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Results of a Practitioner Survey and Comparison with the Themes of Articles Published in the ASA Footnotes: Major Issues Facing the Discipline of Sociology

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Results of a Practitioner Survey and Comparison with the Themes of Articles Published in the ASA *Footnotes:* Major Issues Facing the Discipline of Sociology[*][**]

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on the results of a recent practitioner survey in which respondents were asked to identify the three most important issues facing the discipline of sociology at that time and five years into the future. Respondents were drawn primarily from the Sociological Practice Association and the Sociological Practice section of the American Sociological Association. Responses are discussed both within and across membership affiliations. The authors also compare practitioners' responses to the content of articles published in the ASA *Footnotes* during a comparable period of time. Implications are drawn for the discipline of sociology and for practitioners' involvement in the American Sociological Association as a vehicle for making contributions to the future directions of the discipline.

Introduction

Sociology is no stranger to change or controversy. As a discipline born in the social and political changes of the French Revolution and its aftermath, sociology has continued to struggle with issues of identity, visibility and future direction. A recent article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* claims that sociology is at a vulnerable crossroads, confronting questions about its identity, central focus and where it is headed (Coughlin 1992). Focusing on a major source of tension in the discipline, the emphasis on "basic" knowledge vs. "useful" knowledge, Gollin (1990) contends that the future of sociology as a profession will be very much tied to its perceived social utility rather than its academic standing. He considers the second major issue confronting the profession to be employment opportunities for sociologists. Work outside of academe seems to be viewed as less desirable, thus resulting in practitioners viewing themselves and being viewed by academic sociologists as a "marginal minority." Gollin (1990) believes that the major issues confronting the discipline in the near future are the continuing process of differentiation of interests in the field, the prospect of new interdisciplinary partnerships linking sociologists and other social scientists, and pressures toward becoming a more practice-oriented profession. Focusing on a broader scale, Eitzen (1991) identifies three structural changes in society that, he believes, will result in a "bright" future for sociology and sociologists in the coming decades. These structural changes are the changing racial and gender characteristics of sociologists in academe, resulting in greater diversity; increasing constraints on research funding with the net effect of producing better quality (i.e., more critical and more qualitative) work; and societal and global changes which include the end of the "cold war," ecological crises on a global level, and the transformation of the economy.

In view of the timely interest in these issues, this manuscript reports on an examination of sociological practitioners' views on the most important issues confronting the discipline and compares the issues they identified with the themes of articles published in *Footnotes*, the official "newspaper" of the American Sociological Association. As sociologists whose work is concerned with change, we believe that practitioners are an especially interesting population to ask about the discipline and future directions.

Method and Sample Selection

Two hundred twenty seven respondents, primarily members of two practition-
er groups—the Sociological Practice Association (SPA) and the Sociological
Practice Section of ASA (SP/ASA)—responded to a questionnaire survey con-
taining the following question:

> ... could you give us your ideas about what you see as the *three most*
> *important issues* within the discipline of sociology now [1988] and
> five years into the future [1993]? (If you think they will be the same
> in the future, please note that.)

Questionnaires were mailed to sociological practitioners who resided in the
United States and Canada, using as a sampling frame the directories or member-
ship lists of these different groups available in the Spring of 1988. We sent out a
total of 773 surveys between April and August of 1988. Because some of the
addresses changed between updates of the directories, we estimate that about
seven hundred questionnaires were actually received. The response rate from a
single mailing of the survey was 32 percent.

The Coding Process

The background information for respondents and nonrespondents was de-
rived from the Sociological Practice Association and Sociological Practice/ASA
membership directories available in the Spring and Summer of 1988 and from any
information which respondents provided about themselves on or along with the
questionnaire. The fact that they were asked to include their names at the end of
the questionnaire made it possible for us to identify respondents and non-
respondent members of these associations.

The authors were primarily responsible for coding all data for respondents
and the content of the *Footnotes* articles. Some assistance in tallying background
information for nonrespondents in regard to sex, region and highest degree was
provided by two student assistants.

Coding categories for the open-ended survey question and the *Footnotes*
articles were developed by sampling the content of both data sources and
examining the range and relatedness of the responses. The authors developed the
coding categories together. Coding was generally done by one author with checks
for agreement done by the other. Although no measure of inter-coder reliability

was calculated, we feel that the coding categories and the counts reflect well the content of both the survey question and the *Footnotes* articles identified as relevant.

Description of Respondents and NonRespondents

In terms of sample characteristics, nearly two-thirds (64%) of our **respondents** are male. Most (60%) live in either the Northeast or the South—about three in 10 respondents in each region. About three fourths (78%) of the respondents list a doctorate in sociology as their highest degree; thirteen percent list an MA in sociology.

In terms of membership affiliation, 42 percent of our **respondents** are members of the SPA, and 36 percent, the SP/ASA. Fifteen percent are members of both groups. The remaining respondents include independent practitioners (4%) and some members of the Sacramento Applied Sociology Association (3%).

Just over one half (53%) of the **respondents** work in academic institutions. About 12 percent work for the government—state/local (8%) or federal (4%), one in ten work for nonprofit organizations (11%) or in business/industry (10%). The rest are self-employed practitioners (9%), are employed in "other" settings (2%) or are retired (3%).

An analysis of the **nonrespondents** indicates they are very similar to the respondents in terms of key demographic characteristics. That is, they are more likely to be male than female; to live in the Northeast or the South; and to list a doctorate in sociology as their highest degree. They are also similar in their work setting with the majority employed in academic institutions. Membership affiliation among **nonrespondents** is skewed somewhat more toward the SPA than is true among respondents, with 49% of nonrespondents belonging to the SPA, 41% to the SP/ASA, and 10% to both groups.

Results

Practitioners' Views

More than three-fourths (78%, N=178) of the respondents gave codable responses to the question about the major issues confronting the discipline into the 1990s. The large majority of those who provided codable answers either said

their answer would be the same for 1993 (58%) or did not provide a response for 1993 (18%). We interpreted the latter to be equivalent to the former. The practitioners we surveyed provided 482 codable responses to the question about the three most important issues confronting the discipline, or an average of 2.7 responses per respondent. In coding, we considered all answers to be of equal importance and did not distinguish them by order of mention.

In order to draw some comparison between practitioners' views and those of the ASA Executive staff, we examined the content of articles published in *Footnotes* between January, 1988 and May, 1992. *Footnotes* is the only ASA publication received by all members. As such, one might hypothesize that it would address issues of general interest to the membership at large, including questions about sociology's identity, image/visibility and future direction, as well as issues of interest to specific segments of its audience (e.g., practitioners). We chose these beginning and end points because our survey was conducted in the Spring and Summer of 1988, and because we asked respondents to project their answers into the early 1990s. Our end point for the printed medium was the most recent issue of *Footnotes* available at the time of our analysis.

To examine the data from both sources, the survey and the ASA *Footnotes*, we identified 35 possible coding categories. To facilitate analysis, we combined these coding categories into seven groupings for the survey responses and nine for the articles in *Footnotes*. These groupings and the categories which comprise them are identified in Tables 1 and 2 respectively. The complete list of coding categories is given in the Appendix table. The Appendix table should be used in conjunction with Tables 1 and 2 for a fuller explanation of the contents of each grouping. The numbers in parenthesis under each grouping in the tables refer to codes identified in the Appendix table.

Table 1 contains data for all 482 codable survey responses. The data in this table are organized both by response and by the percentage of practitioners in each membership group mentioning the response. Responses are listed in rank order in the total column, from the most to the least popular based on the number of mentions each response category received *by practitioners overall*. The remaining table headings display the data *separately by practitioner membership* in the SPA, the SP/ASA, in both groups, or in neither (an "other" category containing members of the Sacramento Association of Applied Sociologists and any practitioners referred to us, upon request, by other survey respondents).

As Table 1 indicates, three groups of issues rank highest overall. The *most popular* one was the mention of **dealing with some specific social issue or problem either at the macro or micro level** (29% of responses). Included here

are responses such as reversal of the arms race, the trend of drug abuse and dropping out of school; using sociological principles to protect the environment, dealing with the problems of homelessness, AIDS, the need for services for our aging population; health policy and the delivery of health care services; and the usefulness of sociology in organizational contexts and in daily life.

The *second most popular grouping* focused on **issues pertinent to the discipline** (20.5% of responses). Mentioned were the issues of survival, funding, public awareness/credibility of sociology, status/prestige/pay of sociologists, doing relevant research, and defining the discipline with greater clarity. The *third most popular grouping* included a variety of **career or professional concerns** such as job skills and opportunities, attracting new sociologists, marketing sociologists and sociology, the issue of certification/licensure of sociologists, education/training of students and identity as sociologists (19.5% of mentions). The percentages of the remaining four categories of mentions were considerably lower, varying from a high of approximately 12% to 3%. (See Table 1.)

When the results are broken down by respondents' practice affiliation(s), the *order* of the top three issue groupings identified by members of the SPA and the SP/ASA matches that of the sample as a whole just described, although the pattern varies somewhat. The clear leader issue for SPA respondents was dealing with problems at the macro or micro level (38%), followed, at some distance, by issues pertinent to the discipline (17%) and career or professional concerns (17%). For members of the SP/ASA, the same three groupings ranked highest and were virtually indistinguishable as choices (23%, 23% and 22% respectively).

The top mentioned groupings vary somewhat from the patterns described above when we consider the responses given by members of both groups or by other practitioners. Those who are members of *both* the SPA and the SP/ASA were most likely to mention dealing with disciplinary issues (30.5%). This was followed by career or professional concerns (27%), how sociological work is/ should be done and the expansion of practice and the relationship between academic sociology and practice (12% each). As indicated, respondents who are members of *both* SPA and SP/ASA (as opposed to membership in one group only) are different in that their primary concern is with issues pertinent to the discipline of sociology and their secondary concern is with career or professional issues. It might be hypothesized that their membership in both groups, as well as their responding to a survey of this nature, reflects their somewhat more active day-to-day involvement with topics and issues relevant to the discipline of sociology and to its future.

For the practitioners in the "other" category, "dealing with problems" commanded 40% of the mentions, followed by how sociological work is/should be done (20%) and mention of specific areas of sociology/theoretical perspectives (13%). However, the small number of practitioners who fell into these membership categories does not make a strong basis for comparison with the *Footnotes* articles.

Comparison with *Footnotes* Articles

In the second part of this investigation, we compare practitioners' responses with those issues thought to be important enough to be included as articles in *Footnotes* between January, 1988 and May, 1992. We identified 126 articles or themes as relevant to the discipline and its future from 44 issues of *Footnotes*.

As Table 2 indicates, the majority (73%) of these articles reflect five of the seven groupings of issue categories identified by practitioners in Table 1, with 56% of the *Footnotes* articles falling under only two headings: disciplinary concerns (29%) [second mentioned by practitioners overall] and career or professional concerns (28%) [third mentioned by practitioners overall]. The most popular category of concerns identified by practitioners, dealing with societal and other issues or "problems," was discussed in only four percent (N=5) of the articles.

Approximately 27% of the articles we examined fell into one of four other categories: issues related to the status of women or other minorities (10%), international issues (7%), organizational trends within sociology (4%), and "other" issues (6%). This last category includes sociologists as activists and the quality/influence of journals and sociological networking/interaction. (See Table 2.)

Summary

As a discipline and profession, sociology has experienced changes as changing circumstances and new challenges have captured the attention of the ASA Executive staff and the membership. Just as the character of the ASA membership has changed—by gender, race, ethnicity and career choices/paths (academic vs. practice)—so have some of the issues confronting the discipline now and in the future.

Several areas of concern emerged as the three issues practitioners saw as most important within the discipline in the late 1980s into the 1990s. These included the discipline's need to 1) use sociological principles and theories to help solve a variety of societal and organizational problems, 2) deal with a variety of disciplinary concerns, and 3) work on matters pertaining to jobs, marketing sociologists, licensure/certification, and training. These three groups of issues comprised more than two thirds (69%) of the codable responses given by respondents overall.

The majority of discipline-relevant issues covered in *Footnotes* over the four-and-one-half–year period we investigated matched five of the seven coding groups identified from practitioner responses. Two of these received the most attention in *Footnotes*: issues pertinent to the discipline and career or professional concerns. As noted earlier, the most common issue identified by practitioners as needing disciplinary concern—dealing with social problems—was mentioned in only five of the 126 articles/themes selected as relevant. To its credit, however, *Footnotes* did contain other relevant issues the discipline must deal with now and in the future: the status of women and other minorities, the internationalization of sociology and membership/organizational trends.

Conclusions and Implications

1. The vitality and future directions of sociology will involve its coming to terms with some important issues of both a disciplinary (internal) and a societal (external) nature.

2. The practitioners who responded to our survey keyed in rather accurately to both categories of important issues, although the number of times these issues were mentioned varied somewhat by practitioner affiliation.

3. Since *Footnotes* is focused primarily on the discipline, one would *not* expect a high degree of congruence on all issues identified by practitioners. When comparisons were made between the two sources on disciplinary or career concerns, the data showed *Footnotes* to be higher on both: 57% of *Footnotes* articles [disciplinary - 29%, career - 28%] as compared to 40% of the practitioner mentions [disciplinary - 20.5%, career - 19.5%]. In regard to the percentage of mentions about dealing with social issues, the match was poor: *Footnotes* articles - 4.0% vs. practitioners' mentions - 29%.

If the editors and contributors to *Footnotes* want to better reflect the range of issues many practitioners and academicians feel are the most important ones

confronting the discipline into the 1990s, there must be a notable increase in effort (and the percentage of articles) directed toward external, societal or global concerns.

4. This research also has ramifications for retaining and increasing membership in ASA and for increasing practitioner involvement in ASA activities— especially of those practitioners who work completely outside of academe. Currently, only 22% of ASA membership is comprised of people who identify themselves as sociological practitioners. For many of these practitioners, the connection to ASA is probably tenuous, since their primary loyalty is often the field of day-to-day work (business, health care, etc.) rather than the discipline of sociology. This reality makes it difficult to attract practitioners to the ASA and to involve those who are members in its activities, e.g., the annual meeting.

Paying more attention to social problem and practice issues in *Footnotes* and other "mainstream" journals and increasing the number of practice-relevant/ practice-oriented sessions at the annual ASA meeting could help to retain practitioners who are already members of ASA. Changes in both of these areas as well as a reduced introductory membership rate for new (or returned) practitioner members could also be an effective incentive for attracting more practitioners to the ASA.

At the same time, as the national association of sociologists, the ASA can be an increasingly effective vehicle for practitioners to have an impact on the image and direction of the discipline in the future as well as on social problems/issues on a broad level. We believe that increased practitioner involvement in the ASA would also have the effect of reducing the perception of practitioners as a "marginal minority" and increasing the potential for sociological knowledge to become useful knowledge.

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Table 1.

The Three Important Issues Facing the Discipline of Sociology:
Practitioners' Responses Overall and by Practice Group Affiliation

Response Groupings	Total		SPA		SP/ASA		Both		Other[a]	
	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
Dealing with problems at macro or micro level (5)	29.3	(141)	37.9	(83)	23.0	(40)	10.2	(6)	40	(12)
Dealing with issues pertinent to the discipline of sociology (7a-1,8)	20.5	(99)	17.4	(38)	23.0	(40)	30.5	(18)	10	(3)
Career or Professional Concerns (1,2,3)	19.5	(94)	16.9	(37)	22.4	(39)	27.1	(16)	6.7	(2)
How sociological work is/should be done (9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15)	11.8	(57)	12.3	(27)	9.8	(17)	11.9	(7)	20	(6)
Expansion of applied sociology, relationship between academic and applied sociology (4, 10)	8.3	(40)	10.5	(23)	5.2	(9)	11.9	(7)	3.3	(1)
Specific areas of sociology, theoretical perspectives (6)	7.9	(38)	3.2	(7)	14.4	(25)	3.4	(2)	13.3	(4)
Other Mentions (16,19)	2.7	(13)	1.8	(4)	2.3	(4)	5.1	(3)	6.7	(2)
Total codable answers	100.0	(482)	100.0	(219)	100.1	(174)	100.1	(59)	100.0	(26)
# of Respondents		178		83		58		26		11
No response DK	22% of total (49) respondents		13% of SPA (12) members		29% of SP/ASA (24) members		24% of both (8) respondents		31% of other (5)	

[a]This category includes members of the Sacramento Association of Applied Sociologists and referrals.

Table 2.
Articles Reflecting Concerns Within the Discipline
Published in *Footnotes*, January, 1988–May, 1992

Coding Categories[a,b]	%	N
Survey Groupings		
Disciplinary Concerns (7a,b,c,e,g,h,k,m)	28.6	(36)
Career or Professional Concerns (1, 2, 3)	27.8	(35)
How sociology is or should be done (includes ethical issues) (7n, 11, 14)	9.5	(12)
Problems at the macro- and micro levels (5)	3.9	(5)
Expansion of applied sociology, relationship between academic and applied sociology (4, 10)	3.2	(4)
Subtotal	73.0	(92)
Other Mentions		
Women or Minority Status Issues (16)	9.5	(12)
International Issues (17)	7.1	(9)
Organizational Trends (18)	4.0	(5)
Other Issues[c] (19)	6.4	(8)
Subtotal	27.0	(34)
Total	100.0	(126)

[a]Only those coding categories reflecting themes/content in *Footnotes* are noted here.

[b]Two articles were coded into more than one category because they contained two (N=1) or three (N=1) relevant themes.

[c]This category includes sociologists as activists, quality/influence of journals, sociological networking/interaction.

Appendix Table
Codes for Practitioner Survey—
Three Most Important Issues Facing the Discipline

1. Oriented toward career
   a. Skills and job opportunities
   b. Marketing sociologists and sociology
   c. Attracting new sociologists
   d. Licensing/certification

2. Oriented toward identity as sociologists

3. Oriented toward education/training students

4. Communication (or lack of it) between basic and applied sociology/sociologists.

5. Mention of dealing with issues/problems (micro and macro)

6. Mention of specific focuses in Sociology (areas of concentration, theories)

7. Mention of discipline-related issues
   a. Survival of discipline/sociology—(including membership and visibility
   b. Funding
   c. Scientific rigor/defining scholarly work
   d. Informing sociologists about sociology's relevance
   e. Public awareness/public relations/image problems/credibility
   f. Status/Prestige of discipline/pay
   g. Defining the discipline with greater clarity
   h. Disciplinary "failures" or "lacks"
   i. Doing relevant research
   j. Professionalization of field
   k. Growth of sociological practice
   l. Social policy issues
   m. Strengthening sociology's position in the university
   n. Ethical issues/standards

8. Irrelevance of academic sociology to real world problems
   (links of basic research with real world)

9. Integration of theory/concepts/research/practice

10. Recognizing/accepting/expending applied sociology

11. Over-quantification, de-emphasis on quantification

12. Developing useful methodology/qualitative methods/models

13. Updating/applying theory

14. Multi-disciplinary

15. Better analyses

16. Minority issues

17. International issues

18. Organizational trends

19. Other