

## Contributors

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## REFLECTIONS ON PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE AS A SOCIAL SCIENTIST\*

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Mid-American Review of Sociology, 1981, Vol. VI, No. 1:1-15

Is there a difference between basic and applied social science?

This question has been a source of some considerable debate among sociologists. I find that the debate usually involves different definitions of what constitutes "sociology," varying experiences with the conduct and utilization of "basic" research, and divergent perceptions of what social science practitioners actually do. My purpose in this article is to share some of my own experiences in the practice of social science so as to add additional data that can be used in attempting to answer the question of the extent to which there is a difference between applied and basic social science work.

I will not pretend to approach the question in an objective or disinterested manner. I will be presenting a definite point of view. My position is that there are fundamental and critical differences between social science scholarship and the professional practice of social science. Those differences have important implications for the choices that graduate students make, for training programs in the social sciences, and for improving both scholarship and the professional practice of social science. My position derives from my experience. I have done a good deal of basic research and a great deal of applied research. I've also done research that fell into a gray area between the two. But for the most part, my experience has been that the conduct of basic and applied research is quite different.

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\* I wish to express my deepest appreciation and thanks to the Editor-in-Chief of MARS for unusual assistance in preparation of this manuscript.

My first awarenesses of those differences came in graduate school as I was being socialized into the discipline. The dominant point of view at the time was that there was no real difference between basic and applied work. The only difference was in how quickly a particular piece of research might get used. Basic research was social science knowledge that took a long time to filter into action channels. What was called "applied" research was sociological knowledge that found its way into public use more quickly. The point of this position, of course, was an ideological one: "All sociological research is potentially useful." Those who oppose making a distinction between basic and applied research often fear that such a distinction will end up valuing one kind of research over the other and making judgments, usually political judgments, about the relative usefulness of one kind of research over the other. If no distinction is made, no relative value can be assigned.

The problem with this argument is that people do make relative judgments about usefulness including those very sociologists who argue that there is no real difference between applied and basic research. My first personal experience with the difference came when the first draft of my dissertation was rejected because "Recommendations are not appropriate in a scholarly piece of work." Suddenly the debate was no longer abstract. I found myself face-to-face with specific criteria that affected how my work would be judged and erected an obstacle to the completion of my degree program.

Later in my career as Director of the Minnesota Center for Social Research I had the opportunity to do workshops on evaluation research, policy analysis, and applied social science at a number of sociological meetings and occasionally for specific universities and departments. The recurring question in those sessions was whether or not my work was really "social science." A number of colleagues in sociology have questioned whether or not what I do is *really* sociology. In this article I will describe the nature of my sociological practice by way of illustrating some distinctions between basic and applied research and thereby allow the reader to decide if what I do is sociology.

### *Evaluation Research and Policy Analysis*

Most of my work has involved some kind of evaluation of human service programs or analysis of social action policies. This kind of work is usually done under contract to some agency or organization, sometimes governmental, sometimes not, which is interested in getting answers to specific questions. I've had the opportunity to work on a wide range of program evaluations focusing on different kinds of human service programs: criminal justice programs, early childhood and family education programs, health programs, education programs, manpower programs, energy policy studies, social impact analyses for development projects, agricultural extension programs, welfare programs, and programs that cut across a number of these other categories. I've done work at the county, city, state, federal, and international level. I've worked on contracts for government, non-governmental organizations, businesses, foundations, and community groups. I find that there are some common patterns of social science practice that cut across these different types of evaluations. These patterns of practice give rise to distinctions which are the focus of the contrast between basic and applied work. The distinctions which follow are not the only ones that can be drawn, but in my experience they have been the most important.

### *The Source of Research Questions*

In basic research the sociologist draws on the traditions within the discipline to focus research questions of interest. The major journals, the major theorists, and the major traditions within the discipline tell the individual scholar what is worth investigating. In the end, however, the individual sociologist makes his or her own decision about what to study. The fundamental principle of academic freedom is that no one has the right to tell any scholar what to study. The right of the individual scholar to make the decision about every aspect of research from the selection of the topic to choice of methods and the nature of the analytical presentation is sacrosanct.

In applied work, the source of the questions to be studied is provided by the people who are paying for the research to be

done. The phrase, "He who pays the fiddler calls the tune," is usually used with a derogatory connotation that one's integrity has been lost and that the sociological soul has been sold. At best those of us who do contract research are often considered hired guns or simple-minded technicians who blindly carry out the mandates of people with funds. I was vehemently attacked in a faculty meeting once by one of the elders of our discipline who boasted that he had never taken a dime from government to do his research. Drawn into the attack in the heat of the moment I replied that, from my point of view, the value of his research was just about what the government had paid for it.

My current view is that applied sociologists are no more (or less) subject to charges of sociological prostitution than are basic researchers. In contract research money changes hands and a social scientist is asked to undertake a certain kind of investigation to meet the needs of clients. In basic research the coin of the realm is promotion, tenure, and status within the profession. The discipline rewards certain kinds of research over others. On more than one occasion I have been amused by the claims of completely free choice and individual autonomy in making decisions about research topic and methods by sociologists whose careers have been built on documenting how social structure determines individual attitudes and behaviors.

The difference, then, is not that sociological practitioners (particularly those in private practice outside universities) have less integrity than basic researchers. The distinction is that there are different reference groups available to look to in making decisions about what topic of research to undertake. The basic researchers looks to colleagues and disciplinary traditions; the social science practitioner looks to people who have specific questions they need answered in order to take action.

#### FOCUSING QUESTIONS

In applied social science determining the precise focus of a study is often a major problem, particularly where clients lack

social science experience. Clearly focused questions are the exception rather than the rule in applied social science. The process may begin when an agency, for example a county board, wants to know whether or not a particular program is effective. The social science practitioner must then work with the clients to help them determine what they mean by effectiveness. What are the empirical referents for effectiveness? What kind of information is needed to make a decision about effectiveness? What empirical data can be gathered to shed light on the effectiveness of the program? What hypotheses do they hold about the factors related to effectiveness?

Often the most time-consuming part of the research process is negotiating the precise focus of the study. This is the process that will determine whether or not the study is useful, for the most frequent complaint made by funders of applied research is that the research didn't really answer their questions. One of the major reasons why much applied research is not used results from the researchers imposing on the clients the researcher's questions instead of working to help clients clarify their own questions (Patton, 1978). Effective sociological practitioners, then, must be highly skilled at listening to the concerns of clients and turning those concerns into researchable questions. One has to be able to decipher and decode the concerns of the people with whom one is working so that empirical work can be undertaken. Along the way it is usually necessary to point out which questions cannot be empirically answered and to educate the people with whom one is working about the nature and limitations of social science investigations.

The integrity of the social scientist lies in making sure that the questions framed are *truly* empirical questions, i.e., that data can be brought to bear on the questions and that the way questions are framed in the research does not guarantee certain kinds of results in lieu of other kinds of results. He who pays the fiddler calls the tune in terms of basic topic (for example, a study of the effectiveness of a displaced homemaker's program), but he who pays the fiddler (a sociologist) does *not* predetermine the results of the study.

The problem of conceptual focus is no more or less difficult to deal with in applied work than in basic work. There are always limitations to what one can do and those limitations can be a source of bias. The distinction is whether or not one looks entirely to the discipline to determine the relevant focus of research or if research focus derives from a broader audience of people outside the discipline who need research assistance to help them answer questions they have. Crucial distinctions are not ones of relative integrity, relative degrees of prostitution, relative materialism, or relative interest in one's work.

*The Personal Factor*

A third distinction concerns the people with whom one works in applied and basic research. In basic research one works largely with scholarly colleagues. In applied research one spends a great deal of time working with lay people, non-academics, and non-sociologists. The communications and human relations skills needed in sociological practice are quite different than those needed in scholarly practice. Among scholars there is admiration for the keen analytical mind capable of drawing sharp distinctions, going straight to the heart of the matter. In working with non-academics it is often necessary to use more of an inductive rather than a deductive process. It is necessary to help people discover what they know and what their concerns are rather than pointing those things out to them. The process involves as much education in human relations as it does in analytical skill in conceptual sharpness. Interpersonal relationships become critical for the researcher must build up feelings of trust and confidence if the research is to be understood and used. This usually means that the conceptual process of determining research focus and design is a slow one. The quality of the research becomes closely associated in the minds of clients with the qualities of the researcher. In academic and scholarly settings there is at least some attempt to separate a person's research findings from that person's personality and social skills. No such tolerance of the socially incompetent and interpersonally abrasive scientist

exists in applied research. If the researcher is rejected then there is a high probability that the researcher's findings will also be rejected.

In short, applied research is a personal process and is much more people-oriented than is the traditional practice of basic research. Ideas and knowledge are the driving force of basic research. The needs and interests of the people with whom one is working are the driving forces in applied social science.

*Politics*

I will spare the reader yet another discussion of points and counterpoints about "value-free" social science. Suffice it to say that in sociological practice one is up to one's neck in politics from the very beginning. Knowledge really is power when it can serve the interests of one group against the interests of another. Nor am I just talking about the findings of research. The research process itself is laddened with political liabilities, dangers, and challenges. In *Utilization-Focused Evaluation* (Patton, 1978) I discussed at length the inherently political nature of evaluation research and policy analysis. The basic researcher may adopt a stance of academic freedom and refuse to take any responsibility for how research results are used. The sociological practitioner has no such luxury for the political implications are so stark and omnipresent from the very beginning that the very act of ignoring them is a political act. Not to explicitly recognize the political implications of a particular piece of applied research is itself going to have political implications.

One of the ways in which political considerations often intrude most directly is the selection of research methods. If, as a sociological practitioner, one cares about the utility of one's work and wants to produce useful findings then concerns about the credibility of particular kinds of data, the relevance of specific methods, and the ability of clients to make sense out of research become primary. This means that the social science practitioner must be methodologically flexible and able to adapt rigorous social science methods to particular situations and audiences.

I have discussed the nature of these methodological adaptations and their necessities at greater length elsewhere (Patton, 1980).

The implication of this distinction about the relative degree of political involvement one experiences in doing basic versus applied research is that sociological practitioners must be politically sophisticated and able to handle themselves well in highly politicized environments filled with ambiguities, nuances, conflicts of interests, and enormously difficult and complex value decisions.

#### *Communications*

The final distinction I would make here concerns the different communication processes involved in basic and applied social science research. Basic researchers focus their communications primarily on colleagues. Applied researchers must be able to communicate with people who have a wide range of experience with research and who vary considerably in their understanding of and sophistication about research methods and statistical analyses. Basic researchers communicate to specialists, people who share language (jargon) and, usually, share a set of traditions and assumptions. In sociological practice one can assume almost nothing about the audience's research sophistication. The effective practitioner must be able to simplify without distortion, make concepts and findings accessible and interesting, and help clients make their own interpretations about the meaning of findings.

A word of caution here. There are a good many people who believe that the kinds of communication skills needed are similar to those needed for effective teaching. My own experience leads me to disagree with such an assumption. The teacher-student relationship is quite different than the consultant-client relationship. Clients, even when they are involved in a partially educational process with a consultant, do not like being treated like an undergraduate student. Consultants must usually determine the particular skills and knowledge of the client that can form a basis for mutual respect and allow the research venture to be a joint one rather than the consultant being in a superior position

to the poor, dumb client (student). Of course, the power relationship is also quite different and I've known a number of instances where university professors have failed to appreciate that difference in power balance and found themselves in considerable difficulty on their contracts and with their clients.

#### PROCESS SKILLS

Essentially, what I've been describing are a set of process skills that the sociological practitioner must have to be effective that are not required of the productive scholar. First, in determining the focus of research the social science practitioner must be able to listen attentively and work inductively to help clients figure out what kind of information they need, for what purposes, and with what implications. Such discussions require accomplished interpersonal skills and, because those discussions often take place in group settings, require the ability to work well with groups. Human relations skills and discussion facilitation abilities are key.

Second, and closely related to the first point, the effective sociological practitioner will usually be people-oriented, able to work with and get along well with a variety of types of people under difficult conditions. Such qualities as patience, tolerance, empathy, and self-confidence allow the effective practitioner to be in touch with the needs and interests of the people with whom one is working.

Third, the skilled sociological practitioner is politically sophisticated. This means being able to recognize politics in all of its many guises and disguises, being able to work with political ambiguities, and being able to assess political liabilities and implications while maintaining personal and professional integrity.

Fourth, the sociological practitioner needs communication skills to reach a variety of people and different audiences in order to help them understand the nature of sociological findings and methods. This means being able to simplify complex issues and findings while discussing those issues and findings without technical jargon. It also means being able to make decisions about when it is appropriate to introduce jargon and explain that jargon to the audience or clients with whom one is working.

These are the skills of the social science professional. They are not skills that are essential for productive social science scholarship. They are skills that are essential for the effective social science practitioner.

The scholar produces knowledge in the disciplinary tradition. The scholar searches for truth. The practitioner applies that knowledge according to professional standards. The practitioner's quest is for useful information that meets the needs and interests of those in search of that information.

But, you may say, these professional skills are by no means unique to social science. What, then, does sociology uniquely contribute to professional practice?

It is fairly obvious that subject matter specialists can make an unique contribution in situations where their expertise is needed and appropriate. For my purposes, however, I won't address the contributions of the subject matter (e.g., criminal justice) specialist. Beyond those substantive specialties and the knowledge they encompass there are some general perspectives that sociologists bring to their work as social science practitioners that, I think, make them particularly effective in assisting human service and social action programs in planning, evaluation, and policy analysis purposes. For the sake of brevity and illustration I'll discuss only three of these general principles and understandings.

#### *The Nature of Human Perception*

The social construction of reality is a fundamental principle of sociology. It is so fundamental that sociologists often take their appreciation of the role of human perception in defining reality for granted. From the very first introductory courses in sociology we learn about the ways in which people define situations and therefore mold reality according to their social definitions. The perceptual nature of social reality and all that that implies becomes second nature by the time the sociologist completes the socialization process through graduate school.

When I first began doing consulting work I was often caught off guard when I found how few people outside the discipline

share this appreciation of the social construction of reality. Most people believe that there is a reality that can be determined quite apart from the perceptions of people in a particular social situation. Indeed, many people believe that the perceptions of people in a particular situation should be avoided in the conduct of research so as not to confuse one's search for *real* reality.

Yet, in program after program, in consulting experience after consulting experience, I have found that one of the key contributions I can make is to help people understand how social constructions and human perceptions shape the nature of the situation and the experience of the people in that situation. A simple example will suffice. As I am writing this I am working on an agricultural extension planning project in nine countries in the Caribbean. The major issue in the project from a research point of view concerns determining under what conditions farmers can be induced to grow certain crops in certain ways. In a recent discussion with an economist who has considerable prestige in the region he made the point that the whole thing came down to a matter of profit. If crops could be grown at a profit then farmers would grow the crops. He wanted the planning project to focus on a set of experiments, mostly agronomic in nature, that would determine what agricultural practices would produce a profit. Nowhere in his conceptualization or equation was there a place to answer the question (or ask it) what "profit" means to individual families in the Caribbean. Profit cannot be an absolute value. What constitutes "profit" is socially constructed and defined by people in a particular sociocultural and socioeconomic environment.

The same point can actually be made about any kind of human "improvement." Since all human service and social action programs with which I have had contact are aiming to "improve" something or other, there is a good deal of need for sociologists to help people who plan these programs understand the perceptual and relative nature of human "improvement."

*The Social Systems Perspective*

A second fundamental principle in sociology is that people organize themselves into sociocultural systems which are greater than the sum of their individual human parts. That is, those sociocultural systems constitute structures which exist in complex patterns that have a life beyond the individual lives of participants in the system. The corollary of this sociological understanding is that the people in a particular sociocultural system are affected by that system. Their attitudes and behavior must be understood as a function of the socioeconomic and sociocultural system within which they live. We further understand that the parts of these systems are interdependent such that a change in one part of the system has implications throughout the system. Moreover, these systems are embedded in socialization practices and social structures that are not easily tractable or amenable to change in predictable directions.

The implication of all of this is that it is often more efficient and more effective to adapt programs and plans to sociocultural systems and the people in those systems than to try to change the people themselves. Perhaps the most prominent sociological spokesman for this point of view has been Amitai Etzioni whose writings for the last several years have been permeated with the idea that policy makers should focus on manipulable variables and that programs are more manipulable than people, that the programs should be adapted to people rather than trying to adapt people to programs.

A couple of examples of how this principle has affected my own work may serve to illustrate what I mean. An evaluation of a maternal and child program in Appalachia showed that for a variety of sociocultural reasons women in the hills did not come into the town to visit clinics. For years a variety of techniques had been used to try to get these women to change their behavior and come to town to visit maternity clinics. Our research findings indicated a variety of ways that paraprofessionals could be used to go into the hills where the women lived, thus taking the health education to them, instead of trying to change their patterns and get them to come to town. There are a large number of corresponding examples where policy makers have discovered that it

is cheaper and more effective to take programs to people than to try to change their patterns and make them come to the programs.

Another example is from the project I am currently working on. In the Caribbean a large number of farmers are part-time farmers. Extension workers, however, are hired as civil servants to work nine to five. The farmers tend to work in their fields before nine and after five. Should the farmer's behavior be changed so that farmers are available when extension agents want to work, or should the extension service be adapted to the patterns of the farmers? A sociological practitioner assisting in such a social policy analysis is able to be quite helpful.

The third and final example concerns a common problem in programs, one I have encountered more times than I care to remember. It's that fundamental problem of personality conflicts. In my experience, consultants with a psychological orientation usually make recommendations concerning a variety of ways for helping people work out their conflicts through some kind of therapeutic process. As a sociologist, believing that it is easier to change a program rather than the people in the program, I typically seek structural solutions to personnel and personality conflicts, solutions that do not require the individuals in those situations to change their personalities; rather, structural solutions seek ways of managing the conflict and organizing the situation in such a way that the functions of conflict and the frequency of conflict are reduced.

When people with whom I am working find out I am a sociologist they often tell me that they figure sociologists must be experts on how to manipulate people. I respond that we are experts in knowing how difficult it is to manipulate people and therefore emphasize the importance of adapting social actions and policies to fit people rather than trying to adapt the people to fit the social policies. The emphasis in criminal justice on reducing opportunities for crime rather than reducing the tendencies of juveniles to be delinquent is an example of this sociological perspective in action.

*Sensitivity to Group Norms*

The third sociological principle that is particularly helpful in the conduct of evaluation research and policy analysis is that all groups develop norms of behavior. When a certain behavior has been identified by policy makers as a problem, the sociologist asks if the offending behavior is considered normative by people in the target population. For example, in the last section I mentioned that many of the farmers in the Caribbean are part-time farmers. In Montserrat, for example, over 75 percent of all farmers are part-time farmers. Such a statistic means that part-time farming is the norm rather than the exception. The realization that it has become normative for farmers to seek outside income from other sources of employment has serious implications for extension activities and agricultural policies in general. In the past it has been the policy of extension service to serve only full-time farmers. That policy is clearly out of tune with the normative practices of farmers.

A quite different example comes from an evaluation of foster group homes in Minnesota. The major problem being experienced in that group home program was juvenile runaways. Over 80 percent of all juveniles ran away at least once from the group home in which they had been placed. On interviewing the juveniles we found that running away was not considered by them to be deviant but rather quite normative behavior. Indeed, their peers expected them to run away at least once simply as a way to establish their independence. In many homes running away was a condition for group acceptance. The statistic for second offenders as runaways was only 20 percent. In addition, the average length of time away from the home per runaway was only 48 hours. These data made it possible to informally and unofficially change the perspective on the runaway problem. Instead of moving to the proposed system of standardized punishment and severe penalties for running away no matter how long and no matter what the circumstance, the program policy makers and the group home parents decided to differentiate sharply between the initial runaway event which had become normative and subsequent departures without authorization.

*Training for Sociological Practice*

I hope it is clear that I believe that there is a sociological perspective which can be extremely valuable to policy makers and people who fund, work in, and develop human service and social action programs. To make this sociological perspective accessible to policy makers, however, will require sociological practitioners who have skills that go beyond pure scholarship within the discipline. The training in most graduate schools of sociology has been aimed almost entirely at scholarship and recently, in some instances, at teaching sociology. We are just beginning to develop a notion of sociology as a profession which can be practiced outside of universities.

Human service and social action programs are the defining characteristics of our times. Concerted and organized action for human change in social control is the defining characteristic of post industrial society. Practicing professional sociologists can make a major contribution to the increased effectiveness of human service and social action programs. Doing so will require a clear recognition that sociological practice is different than sociological scholarship and that special training programs are needed for each.

## REFERENCES

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