

I

Public Scholarship, the Sociological Imagination, and Engaged Scholarship

The purpose of this book is to highlight the variety of ways in which sociology “gets into play,” bringing about social change in community settings, assisting nonprofit or social service organizations in their work, influencing local, regional, or national policy, informing the general public on key policy issues through media publications or visibility, and creating research centers that develop and carry out collaborative research involving both researchers and practitioners in all facets of the research process. When sociologists are actively engaged with audiences outside of academia in identifying issues, researching those issues, and disseminating results, the process of connecting sociology to those publics is most obvious.

Defining Public Sociology

Although there is a long history of sociologists and social scientists working outside the walls of academia—some dating back to the 19th century—the most recent movement to connect sociology to the interests, needs, and concerns of organizations, communities, and individuals outside the university has been framed by discussion of “public sociology.” Michael Burawoy, president of the American Sociological Association (ASA) in 2004, has been a significant leader both in recognizing the importance of engaged scholarship outside of the university and in facilitating the work of sociologists

engaged in public scholarship. The ASA annual meeting organized around the theme of public sociology in 2004 was the best-attended national meeting to date. The increased presence of graduate students and younger sociologists was notable. Burawoy defines *public sociology* as a

sociology that seeks to bring sociology to publics beyond the academy, promoting dialogue about issues that affect the fate of society, placing the values to which we adhere under a microscope. What is important here is the multiplicity of public sociologies, reflecting the multiplicity of publics—visible and invisible, thick and thin, active and passive, local, national and even global, dominant and counter publics. The variety of publics stretches from our students to the readers of our books, from newspaper columns to interviews, from audiences in local civic groups such as churches or neighborhoods, to social movements we facilitate. The possibilities are endless. (Burawoy, 2004, p. 104)

Burawoy further distinguishes between “traditional” and “organic” public sociologies. Traditional public sociology includes scholarship and professional activity that is driven by interests and priorities of the discipline. Although not done in conjunction with any organizations or movements, the products of such scholarship may have significant relevance for those outside of academia. Work on educational inequality, persistent racial and ethnic income inequities, gender differences in career development, effective leadership styles in large organizations, or the new role of tourism in local community identity may be motivated by interests within the discipline of sociology. As Burawoy puts it, “The traditional public sociologist instigates debates within or between publics, although he or she might not actually participate in them” (2005, p. 7). However, all of these research areas are of considerable relevance to various groups outside the university. Insofar as sociologists who have done this work write op-ed columns for local newspapers, testify at government hearings, speak to community groups, consult with organizations about their work, or report on their research through blogs, web pages, and other Web-based media, they are engaged in a form of public sociology.

EXPERT TESTIMONY

Gregory Squires, a faculty member at George Washington University and national expert on racial and ethnic discrimination in housing and housing-related financial services (such as mortgage loans and home insurance), has

presented testimony before congressional committees in addition to serving as an expert witness in many court cases. He also serves on the board of the Woodstock Institute, a nationally recognized policy research organization focusing on fair lending and financial service industry reform.

What impact has your congressional testimony had?

It is difficult to answer this specifically and concretely. I do not think that anyone can point to a particular piece of testimony that was given as the cause of a particular law that was eventually passed or regulation that was eventually promulgated. But the reality is that before any legislation is considered, a hearing record is developed. In the course of congressional debate, proponents point to that hearing record as part of the evidence as to why they are proposing their legislation.

It is rare, if ever, that a particular statement actually causes a legislator to change his or her mind. But in the absence of a compelling hearing record, it is unlikely that any significant legislation or regulation will be enacted. In the case of my recent testimony on how racial segregation in U.S. cities has opened the door to subprime lending [where some groups are forced to pay higher loan or mortgage rates], a major financial services reform bill was passed a few months later. I suspect that my testimony may not be 100 percent responsible for that! But in the absence of hundreds of people like me testifying, at the dozens of hearings on financial services issues held over the past five years, I suspect that we might not have gotten this bill.

Are you giving voice to communities typically not heard by policy makers?

That has been the intent. Ever since I worked in the Chicago Regional Office of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, I have tried to consciously conduct research projects for which the findings would provide evidence for people who are trying to ameliorate various forms of discrimination. So I pay attention to what government law enforcement agencies are looking at, what nonprofit advocacy groups are doing, and I try to figure out a way that I can do research that will give these groups additional ammunition. This was my approach when I worked with community groups in Chicago while at the commission and with neighborhood organizations in Milwaukee when I taught at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee; in Washington, D.C., I have been more involved with national organizations, most of which are umbrella organizations for local groups.

Distinct from this traditional public sociology is organic public sociology. This represents a more collaborative approach to research in which boundaries between researcher and practitioner, scholar and activist, or university and community are more permeable. It is a sociology that more explicitly recognizes the value of both university-based knowledge (e.g., outcomes from research done by academic sociologists responding to interests of the discipline) *and* community-based knowledge (e.g., awareness of community practices and histories). Burawoy explains that in organic public sociology, “The sociologist works in close connection with a visible, thick, active, local and often counterpublic. . . . Between the organic public sociologist and a public is a dialogue, a process of mutual education” (Burawoy, 2005, pp. 7–8). Organic public sociologists often find themselves working in very dynamic environments in the middle of heated community debates, conflicts between organizational managers and staff, disputes between elected officials and grassroots organizations. Although such public sociologists have sometimes been dismissed as having crossed over to the other side and having not been objective in their research, that is generally far from the truth.

Immersing oneself in the world outside of one’s discipline does not mean that one drops the discipline’s standards of research. It does mean that one becomes more aware of the complexities of these outside worlds—the complexities with which nonsociologists and nonacademics are intimately familiar. Truly listening to the perspectives of outside publics and using these perspectives in shaping research add to the quality of sociological research. Entering into unfamiliar communities or organizations with preconceived perspectives and notions created solely by research in the discipline and shaped solely by other sociologists is more likely to produce research that misses the mark than is the research informed by publics. As the expression goes, “A mind is like a parachute; it doesn’t work unless it is open.” Similarly, sociology does not work effectively if it is not open to considering perspectives of publics outside the field.

It is in concert with publics that some of sociology’s most valuable contributions to the broader society can be enhanced. The critical eye that undergraduate sociology majors and graduate students develop is of significant value in the everyday world in sorting through layers of organizational rules and regulations or taking seemingly random community social interactions and making sense of them. C. Wright Mills wrote of the “sociological imagination” as a perspective that can produce clearer thinking, can liberate, and can facilitate social change:

The sociological imagination enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career

of a variety of individuals. It enables that person to take into account how individuals, in the welter of their daily experience, often become falsely conscious of their social positions. Within that welter, the framework of modern society is sought, and within that framework the psychologies of a variety of men and women are formulated. By such means the personal uneasiness of individuals is focused upon explicit troubles, and the indifference of publics is transformed into involvement with public issues. (Mills, 1959, p. 5)

From a different perspective, symbolic interactionist Herbert Blumer describes something similar to Mills's "sociological imagination." Blumer (1969) talks about sociologists' skills in systematically uncovering societal conventions and practices that obscure social processes from common view. He explains that much of his own work has been "to lift the veils that cover . . . group life. . . . The veils are not lifted by substituting, in whatever degree, preformed images for firsthand knowledge. The veils are lifted . . . by digging deep . . . through careful study" (p. 39). As Burawoy states, sociologists' ability to clear away some of the fog and place issues in clear focus is at the heart of the work of organic public sociologists: "The project of such public sociologies is to make visible the invisible, to make the private public, to validate these organic connections as part of our sociological life" (2005, p. 8).

There is an activist thread in the work of many public sociologists, past and present. Alfred McClung Lee, a past president of the American Sociological Association and founder of the Association for Humanist Sociology, speaks on the need for sociology to be proactive in connecting to the world around us:

The great challenge of social science is the development and wide dissemination of social wisdom and social-action techniques that will enable more and more people to participate in the control and guidance of their groups and their society. In meeting this challenge, social science stimulates and nurtures the fuller development of individual potential. (1973, p. 6)

This is not suggesting that sociologists take up positions on the front lines of social movements and political battles. However, it is suggesting that it is not sufficient to just "do sociology"; there is a need to more actively work with others outside the field and outside of academia in seeking positive change.

We do not pretend that public sociology is the be-all or end-all of engaged scholarship, nor do we want to suggest that this work was not being done before Michael Burawoy came along and named it in 2004, before the ASA created the Task Force on Public Sociology in 2004 (ASA Task Force, 2005),

or before the American Sociological Association established the Sociological Practice and Public Sociology Section. In some ways this is repackaging current and past work in the field. Certainly the work of James Coleman on educational policy (Coleman et al., 1966), William Foote Whyte and his colleagues on community efforts to preserve jobs (Woodworth, Meek, & Whyte, 1985), or Seymour Martin Lipset (Lipset, Trow, & Coleman, 1977) on union democracy would fit under the public sociology umbrella. Similarly, work variously described as action research, participatory action research, participatory evaluation research, and collaborative research, among other grassroots approaches, also fit—particularly into the organic public sociology model (Gaventa, 1991; Stoecker, 2005; and Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donohue, 2003).

The accomplishments of Burawoy's leadership in getting the field of sociology to recognize the importance of public sociology should in no way diminish the efforts of many who have worked under these different banners. There are some who argue that traditional academics might even learn something from these well-established participatory research traditions—as one sociologist put it, this might be the time to teach “academic dogs and cats new tricks” (Felt, Rowe, & Curlew, 2004). In this book we do not assume that we know it all, nor do we suggest that there are not other well-established approaches to go about research that brings about effective community-based change. We do seek to broaden research horizons, learn from others, and make sociology the dynamic field that it can be.

Mainstream or Marginal?

The public sociological projects included in this book do not represent outliers from mainstream sociology. The case studies represent the kind of work that many sociologists do on a regular basis. It is why many of us went into sociology in the first place. Most of us did not go into sociology so that we would spend the rest of our lives reading Weber, Durkheim, and Marx; rather we wanted to do something with our training. Even within public sociology, most of the work is best classified as organic public sociology. As Burawoy observes, “The bulk of public sociology is indeed of an organic kind—sociologists working with a labor movement, neighborhood associations, communities of faith, immigrant rights groups, human rights organizations” (Burawoy, 2005, pp. 7–8). Indeed, historically a number of sociologists routinely worked in polling, industrial sociology, labor relations, and other fields outside of the academy. The growing call for a more relevant sociology in the late 1960s in response to more activist students and younger faculty had

its influence on the field. In the 1980s, the shrinking job market for sociologists pushed the profession to work with publics outside of academia (Freeman & Rossi, 1984). Recognition that the field needs to be responsive to the outside world if sociology is to remain vibrant and viable continues to fuel support for engagement outside of the academy today.

There is a distinct grassroots character to much of public sociology and certainly most of the projects outlined in this book. If one reads only the “top” journals in the field, one might miss the bulk of work going on within sociology. Whether it is working with graduate and undergraduate students on one of the community-based projects described in this book or directly with local organizations, engagement is a natural extension of the sociological enterprise. If we do not actively connect our sociological work to the needs of the broader society, the long-term health of the field will be threatened. Connection to the broader public and to consumers of our research, whether made traditionally or organically, is vital to the continued vibrancy of our field.

This is not to say that all is well for public scholarship in academia-world. There is significant resistance from a number of directions. The reward system for professors in most colleges and universities is slanted toward outcomes valued by the discipline. More than one sociology department has a “point system” in which faculty have to excel if they are to get tenure, better salaries, and other rewards. Publishing in sociology journals may be valued more than publishing in policy journals. A peer-reviewed published article that will ultimately be read by 200 fellow sociologists may be weighted much more heavily than a local policy report read by 2,000 community residents and leaders who are seeking solutions to reduce youth crime. The central focus of the discipline is the quality of the methodology, the strength of the sociological analysis, and discipline-based publication. Points are typically not rewarded for documenting that your research has contributed to improved education in local schools, less poverty in a neighborhood, more affordable housing, less racial profiling by the police, or more employment opportunities. Those promoting public sociology are not attempting to diminish the importance of quality research; rather they are trying to *add* positive impact on the local community and broader society as one measure the discipline uses in evaluating research quality.

Just as they are trying to meet the challenges of pressing problems in the world around them through their research, the contributors to this book have not been fazed by resistance to public scholarship within their departments or within the field. In subsequent chapters we talk more about strategies for surviving as a public sociologist within academia. We also show that not all public sociologists work in universities. Historically, some of the most

prominent public sociology was done by people who were outside of academia or who spent a substantial amount of time outside of universities. W.E.B. DuBois and Jane Addams are two such examples from the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Although we have included examples of both traditional and organic public sociology in our case studies, this book has a distinctly grassroots orientation. A few years ago, the University of California Press published a book entitled *Public Sociology: Fifteen Eminent Sociologists Debate Politics and the Profession in the Twenty-First Century* (Clawson et al., 2007). Many of these scholars, from Francis Fox Piven and William Julius Wilson to Barbara Ehrenreich and Orlando Patterson, offer valuable perspectives from their years of scholarship, policy work, and activism. However, the more than 30 sociologists writing in this book do not pretend to be “eminent” sociologists. We are more the rank-and-file of public sociology who represent a growing sector of the field. A year ago Michael Burawoy visited the Center for Urban Research and Learning at Loyola University Chicago, a collaborative university–community research center directed by Phil Nyden. After talking with faculty, graduate students, and community partners, Burawoy remarked, “I just write about public sociology, you are doing it.” For public sociology to survive, we need advocates, eminent established scholars, *and* the front-line public sociologists along with their community partners.

Focus on Active Sociology

This book emphasizes actions and connections. This is not armchair sociology in which self-proclaimed public sociologists just write articles suggesting what government, corporations, communities, or others “ought to do.” We are interested in the *active* connections to publics and users of the research, not a passive research process. We do not shy away from getting into the thick of community controversies and policy debates and having a significant presence in settings outside of university walls. We do not retreat from interacting with various community groups, advocacy organizations, or government agencies under a false guise of objectivity that says you have to stay at arm’s length from “interest groups in your research.” Public sociologists actively engaged in the community can just as easily maintain top ethical and research standards as can the sociologist studying secondary datasets and not directly immersed in the community.

Moreover, the claim that engaged sociology has the inherent danger of being biased and too political because the researcher gets too close to various

interest groups is a red herring. *All* research is political. Sociologists' choices of what to research and how to research it are very political decisions. One sociologist may decide to study how to create more effective corporate management strategies to increase worker productivity. Another sociologist may study the impact of discrimination on workers in the same company. Both may be legitimate topics for sociological research, but the outcomes of the two research projects will have different implications for increased corporate control versus worker rights. The difference between these two orientations is a political difference.

How research is done is also a political decision. One sociologist may choose to do his research from afar, using existing datasets and other secondary information rather than interacting with any of the individuals, communities, or organizations active in the issue being studied. This approach is a political decision—a decision to stay at arm's length from those being studied and not seek their direct input in research design or in interpreting data. A second sociologist may decide to immerse herself in the field with an openness to discover social practices that she could not anticipate before entering the field. That choice is a political decision to give community members or staff in an organization more direct voice in the research.

The two sociologists described in the example are making political decisions. One is more willing to work with data collected by surveys designed by sociologists and coded by sociologists with limited input from publics. The second sociologist may assume that the discipline does not know everything, that people in the community have valuable knowledge that needs to be gathered, and that there is a complexity of everyday life that gets overlooked by the numbers in the databases. The end results of both research projects may be valuable, but the different ways in which the two sociologists go about their work does represent a political orientation—one favoring more reliance on sociologist-produced knowledge and the other being more open to the knowledge and perspectives of community members in influencing the direction of the research.

Clearly the character of a particular sociology department factors into this political environment. The extent to which a junior faculty member perceives senior colleagues as supportive or not supportive of public sociology will affect his or her decision to pursue such sociology. It will also affect the kind of research that students do, particularly graduate students as they decide on thesis and dissertation topics. This means that the new faculty member's decision regarding what department to apply to for a job and the prospective graduate student's decision regarding which M.A. or Ph.D. program to apply to have consequences for the kind of sociology they will pursue in their careers. Of course, the ups and downs of job markets and the competitiveness of the

graduate program application process also factor into this equation and are not completely in the control of the job candidate or prospective graduate student.

Even the decision to become a sociologist is a political decision. In a society where we look to individual explanations for human behavior before we look to the role of social structures, social institutions, or social class, the choice to become a sociologist rather than a psychologist is a political decision. Sociologists often find themselves swimming against the stream in a society that likes to focus on individual initiative, leadership ability, and intelligence, as factors explaining success.¹ A sociologist's analysis of racial discrimination, social class boundaries, or unequal educational opportunities often challenge existing practices and can make powerful individuals or institutions uncomfortable.

Our book grows out of our direct experience doing public sociology, establishing research centers or networks that engage in public sociology, work within the American Sociological Association to institutionalize public sociology in the field, and teaching in the college classroom. The book presents a broad range of sociology projects. In some cases these are interdisciplinary projects, since solutions to social problems are often multifaceted and do not fit into disciplines as defined by universities. We hope that this book will be of value to undergraduate students, graduate students, faculty, policy makers, and activists. For students we try to illustrate how engaged social science projects are developed, what impact they have, and the broad areas in which social science has had an impact. For established sociologist researchers inside and outside of academia, we provide a broad picture of the field in which public sociologists work and seek to encourage more public sociology work to keep our field dynamic and responsive to the world around us. To policy makers and community activists, the book gives examples of those places where sociology is responsive to and addresses their needs. We hope this encourages more connections between our field and those working to improve the quality of life in our many communities.

References

American Sociological Association Task Force on Institutionalizing Public Sociologies (ASA Task Force). (2005). *Public sociology and the roots of American sociology: Re-establishing our connections to the public*. Interim report and recommendations to the ASA Council. Available at <http://pubsoc.wisc.edu/tfreport090105.pdf>

¹Similarly, the assumption that an individual's own shortcomings are the cause for failure is endemic in American society. William Ryan's book *Blaming the Victim* (1976) documents this bias quite well.

- Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Burawoy, M. (2004). Introduction. In M. Burawoy, W. Gamson, C. Ryan, S. Pfohl, D. Vaughn, C. Derber, & J. Schor, Public sociologies: A symposium from Boston College. *Social Problems*, 51(1), 103–130.
- Burawoy, M. (2005, February). 2004 presidential address: For public sociology. *American Sociological Review*, 70, 4–28.
- Clawson, D., Zussman, R., Misra, J., Gerstel, N., Stokes, R., Anderton, D. L., & Burawoy, M. (Eds.). (2007). *Public sociology: Fifteen eminent sociologists debate politics and the profession in the twenty-first century*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Coleman, J. S., Campbell, E. Q., Hobson, C. J., McPartland, F., Mood, A. M., Weinfeld, F. D., et al. (1966). *Equality of educational opportunity*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Felt, L. F., Rowe, P.M., & Curlew, K. (2004). *Teaching academic dogs and cats new tricks: “Re-tooling” senior academic researchers for collaborative community-based research*. Paper presented at the Researching the Voluntary Sector Conference, Sheffield, UK. Retrieved from <http://www.envision.ca/pdf/cura/DogsCats.pdf>
- Freeman, H. E., & Rossi, P. H. (1984, August). Furthering the applied side of sociology. *American Sociological Review*, 49(4), 571–580.
- Gaventa, J. (1991). Toward a knowledge democracy: Viewpoints on participatory research in North America. In O. Fals-Borda & M. A. Rahman (Eds.), *Action and knowledge: Breaking the monopoly with participatory action research*. New York, NY: Apex.
- Lee, A. M. (1973). *Toward humanist sociology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Lipset, S. M., Trow, M. A., & Coleman, J. S. (1977). *Union democracy: The internal politics of the international typographical union*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Mills, C. W. (1959). *The sociological imagination*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Ryan, W. (1976). *Blaming the victim*. New York, NY: Vintage.
- Stoecker, R. (2005). *Research methods for community change: A project-based approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Strand, K., Marullo, S., Cutforth, N., Stoecker, R., & Donohue, P. (2003). *Community-based research and higher education: Principles and practices*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Woodworth, W., Meek, C., & Whyte, W. F. (Eds.) (1985). *Industrial democracy: Strategies for community revitalization*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.