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Harris Chaiklin
University of Maryland

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HARRIS CHAIKLIN
University of Maryland
School of Social Work

Introduction

Individual sociologists have been effective in solving organizational problems. They have been spectacularly unsuccessful in solving persistent social problems such as poverty. These ultimate troubles may never be solved but they must always be worked with. Sociological ideas cannot be the only knowledge system used in working with social difficulties. No reductionistic system has ever been successful. Creating the conditions which will even improve any deleterious social behavior requires a wider perspective and more resources than the sociologist, as sociologist, can muster. Practicing sociologists can make their greatest contribution to ameliorating major social malfunctions by putting increased emphasis on their traditional role as debunkers. That is, by showing when policies or programs are based on false perceptions or poor data.

The Injunction

Since its inception sociology has either promised to or been called on to demonstrate that it is useful in improving society. It has also been enjoined to avoid "real world" politics and concentrate on being a science. Lately, the tussle between these presumed polar opposites has shifted in favor of application. A significant segment of the profession is moving from a disciplinary to a professional orientation. In addition to the now traditional Society for the Study of Social Problems there are several "applied"

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groups who, with the active support of the American Sociological Association, are creating professional practice certification.

Response to the Injunction: Promising Too Much

While sociologists have never been able to ameliorate social problems, it is not as if they haven't tried. The origins of the discipline are rooted in a desire to improve social conditions. Saint-Simon wanted sociology (Schewendinger and Schwendinger, 1974) to be a positivistic science that would enable people to manage the economy better. The University of Chicago (Bulmer, 1984), founded in 1890 under the leadership of William Rainey Harper, included the sociology department when he directed the university to use knowledge based on data to solve social problems. Early Chicago sociology was influenced by Mead and Dewey (Cook, 1993) who had a strong social reform orientation. Philosophical pragmatism (Kutz, 1984) and attempts to influence social behavior continue to underlie Chicago sociology.

When sociological ideas have been the major basis for intervention there have been few positive results. The obstacle of reductionism could not be overcome. Millikan (1959, p. 170) says that some of this comes from a "mechanical and inappropriate application to both research and policy of the principle of division of labor." This results from exaggerating the degree to which research will result in problem solution, expecting to be able to predict things which we cannot now predict, and from assuming that research conclusions make the difference rather than the process of analysis which underlies them. This has not worked to enhance either the influence or the image of sociologists. One of the chief complaints (Rosenberg, Gerver, and Howton, 1964, p. v) has been that sociology has created disappointment because it has promised to do more than it can do.

When it got involved in government operations that involved secrecy (Horowitz, ed., 1967) it found itself compromised. In perhaps its largest endeavor, The War on Poverty, there was little concrete to show for all the effort and money spent. To cite one example. In New York City, "Mobilization for Youth," fueled by the ideas of Cloward and Ohlin (1960), aimed to reduce delinquency. A similar program, "Haryou Act," followed shortly (Haryou,

1964) and was influenced by the psychologist Kenneth B. Clark. One cannot point to any new principles for working with youth that came from these efforts and there have been no lasting effects that came from these efforts.

Sociology has backed itself into a corner where too much time is spent in methodological nit-picking and ideological argument. Not enough attention is paid to creating knowledge and demonstrating what sociology knows about human behavior. Freese (1972) says that sociological knowledge is not cumulative because it does not pay enough attention to fundamental theory building. Rose (1992, p. 707) adds the charge that lazy scholarship not only results in lack of knowledge cumulation but, "there is too much rediscovery of old findings."

Davis (1994) says that Sociology has become "incoherent." Cole (1994) maintains that the inherent nature of human problems precludes developing grand theory or solutions and that it will have to settle for lower level theories. Lindblom (1979) goes so far as to say that the very ethos of social science precludes it from being much help in solving problems.

The Policy Option

There are those who advocate that rather than attempting to solve problems sociology (Wiseman, 1979) should develop a theory of policy intervention and make applied sociology (Freeman and Rossi, 1984) be equivalent to making policy recommendations. This, however, has not shown any better results than direct intervention. Social scientists are having increasing difficulty in getting their ideas heard and accepted by policy makers. Williams (1971) sums up his experience with social science in government by saying that the studies and proposals based on sociology were not relevant and were not likely to become implemented. He felt that agencies had not developed good ties with the scientific community and that not enough attention has been given to implementation problems. If the results (MacRae, 1976) of social science research and intervention are to be applied by policy makers it is necessary that they and the general public have a level of education which enables them to identify results which are valid and applicable to the problem at hand. We are far from

attaining the level of education necessary for this to happen. The effort must continue (Lerner, 1959) for it makes an important contribution to preserving democracy.

The Social Survey as a Precursor to Debunking

Sociology has a long history of conducting data gathering activities to promote social change. In the past this was called "The Survey Movement." While a survey is held to the same technical standards as research, it is not "research" in the sense that concepts are developed or generalizable hypotheses are tested. The distinction between a survey and research lies in aim rather than technique. Any survey could become research by conceptualizing the data.

It is seldom possible to discount a survey because its methodology is incorrect, though this is often tried by those who disagree with its results. The real problems come with value positions and their implications. Long ago Willard Waller (1936) pointed out that to understand why anything is considered a problem requires finding where there is a conflict of values. One may be against poverty; there is also a limit as to how much they are willing to raise their taxes to alleviate this.

To openly conduct surveys with explicit value bases makes clear that in the endless search for social good it is possible to entertain many versions of the truth. Where there are no open political processes government becomes autocratic, relatively permanent, and monolithic

Past Surveys

Historically the survey has been one way that sociologists have had an impact on the world without getting involved in being responsible for implementing change. Surveys have been done almost since the beginning of written history, if only to have data for tax collection purposes. A convenient landmark for the start of the modern era lies in the work of Frederick Le Play, a French mathematician and mining engineer, who in 1855 published a six volume work called *The European Workers*. He observed and lived with more than 300 "average" European working families and focused on their budget; how they spent their

money. He is generally credited with introducing the term "laboring classes" and with being a pioneer in the methods of case-study and participant observation.

Le Play's work had great impact in Europe. This was because he wrote from a believable and replicable data base. His aim was to project a view of the working class family as a source of stability and morality in a social order run by the upper classes. He had come to accept the necessity of a factory system but wanted to retain a feudal social order. To him the basis for all social reform (Nisbet, 1978) was to eliminate intervention by the state in people's lives. The advance which Le Play brought was not in his political philosophy but in his methods. If data was collected by replicable techniques there was at least a rational basis for arguing over differing interpretations.

Something like this happened with one of the most famous of Le Play's successors; Charles Booth published in seventeen volumes, between 1892 and 1902, *Life and Labor of the People of London*. Booth was a politically conservative shipowner. He was irritated over a literary account of the condition of the poor; W.C. Preston's *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London*, published in 1883; and set out to prove him wrong. Not only did Booth find that it was he that was wrong but he also recruited for his staff people who became noteworthy social reformers. The most renowned of these were Beatrice Potter Webb and Octavia Hill.

Booth established a tradition which led to the attempt to use the survey as an instrument for reform. Among the outstanding ones were B.S. Rountree's *Poverty A Study of Town Life* published in 1901 and then redone in 1936 as *A Second Survey of York: Poverty and Progress*. In 1915 Arthur Bowley and A.R. Burnett-Hurst published *Livelihood and Poverty*. Between 1930 and 1935 Hubert Llewelyn Smith published a nine volume redo of Booth's work as *The New Survey of London Life and Labor*.

The Survey in the United States

It is hard to say how influential the English surveys were in bringing change but they are valuable sources of historical information about the nature and conditions of poverty and landmarks in developing research methods. When the survey movement

came to the United States it took on American character. It was clearly dedicated to reform, often presenting its material in a dramatic form.

The first decades of this century can be characterized as an age of reform. It was Theodore Roosevelt who gave a name to this era in a celebrated speech, "The Man with the Muckrake," given on April 14, 1906, at the laying of the cornerstone for the House of Representatives, It was a plea for honesty and sanity in the wave of exposures then sweeping the country. During this era there was an outpouring of expose books and articles, many based on solid research, which become caught up in "yellow" journalism, whether the authors intended this or not. Among the more noted of these are Gustavus Myers' *The History of the Great American Fortunes*, Ida M. Tarbell's *The History of the Standard Oil Company*, Lincoln Steffens' *The Shame of the Cities*, and *The Struggle for Self-Government*, and Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* and *A Ten Years War*.

There were also surveys which covered the same topics as those in Europe. In 1895 Jane Addams published *The Hull House Maps and Papers: A Presentation of Nationalities and Wages in a Congested District of Chicago*. In 1898 there was Robert A. Woods, *The City Wilderness* and in 1901 Robert Hunter's *Tenement Conditions of Chicago*.

These early efforts were soon followed by a series of large surveys which involved broad community representation. Many of these were supported by the Russell Sage Foundation. Among the largest and most prominent of these were the two Pittsburgh Surveys. The first was under the direction of Paul Kellogg and was published in 6 volumes in 1914 and 1915. The main concern of the study was what was happening to steel workers during a period of industrial expansion. The second was published in 1938 and was done under the direction of Philip Klein. Now the focus was on needs and services in the whole community. Other notable surveys included Shelby Harrison's *Springfield Survey* published in 1920, Raymond Moley's *Missouri Crime Survey* in 1926, and the *Wickersham Crime Commission Survey* published in 1929.

Through the first three decades of this century there is no area of American life or its problems that wasn't the subject of a survey. There were probably 4,000 surveys done during this

period. Like all such movements it had its time of glory and then declined. The survey movement was at its peak when sociology as we know it was in its infancy and there were only hints of a later sharp divergence between those with "pure" and those with "applied" interests.

One of the great lessons of the survey movement is that valid data is not enough to ensure change. Rita Davidson (1971, p. 17) Maryland's first Secretary of Human Resources, described her first trip to the legislature as one where she was prepared with an array of charts and tables because she was determined to have all the facts necessary to justify her program:

> We met for over three hours. When we came out I met one of the most conservative members of the State legislature who has been around for fifteen years and is sort of a Wilbur Mills of Maryland. I asked, "Are you going to help me now with my program?" He answered, "No!" I said, "Why not?" He said, "Rita, I'm going to do something better for you. I'm going to tell every State legislator I know that I never heard such a fine presentation. I never heard a program so justified in all my life. You are indeed a remarkable woman. That was the finest performance I have ever seen anybody make before the State legislature!" So I said, "Then why aren't you going to help me with my program?" He said, "Because I don't like it!" . . .

The limits of rationality are reached when people oppose any position solely on value grounds.

As the survey movement declined it was partially replaced by investigative journalism. Albert Deutsch had an important influence on pubic policy with such books as *The Mentally Ill in America* and *Our Rejected Children*. The War on Poverty got a big push from an essay that Dwight McDonald wrote in *The New Yorker* on Michael Harrington's *The Other America*. As noble as these efforts were they do not replace the systematic collection of data to document social need. While surveys are still done they are used more as planning instruments and do not have the impact that they had in the past.

The Sociologist as Debunker

While the role of the sociologist in the social survey is well known less attention has been given to the role of debunker.

Yet, some of the landmark studies which characterizes the development of sociology as a modern social science were debunking studies. LaPiere, (Dockery and Bedian, 1989) beginning in 1930 travelled the country for two years with a Chinese couple. They presented themselves in ways that ranged from disheveled campers to well-dressed and prosperous people. In 251 instances of seeking hotel and restaurant accommodations they were refused only once. This was a period of negative sentiment toward Asians. In a subsequent follow-up mail survey (n = 128) over 90% said that they would not serve orientals and most of the rest were uncertain. Only one person said yes and she was also the only one who remembered serving them. The distribution was about the same on a matched control sample. Since the attitudes were asked after the behavior had occurred LaPiere knew what people had done as opposed to what they said they would do. He concluded that questionnaires were not a good basis for predicting behavior.

Modern social science, both theoretical and applied, could be said to have gotten its start (Stouffer, et al., 1949) in the four volumes on the American soldier in WWII. Several of the studies debunked assumptions made about the relationships between attitudes and behavior. Among the most important of these were a series of studies done on the attitude of troops toward integration. Before integration (Stouffer, et al., 1949, pp. 568–596) more than 80% of the white troops were opposed to any form of integration. Among the soldiers who served in units that had various degrees of integration only 7% strongly opposed the idea after it was done.

This is a lesson that sociologists need to teach with great regularity since the reduction of many problems is often predicated on changing attitudes before behavior. The reverse is usually true. One wonders how many programs designed to ameliorate problems connected with race relations have foundered because of the false assumption that attitudes have to change before behavior. What Stouffer and his associates demonstrated was that if you change behavior the attitudes will follow. While few organizations have the army's ability to control behavior, that doesn't negate the principles of behavior change that these studies illustrate. The challenge is to find ways to do this without compromising anyone's rights.

There is no shortage of topics for debunkers. Billions of dollars

are wasted and millions of lives are compromised because not enough attention is devoted to bringing a focus on erroneous information. To cite some examples: The effect of television on violence is a hotly debated topic. Lande (1993) concluded that while there may be a small group of vulnerable viewers, not much more could be said because social science researchers do not agree on the nature of the evidence.

Facilitated communication claims that people with severe autistic like disabilities can communicate through keyboards if they have a guide to hold their hand. A meta-analysis (Jacobson, Mulick, and Schwartz, 1995) of existing studies show that this is a claim that cannot be substantiated.

Post traumatic stress disorder (Scott, 1990) is a presumed psychiatric condition whose "existence" was established through a political process rather than through clinical research. It projects the idea that war is abnormal and the condition is created when a normal person is overwhelmed struggling with this aberrant condition. Today careers are built and pensions are given when this diagnosis is made.

The history of the Dissociative Disorders is equally interesting. They were not recognized until 1980 in the DSM (Moss, 1993). The most extreme form is known as Multiple Personality Disorder. It is estimated that 20% of the individuals in the adult general psychiatric hospital have a Dissociative Disorder and 5% have MPD. The diagnosis is made with much greater frequency. What is most probable is that there has been no real change in psychodynamic problems and people are just fitting their symptoms to what is a socially acceptable reason for irregular behavior.

It is even the case that many of the "findings" of sociological research need to be debunked. Weitzman (1985) showed that after divorce women suffered a 79% decline in their quality of life and men a 42% increase. Peterson (1996) reconstructed the original data and then reanalyzed it. His findings show that the figures were a 27% decline for women and a 10% increase for men. Weitzman (1996) accepts that she had a methodological error but still argues that the difference that was found should be a basis for action.

Careful study of almost any "popular" social problem like sexual abuse, family dissolution, spouse abuse or child abuse,

shows that more attention is paid to them but their incidence has not increased. The family is not disintegrating. Family life (Coontz, 1992; Chronicle, 1992, p.8) was not better in earlier eras and the family was never self-sufficient. One thing does stand out about these popular problems. Once identified no one seems to get over them. One of the most fashionable forms of treatment seems to be for adult survivors of some past stress.[1] Whatever presumed aid comes from these survivor groups is at a high price. One apparently never gets over the effects of past trauma. Freud at least offered the hope that with understanding you could put down past burdens.

These examples reflect a politicization of knowledge. Data that do not fit politically correct assumptions are rejected. Monahan and Steadman (1983, p. 1) cite John Gunn about continued attempts to link crime and mental disorder. Gunn said:

> The main problem in discussing any relationship between criminal behavior and mental disorder is that the two concepts are largely unrelated.

That doesn't prevent those with a stake in the presumed connection from denying the data.

Elizabeth Whelan, (1992) president of the American Council on Science and Health, says that creating a politically correct science is undermining public health. E.g., the ideology of extreme environmentalists focuses attention on the minute amounts of carcinogens on barbecued chicken rather than the compliance problems that harm large numbers of people. Her example can be generalized to include all of sociology.

Conclusion

The argument presented in this paper is that it is not possible for sociologists using only a sociological perspective to solve large scale social problems. Rather, the practicing sociologist can have his greatest impact on social practice by resurrecting and emphasizing their role as a debunker; that is, one who uses the methods of social science to demonstrate that what everyone assumes to be true is not.

This is an age of skepticism and doubt. Arthur Hays Sulzberger (1973) also thinks it is an age of mediocrity. People have come

to doubt rational technical solutions that are proposed by social scientists. There have been too many failures. Anti-rational forces like deconstruction and post-modernism are powerful influences in the University. They threaten to undermine the contribution sociology can make to improving the world. There is no more important function for sociologists than debunking.

Note

1. One of my favorite cartoons shows a large auditorium with about two people sitting in it. Strung across the back is a banner which says "Convention of Adult Survivors of Normal Parents." A separate paper could be written on the evil stepchild of this movement "recovered memories."

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