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Sociology as Advocacy: There are No Neutrals

James H. Laue

I have tried to indicate that sociology's dominant conception of both "the just society" and of intervention approaches to achieve justice are grounded in doctrines of persons and society which stress human fulfillment as the ultimate goal, and rational, data-based social decision processes as the appropriate means.

Now we come to an analysis of sociology's conception of advocacy, which must begin with the assertion that all human social action (including the doing of sociology) is (a) value-laden and (b) political. That is, all action (a) requires choice among alternatives (whether conscious or not, with not deciding being as value-laden as deciding) and (b) exercises power and affects the power configuration of the social systems involved.

I shall argue in this and subsequent sections that doing sociology in all its forms is social intervention, and that all intervention is advocacy of one of three types—of party, outcome or process. Given these conditions, there are no neutrals in terms of their impact on given power configurations, and any sociologist claiming to be "neutral" in anything other than the strictest technical sense is naive, misinformed, and/or devious. The conceptions of intervention and advocacy developed here are intended to be applicable to all forms of discipline-based and professional action.

Social Problems: The Root of Sociological Advocacy

The concept of social problems is at the basis of virtually every contemporary conception of sociological advocacy. "Social problems" is the most firmly established sub-field of sociology, as evidenced by the 25-year existence (and

Excerpts pp. 172–184 from "Advocacy and Sociology," in G. Weber and G. McCall (Eds.), *Social Scientists as Advocates*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1978. Reprinted by permission.

contemporary strength) of the Society for the Study of Social Problems, and its journal, *Social Problems*. Most of the 24 recognized specialities and sections within the American Sociological Association deal with issues or institutional systems that are considered to be problematic for one reason or another—medicine, education, aging, deviance and world conflicts, for example.

The viability of the sub-field of social problems is visible in the comprehensive and useful issue of *Social Problems* devoted to "SSSP as a Social Movement" (Colvard 1976). Hundreds of persons, most of them sociologists, worked in task forces and other research arrangements to analyze the field, the Society, and the journal *Social Problems*. A thorough review of the issue leaves one with a feeling of the vitality of social problems theories, networks and research efforts.

Definitions of social problems abound as textbooks and articles continue to proliferate. While the definitions differ, it is clear that most sociologists agree that there does exist a class of phenomena which may be appropriately labeled "social problems." With Kohn (1976:94) in the *Social Problems* special issue, my preference is for "a broad definition . . . that includes any social phenomena that have a seriously negative impact on the lives of sizable segments of the population."

Different approaches to the etiology of social problems may provide at least implicit guidelines for meliorative attempts by sociologists and other problem-definers. Rubington and Weinberg (1971) analyze five different sociological perspectives on social problems, each with its own practice implications: social pathology, social disorganization, value conflicts, deviant behavior and labelling.

"Social problems," then, is the label for the cluster of ideologies and conceptions that is at the root of sociological efforts at advocacy. two other traditionally valued orientations in sociology provide the vehicle and conception-of-outcomes for responding to social problems (in some rubrics, "solving" them)—social policy and social change.

Social Policy and Social Change: The Pursuit of Justice

There seems to be an emerging consensus in the field that social policy is the most appropriate vehicle for applying sociological understandings to the amelioration of social problems (Freeman and Sherwood, 1970; Etizioni, 1973; Rainwater, 1974; Horowitz and Katz, 1975; Lee, 1976). Social policy research is critical, comprehensive, reality-testing, alternatives-generating, and appropriate for small demonstration or quasi-experimental field projects. Sociologists are among numerous social scientists currently benefiting from the need of governmental agencies to know, to plan, to evaluate and to traffic in expertise.

Freeman and Sherwood's view of the "key role of the social-policy

scientist'' is precisely what would follow from the human fulfillment criterion for justice noted in the first part of this paper:

> The social-policy scientist seeks to mold a social order that is more consistent with human needs and human dignity. He searches for the causes of social problems and attempts to specify the conditions which will achieve a better state of affairs. He views any particular social arrangement as only one of many. Thus, he often challenges the status quo. Perhaps most important, he asks what institutions and what course of action are most likely to meet the needs and enhance the dignity and self-fulfillment of man (1970:22).

Social policy, adequately researched and planned by the sociologist-reformer, is believed to create new social arrangements and to redistribute resources—which, therefore, ''solves social problems,'' i.e., moves the system toward justice. This is social change—the third cornerstone of sociology's predominant conception of its advocacy role.

But sociologies' conceptions of social change still suffer, for the most part, from an Enlightenment hangover. ''Social change'' has a generally positive ring to the sociologist: Bash argues (1977) that in its earliest conception, social change ''was almost unanimously construed as 'progress'.'' Students prepare for careers in social change; agencies promote social change. But social change means the continually shifting patterns (sometimes dramatically so) of distribution of power and resources, and those redistributions may take a variety of forms, ranging from revolution to consciousness-raising and institutional reform on the left, to increased social control, status quo-ante conditions, or political repression on the right.

This is the scenario of advocacy (often implicit) on which sociologists base their activities: research on social problems which interest them, which is expected to influence the development of social policies which will produce desired social change. The uni-directional scenario becomes a loop, of course, when social changes engender new social problems—usually unintentionally—to which policy solutions must be addressed.

Modalities for Sociological Advocacy

Numerous specific activities have been undertaken by sociologists in their advocacy of truth and specific policies. It is important to record at least some of them to indicate the range and diversity of the discipline's practice approaches beyond the traditional teaching, research and publication. They include community organizing, training, passing resolutions, picketing and other

forms of direct action, formation of radical and ascription-based caucuses in professional associations, other internal political action within professional associations (the write-in victory of Alfred McClung Lee for the Presidency of the ASA in 1975 is the best example), signing petitions, making videotapes rather than publishing findings (for greater accessibility to "the people"), conscious institution-building, networking (see Duhl and Volkman, 1970), and lobbying and litigation.

It is clear, then, that sociology is "practiced" in a variety of ways and settings (i.e., the members of the discipline advocate, at the minimum, their ways of viewing social phenomena as "better" or "more truthful"), with wide-ranging conceptions of appropriate outcomes for the host systems. The dominant ways may be summarized as truth-finding (research) and truth-telling (teaching, consultation, testimony and various forms of policy advice). The dominant settings are the university, the professional journal, the private or public agency program, the legislative hearing, and the popular media. The dominant desired outcomes are, in Kelman's (1968:9–10) terms, "the advancement of human welfare, the rationality of social decisions, and the achievement of constructive social change."

How is it possible to organize and understand the wide range of methods and forums utilized by sociologists in expressing their advocacies? We approach the problem in two ways: first, through examining several formulations of the social roles and functions of sociologists and other social scientists, and, second through an analysis of the three types of advocacy—party, outcome, and process.

Social Roles and Functions of Sociologists. Herbert Kelman (1968), 1976–77 chairperson of the Social Psychology Section of the American Sociological Association and a major spokesman for a systematic ethics of social science, proposes three analytically distinct roles in which the social scientist "practices:"

— Producer of social forces (through research findings and other activities that may affect social policy);
— Experimenter and social thinker (the classical scientist/scholar role); and
— Participant in social action ("a role defined in nonprofessional terms, but to which his standing and knowledge as a social scientist have obvious relevance.")

Most sociologists see their "practice" as centering in the first or second roles, whether in the classroom, in publication or in the field.

In another formulation, Gans (1967: 443–448), noting "that the sociologist ought to be more than a detached researcher and that he should participate more

directly in social-action programs,'' delineates the ''role of sociology in planning against poverty'' into four categories that can apply to sociological (or other social science) advocacy regarding any problem:

— Developing a theoretical scheme to guide planning;
— Determining appropriate and feasible goals;
— Program development;
— Evaluation of action programs.

This scheme accurately describes the major roles of the sociologist-practitioner in a program agency, I believe, and is discussed in connection with an analysis of types of advocacy later in this section.

Howard Becker answers the question of what social scientists can contribute to dealing with social problems with the following list of five activities—all of them squarely within the truth-finding/telling modality:

— Sorting out the deferring definitions of the problem:
— Analyzing the assumptions made by the interested parties about the problem;
— Testing various assumptions about the problem against empirical reality;
— Discovering strategic points of intervention in the social structures and processes that produce the problem;
— Suggesting alternative moral points of view from which the problem can be assessed (in Rainwater, 1974: 10–11).

Becker's 1966 S.S.S.P. Presidential Address clearly framed sociology as an advocate for the subordinate and less powerful members of the social systems in which sociologists work (Becker, 1967). His argument may be summarized as a plea for ''evening up the odds,'' especially between client underdogs and service agency overdogs (who, in Becker's words, ''usually have to lie'' because they are responsible for services which ''are seldom as they ought to be''). By explicating the points of view of subordinates, minorities, or deviants, sociologists help move them up the ''hierarchy of credibility.'' With perhaps unintentional symmetry, sociology thus reflects its own underdog status among the disciplines in its practice roles and orientations.

Alvin Gouldner has contributed a wide range of insights to understanding the place and purposes of sociology, notably through *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (1970) and *For Sociology* (1973). He joins the argument with Becker by questioning ''blind advocacy'' for underdogs, and in essence accuses Becker of being a lower-level reformer aiming at the managers of service—providing institutions which are structurally corrupt by nature. Gouldner wants the sights of sociological advocates set on the real overdogs who maintain

the traditional liberal's welfare state for their own interests—corporate financiers and policy-makers. His own SSSP Presidential Address in 1962 argued against the tradition of objectivity, "charging the value-free researcher with being socially irresponsible" (Freeman and Sherwood, 1970:21), and calling for professionalized disrespect of the existing order and for advocacy of change.

Sociology as Intervention: Three Types of Advocacy. Each of these formulations is useful in categorizing the advocacy positions and activities of sociologists. What is needed now, I believe, is a more general theory of social advocacy which can help explain the nature and impact of the practice of sociology (as well as other disciplines) on the clients, colleagues, administrators, politicians, and other publics it touches.

I began by asserting that all activities of sociologists are a form of social intervention. Intervention may be defined as follows:

1. A deliberate and systematic entering into a social setting or situation (often a conflict situation)—
   (a) By an outside or semi-outside party or parties;
   (b) With varying degrees of legitimation conferred by the first and second parties;
   *(c) With the aim of influencing the course of events toward outcomes which the intervenor defines as positive.
*2. Every act of intervention alters the power configuration in the social systems in which it takes place and, therefore:
*3. Every intervenor is an advocate—for party, for outcome and/or for process.

The last three elements of the definition deserve elaboration.

*1(c) Intervenors aim to influence the course of events in theintervention setting in a direction which they define as positive. Each intervenor has tolerance limits for acceptable outcomes; just any outcome will not do. Family therapists, architects, lawyers, and college professors, for example, operate from different world views, but each "knows" the range of conditions within which outcomes of intervention must fall to be acceptable—whether the coinage is family dynamics, buildings, litigated settlements, or concepts. All intervention is thus value-directed; there are no "neutral" intervenors.

*2. Human social life is the process and product of decision. Social decisions allocate scarce resources among persons and groups. Power is the control of decisions. Every act of intervention affects the configuration of negotiable power in a given social system, increasing the power of some parties, decreasing that of others. Therefore, every

act of intervention—and especially the activities of conscious, goal-directed professionals—is an exercise of power, with positive consequences for some in their pursuit of their interests.

*3. Every intervenor, therefore, is an advocate, despite self-perceptions or public claims of "neutrality." Most intervenors advocate particular outcomes or advocate the case of one of the parties (typically their client). The third type of advocacy is for a particular kind of process to be followed in arriving at the outcome (see Laue, 1975b).

Analysis of the three ideal-types of advocacy proposed here can provide an organizing framework for the various activities of practicing (i.e., all) sociologists. But first definitions and qualifications regarding advocacy are in order.

Advocacy and advocates have received considerable treatment in the nonsociological literature in the last ten years. Among the elements which have been defined as crucial to the role of advocate are:

— Alignment with the interests of disadvantaged subgroups who heretofore have not been in a position to articulate their needs in the process of community decision-making, with the objective of effecting a redistribution of public resources from the most advantaged sectors of the community (Davidoff, 1965).
— Provision of leadership and resources directed toward eliciting information, challenging the stance of service institutions, and arguing issues in behalf of disadvantaged clients (Grosser, 1973).
— Utilization of the expertise of professionals to defend the interests of low-income community groups in the policy process. . . . Assisting the poor, black and Third World minorities to compete successfully in the influence process as a way of compensating for "an imperfect pluralism (Guskin and Ross, 1974)."

But a much broader conception of advocacy is required if the concept is to have utility beyond the limited settings described in the preceding definitions. For, in fact, every act of intervention by every professional affects the power configuration in the target system—whether that system is a classroom, agency, legislative body, neighborhood, courtroom, or intergroup conflict. Modern dictionaries offer derivations and definitions that cast the analysis of advocacy in the comprehensive terms that are most productive for our purposes. Here advocacy means "to speak or write in favor of," "to plead or argue for something," "support," and "active espousal," in addition to the term's technical application to lawyers in litigation:

> Advocacy, as utilized in this paper, means acting in support of a particular party, outcome and/or process in a social situation.

Acting encompasses writing, talking, and other forms of overt human social action. Support may take the form of any of the activities engaged in by practicing sociologists. A social situation may include social systems or processes of any size, structure, duration and dynamic.

The central focus of the analysis contained in this paper is on the three types of advocacy—party, outcome, process. Every act of sociological practice represents one or a combination of these three advocacies. Dimensions of the three types of advocacy are summarized in the accompanying Table 1.

Table 1 attempts to systematize some of the characteristics and activities I have observed and practiced as a sociologist. It is intended to delineate some of the categories for a general theory of advocacy for social scientists—not only for sociologists. Sociology is no different than the other social sciences in its approach to advocacy: the practitioners' worldviews and the subject matter may vary, but the structural characteristics of intervention situations and the range of loyalties available to the advocate for party, outcome or process are similar.

So, structural characteristics rather than self-conscious choice are the major determinant of the impact and, therefore, the type of advocacy employed in any intervention situation.

We start with the assumption that there are elements of all the three types of advocacy in every interventive act; one cannot choose to limit his or her impact to only one of the three areas. The table focuses attention on the predominant mode of advocacy employed by the practitioner, and proposes correlative conditions and characteristics. We also assume that most sociologists—especially those in the truth-telling mode—generally are unaware of their work as advocacy, for their professional training imparts values to the contrary.

Most of the cells in the chart are derived in response to questions about the actual impact of social science intervention on actors, outcomes and processes in the target systems. Regarding "Goals (A)'and "Targets (B)," for example, activities which improve the perceived or actual advantage of a client or target group may be labeled "party advocacy." The production of a considerable volume of research findings by sociologists regarding the negative impacts of racial discrimination have been a form of party advocacy—for blacks and other minorities.

Perhaps the most typical form of advocacy represented in the research activities of sociologists conducted outside the academy is "outcome advocacy." Here the target is social policies and the goal is to influence them in a direction that squares with the values of the researcher.

Table 1. A Typology of Social Advocacy Goals, Targets and Practice Characteristics

	Predominant Mode of Advocacy		
	PARTY	**OUTCOME**	**PROCESS**
A. GOAL	Improve the perceived or actual advantage of a client or target group—individual or class.	Achieve a decision or policy the advocate defines as positive.	Institute and/or follow a process meeting important value criteria of the advocate in achieving an outcome.
B. TARGET FOR INTERVENTION	Clients and/or their opponents.	Social policies	Social systems.[a]
C PRACTICE CHARACTERISTICS			
1 Truth Orientation			
a. Predominant Practice Setting:	a. Academic Institution, Professional Journal	→	→
b. Predominant Roles:	b. Advocate researcher.	b. Policy researcher; summative evaluator.	b. Pure researcher.
c. Major Practice Approach:	c Research, writing and teaching.	c. Research, writing and teaching.	c. Research, writing and teaching.
d Primary Product(s):	d. Position paper; opponent analysis.	d. Position paper; research report, evaluation report.	d. Article or book.
e. Effectiveness Criterion:	e. Client acceptance.	e. Colleague acceptance.	e. Colleague acceptance.
2. Change Orientation			
a. Predominant Practing Setting:	a. Public or Private Agency, Popular Media.[b]	→	→
b. Predominant Role(s)	b. Community organizer; trainer; agency field worker.	b. Policy-maker; administrator.	b. Mediator; advocate mediator; program developer; formative evaluator; action researcher; trainer.
c. Major Practice Approach:	c. Political action.	c. Legislative or administrative action.	c. Third-party action.
d. Primary Product(s):	d. Client empowerment.	d Laws; budget allocations, administrative guidelines or regulations.	d. Action memorandum; evaluation report; programs; consultation.
e. Effectiveness Criterion:	e. Client gets bigger share of power, resources.	e. Policy influence.	e. Win-win, jointly-determined, rational outcomes (i.e., the result of "good process").

[a]All the parties, intervenors, structures, processes and outcomes in the social systems affected.
[b]And, on rare occasion, elected office.

The focus of process advocacy is on the totality of interaction in a system, with the sociologist always holding values about the most productive ways of viewing the system and its processes, and often, in addition, about the process of procedure that should be followed in ongoing decision-making and problemsolving in the system. While in the first case the major impact of the intervention ultimately falls on a party or parties (i.e., actors) in a social system, and in the second case the impact is on social policies, in the case of process advocacy the impact is on the way in which parties achieve outcomes—namely, the entire range of social interaction.

The most important distinction made in the table is between the "Truth Orientation (1)" and the "Change Orientation (2)" under "Practice Characteristics (C)." After examining the role formulations of Kelman and others, I concluded that virtually all distinctions in practice approaches in sociology are best understood by first determining whether the practitioner is primarily oriented to truth-finding and truth-telling or to promoting social change. Kelman's three role types may be condensed into these two: Friedrichs' "priestly" and "prophetic" paradigms represent the same distinction.

Applying this distinction does not imply that truth-oriented practitioners are uninterested in doing change—only that they see their roles as predominantly involving discovering and communicating social reality, usually coupled with the unexamined assumption that truth somehow directly translates into good policy. Similarly, the change-oriented sociologist is not disinterested in finding and telling truth; indeed, his skills in doing so usually are at the base of his ability to be an effective change-agent. But the ultimate professional and personal reward for him is more likely to be found in particular client, policy and process outcomes (see C.2.e.) than in the professional approbation which is the lifeblood of all who see truth rather than change as their predominant mission (C.1.e.).

The predominant practice settings are consistent within two orientations: truth-tellers are most at home in academic institutions and in the pages of professional journals (C.1.a.); and change-doers are more likely to gravitate to the public or private agency, to the popular media, and, on rare occasion, to elected office (C.2.a.).

The predominant roles associated with the two orientations (C.1.b. and C.2.b.) vary within advocacy types in this scheme. In each case for the truth orientation, the role is related to research, whether as advocate, policy and pure researcher. The range of roles is greater for the change orientation. Typical client advocate roles include community organizer, trainer and field worker, and the sociologist who chooses to direct his work toward actively influencing change in favor of a given group will inevitably find himself assuming these types of roles. The sociologist predominantly committed to policy change would find high administrative or policy positions the most cordial practice setting.

The most innovative and potentially influential roles for the sociologist/change-agent cluster around process advocacy, where the commitment is to promoting a process of social interaction that reflects such values as win-win social exchanges, rationality, and democratic decision making. The mediator assists in negotiations between disputing parties. The advocate mediator uses his skills and base to empower the less powerful in preparation for fuller participation in the process. A variety of agency and social movement-related roles attract process-oriented change agents with sociological training: program developer (the activities of sociologists in poverty, population, crime, and delinquency program development is noteworthy), formative evaluator, action researcher and trainer, for example.

Regarding the major practice approach of advocates, the distinctions again are more complex for the change-oriented in contrast to the truth-oriented practitioner. Research, writing, and teaching is the basic modality for all truth-telling (A.1.c.). The different requirements for effective advocacy in the change-oriented mode (C.2.c.) call for different kinds of approaches, skills, and risks. Party advocacy requires political (i.e., power-related) action if the relative advantage of groups is to be altered. Policy changes require legislative and/or administrative action. And the most effective way of promoting "good process" is through the types of third-party activities listed in C.2.b.—mediation, action research, training and the like.

Primary products of sociologists in the truth-telling mode (C.1.d.) are written materials. Again, the requirements for effective advocacy are more complex for the change-oriented roles (C.2.d.); for the practitioner is committed to real-world outcomes in contrast to writing or talking about real-world outcomes. Hence, client empowerment is the primary product of the change-oriented party advocate, and various forms of policy statements (laws, budget allocations, administrative guidelines and regulations) are the principal intended products of change-oriented outcome advocates. The primary products of change-oriented process advocates include various forms of action and evaluation documents, programs and consultation activities.

Summing Up: Sociological Advocacy

In structure and impact, then, sociological advocacy is much the same as other advocacies. The worldviews and the content may differ, but the practice modalities and impacts cover the same range of alternatives. All sociological activity is advocacy—whether for an intellectual viewpoint on social reality, for the rights of a given set of actors, for a desired policy outcome, or for a specific set of social process.

From the early days of the field—especially in the United States—the subject matter of sociology and the values of sociologists have kept sociological

"practice" (of even the most isolated/scholarly type) closely related to the ongoing issues and problems of the host social system. So the history of sociology is a history of advocacy: at the minimum, advocacy for certain ways of viewing society and its "problems," often in sharp contrast to the views of politicians, ecclesiastics, secular humanists, agency bureaucrats, journalists and the electorate.

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