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SOCIOLOGY AND THE PRACTICING PROFESSIONS

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THE community from which sociologists draw their livelihood expects them to earn their keep; and the ultimate judge of whether they or the members of any other profession are justifying their existence is society, not the profession itself. The prevailing expectations and values of any particular society—not the claims, promises or even the logical arguments which seem so irrefutable to members of a profession—sooner or later determine whether a calling shall flourish or languish. The physical and biological sciences are prospering; the humanities, on the word of at least some of their own leaders, are in low estate. The social sciences are precariously somewhere in between, with sociology not very near the top of the social science hierarchy.

The status of sociology in the opinion of the public which it ultimately serves and on which it must depend for support needs examination in the light of the hopes and measures of worth on which the judgment of the American public is broadly based. Over a century ago a distinguished visitor to our country, Alexis de Tocqueville, observed that

Those who cultivate the sciences among a democratic people are always afraid of losing their way in visionary speculation. They mistrust systems; they adhere closely to facts and the study of facts with their own senses. As they do not easily defer to the mere name of any fellow man, they are unremitting in their efforts to point out the weaker points of their neighbor's opinions. Scientific precedents have very little weight with them; they are never long detained by the subtlety of the

schools, nor ready to accept big words for sterling coin; they penetrate, as far as they can, into the principal parts of the subject which engages them, and they expound them in the vernacular tongue. Scientific pursuits then follow a freer and a safer course, but a less lofty one.¹

Such sweeping generalization certainly is not descriptive of the members of the American Sociological Society, although some painful barbs may be found in the passage quoted. Much of what de Tocqueville said about "those who cultivate the sciences among a democratic people" is more applicable today to the behavior and attitudes of the larger population. Its aptness in this respect is clear when it is recalled that de Tocqueville was firmly convinced that the democratic way of life in the United States tended to encourage and reward attention to present practical problems more than devotion to basic questions of science.

The expectation of usefulness dominates the popular view of science in the United States in spite of apparently increasing respect for those who contribute to the store of knowledge of man and nature without immediate concern for utility or for reward. This expectation may be accepted as an important aspect of the milieu without interminable and futile argument concerning the extent of acceptance of such a view, its possible dangers for the development of science in both pure and applied form, and

¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Part II, "The Social Influence of Democracy," translated by Henry Reeve, New York: J. and H. G. Langley, 1840, p. 41.

its threat to the intellectual integrity of the scientist. Popular expectation need be regarded as simply a condition that sociologists and others concerned with the advancement and utilization of knowledge must take into account. And of course it is not inflexible in its impact, for it readily permits any profession to include among its members an indefinite number of individuals who devote their energies to questions of no obvious practical utility or even interest to society at large, provided that the profession as a whole meets social expectations.

There is vital opportunity rather than discouragement in the obligation placed by society on sociology, as on all sciences, to pay its own way by contributions to knowledge of recognized social utility. It may be taken for granted that practical utility is at least an implicit objective, however remote in some instances, of all sociological research. Those sociologists who have chosen the profession because of concern with social amelioration may gain support and personal satisfaction from the fact that their career objectives are in accord with the prevailing view of the community. Beyond this, research as such gains essential opportunity from the demand that it prove its social worth. Sociology has relatively limited scope for contrived experimental verification of hypotheses and findings, and so must depend heavily on application in practical situations as a substitute for the university laboratory. Such applications, furthermore, reveal gaps in knowledge, uncover new fields for new research, and offer excellent sources of data for study. There is of course danger that unbalanced involvement with social improvement may warp research design, weaken devotion and adherence to scientific standards, and lead to neglect of fundamental questions. The danger, however, can be minimized and is outweighed by the advantages of co-ordinated research and application.

Sociologists have not yet taken anything like full advantage of the opportunities, existing as well as latent, available to them through collaboration with the practicing professions. All practicing professions involve the utilization of knowledge gained by research in a number of relevant disciplines. All are somehow or other concerned with people and consequently require some under-

standing of human behavior. Reliance for such understanding thus far has been overwhelmingly on lessons drawn rather casually from professional experience by the practitioners themselves. However, leaders in the practicing professions where an understanding of human behavior is clearly of crucial major importance, as in the health services and social work, are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with this traditional and uncertain approach to the problems of social behavior encountered in their specialties. They know that there are thousands of social scientists at work on related if not identical problems, and are impatient that the results of this work have been of so little practical help.

The range and nature of the opportunities for sociological co-operation with the practicing professions may be suggested by a few brief extracts from recent writings by distinguished practitioners in several fields. Social work, law, and the health services may be selected for illustration, although if there were no need for brevity, the list could be lengthened to include education, business and industry, agriculture, public administration, and others.

The General Director of the Community Service Society of New York City, Stanley P. Davies, in addressing a meeting of the National Social Welfare Assembly on "The Relation of Social Science to Social Welfare" summarized his position in these words:

Social science can strengthen social work by helping it devise and execute methods for testing the results of its practice and evaluating its assumptions, be it in casework, group work, community organization or social action, and also by making the knowledge in its storehouse more readily accessible and useable. Social work can strengthen social science by formulating knowledge gained from its own experience and by utilizing the riches of its working data for basic research.²

The sociologist who reads *Social Work Education in the United States*³ by Ernest V. Hollis and Alice L. Taylor will find innumerable aspects of social work for which sociological knowledge has relevance. A para-

² Stanley P. Davies, "The Relation of Social Science to Social Welfare," *Social Work Journal*, 31 (January, 1950), p. 32.

³ New York: Columbia University Press, 1951.

graph written by a past president of our Society, Robert C. Angell, so closely parallels the quoted view of Dr. Davies that it may be offered to emphasize the mutual benefit to be derived from close co-operation between sociologist and social worker:

I believe that . . . investigations by social science methods can be of help in three main ways: (a) by providing more thorough analyses of the factors which create social problems and hence constitute the setting and the processes within which welfare practice is operating; (b) by determining what the value preferences are of groups upon which welfare practice must rest for support; and (c) by evaluating practice programs.⁴

Many sociologists—although perhaps proportionately fewer today than in earlier years—have been directly concerned with problems of social work practice. Very few sociologists, excepting criminologists and penologists, have been concerned with the utilization of sociological findings and methods by the legal profession. Yet the law is no less concerned with social behavior than is social work. Dean Erwin N. Griswold of the Harvard Law School has made the point succinctly:

Of course, all law deals with human relations. But my point is that as it exists in its more or less scientific form, and as it is taught, it does not deal very much with people. Yet lawyers constantly deal with people. They deal with people far more than they do with appellate courts. They deal with clients; they deal with witnesses; they deal with persons against whom demands are made; they carry on negotiations; they are constantly endeavoring to come to agreements of one sort or another with people, to persuade people, sometimes when they are very reluctant to be persuaded. Lawyers are constantly dealing with people who are under stress or strain of one sort or another. How do people act in such situations? Do law students ever learn anything about this at all?⁵

One may question Dean Griswold's flat

⁴ Robert C. Angell, "A Research Basis for Welfare Practice," *Social Work Journal*, 35 (October, 1954), p. 169.

⁵ Erwin N. Griswold, "Law Schools and Human Relations," Tyrrell Williams Lecture, delivered at the Law School of Washington University, April 19, 1955, (processed), pp. 6f.

statement that law is one of the social sciences, made earlier in the same lecture, with no qualification concerning the predominantly applied nature of the law, and still agree with his basic position. For us the question is why sociologists have contributed so little to the study, perspective, teaching, and practice of law.

Turning to the health services, the last of the three professions selected for illustrative purposes, the significant fact is that they are outstanding today in their efforts to establish effective collaborative relationships with social scientists. This in spite of the fact that medical practice is widely regarded by layman and specialist alike as applied biological and physical science. Psychiatry and sociology of course have had a degree of association from the time of Freud, but their association, it must be admitted, has had its unhappy as well as positive aspects. More surprising is the recent rapid expansion of interest within the more traditional specialties, such as medicine, in the social sciences as a source of reliable knowledge concerning the social factors in illness and health. The description of illness by Talcott Parsons as "a state of disturbance in the 'normal' functioning of the total human individual, including both the state of the organism as a biological system and of his personal and social adjustments"⁶ increasingly reflects not only the theoretical position but also the practice of progressive personnel in the health services.

The Dean of the University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public Health, Thomas Parran, is in agreement with Parsons' concept of illness and health when he observes that

More attention currently is being given to understanding the total individual and all of the environmental and social factors which bear upon illness and health. To this should be added a broad understanding of the patient as a member of a family group and of a working group which represents—together with church, lodge, club and other organizations—the social environment with which the individual is constantly interacting and which

⁶ Talcott Parsons, *The Social System*, Glencoe: The Free Press, 1951, p. 431.

contributes greatly to his health or his lack of it.⁷

Thomas A. C. Rennie, Professor of Psychiatry at Cornell University Medical College, has made a similar observation with regard to his own specialty:

Psychiatry in the past thirty years has been too one-sidedly preoccupied with the search for dynamics as revealed by the intensive and "microscopic" study of the intra-psychic dynamics of the person. With this intense preoccupation with personal dynamics, including the ever-increasing understanding first of the instinctual life and then of the formation of ego and super-ego, psychiatry took great strides forward. All too often, however, this line of development was gained at the expense of a relative neglect of the total family dynamics and of the cultural *milieu* from which the patient came.⁸

The implications for sociologists are obvious: their responsibility for providing the understanding defined by Dr. Parran and Dr. Rennie is both sobering and challenging.

Joseph W. Mountin, although referring only to his own specialty, public health, has expressed the need for improved utilization of the social sciences in words equally applicable to the other health services:

Public health is an applied technology resting on the joint pillars of natural science and social science. For the past century the natural science foundation has been magnificently strengthened—strengthened to the point that we now have the technical knowledge to eradicate or reduce greatly much of the misery to which man has been heir. Yet vast amounts of preventable or controllable disease and disability remain, because the social science foundation is relatively weak. Until both the pillars of natural and social science are strong, the arch of public health will not be firm.⁹

Sociologists cannot escape their major share of the responsibility for strengthening the

social science pillar that is an essential part of the foundation of public health practice.

Why is the social science pillar weak in the structure of the practicing professions where its support is so clearly needed as in public health, medicine, social work, law, and other fields of application? A discouraging list of contributing factors is easily compiled. Sociology is a youthful discipline and has a correspondingly small store of useful knowledge; there has not yet been time to develop effective liaison with the established professions. The roles of sociologists, accepted as "normal" by sociologists, generally do not encourage or facilitate specialization in close collaboration with operating agencies and personnel, as in welfare institutions, hospitals, law schools, and the like. Specialization in an applied field associated with another profession is a departure from the "normal" sociological career pattern and offers an uncertain future. The way sociology is taught—usually as a mixture in varying proportions of research techniques, more or less systematic theory, social problems and general education—is poor preparation for work in any specific applied field. A society in which any man may be his own sociologist without external criticism or inner doubts because of lack of relevant training is an unhappy setting for a career in applied sociology. Only the imaginative leaders, not the rank and file of professional practitioners, see the opportunities for mutual benefit in better collaboration between social science and social practice. And when there is willingness to collaborate, expectations usually are unrealistic in terms of current sociological knowledge and techniques. There is no need to attempt to make this list exhaustive, for it is intended only as a sampling of reasons commonly offered in explanation of the continuing inefficiency and ineffectiveness of working relations between sociology and the practicing professions.

Factors in this situation, such as those just mentioned, are handicaps rather than absolute barriers to co-operation of sociologist and practitioner, and are subject to modification. Indeed, the passage of time may be relied on with confidence to work great changes insofar as the factors listed may be largely attributed to shortcomings

⁷ Thomas Parran, "The Doctor of the Future," *Transactions and Studies of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia*, 4 Ser., Vol. 20 (February, 1953), p. 100.

⁸ Thomas A. C. Rennie, "Social Psychiatry—A Definition," *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 1 (Summer, 1955), p. 10.

⁹ Joseph W. Mountin, "Foreword," in *Organized Health Services in a Rural County*, by Milton I. Roemer and Ethel A. Wilson, Washington: Public Health Service, 1951. Processed.

of youth. There is no need, however, to let time do it all alone. The social relations involved are peculiarly suitable for sociological analysis as a basis for planning and action.

Sociologists have, in fact, given considerable thought to the problem of the most effective means for getting their product into use. As usual, when a number of sociologists give thought to the same problem, several solutions have been proposed and their relative merits have been argued by their proponents. To one not closely involved in the argument it might seem that all courses advocated have merit in some circumstances, that they are supplementary rather than mutually exclusive, and that all are more the result of a priori reasoning than of empirical study.

One widely held but increasingly unpopular point of view is that useful knowledge inevitably will be used sooner or later. This is a comfortable conviction, for it relieves the research specialist of any possible worry about his role in society. It may be true that validated research findings cannot forever be lost to society, no matter how completely neglected for a while. It may also be true that discoveries may be made in times unsuited for their utilization and that prompt efforts at application may therefore be dangerously premature. Such possibilities, however, do not lead inescapably to the conclusion that a policy of *laissez faire* should be accepted. It may be doubted that the relatively small but significant contributions that sociology already has made to human relations in industry, criminal treatment, morale and efficiency in the military services, and understanding of social factors in health and welfare could have been accomplished without the planning and positive efforts of sociologists who cared enough to take the major share of initiative. Possibly this initiative did little more than advance the time schedule of sociology in application, but time itself may well be a crucial factor in this development.

A second point of view is that sociological research and application ordinarily are the responsibility of the same individual. This view may be held merely as a practical necessity because at present there is no adequate corps of specialists in application. There is also the supporting claim that the

research and applied functions are interchangeable in the individual with benefit in the performance of both functions. There can be little argument about the practical necessity that has induced many sociologists to accept the dual roles of scientific investigator and of counsellor or practitioner. As things are, the sociologist, primarily motivated and trained to extend the boundaries of knowledge of social relations, is frequently under both internal and external pressures to see that some use is made of his findings. All too often no other course is open to him than to accept a second role as applied sociologist, with inadequate regard for his training, primary skills, and personal interests.

Sociologists should be proud of the successes of their colleagues who have received deserved recognition both for basic research and for pioneering in its application in unfamiliar fields. However, it does not follow from such individual successes that there is inherently and universally some advantage in such changes of role. There are, certainly, some individuals for whom such shifts are feasible and advantageous both on occasion and throughout their careers, but it is doubtful that this resolution of the dilemma would prove satisfactory on any wide scale either for sociologists or for society. One difficulty is that of predominating individual motivation, for it is not likely that many of our colleagues are nicely balanced in their inner drives for accomplishment in both social research and social action. A second difficulty is that the training, factual knowledge, qualities and skills essential for extending the boundaries of social knowledge are not identical with those required for effectiveness in social practice. Undoubtedly there are individuals well motivated and competent for both roles, but they seem to be rare.

A third point of view is that special effort should be made to develop experts in applied sociology, trained both in applied research and in the application of existing sociological knowledge to social problems. If this means generalists in applied sociology, they are probably not a solution. To be effective, the applied sociologist requires intimate knowledge of the specific area of application, whether it be race relations in industry, crime, mental health, labor re-

lations, preventive medicine or any other area of social relations. He must be familiar not only with the academic materials of potential utility in the selected area but also with the values and behavior patterns of the people involved and with the problems of concern as seen by them and by any leaders or practitioners with whom he must collaborate. Even encyclopedic familiarity with sociological substance and techniques combined with the strongest of utilitarian drives is not enough; the applied sociologist must also have thorough sophistication in the prevailing ways and current difficulties in the social segment selected for applied work. Such sophistication cannot be acquired by reading any number of books, by conversation or by short tours. Adequate orientation requires long periods—commonly years—of intimate association and immersion. Hence, the generalist in applied sociology must be regarded as a makeshift who is already rapidly being superseded by more sharply trained specialists in application.

If one agrees that increasing numbers of applied sociologists specifically prepared for careers in selected problem areas are needed, there is still the important question whether the aim should be the development of practicing sociologists to take direct responsibility for determination of policy, operation of action programs, and work with clients presenting personal problems; or whether the purpose should be the development of consultants or middlemen to work closely with the applied professions already established. This question of course cannot be answered flatly one way or the other; one might better ask in which of these two directions main effort should be expended in the immediate future. Reference has been made to the needs of the practicing professions for social science data and techniques, and to the fact that many leaders in these professions are actively seeking the collaboration of social scientists. It would be a pity not to respond to their need and not to take advantage of the opportunity to test our "wares"—to identify their deficiencies and to consider where to attempt to improve them. There is indeed little likelihood that sociologists will ignore this opportunity. The danger is that they will co-operate inexpertly because of ignorance of what are sometimes

called the subcultures of the practicing professions.

On the other side of the question, it is difficult to envisage any focus or cluster of problems of social relations that applied sociologists could now define to the satisfaction of society as primarily within their province as practitioners. Fortunately, there seems to be no need to do so. To turn to my own former field of specialization for illustration, what we know as sociologists about race relations can be used most effectively if it is made available to social workers, business management, public administrators, public health officials, psychiatrists, and others. The same is true of what we know as sociologists about crime, social structure, the family, socialization, and so on to general social theory. The most promising present outlets for sociological materials are the practicing professions, but the promise can be realized only in minor part so long as a mere handful of sociologists relate the results of their research to the needs of specific professions.

The relative disregard of sociology by practitioners directly concerned with social problems itself calls for research. How much do we know about the factors that facilitate or restrict the use of research findings in the social field? Under what circumstances and to what extent may there be reliance on a policy of *laissez faire* which assumes that some natural, inevitable process ensures the social use of knowledge? Could not the debated questions concerning the service of the individual sociologist in both the research and action roles be analyzed objectively? Why not study the needs of the various practicing professions for sociological data, knowledge and techniques, the resistances to their introduction in specific professions, the means for reducing these resistances, the methods for the development of men and materials better adapted to practitioners' needs? Why are there not more case studies of sociology in application? It is encouraging to note that the professions as such have gained acceptance as a proper subject for sociological study; it is also proper to study their present and potential use of sociology and sociologists. Although many published writings bear on these questions, it is nevertheless true that contributions to the subject

of applied sociology are fragmentary and that few sociologists have given more than secondary research attention to it.

The key to effective collaboration between sociologists and members of the practicing professions lies in detailed study of the professional subcultures involved. As social scientists, and as a special category of social scientists, sociologists should be peculiarly sensitive to the fact that they have values, ways of working and other idiosyncracies which are not wholly shared either by the subjects of their applied interest or by collaborators in other professions. All sociologists recognize the importance of such differences in their relations with Vermont farmers, Indiana steel workers, the Mexicans in Texas, the Puerto Ricans in New York, and countless other groups. Yet there seems to be little recognition of the importance of similar if less conspicuous differences between themselves and members of other professions with whom they may have occasion to work. Difficulties and failures in co-operation with practitioners tend to be attributed to arrogance, narrow-mindedness, trade school education, authoritarianism, professional insecurity, plain stupidity and what not. Frustration, anger, a sense of futility, discouragement, and withdrawal are likely to be the reactions. It is not easy to explain why so many sociologists should respond so irrationally to subcultural variations at the professional level and yet behave understandingly when faced with similar subcultural differences in nonprofessional subjects of study. Perhaps it is merely that without sufficient thought it is erroneously taken for granted that professional people as a whole have so much in common that communication and mutual understanding should be simple.

Yet a moment's consideration of commonplace facts reveals the seriousness of the problems of communication and co-operation with practitioners. Sociology is first of all concerned with understanding; the practicing professions with doing. This difference in central objectives necessitates differences in training, to which reference already has been made, and is accompanied by differences in values and favored ways of work and living. The sociologist studies people for what he can learn about behavior; the physi-

cian or social worker is under compulsion to do something to help the patient or client. The potentialities for disagreement when the sociologist's subjects also happen to be a collaborator's patients or clients are obvious. The social statistician is proud of his actuarial inferences based on fragments of information about large numbers of people; the clinically oriented practitioner is more concerned with individuals and must learn all he can about particular persons and situations. Basic concepts vary confusingly among professions. No single definition of the word "case," for example, can accurately describe its current ordinary use in sociology, medicine, social work and law. The term "social organization" has quite different meanings for sociologists and social workers. Other technical terms necessary for precision within one profession often are unintelligible in another. The advocacy system in law has no close parallel in any other profession.¹⁰

The medical profession has a hierarchical system defining status and roles within the profession and in relation to personnel in the other health services as well as to the patient and community, and this system is in strong contrast with the social workers' emphasis on democratic procedures and with the high value placed on individual independence by lawyers and sociologists. Professions also vary in the degree of their acceptance of authority and tradition. The health services, for example, discard precedent and earlier training in the light of new research evidence more readily and easily than do lawyers and social workers. These almost random generalizations may be adequate to demonstrate the importance of taking account of divergencies in professional subcultures in sociological research and application, but they are too broad and superficial to be useful in planning for improved interprofessional co-operation.

Co-operation between sociologists and practitioners requires interprofessional understanding of needs, potentialities, and limita-

¹⁰ For a comprehensive lawyers' view of the law as a profession, see Elliott E. Cheatham, *Cases and Materials on the Legal Profession*, second edition, Brooklyn: The Foundation Press, Inc., 1955. The study communicates an appreciation of the many difficulties standing in the way of sociological collaboration because of distinctive professional values and practices.

tions. In the main, sociologists thus far have been either unmindful of the opportunities offered them by the practicing professions or too ready to offer their wares to the practitioner with little consideration for his requirements and ways of work. These can be discovered only by hard study somewhat off the beaten sociological path. Fortunately, the nature of this needed study is not strange; it involves only the use of ordinary sociological methods in relatively strange territory. For the present, those who have the imagination and courage to undertake such work must train themselves by pioneer-

ing experience in coping with the unfamiliar problems always encountered in new professional milieu. In the future, it is reasonable to expect the establishment of special graduate curricula to train sociologists for research in the applied fields for which sociology has the most relevance. The development of such curricula, however, must be slow until suitable personnel and materials are in much better supply than is now the case. The speed and quality of their development depend largely upon the contributions that may be made by the members of this Society.

THE CLINICAL STUDY OF SOCIETY *

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INFORMAL groups of "practical" men often ask me to take part in their discussions of problems and theories related to sociology. These men are personnel, advertising, sales, research, and administrative specialists drawn chiefly from business but also from organized labor, politics, government, and civic agencies. They want me to bring into their discussions current findings by sociologists and to engage in their critical and analytical conversations.

These "practical" men are what might roughly be called clinical students of society. They study society through observing and assessing group responses to therapeutic efforts, efforts to change an aspect of a group's ways. My friends thus actually hold what might be called clinical seminars. Their "patients" are social aggregates rather than individuals, but their exchanges of observations, techniques, and insights have points in common with clinical seminars held by psychiatrists and clinical psychologists and with conferences of ethnologists who are also missionaries or U.N. or national government

officials just returned from the field. Their diagnostic reports on characteristics of social aggregates and of society, including assessments of consequences of manipulative measures, may be sketchy, impressionistic, unsystematic, and warped by special interests, but their reports are improving and have long yielded valuable knowledge. They emphasize above all a method of investigation and analysis which has contributed to sociology out of all proportion to the grudging recognition it has received.

How can academic sociologists learn from clinical studies of society? There are at least three ways: (1) We can subject our theories to the rigors of clinical seminars in which "practical" students bring their findings to bear upon the products of other methods of investigation. (2) We can gain access to the rich clinical records of such organizations as the ethnic and racial defense agencies, some political party adjuncts, civic and social welfare bodies, trade associations, and trade unions. Some of these materials have to be dug from the minds of participants in a given sequence of operations. Strangely enough, little of this has been done in a systematic manner. (3) We could make clinical studies on our own campuses, in our own professional societies, and in other social areas available to us. I am not, of course, overlooking the vast mass of professional

* Based upon presidential address before the Eastern Sociological Society, New York, April 2, 1955. Suggestions embodied in this paper were made by the author's teachers, Manuel Conrad Elmer and Maurice Rea Davie, many years ago. S. M. Miller and George Simpson read and criticized a previous draft. Elizabeth Briant Lee as usual helped in many ways.