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CONTEMPORARY CRISES

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SOCIAL PROBLEMS OR SOCIAL SOLUTIONS? THE ROLE OF PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY IN ADDRESSING CONTEMPORARY CRISES

Most every sociology department in the United States has a course entitled, “Social Problems.” Few, if any, have a course entitled “social solutions.” This orientation – whether in our teaching or in our research – suggests a crisis in the relevancy of our discipline in solving the many issues facing local communities, regions, our nation, and our world. Are we to be content in just analyzing and describing the myriad of problems facing our society, or are we to become more engaged in working with others in seeking solutions to these problems? This is at the core of discussions around public sociology over the past decade.

We should not assume that producing **quality sociological research** or being objective in our research precludes working on innovative solutions in addressing society’s challenges. The same research and analytical skills that allow us to gain an understanding of social problems can be used to go a step further in exploring solutions. We should not be satisfied with studying what is, but rather be part of the process of exploring *what can be*.

There certainly is a tradition of emersion in local communities in sociological research. The rich ethnographies of the Chicago School sociologists in the 1920s and 1930s, the now classic study of Boston’s North End Italian community by Herbert Gans (1965), or Robert Courtney Smith’s recent study of Mexican immigrants in New York City (2006) are certainly examples of the connection of our field to day-to-day community life. There have been prominent examples of sociologists getting involved in high-profile research that informs and ultimately helps to shape policy. James Coleman’s work on education and Daniel

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Moynihan's work on welfare are prominent and controversial examples of such work.

However, if academic sociologists step away from an exclusive focus on doing research for publication in peer reviewed journals, and move toward more policy work or activist work, they start walking onto thinner ice in terms of support from their discipline and the academic departments that enforce the standards of that discipline. Signposts mark the dangers. Colleagues raise questions about how "balanced" a researcher is as the researcher works with community organizations in seeking solutions to local problems. In tenure and promotion policies, departments do not always value sociological research work with non-academic agencies. Although a report to a local advocacy organization might ultimately be used to improve the lives of thousands of community residents, it is still the peer-reviewed article published in a sociological journal that is the gold standard of our discipline. The fact that the journal article might ultimately be read by just 200 fellow sociologists and not thousands outside of the field is not seen as relevant.

This standard is established formally and informally in interactions by graduate students and junior faculty with senior colleagues. In their formative years in the discipline, untenured faculty are told to "wait until you get tenure," before you do community-engaged work or any more activist sociology. More often than not sociologists heeding this advice remain in this more discipline-bound and passive mode after tenure.

This historical conservatism in the field often pushed prospective activist scholars to the margins of the field. While Jane Addams had a working relationship with male sociologists at the new University of Chicago, there were times when it was easier to develop and carry out research outside the boundaries of academic sociology. Her participatory action research on the causes of infant mortality in Chicago's immigrant slums led to local and national policies that saved thousands of lives (Deegan 1990). Community organizer and Industrial Areas Foundation founder Saul Alinsky demonstrated intellectual prowess in his brief stint in the university, but ultimately he found working outside the constraints of academic disciplines to be a more productive avenue when pursuing significant community change. Alinsky was free in his criticism of academics. In a 1972 interview in his

familiar earthy style he remarked, “Asking a sociologist to solve a problem is like prescribing an enema for diarrhea.” (Norden 1972),

The marginalization of Harvard-educated sociologist W.E.B. DuBois is another case in point. Partially a reflection of racism through much of the 20th century and partially a result of the fact that his scholarship focused on how to confront racial inequality in the United States, DuBois has not always been part of the sociological canon presented to undergraduates and graduate students. This has changed in recent years, but nevertheless reflects the discomfort with activist researchers that the field has displayed during much of its history.

Rather than falling victim to the same problems-oriented approach for which I am criticizing the discipline, I am suggesting a re-orientation of the field to embrace engaged and activist scholarship. Since Michael Burawoy’s presidency of the American Sociological Association in 2004 and his subsequent articles and speeches outlining and promoting public sociology, the connection of our field to non-academic worlds has received increased attention (Burawoy 2005; Nyden et al. 2011). I am not proposing that all sociologists engage in public scholarship, but rather I am suggesting that the field recognize and embrace this orientation as one of the many intellectual and research approaches available to us. Even more specifically, I am focusing on the promise and benefit of collaborative research – a research approach that involves non-academic partners at all facets of the research enterprise from conceptualization of research questions to the gathering of data and the authorship of research outcomes.

Collaborative University-Community Research

Involving non-academics in the research process is nothing new. The long history of what has variously been called, action research, participatory action research, and community-based participatory action research, has involved cooperation among trained researchers and community members in various ways. (Park 1993; Stoecker et al. 2003) Over the past 35 years, my own experience has been shaped through direct participation in collaborative research projects, coordination of the Policy Research Action Group (PRAG) a Chicago-based university-

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community research network from 1989 to 2004,¹ and, for the past 15 years, directing the Center for Urban Research and Learning (CURL), a university-based collaborative research center at Loyola University Chicago.

At the heart of all of this collaborative research is the premise that knowledge is produced both inside and outside the university. It is assumed that a more effective way of developing this knowledge is to combine both sets of knowledge. Finally, it is understood that combining these sets of knowledge necessarily involves engaging the producers of both sets of knowledge directly in the research process.

Community-based knowledge includes the everyday lived experience in communities, organizations, government agencies, social change movements, and other places outside of university settings. This can include the sum-total of knowledge of present and past members of a community-based organization; this can include detailed knowledge of both past efforts to bring about community change and perspectives on why advocacy initiatives in the past have succeeded or failed. It includes an awareness of complex social interactions, **community** histories, and individual histories.

In some cases community-based knowledge includes innovative ideas about solutions to address problems facing the community or a service-delivery program, but not necessarily an understanding of how effective these interventions have been. On the community side, systematic collection of data, routine evaluation, and comparisons to other models in other communities or organizations, are not always top priorities. There may be an awareness of problems but not the complete analytical tool set to solve them. In still other cases the community may not be aware of problems or challenges that are affecting them, or will be affecting them. Some environmental hazards or emerging demographic shifts are examples of two such looming challenges.

University knowledge is acquired by mining existing information and data from social and natural worlds. Academics use methodologies and standards established in their respective fields in collecting and analyzing data. Theoretical frameworks exist with which to shape research

¹ More information on PRAG (which is not longer active) is provided in Nyden et al 1993 and on PRAG's web site, www.luc.edu/curl/prag.

questions and complete analysis. Significant resources are available to complete this research within the university. These resources include labor (faculty and students), research centers, computers, information centers, and a collection of experts in a broad variety of disciplines that can be called upon as needed. University-based knowledge also benefits from a broad comparative view that may involve contrasting one community with another, one city with another, or one nation with another.

This control of the means of knowledge production can be construed in such a way to make us believe that universities are *the* place where knowledge is produced. Over the decades, the accumulation of research results, the development and fine-tuning of theory, and the archiving of this knowledge into journals, annual conference proceedings, and other discipline-based repositories, has created the impression that we in academia are the sole-producers of knowledge; we are the experts. And even though much of our knowledge and much of our information has been drawn by mining this information from sources outside of the academy, the fact that we have produced the reports and have organized the knowledge into disciplines, has come to mean that we in academia are the knowledgeable ones. Sociology has been no exception to this trend in claiming expertise.

In many disciplinary circles efforts at bringing non-academics into research teams is seen as a dangerous proposition, since it is seen as potentially compromising the quality of our research. It is feared that it will bias our view. Quite to the contrary, the lack of involvement by those outside of the field in our research endeavors *may produce blind spots and oversights* in our work that might reduce the quality of our research. The lack of routine contact with publics outside the discipline may drastically slow down our awareness of emerging issues and our discipline's ability to respond to research needs in addressing those issues.

Even where we are not talking about direct involvement of publics in the research process, the absence on ongoing, routinized relationships with publics is problematic in terms of getting existing sociological knowledge into the hands of people who can use it to inform their work and craft new policies. The National Institutes of Health have already recognized that there is a crisis in the communication between basic

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“bench” researchers and practitioners delivering health care to patients. There has been as much as a 15-year lag in this translation process, a lag that has life and death implications. While a lag in getting sociological research into the hands of publics may not routinely have such dire implications, the lack of connections can delay information that can improve the quality of life in local communities or increase organizational efficiency in committing resources to educational, health, employment, or other sectors where they can have the most impact.

The separation of university from community knowledge reduces the quality of research and its impact. It restricts the different perspectives that can be utilized in understanding issues. In our own research, many a time community partners see patterns in the data that we as PhD sociologists do not see. Our separation from community knowledge may blind us from existing practices in local communities that might be the basis for solutions to pressing problems. These are practices that may not be on the radar screen of regional or national policy-makers, but which could be documented and communicated if there were better linkages between sociologists and community leaders and members.

The Center for Urban Research and Learning

The Loyola University Chicago Center for Urban Research and Learning (CURL) was created explicitly to close the gap between university and community in the day-to-day research enterprise in the university. Growing out of the success of a citywide partnership among multiple universities and many more community-based organizations, advocacy groups, and other non-profits, CURL was created at Loyola in 1996 as an interdisciplinary center to work closely with a broad range of community partners. While the sociology department, its faculty, and its students have been well represented in the center’s work, at the same time CURL has broken down boundaries between departments.

When the community is involved in conceptualizing and shaping new research projects, they do not generally define themselves as a “sociological,” “psychological,” “business,” or “legal” research project. The process produces research projects that reflect the holistic view of communities and community organizations. The holistic view of community partners naturally creates interdisciplinary projects. This process has produced interdisciplinary research where years of university

presidents, provosts, and deans have had difficulty in getting stronger working relationships across disciplines. Inside universities more often than not disciplines are referred to as “academic silos.”

CURL involves community partners at all stages of research, from the conceptualization and methodology design to data collection, data analysis, report writing, and dissemination of results. In essence, we have added chairs at the “research table” and have invited community partners to join us. A major asset of academic life is the opportunity to bounce ideas off of colleagues in informal conversations in the hallway or at more formal brown-bag lunches, seminars, or conferences. New research emerges out of these conversations and emerging research projects get fine-tuned. Colleagues can provide guidance on past research with which you may not be familiar; they may suggest better, more effective, ways of designing surveys, interview questions, and other methodological tools. They also may be brutally honest and suggest other avenues where they see weaknesses.

Community-based colleagues are capable of showing the same critical eye. Indeed, one of the key skills of many community leaders and community organizers is the ability to question the status quo or the way things “have always been done” in a government agency. While their knowledge base may not be the same as researchers within the academy, community leaders have complementary perspectives and experiences that can improve the quality of many research projects. They also may be familiar with past research or past initiatives in their communities or their organizations with which the researcher is not familiar. As is the case with faculty colleagues, community partners also have the ability to be brutally honest.

A Case Study in Collaborative Research: Creating Stable Diverse Communities

A closer examination of a collaborative research project focusing on what produces stable, racially and ethnically diverse communities can serve as an illustration of this community-engaged approach and the value of its outcomes. This particular project was started in the mid-1990s by the multi-university Policy Research and Action Group and was completed with assistance from CURL. It grew out of a series of “think tank” meetings among a working group of more than 20 academics,

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community leaders, and fair housing advocates. The questions we were tackling were: 1) how to address Chicago's continued high-levels of racially and ethnically segregated neighborhoods, and 2) how to moderate the displacement of low-income, families of color as Chicago neighborhoods experienced reinvestment.

Initially the working group focused on the high levels of segregation in the city as measured by the dissimilarity index. The statistic compares residential patterns of two races (or ethnicities) and indicates how many people of one race would have to move to another neighborhood to produce communities or census tracts with equal proportions of each racial (or ethnic) group. Chicago has historically been among the most segregated cities in the U.S. and in the late 1990s had the second highest levels of black-white segregation in the U.S. and the highest levels of black-Hispanic segregation of the 100 largest U.S. cities.²



Community Pride: Mexican Flag -Chicago

² In 2000 Chicago's white-black dissimilarity index was 82.5 compared to the 100 largest city average of 53.9. The similar figure for blacks-Hispanics was 81.4 compared to the 100 city average of 44.3, making it the most segregated large city on this dimension. (Lewis Mumford Center 2002) These figures reflect the trends of the 1990s when we were doing our research.

It was not until the second meeting that one of the community participants stated, “I really don’t care where Chicago ranks in a segregation index. Whether it is number one, number five, or number ten, it doesn’t make any difference to me or my community. What I care about are solutions. There are a few diverse neighborhoods out there that have been diverse for twenty or more years. Why?” What in hindsight was an obvious question, at the time was not so obvious. From Gunnar Myrdal’s *American Dilemma* (1944) to Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton’s *American Apartheid* (1993), heavy emphasis was placed on describing the dimensions of this country’s racial divide with only limited attention to solutions – proposed or already in-place at local levels.

What this community member of the working group was demanding was research that could uncover innovative local practices already in place in neighborhoods around U.S. cities – practices that could serve as the basis for changes in: 1) other communities seeking to preserve diversity; or 2) national policy initiatives aimed at creating sustainable diverse communities. She was also asking for something that she could use to guide specific community organizing efforts. The two-year research project that emerged out of these working group meetings moved away from sociology’s traditional social-problems approach toward a more social-solutions approach. While both academic and community partners alike were not naïve enough to think this was an easy task, we did recognize that looking at the “half-full glass” – the successful communities – was a more productive research avenue.

In identifying resources to support a national research project on this topic, it was community partners and not the academics that had the knowledge and professional connections to federal government agencies. The Leadership Council for Metropolitan Open Communities, a regional fair housing agency that had been created following the 1966 Chicago open housing marches led by Dr. Martin Luther King, had the ongoing connections with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) that led to the award of \$80,000 to a national study.

After initial analysis of census data to identify clusters of stable racially and ethnically census tracts in the top 30 U.S. cities, we selected

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14 neighborhoods in nine cities to study.³ A collaborative team of one or more researchers and one or more community partners was established in each city to complete a report on factors creating stable diversity in the communities we had identified through our initial census data. Although they had made the decision to fund the research in the first place, the policy and research staff at HUD expressed surprise at the high quality of research reports that were produced by this collaborative university-community research process.

Guided by a national research team of academics, community leaders, and advocacy organization leaders, the project produced a series of city-based reports and overall analysis that was published in HUD's policy journal *Cityscape*. As a free, national journal published and distributed by the U.S. government and also fully available on-line, by conservative estimates, the research report has been used by over 10,000 researchers, activists, and policy makers since its publication. This is an audience much larger and broader than would have been reached by a discipline-based publication.

The researchers found that in all communities, there were attractive physical characteristics that attracted and kept a broad mix of residents in the diverse communities.⁴ In Southeast Seattle it was spectacular views of Mt. Rainier. In Chicago's northern lakefront communities it was access to beaches and views of Lake Michigan. In Philadelphia's West Mount Airy it was the presence of modestly priced "mini-mansions," large, older houses that were affordable to moderate-income households. The presence of social seams, places where people routinely came in contact with the community's diverse population, were apparent in all communities. These includes parks as well as shopping districts.

³ "Stable diverse" census tracts were defined as the 15 percent of the census tracts in a given city that came closest to the city's overall racial and ethnic proportions in both 1980 and 1990. More details on the methodology is provided in Nyden et al. 1998.

⁴ The full report, including the fourteen community case studies and the overall analysis, is available on-line (Nyden et al. 1998).



Argyle Street El Station-Chicago

Since diverse communities are often viewed as unstable or “changing” neighborhoods by outsiders, extra efforts are often made to promote economic development. This takes the form of housing development that includes both market-rate and affordable housing. It also includes business development by advertising the diverse customer base. In some communities, leaders noted that when national chains moved in, the new chain stores reported higher revenue levels compared to other stores in the chain.

We did make a distinction between two types of diverse communities, however. *Diverse-by-design communities* were communities that were more consciously developed out of civil rights and fair housing efforts of the 1960s. *Diverse-by-circumstance communities* were neighborhoods that were created through a less conscious process of: influx of immigrant groups, gentrification stalled by a poor real estate market, residential transition because of an aging population, and development of affordable housing in the community. Community-based organizations provided key roles in all communities.

In the case of diverse-by-design communities, a number of organizations were directly involved in creating and sustaining diversity. These included ecumenical groups bringing homogeneous religious congregations together to promote diversity, as well as community-based organizations that saw their primary purpose as sustaining diversity. In

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diverse-by-circumstance communities these organizations were often coalitions of organizations representing separate groups, particularly separate immigrant groups. One such coalition is present in Chicago's Uptown community, a diverse-by-circumstance community; the Organization of the Northeast (ONE) is an umbrella organization that includes over 30 mutual aid societies, schools, religious congregations, and businesses. Their motto is "We are ONE we are many."

Over the years, since the original project was completed, it has been used by many community-based organizations around the country to explore ways of using diversity as an asset rather than as a problem to be managed. The data and analysis contained in the 14 case studies published in *Cityscape* has provided ammunition to local leaders and organizations defending their communities as stable diverse communities that can serve as positive models for an increasingly diverse U.S. population, rather than unstable communities headed toward resegregation. National pro-integration networks, such as the Exchange Congress, welcomed the research as affirmation of their decades-long efforts to have diverse communities viewed as communities of the future rather than as anomalies created by a few aging civil rights activists.

CURL is currently at the early stages of doing a follow up of this early HUD-funded research that will include 2000 and 2010 census data. In keeping with the solutions-oriented, glass-half-full perspective of this collaborative research, particular attention is being paid to the integrative function of social seams. These can be locations for just passing contact, but contact that establishes that racial and ethnic diversity is normal. These can also be locations for debate, disagreement, understanding, and new ways of thinking and doing. Such places can be schools, community-based organizations, public meetings hosted by local government, and other opportunities for civic engagement.

CONCLUSIONS

Strengthening the relationship between sociologists and the publics – publics that can both inform and benefit from our research -- can only strengthen the relevance and vibrancy of our field. On the one hand, this represents an uphill battle within the field because it challenges the traditionalists who believe that scholarship insulated from influences outside the discipline produces higher quality research. On the other

hand, there is room in the field for multiple research approaches. We can only benefit from inclusion of collaborative university-community research in our repertoire of research approaches.

Pursuing stronger links with publics is essentially a democratizing process. Increasing numbers of graduate students and junior faculty are showing interest in these expanded approaches. By recognizing innovative ways of working with communities and organizations outside the traditional disciplinary boundaries, we are opening up more avenues for scholarship and teaching. The reality is that many sociologists already do such work in their local communities. Bringing these sociologists into the center of the life of our discipline represents a more inclusive approach in the research and teaching taking place in our field.

In every walk of life there is a tendency to establish who are the “top leaders,” or “the leading experts.” Indeed even within the growth of public sociology -- a movement that comfortably can embrace grassroots projects of benefit to local communities -- there are efforts to define who are the “leaders” are in the field. A case in point is recent book on public sociology entitled, *Public Sociology: Fifteen Eminent Sociologists Debate Politics and the Profession in the Twenty-first Century*. (Clawson et al.2007) Even Michael Burawoy, the ASA president who helped set in motion the move toward more public sociology and the integration of this work into the sociological mainstream, observed that while he has helped to make the case for public sociology, it is others in the field who are actually *doing it*. Whether it is a sociology faculty member working on a community-based project with a team of students at a small liberal college or a nationally- coordinated research effort to collect data to inform federal policy, public sociology represents our field’s “stimulus package” that will help us attract new, creative minds to the field and keep sociology front-and-center in the eyes of the public when they look for guidance in meeting the challenges ahead.

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