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Sociological Practice Editors

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Ethical Considerations

Early American sociologists were very concerned about ethical issues and particularly those connected with the goals of justice, social welfare, democracy and peace. Courses reflected these interests ¹ as did professional meetings. For example, in 1892 The School of Applied Ethics in Massachusetts held a week of “instruction . . . devoted to the Theory of Social Progress, being a study in sociology” (Adams, 1893: viii) during which Franklin Giddings (1893) gave a presentation entitled “The Ethics of Social Progress.” Another week was devoted to “Philanthropy in Social Progress,” and sociologist Jane Addams (1893a,b) gave two presentations on social settlements.

The earliest presentations and publications on ethics include Jane Addams’ 1896 presentation at Hull House entitled “Ethical Impulses Working Toward Social Reconstruction,” her lecture at the University of Chicago in 1906 on changed ideals and public morality and her article (Addams, 1897–98) “Ethical Survival in Municipal Corruption.” Two articles focusing on ethics also appeared in early issues of *The American Journal of Sociology*—Alfred Lloyd’s (1905) “Ethics and its History” and Harald Hoffding’s (1905) “On the Relation between Sociology and Ethics.” In addition, Charlotte Perkins Gilman gave a series of six lectures in 1895 to the Social Science Club at Hull House.² Her last lecture was entitled “Social Ethics.”

Sociologists during the last 100 years have been concerned with the range of topics that fall under the heading “ethics.” Some have undertaken studies in which they have tried to be objective observers providing needed information about the development of, and adherence to, different ethical systems. At the other end of the spectrum are those who have tried to provide passionate and persuasive analyses which call into question the kinds of topics sociologists choose to study and the frequently uncritical acceptance of funds for social science research and practice. These writers want sociologists to accept responsibility for the outcomes of their actions or lack of involvement.

The documents which we have chosen to include here are two articles and the current ethics code of the Sociological Practice Association. The first article is “Ethical Limitations on Sociological Reporting,” by Joseph Fichter and William Kolb, which first appeared in a 1953 issue of the *American Sociological*

Review. Fichter and Kolb present what they identify as important variables in developing an ethical system. While they are dealing specifically with the reporting of research on communities and groups, what they say has applications to sociological practice. The authors mention that an "explicit code of ethics . . . seems urgently needed."

In 1981, The Hastings Center published Martin Bulmer's "The British Tradition of Social Administration: Moral Concerns at the Expense of Scientific Rigor." Bulmer provides a great deal of information about the relationship between scientific interests and ethical concerns in the development of sociology in the United States and social administration in Great Britain.

Bulmer (1981:41) prefers the "enlightenment model . . . where the social sciences . . . provide a general framework within which social processes can be examined." He does not advocate sociological practice and says, in fact, that sociologists "need not provide definite predictions about the direction of social change, nor offer technocratic solutions to discrete problems." He does think that the framework offered by social scientists "must necessarily take into account of the ends of social action, and deal with the moral dimension of human affairs." Bulmer asks if it is possible to "integrate formal theory and rigorous methodology with historical and ethical sensitivity."

Fichter and Kolb recognized the need for an ethical code and they, as well as Bulmer, discussed the difficulty of combining scientific rigor and ethical sensitivity. While these writers directed their remarks to the research community, the issues are even more complex when one tries to establish a complete ethical code, one which will cover research, teaching, and practice.

The ethics code developed by the Sociological Practice Association (adopted in 1982 and revised in 1987) is the most complete code to cover the professional activities of clinical and applied sociologists. The association reviewed approximately twenty codes of professional groups before selecting a basic model and adapting it to the specific needs of scholar-practitioners in relation to their students, colleagues, employers, and clients.

The code underlines the values of the association including humanism and contributing to the advancement of human welfare. All association members who apply for clinical certification are expected, as part of the certification application process, to write an ethical statement. They also will be questioned about their ethical practices as part of their certification demonstrations. All members of the association are provided with opportunities to revise the code and to discuss ethical dilemmas, and procedures have been established for resolving ethical questions.

Notes

1. As Bulmer (1981:35) noted: "Albion Small and E. A. Ross combined in their teaching scientific analysis and direct ethical prescription. From 1906 sociology at Harvard University was taught in the Department of Social Ethics."
2. The Working People's Social Science Club met weekly at Hull-House from 1890–1895. Some information about the establishment of the club and its programs is available in the Jane Addams Memorial Collection at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

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