Lee (1988) and Jan Fritz (1988), trace the history of sociological practice from a variety of perspectives. A review of the items indicates that the definitions have changed over time and continue to evolve and be refined. We are only beginning to understand the history of the entire field of American sociology.

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