

## Bringing Sociological Theory and Practice Together: A Pragmatic Solution

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In his conclusion, Professor Turner (Turner MSS p 32) recommends that sociology use its theoretical principles to explain how sociology works in order to close the schism between theory and practice. In this response, I will attempt to identify some existing sociological knowledge and theories that led to the program of work and standards of the Commission on Applied and Clinical Sociology which Professor Turner mentioned in passing (Turner MSS p 17). In addition, I will present some historical background that could help explain both the marginalization of sociological practice and the shunning of social engineering, and conclude with some pragmatic suggestions for integrated training in theory and practice.

### Applying Sociology of Professions

By applying sociological theories and analyses of occupations and professions, we can achieve Professor Turner's objective. The works of Durkheim (1933), Freidson (1986), and Abbott (1988) provide a theoretical basis for conceptualizing a profession which encompasses both a discipline that generates new knowledge and a practice that utilizes this knowledge whether it be called engineering, clinical practice, or applied research. I suspect that the preference for terms reflects whether the model is drawn from the physical, health, or social sciences. In addition, we should use the term *discipline* to refer to the development of abstract knowledge and instruction within and across academic institutions; the term *practice* to refer to the application of the knowledge system to diagnose, advise, counsel, intervene, and/or treat within an independent or entrepreneurial setting; and the term *profession* to refer to the umbrella

covering both discipline and practice that fosters status and respect by establishing entrance examinations, practice standards, and codes of ethics to assure quality and protect the public.

Freidson (1986) noted that quality assurance is symbolized in licensure by the state, certification by the professional association, and accreditation by the discipline. The first two credential individuals, while the latter endorses training programs. Furthermore, all three contribute to the field's niche or jurisdiction over the generation of knowledge and its application in practice (Abbott, 1988). Many fields go through a set of developmental stages to attain dominance over a jurisdiction. Those that come later find jurisdictions already occupied. This is the case of sociology which finds itself effectively excluded from certain areas of practice by social work and clinical psychology, or competing with economics and political science in survey, market, and evaluation research.

One step to improve the position of sociology is to begin accrediting programs in applied and clinical areas as a means of developing, promoting, and supporting quality sociological education and practice. To accomplish this, the Sociological Practice Association and the Society for Applied Sociology established the Commission on Applied and Clinical Sociology (Perlstadt, 1995, 1998). This initiative will disseminate program models and resources to departments interested in developing applied and clinical programs, and promote accreditation as one basis for state licensure of sociological practitioners.

The Commission has adopted standards linked to learning objectives. Students completing accredited programs will be able to integrate sociological theory, knowledge, and skills in a practice setting, maintain a professional orientation, and adhere to a set of ethical standards in their practice endeavors. They will be able to discuss the role of theory in sociological practice and the interaction between theory and practice, and, they will be able to compare and contrast the types of methodological approaches, both qualitative and quantitative,

that are particularly relevant to applied and clinical sociology. Students will have a supervised practice experience where they can learn how to apply sociological theories, methods, skills, professional orientations, and ethics.

Given higher education's current focus on student learning outcomes and assessment, undergraduate and masters level sociology programs are already being asked to document how the content of their courses and learning experiences meet curriculum goals and objectives. The Commission standards fit this approach. The Commission acknowledges that not all sociology programs will want to be or should be accredited. Accreditation should reflect the overall mission of the program and the institution in which it is housed.

#### The Outrageous Connection: Social Engineering and Fascism

While Professor Turner notes the applied interests of Comte (but not Marx) as well as those of the founding figures in American sociology, he overlooks the 1930's and 1940's which I will argue led sociologists to shrink and run from the label "social engineer" (Turner MSS p 13). Professor Turner correctly sees social engineers using theoretical principles to build something and having to separate their personal and political ideologies from their work, that is, be value-free.

As it happened, the fascist regimes in Europe supported social engineering. Bannister (1992) presents a fascinating account of American sociologists embroiled in controversies over scientific objectivism, fascism, isolationism, and the war effort. His thesis is that fascism was rooted in positivism and that a cult of scientific objectivity inhibited public statements in the United States. This led to a bitter three-way fight over the role of sociology as a social science and social conscience. On one side, William F. Ogburn argued that sociology was not interested in changing the world, should adopt a colorless literary style and rigorous statistical methods,

and should not pretend to guide society. In contrast, George A. Lundberg promoted a value neutral engineering model which stressed methods and results over knowledge and truth, and held an approach to resolving social problems that isolated science from politics, ethics, and aesthetics. Finally, Luther L. Bernard wanted social policy based on science, and saw sociology as providing an objective standard for social control that could lead to social reconstruction and reform.

Social engineering and social policy based on applied urban and rural sociology were adopted by the Third Reich in their plans for the reorganization of an expanded Germany and the expulsion and annihilation of the populations of conquered territories (Klingemann, 1992). These developments were noted by Merton (1938) who advocated that scientists repudiate the application of utilitarian norms and commented that "an economy of social engineers is no more conceivable or practicable than an economy of laundrymen" (1936: 177). Parsons also opposed totalitarianism of both the right and the left (Bannister, 1992) and advocated the separation of sociology as a science from sociology as practice (Parsons, 1959). At the end of World War II, there was, in the United States, "little evidence of any practitioner of sociology being in any policy making or agency role *as a sociologist*," and that "being a sociologist was a positive disadvantage in acquiring a strategic position in government" (Melvin, 1945).

#### An Approach to Avoid the Great Tedium

Professor Turner (Turner MSS p 25) advocates reconnecting sociological theory to research and practice, using a greater diversity of methods while down-playing survey research, and assessing the utility of theory for real world problems. This would require teaching the interrelationships between theory, methods, and resolving social problems. In *The Origins of Scientific Sociology*, Madge (1962) does precisely this for works that have stood the test of time:

*Suicide, The Polish Peasant, The American Soldier* (which depended on survey research), Bales on interaction, and Lewin's action research. In fact, our theoretical and methodological appreciation of *The Polish Peasant* was the result of a special conference held in 1938 to assess its importance. Similar treatment could easily be given to the work of Blau and Duncan (1967) on occupational stratification, Kanter (1977) on women in the corporate structure, and Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) on married, cohabiting, and homosexual couples. Furthermore, Caplow (1976) has written a "rule of thumb" book for organizations and groups, and Chen and Rossi (1980, 1989) have developed theory-driven evaluation. Materials and models are available to develop an integrated teaching approach.

If theory and practice have a natural affinity to each other (Turner MSS p 33), perhaps the reconnection will come from the impact of practitioners on the discipline. Practitioners should combine theory, methods, and problem solving interventions on a regular basis. The Commission on Applied and Clinical Sociology has developed standards that emphasize relating basic theoretical perspectives to social action, change, and intervention, utilizing appropriate methodological approaches to examine social issues, and requiring students who want technical/professional careers to have a meaningful practice experience. Making theory and methods relevant to real problems and issues should end the tedium. The question is no longer "what should we do?" (Turner MSS p 25) but rather "do we have the will to do it?"

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