THE PRACTICE OF SOCIOLOGY: Alternative Futures for Applied Sociology

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Petersen, James C., Duane Dukes, and Thomas L. Van Valey. Fall 2008. The Practice of Sociology: Alternative Futures for Applied Sociology. Journal of Applied Social Sciences 7: 16-30.

Abstract:
The future of applied sociology is being shaped by a variety of factors including the historical development of the discipline, the institutional context of colleges and universities, and a wide variety of social trends related to the goals and funding of higher education. Five alternative scenarios for the future of applied sociology are set forth: "Down and Out," "Subfield Status," "Increasing Focus," Ascension of Applied Sociology," and "Leaving Home." Internal and external factors shaping contemporary higher education and their possible impacts on the fu to of applied sociology are considered in order to assess the likelihood of the five alternative futures.

Article:
The current status of applied sociology within the larger discipline of sociology is a continuing source of discussion and debate whenever applied sociologists convene or engage in other forms of structured conversation. Some of this discussion attempted to define applied sociology, typically in the context of existing, traditional academic sociology (Steele and Iutcovich, 1997). But the uncomfortable fit between applied and academic sociology has been a real factor that cannot be ignored in the discussion. John M. Kennedy (1998) focused his 1997 Presidential address to the Society for Applied Sociology on this issue. Additional literature has looked at the interface created among teaching applied sociology, careers in applied sociology, and the representation of these interests by sociological professional associations. Several authors of chapters in *Teaching Applied Sociology* (Dukes, Petersen, and Van Valey, 2003) included comments about the status of applied sociology in setting a context for explorations of issues in teaching new generations of applied sociologists.

In a session on the status of applied sociology, Robert Dentler (2004) identified several periods in the history of the discipline of sociology as being especially relevant to the status of applied sociology. More recently, Harry Perlstadt (2006) elaborated the disciplinary context of applied sociology. According to Dentler and Perlstadt, prior to the 1920s one of the fundamental goals of American sociology was the positive transformation of society. After that, sociology became more firmly entrenched in the ivory towers of academe and sought enhanced respectability through the use of scientific methods. This often required that "basic" rather than "applied" research was emphasized. During and just after WWII, however, sociology again began to be involved in applied research (primarily through large, funded projects, first for WWII and then for the War on Poverty (Perlstadt, 2006). With the Kennedy/Johnson years and Vietnam, many

sociologists once again embraced applications designed to transform society. This was one of the periods of great student interest in the social sciences, especially sociology. Then, during the late 1970s and early 1980s, when students abandoned the social sciences for business, engineering, and other fields (ASA, 2005), many sociologists accepted positions outside academe or established their own consulting practices (Perlstadt, 2006). Especially in the 1990s, these nonacademic enterprises flourished, although as a consequence many sociologists gave up their sociological identities to become known as policy analysts, market researchers, and demographers.

The beginning of the 21st century brings us to a renewed consciousness of the status of applied sociology and concern for its future. This is especially the case, given the recent merger of two major professional organizations for applied sociologists—the Society for Applied Sociology and the Sociological Practice Association—into the new Association for Applied and Clinical Sociology. Nevertheless, since sociologists do not agree on the current status of the discipline, one could hardly expect consensus among applied sociologists on the future of applied sociology or on what actions might enhance its ability to flourish.

At least five scenarios for the future of applied sociology seem plausible. They vary in the centrality that applied sociology will play within the larger field of sociology and in the extent to which applied sociology is integrated with other applied social science fields. One might label these five alternative futures as (1) "Down and Out," (2) "Subfield Status," (3) "Increasing Focus," (4) "Ascension of Applied Sociology," and (5) "Leaving Home." Before turning to the individual scenarios, however, it is useful to examine the historical and institutional context as it applies to the entire discipline of sociology.

THE HISTORICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

Following WWII, at least two generations of sociologists focused more or less inwardly on the development of theory and research methodology in the discipline (Dentler, 2004; Perlstadt, 2006). However, while they were busy with this essential task, they failed to notice that other disciplines (e.g., social work, criminal justice, and psychology) had given much more attention to curricula that addressed a changing world outside the university. During the 1970s and early 1980s, the attrition of students from academic sociology departments was severe. According to the American Sociological Associa- tion, undergraduate degrees declined steadily from a high of almost 36,000 in 1973 to a low of 12,165 in 1985, a net decline of almost two-thirds. This pattern was similar for both M.A. and Ph.D. degrees. These declines along with other factors resulted in a few universities actually closing their sociology departments (e.g., Washington University in St. Louis and the University of Rochester).

While there has been a rebound in sociology enrollments since the mid-1980s, they are still well below the peak of the early 1970s (ASA, 2005). Furthermore, without applied careers that are unique to the discipline, sociology has a more difficult time than many disciplines in the competition to recruit majors and place them in discipline-related jobs (both of which can be counted). Worse, the lack of a specific career field to which sociology sends its undergraduate majors means that sociology has only a limited ability to define its identity. While sociologists are rightfully proud of being able to cite and apply the works of the protosociologists of 150 years ago, sociologists often do not recognize that the rest of the world does not always hold our

depth and insight in the same esteem. This, combined with a recent history that includes limited enrollments, makes it difficult to demonstrate the importance of sociology to university boards and state legislatures that are increasingly focused on accountability, university contributions to economic development, and the analysis of various performance indicators.

The fiscal pressures on universities that have resulted from reductions in the share of public university budgets provided by state government, reductions in endowment earnings, and increases in the costs of health insurance and other benefits, along with many other factors, threaten to result in continuing cutbacks in academic programs and the potential elimination of those portions of academic programs that are seen as less central (ASA, 2004). A widespread joke among university administrators is that declining state funding of public universities has transformed them from "state-funded" universities to "state-assisted" universities, and may soon result in them being merely "state-located" universities.

Over the past quarter century, there has been a steady decrease in the proportions of state university budgets that are provided by state governments. The magnitude of this decline has resulted in sharp tuition increases that pose access problems for many potential students and threaten to reduce the quality of public education (Coleman, 2004). At some public universities, state funding now makes up less than one-fifth of the annual operating budget. For example, Miami University only receives 15 percent of its revenue from Ohio; Penn State receives 12 percent of its budget from Pennsylvania; just 9 percent of the University of Colorado's budget comes from the state; and Virginia provides only 8 percent of the University of Virginia's budget (Symonds, 2004). Such levels of funding have generated serious discussions at some public universities about eliminating their ties to the state and becoming private institutions. This would, of course, reverse a trend that occurred during the 20th century when a number of private and local institutions (e.g., city universities) became part of state-funded systems.

The increasing dependence of universities on sources of external support has greatly increased expectations that faculty and other researchers seek external grants and contracts from federal and state agencies, private foundations, and private corporations. Infrastructures have also developed on many campuses to support the commercialization of intellectual property developed by university faculty, staff, and students. However, the competition for external funding is intense and success stories of major commercial development of intellectual property by universities are rare.

Similarly, many institutions are also relying heavily on the development of major campaigns for private giving to help them cope with the economic pressures with which they are faced. However, developing such programs is often an incremental process, with its own initial investments and overhead. Capital campaigns often take years to plan and execute. The development process frequently requires coordinated efforts, carried out over years—sometimes decades—before significant donations are realized. Even an annual fund campaign designed to solicit relatively small donations from large numbers of alumni requires a substantial staff and infrastructure.

ALTERNATIVE SCENARIOS FOR APPLIED SOCIOLOGY

Down and Out

This scenario is the least optimistic about the future of the discipline of sociology as a whole. Today, in great part because sociology has evolved into a discipline that is primarily academic, the fates of sociologists have become inexorably tied directly to the fates of their academic departments. The fates of the departments, in turn, are tied to the fates of their universities, which are generally tied to student credit hour production and external support mechanisms.

Given the context and the financial problems that are likely to affect higher education for at least the near future, it is therefore possible that the result could be increasing pressure to minimize the presence of applied sociology within the larger discipline of sociology. Indeed, there is a very real risk that many departments of sociology will respond to the growing pressures by cutting back or even eliminating applied programs to focus on their traditional cores. Certain elements of applied programs such as internships, student research experiences or other field experiences tend to add costs to traditional core programs due to their time- and labor-intensive nature. Furthermore, the application of knowledge has traditionally held lower prestige in universities than the creation of knowledge (Boyer, 1990). Evidence of this general value pattern can certainly be seen within sociology and within the ASA. In the early 1990s, for example, ASA funding for the *Sociological Practice Review* was withdrawn as a result of financial pressures after only three years of publication.

Thus, given that the severe financial problems facing higher education are likely to continue at least in the near term, the result could be increased marginalization of applied sociology and the potential elimination of many applied programs within sociology departments. This would be a "Down and Out" future for applied sociology within the larger discipline. Such a scenario is certainly within the realm of possibility in the coming years, and its probability may grow more likely if there is a significant and prolonged downturn in the U.S. economy.

Subfield Status

While it does not seem likely at the moment, it is certainly possible that solutions may be found for the current financial problems that are threatening higher education. Colleges and universities, especially public institutions, have been raising tuition and fees at rates well outpacing inflation (Symonds, 2004). According to the College Board's annual survey of colleges (2007), tuition and fee charges in public four-year institutions rose by 8.8 percent in 2002, 13.3 percent in 2003, 10.4 percent in 2004, 7.1 percent in 2005, 5.7 percent in 2006, and 6.6 percent in 2007, for a total increase of more than 50 percent. It does not seem feasible, however, for public universities to continue to have tuition increases at such rates without radically limiting access to higher education. Even though some political leaders seem to view higher education as a private rather than public good, it is hard to imagine public acceptance of tuition and fees at public institutions that rival those of elite private institutions.

In addition to raising tuition and other fees, many universities have responded to the current financial pressures by expanding their pursuit of external research funds, encouraging corporate support of research, and developing a variety of mechanisms to exploit intellectual property. For example, at the National Institutes of Health, a major theme focuses on research teams that have applied and translational research as an explicit goal (NIH Roadmap Initiatives, 2007). All of these efforts have created a substantial incentive for the creation of university-based research efforts that have the potential for practical applications. In such a setting, applied sociology

might be able to establish itself more securely as a subfield within the discipline along with such long-standing specialties as sociology of the family, social psychology, and medical sociology. To the extent that applied areas can bring funding to universities, rewards and influence follow.

However, to be highly successful in the pursuit of external research dollars requires experienced research faculty and expensive infrastructures that relatively few institutions can afford to acquire or maintain. The competition for external funding is fierce. Of the approximately 2,500 four-year institutions of higher education in the United States, federal research funding is highly concentrated in relatively few, major research universities. A study by the RAND Corporation (Fossum, Painter, Eiseman, Ettedgui, and Adamson, 2004: 34) revealed that in fiscal year 2002 just 80 universities received 71 percent of all the federal research and development funds awarded to institutions of higher education. Moreover, it takes time to establish the faculty, the facilities, and the track record that are key factors in the competition for external funds, even at modest levels.

There is, of course, precedent for applied sociology to be seen as a subfield. The American Sociological Association does have a section on Sociological Practice, although it only has about 200 members out of the approximately 14,000 members of the ASA. Similarly, in recent years the two dominant professional associations for applied sociologists, the Society for Applied Sociology and the Sociological Practice Association, have been relatively small groups, with only a few hundred members. Recently they merged into a single organization, the Association for Applied and Clinical Sociology. Unless their numbers expand dramatically, however, they will still continue to be tiny compared to the larger discipline of sociology. Nevertheless, in a continuing climate of economic pressure, applied sociology might continue to solidify its current status and have a future as a stronger "Specialty Status" within Sociology.

Increasing Focus

The third alternative for the future of applied sociology follows from some recent trends in American education that have, in fact, provided a context that could be increasingly supportive of applied sociology. Perlstadt (2006) notes that the demand for applied research, especially by the federal government, is unlikely to diminish. The Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities (1999) urged universities to go beyond their traditional activities of outreach and service and called for the development of the "engaged university." By "engagement," the Commission meant "redesigned teaching, research, and extension and service functions that are sympathetically and productively involved with the communities universities serve, however community is defined" (Kellogg Commission, 1999: 11). The series of reports issued by the Kellogg Commission has received a great deal of attention by universities, and many institutions have adopted the language of engagement in their mission statements.

Similarly, the work of Ernest Boyer (1990) and others, calling for a restructuring of higher education to acknowledge and reward both teaching and service has added additional pressure to this movement toward the scholarship of engagement and application. In addition, the recent economic downturns have resulted in state officials calling on universities to become more involved in economic and community development and in workforce development. The shift in external funding from researcher-defined grants to funder-defined contracts has also contributed to a greater applied emphasis. Finally, service-learning has become strongly institutionalized at

many colleges and universities and has increased the visibility of applied community-based research. These trends are producing an environment more open to change on many campuses and are raising the visibility, the profile, and the prestige of applied work, including applied sociology.

Unfortunately, modifications to the reward structures related to tenure, promotion, and merit pay have generally lagged behind any pressures to expand the scholarship of engagement. Still, given sufficient time and resources, these trends reshaping the relationship between higher education and the community could result in a future where applied sociology receives more resources, expands, and becomes an "Increasing Focus" of sociology in higher education. Such a scenario does, however, require real changes in the dominant academic culture.

Ascension of Applied Sociology

If inversion themes have a place in the academy as in religion, the most optimistic interpreters of those factors encouraging applied research and the engagement of universities with their communities might envision a future where applied sociology becomes the dominant force within the profession. This would be the future where many of our students do not become academics, or if they do, only for part of their careers. While the likelihood of this outcome does seem remote at present, much of higher education has in recent years shifted resources from traditional liberal arts areas to professional schools. Were applied sociology not so tightly linked to sociology in general, it might be able to benefit more fully from these shifting resources. In addition, the "Ascension of Applied Sociology" would have to overcome resistance from much of the sociological elite. The nature and extent of that resistance was apparent at the 2004 meetings of the American Sociological Association in San Francisco. While the theme of "Public Sociologies" was clearly evident, applied sociology was far from being publicly recognized and respected by the power structure of the larger discipline.

The "Ascension of Applied Sociology" has been the quiet dream of many applied sociologists and the quiet fear of many academic sociologists. This conflict born out of the competition over resources, careers, and status is real and has been a predominant feature of the discipline over the past three decades. However, it is also sadly short-sighted and mistaken, and has thus far only further weakened the position of the discipline in the larger academic context. Academic sociology clearly will continue to "own" the theoretical and methodological foundations of the discipline. Meanwhile, applied sociology will continue to develop appropriate applications for the approaches and the substantive knowledge within the field. It is not any more likely that applied sociology will replace academic sociology than engineering has replaced physics or that medicine has replaced biology and chemistry. The important practical message is that these academic departments serve the greater needs of society by enhancing the preparation of new generations of professionals and scientists and in doing so have also served their own needs, securing their places in the academic environment.

Leaving Home

Another current trend in higher education could merge applied sociology with other applied fields and create an interdisciplinary applied social science outside of sociology. The mismatch between problems that require expertise drawn from multiple disciplines and traditional academic departments that are often remarkably parochial is increasingly problematic. A recent

report of the National Academies (National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering, and Institute of Medicine 2005: 26) observed that an examination of current high priority issues and pressing research questions allows us to predict that the major questions of the future will be "so complex as to require insights from multiple disciplines." The report notes ways in which the traditional departmental structures of universities create barriers to interdisciplinary research and identifies a range of new interdisciplinary structures.

Some funding opportunities such as the IGERT (Integrative Graduate Education and Research Traineeship) program at the National Science Foundation and the NM Roadmap initiatives are clearly designed to move graduate education outside the traditional academic department. Various combinations of experience and expertise from a range of social science and other disciplines can easily be identified, especially as universities are being asked to do research on increasingly complex issues, many of which are clearly aimed at practical (i.e., income generating) outcomes. Thus, an interdisciplinary future where applied sociology is integrated with GIS, policy analysis, econometric modeling, and other techniques could result in the "Leaving Home" or interdisciplinary application outcome.

An essential concern for the development of this option is the understanding that sociology is practiced by sociologists who are trained in the discipline but who do not necessarily have to maintain that identity to have a career. Therefore, this option reflects the structural possibility that coalescing professionals with greater experience in organizing on a career-based level will produce results similar to those that now define fields such as criminal justice, social work, program evaluation, and counseling.

One of the most telling examples of the rebirth of multidisciplinary educational programs in the social sciences is the recent surge of private foundation support in this area. For example, beginning in 2002 the Council of Graduate Schools and the Ford Foundation collaborated on research to study if there was a need for master's degree programs in the social sciences and humanities that would be similar to the professional science master's programs that had been developed with support from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation (Council of Graduate Schools, 2006). By 2003 CGS/Ford began to fund feasibility studies for such new graduate programs in the social sciences and humanities. Two important criteria defined the basis for funding: first, that the program had to be interdisciplinary, and second, that it had to be demonstrably career-related. Nearly 40 planning grants and over 25 implementation grants were funded by this effort, all addressing areas of vocation or career-related training (Council of Graduate Schools, 2008). There is clearly a market for such interdisciplinary programs oriented toward employment in industry, government, and the community.

The private foundations have accomplished what sociology departments and professional associations have not been able to do in the past thirty years---they stimulated the creation of a form of graduate education relevant to a career outside of academia. The catch is that such careers have no particular allegiance or even identification with sociology. Sociology and the academic departments that represent it across the nation may benefit if they participate, but it will only be in a multidisciplinary context. Departments eligible for grant seed money in this initiative have included communications, philosophy, psychology, economics, and history, as well as sociology.

Multidisciplinary efforts have certain strengths. They provide a strong venue for serving the kinds of purposes defined by the Ford Foundation and the Council of Graduate Schools. Today, they also are a strong venue, given the circumstances, for addressing the needs typically served by applied sociology. Unfortunately, they are also likely to produce a problem for sociology departments, applied sociology, and the discipline of sociology as a whole. Quite simply, when you are trained to be vocation-specific and/o• are educated in a multidisciplinary program, you do not develop an identity with a single discipline.

CONCLUSION

There are many dynamic external forces shaping American higher education today. It should be expected that they would have conflicting consequences for the future of applied sociology. The strength and likely duration of some of these forces certainly leaves their impact open to disagreement and debate. Indeed, a reasonable argument can be made for each of the possible scenarios we have presented. It is our view, however, that the "Increasing Focus" future is the most likely in the long run. However, we say that with a significant caveat. It does require applied sociology to attempt to remain connected to the sociological mainstream. The pressures for engagement, economic development, and more student-centered education seem particularly powerful, especially as they are reinforced by increased external pressures for assessment and accountability. Furthermore, applied sociologists seem to be well positioned to take advantage of the federal and state research dollars that are available for projects that have clear applications (e.g., criminal justice and medical and health related issues).

On the other hand, if applied sociologists, particularly those working outside of academic departments of sociology, find collaboration easier with other applied social science practitioners than with traditional sociologists, the "Leaving Home" future may prevail. There is further need for a measure of caution in this latter possibility, however. The rapid growth of some of the other fields that are already interdisciplinary in nature (evaluation, in particular) could just as easily result in the absorption of applied sociology. This, of course, is merely another path to the "Down and Out" future.

NOTE

This paper is based on a paper originally presented at the North Central Sociological Association annual meeting in Cleveland, Ohio, 2004 and a subsequent presentation at the Annual Meeting of the Society for Applied Sociology, Bethesda, Maryland, 2004.

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