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Joseph R. DeMartini

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Basic and Applied Sociological Work

Joseph R. DeMartini

Definition and Typology

For the purposes of this paper, applied sociology is the use of sociological theories and/or methods to address issues of practical concern identified by a client for which this use is intended. The crucial part of this definition of the last phrase: ". . . identified by a client for which this use is intended." Applied work is not focused upon the needs of the discipline as a social science; it is designed to meet the needs of persons or groups who desire to employ information and knowledge for a specific end. I use the phrases "client oriented" to describe the focus of applied work and "discipline oriented" to describe the focus of academic or basic sociology.

These foci are compared in Figure 1 on three dimensions: goals, working norms, and reference groups. Figure 1 is an ideal, typical statement. It identifies the rationale and justification for basic and applied work without citing individual accommodations made by persons engaged in either work on a daily basis.

The goal of basic sociology, as in all basic science, is the construction of valid and generalized knowledge statements. Hypothesis testing, theory building, and heuristic/exploratory research are incremental steps in building a body of knowledge about the social world. While sociologists may fall short of achieving this goal, working toward it is both a definition and justification of the discipline as well as a measure of individual success and consequent prestige.

Working norms that guide knowledge production embody the scientific method and corresponding rules for determining the validity and reliability of empirical measurement. The rules that guide basic research emphasize the importance of withholding judgment until all available information is in as well

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	Discipline Oriented Basic Sociology	*Client Oriented Applied Sociology*
Goals	Knowledge Production	Problem Solving
Working Norms	Careful Testing of Hypotheses and Qualification of Conclusions	Persuasive Use of Available Information
Reference Groups	Fellow Professionals	Political Interest Groups

Figure 1. Comparison of Basic and Applied Sociology in Terms of Goals, Working Norms, and Reference Groups

as a willingness to live with considerable doubt that may never be resolved fully. To ensure the integrity of knowledge produced through scientific research, conclusions are often tentative and stated in terms of probability with recognized margins of error.

Basic sociology is conducted with a specific audience in mind: the researcher's professional peers. This is the audience that will read and judge the results of basic research. Even within a multiparadigm discipline like sociology, a considerable body of knowledge is shared and taken for granted that helps establish priorities and the terms by which research products will be recognized as contributions toward the goal of knowledge production.

The goals of client-oriented applied work center on the use rather than production of knowledge. Most often this use is of a singular nature: i.e., specific problems arise calling for specific solutions. Directed by these goals, applied sociologists channel their efforts to provide information that usefully bears on the problem(s) at hand. Efforts to produce useful findings frequently are irrelevant to the goal of increasing the discipline's body of knowledge.

Problem solving and policy setting take place in political arenas. Within these arenas the political process determines whose interests will be served, not whose arguments and supporting data are more correct when judged by some objective standard of validity. The adversarial nature of this process and the rules that govern it directly impinge on the working norms that govern applied sociology. Information is desired that will be persuasive over and against other interest groups. Presenting research conclusions in a tentative light that recognizes possible sources of error and calls for further research is less useful than presenting findings with an aura of certainty. The rules governing applied work call for products that will be as effective as possible for the client who commissions them. Conflict between the demand for certainty and the norms of scientific research is probable (Levine, 1974).

Applied work has at least two audiences—the person or group for whom a final report is intended, and, at the next level, those populations to whom the final report will then be reinterpreted and disseminated. Research findings must be intelligible to persons not familiar with the research process and made clearly relevant to the concerns of those who commission the work. The results of applied work are seldom directed toward other sociologists.

I have associated basic and applied sociology with discipline-and client-oriented work and compared them on three dimensions: goals, working norms, and reference groups. These distinctions highlight differences and suggest great difficulty in merging the two types of work. A clarification and qualification are necessary at this point.

Varieties of applied work

The definition of applied sociology as client oriented cannot and is not intended to describe fully the variety of activities known today as applied work/research.[1] Both basic and applied sociology are more accurately presented as points on a continuum with "discipline oriented" and "client oriented" denoting polar extremes. Figure 2 illustrates such a continuum. The six examples of basic and applied work in this figure are not exhaustive, nor are they considered equally important by members of the discipline. Over time, emphasis may shift from one type of work to another, and new forms may emerge while existing

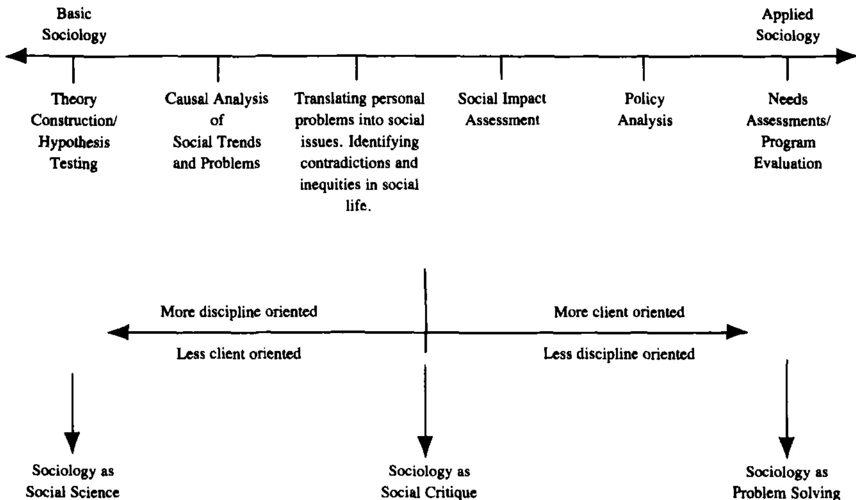

Figure 2. A Typology of Sociological Work from Basic to Applied

types blend, combine, or fade away.[2] The significant factor about the continuum is the pull exerted at each pole.

As in Figure 1, these extremes are best viewed as Weberian ideal types. Seen from this perspective, sociological endeavors that fall at the center of the continuum represent situations in which there is much dissension over appropriate goals, procedures, and measures of success. This viewpoint counters the position that work at the center of the continuum is a smooth integration of differing perspectives. Other common labels applied to this continuum are (from left to right): sociology as social science, sociology as social critique, and sociology as problem solving.

This continuum hints at the difficulty in making distinctions between sociologies. Basic sociology or sociology as social science is not a unified discipline. Debates over the lack of a single paradigm within the discipline reflect the diversity of work taking place. A full presentation of basic sociology requires a three-dimensional figure specifying the many criteria by which sociological research can be defined: e.g., differing theoretical schools of thought, methodological techniques, and underlying epistemologies.

Similarly, applied sociology encompasses a variety of activities that can be grouped by several criteria—few of which are used to distinguish types of basic work. Who is the client and/or potential user of applied work: national government, regional or local government, private industry, the judicial system? What is the intended purpose of this use: implementing government policy, resisting proposed programs, effecting organizational change? Are the users of applied work within or outside of existing centers of power? These and other related questions influence the nature and form of applied sociology as well as the probability and type of impact this work will have upon clients and target populations.

In addition, the variety of applied work goals and settings raises professional and ethical questions regarding the use of sociological skills for client use. Who can afford to purchase the often expensive array of social science research skills? What are the consequences of unequal opportunity to pay for these skills? To what extent are the products of applied work as much the result of economic and political realities as they are functions of intellectual and professional goals and standards? The nature of ethical issues along with variety in the settings and forms of applied work bear directly upon the relationship between basic and applied sociology. The next section explores this relationship in some depth. While the diversity of applied work qualifies the generality of conclusions that follow, I argue that connections between basic and applied work are limited and points of contradiction exist, especially for policy analysis and social problem-solving research.

Linkages Between Basic and Applied Sociology

I shall explore the connection between basic and applied work. . . .

> I. What relevance do the *products* of basic research have for applied work?. . . .

Answers to (this) question are available in the literature on sociology's impact upon social problem solving and policy decision making as well as in the reflections of sociologists who have done applied work. . . .

Products

The growing literature on applied work is skewed toward research done for the public sector at the federal level. Only a small portion of this literature addresses the first question I pose here: i.e., what relevance do the products of basic research have for applied work? In addition, materials on the use of basic research (theory, method, or findings) for the conduct of applied work at regional and local levels or by persons attempting to effect social change are extremely limited. As a result, the conclusions drawn in this section are restricted to the impact of sociological research upon policy decision making at the national level.[3]

Policy makers and problem solvers do make use of sociological research findings, but this use is often difficult to identify and seldom as direct and influential as social researchers would like. Surveys of decision makers at various levels within Austrian federal and municipal government agencies found the use of applied and basic social science knowledge to be "indirect," "diffuse," and "difficult to localize" (Knorr, 1977). Rich (1977) describes the use of national public opinion data by seven United States federal service agencies as "conceptual," i.e. ". . . influencing a policymaker's thinking about an issue without putting information to any specific, documentable use" (p. 200). Patton et. al. (1977) characterize the impact of federal health program evaluations as contributing to a general clarification of relevant issues thereby stimulating the "evolutionary process" out of which decisions and policy finally emerge. Again, a direct impact upon the content and outcome of specific policies and decisions was not evident.

The experience of sociologists on presidential commissions leads to similar conclusions regarding the role played by sociological theory, method, and data in the conduct and impact of national policy research. Komarovsky (1975) has assembled detailed analyses by sociologists who served on presidential commissions between 1965 and 1972.

Empirical research in the classic social science tradition did not yield clear

policy alternatives that could be incorporated into committee recommendations (Larsen, 1975). Available social science literature lacked specific action alternatives that could be translated into policy recommendations (Short, 1975). When social scientists did provide recommendations, these were more frequently influenced by "personal ideological conviction" than by sociological research and analysis. "The greatest strength of the social science contribution lay in providing sensitizing concepts and theories which oriented the search for solutions. . . ." (Ohlin, 1975, p. 108). The inability of social scientists to identify the policy consequences of research findings and literature is a unifying theme in these accounts of the commissions' work.

Two studies that focus on the characteristics of *usable* social science research are helpful in clarifying the relationship between applied and basic work. Their findings suggest that these characteristics are at odds with those that describe traditional, scholarly research products. Caplan examined the use of empirically based social science knowledge—excepting standard economic research—by upper level United States government officials as part of policy-related, decision-making processes. He identified over 500 self-reported instances of such use. What was used did not resemble typical scholarly research.

> Hard knowledge (research based, quantitative, and couched in scientific language) was usually only of some instrumental importance, and the final decision—whether or not to proceed with a particular policy—was more likely to depend upon an appraisal of "soft" knowledge (nonresearch based, qualitative, and couched in lay language). (Caplan, 1977, p. 188)

Van de Vall and Bolas (1980) reinforce Caplan's findings in their study of social policy research and applied social research in the Netherlands. This research examined the use of social science knowledge in the areas of industrial and labor relations, regional and urban planning, and social welfare and public health. Two findings are of interest to us here: (1) the utility of formal sociological theory and concepts, and (2) the utility of research conducted in accord with traditional disciplinary standards of methodological rigor. On both accounts, discipline-oriented (basic) research procedures had lower utility or impact scores than procedures less characteristic of basic research. Projects that employed formal theoretical concepts were utilized by decision makers less often than research that employed grounded concepts of "low abstraction and simple construction." Applied research, which rated highly in terms of methodological sophistication, correlated negatively with measures of utility or impact in all three sectors of social/policy decision making.[4] The authors conclude that:

> These findings suggest a number of theoretical, methodological, and normative differences between the traditional academic paradigm of social science discipline research and an emerging professional paradigm of social policy research. (van de Vall & Bolas, 1980. p. 135)

Does this brief literature review suggest any conclusions about the relevance of basic sociology for the variety of applied work treated here? I offer two:

> 1. Sociology functions to expand the outlook of decision makers. It offers alternative perspectives and questions standard myths. It does not provide specific solutions or courses of action that might be taken on the basis of sociological research. Nor does applied work provide insight into social problem solving *because* of its resemblance to basic research in the use of theory or method.
>
> 2. A change of perspective is most likely to occur when the policy needs and alternatives of decision makers are made an integral part of the research process. Such an approach may undermine the research product's contribution to sociological theory, but it is mandatory if this product is to be of use to decision makers.

These conclusions are consistent with the "enlightenment" hypothesis, which dates back at least 15 years to Gouldner's (1965) treatment of applied work.[5] They do not, however, simply confirm the accuracy of this hypothesis. They significantly alter it by introducing the need to anticipate how research findings and subsequent policy recommendations will be incorporated into the decision-making process. Good social science does not automatically illuminate aspects of a social problem for persons who must cope with that problem and its consequences (Aaron, 1978). Alternative interpretations of why the problem emerged and how it might be solved do not naturally flow from the conclusions of applied research to the consciousness of those involved in policy making and problem solving.

Applied researchers must plan for the careful interpretation and dissemination of research findings long before the research is completed. At the least, this requires that researchers advocate to their clients the serious consideration of interpretations supported by research data even when these interpretations contradict ideological preferences and political expediency. Maximizing the possibility that social problem solvers will seriously consider the results of applied research requires role activity not common to that of impartial scientific inquiry. . . .

Notes

1. Nor do I suggest that one can meet the demands of applied work by drawing upon a single discipline. The interdisciplinary character of the applied or policy sciences has been well documented. This paper focuses upon sociology because it is an area in which the problems of adapting basic research to applied work are most apparent.
2. Several times on this continuum have experienced periods of increased popularity. An attempt to explain the causes of social problems was most typical of applied efforts in the discipline prior to World War I. Translating personal problems into social issues was championed by C. Wright Mills in the late 1950s and became a foundation for activist sociology in the 1960s. Needs assessments and program evaluations increased in the 1970s. Social impact assessment will probably grow during the 1980s as an offshoot of environmental impact assessment.
3. For examples of applied work at regional and local levels, see Alkin et al., 1979. The need for social scientists to take an active role in promoting social change is often recognized, but very little documentation of persons acting in this role is available. One notable exception is Shostak's anthology, *Putting Sociology to Work* (1974). I have omitted from this review of literature any reference to the use of social science by the courts. Rosen (1977) and Collins (1978) provide a full listing of the extent to which social science is increasingly introduced into judicial hearings. They agree, however, on the absence of data that might verify the impact of such testimony. Overall, social science testimony appears to support (i.e., legitimate) court decisions rather than determine their outcome.
4. Weiss and Bucuvalas (1980) report an opposite finding; however, their research measured the *expected* use of applied research findings while van de Vall et al., measured actual use.
5. I am indebted to an anonymous *JABS* reviewer for pointing out the elitist implications of the "enlightenment" hypothesis. Social scientists who view their perspectives as intrinsically better than the everyday understandings of policy makers harbor a narrow and counterproductive world view. Such perspectives, however, very frequently are different from these understandings. This difference expands the variety of analyses available to decision makers and is the essential contribution social science offers under the unfortunate title of enlightenment.

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