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SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL WORK: SCIENCE AND ART?

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We live in an age of specialization and usually find it beneficial, perhaps even essential. However, we have been aware since Marx's time at least that the division of labor has its cost. And though we may be a long way from the uncompartimentalized utopia where an individual might do four different kinds of work in a single day, we cannot afford to let the assumptions which underlie the separation of important jobs and functions go without periodic reexamination. The separation of the work of the sociologist (or, indeed, any social scientist) and the social worker is one area where reconsideration is overdue. In examining the taken-for-granted bases of this division of labor, we may find they obscure more than they clarify.

One version of the conceptual basis for the distinction between social work and sociology was offered by Robert McIver in a series of lectures at the New York School of Social Work (later Columbia School of S.W.) in 1931. McIver's lectures came at the end of a period of widespread discussion of the relationships between sociology and social work. (Pankin, Leighninger, & Leighninger, 1973) This period, c. 1926-1932, was followed by a time of mutual indifference between the fields and McIver, having anticipated this development, was trying to keep the possibility of collaboration alive by establishing a division of labor while stressing interdependence. It is impossible to tell, at least at the moment, what influence McIver's argument has had; we feel, however, that his formulation is close enough to popularly held but seldom articulated notions to merit our detailed attention. (e.g. Lubove, 1956, P. 33; Kahn, 1959, P. 274; Chambers, 1967, P. 105)

"The relationship of sociology to social work," McIver asserted, "is that of a science to an art." (1931, p. 1)

An art manipulates, controls and changes...; a science seeks only to understand.... An art individualizes, a science generalizes. An art lives in concrete embodiments.... A science lives in abstract relationships.... Each has its own task to perform, and while each needs the other, neither can ever perform the task of the other.
(1931, p. 2)

The lecture, the first of a series of five, goes on to discuss this relationship of sociology as science and social work as art and to make many helpful suggestions on contributions each might make to the other. Unfortunately, few of those suggestions seem to have found their way into practice. Instead of focusing on the words "each needs the other," social workers and sociologists seem to have heard only: "each has its own task."

The reasons for the failure of collaboration are numerous and will take further work to give each its proper weight. The inability of sociology to provide cookbook procedures for dealing with specific situations that could compete with Freudian prescriptions (Lubove, 1965, pp. 64-114; Woodroffe, 1968, pp. 118-150), the continuing preference

among social workers in particular and Americans in general for individual rather than social explanations of social problems (Heraud, 1970, p.8; Hinkle & Hinkle, 1954, p. 74), the politics of status and professionalization (McIver, 1931, Pp. 18-19), and the politics of national public policy all played a part in this separation. The conceptual distinction, however, may be as important in keeping social work and sociology apart as any of these other factors.

McIver seems to base his art/science distinction on two broad points: 1.) manipulation vs. understanding and 2.) generalization vs. specificity. The first argument, that art (and social work) "manipulates, controls and changes" while science (and sociology), stands apart and "above", seeks only understanding, may be seen as a version of the classic Weberian science/value or objective/subjective distinction. For Weber, the relativity of values could be tolerated if the security of absolute scientific truth was preserved. McIver, who follows Weber on a number of points, thus leaves it to the social worker to decide to what ends the sociologist's knowledge will be put. "Social work must find its own standards of value...without aid and without hinderance from science...." (1931 pp. 2-3)

The second point, that art "individualizes" and is concerned with the concrete, the detailed, the particular while science seeks generalizations and "abstract relationships", is another traditional distinction of Weber's time. It is most clearly formulated by Windleband but probably should be traced to Plato's "divided line." The implication is that the social worker is immersed in the complex and concrete details of a particular case and, moreover, must seek a practical resolution to the problems presented. The sociologist, on the other hand, can afford simply to observe and has the benefit of distance. He is concerned with statements that are trans-situational. He establishes typologies, categories, and patterns. He is responsible to an abstract ideal, "knowledge", and not to particular clients.

Also implicit in the generalization/specificity argument is the suggestion that the social worker's tactics in practice are a matter of "native skill and acquired experience" (McIver, 1931, p. 13) and have only a tenuous relationship to scientific knowledge. Mary Richmond, in her landmark social work text Social Diagnosis, expressed this more clearly and in a manner truer to the art analogy:

...The practitioner of an art must discover the heart of the matter himself -- it is of the essence of art that he shall win his way to this personal revelation... (1917, p. 103)

A recent version of this same distinction may be found in Jack Douglas' title article in The Relevance of Sociology (1970, p. 187):

It is this concrete and particular, this immediate existence full of uncertainty and contingency, which concerns us most about man. And it is this realm of experience that we can understand most fully only through poetic and artistic forms of knowledge.

Let us, then, take these two conceptual distinctions, derived from an analogy of the relationship of art and science and being used to distinguish social work from sociology, and examine each in detail.

When Weber promulgated the idea of value-free social science, he was being pressed hard not only by German nationalism, which threatened to turn university classrooms into jingoistic indoctrination sessions, but also by German historicism, whose ever-growing mountain of historical and cross-cultural data produced a doctrine of cultural relativity which called into question all absolute standards of goodness, truth, and beauty. Weber's strategy of yielding to cultural relativity in values while holding to objective universality in science proved to be a very successful holding action. This position, which lies behind McIver's manipulation vs. understanding distinction, is still maintained by many American social scientists. Yet, an increasing number are beginning to suspect that Weber really lost the battle with radical sociology of knowledge. Having witnessed the uses of sociology by business and industry for productivity and market research, having survived Vietnam and Project Camelot, social scientists are more willing than before to agree that "...the value-free doctrine of social science was sometimes used to justify the sale of one's talents to the highest bidder..." (Gouldner, 1962, p. 206; see also Birnbaum, 1971, pp. 214-231; Friedrichs, 1970, p.84) Having seen a change in the physical sciences from Newtonian simplicity to Einsteinian complexity and a corresponding change in philosophy of science from positivist absolutism to the more conditional and pragmatist viewpoints of Whitehead and Popper, having seen the arrival of the sociology of knowledge to the physical sciences in the work of T.S. Kuhn, many social scientists are ready to deal with the full impact of Mannheim's statement made in 1926:

At this point we may relativize ideas, not by denying them one by one, not by calling them into doubt, not by showing that they are reflections of this or that interest, but by demonstrating that they are part of a system, or more radically, of a totality of Weltanschauung, which as a whole is bound to, and determined by, one stage of developing social reality. From this point on, worlds confront worlds -- it is no longer individual propositions pitted against individual propositions. (Wolff, 1971, p. 69)

Both sociologists and social workers must now face the possible interdependence of values and scientific knowledge. They both must cope with the possibility that their value positions may affect their judgments of fact. They both must recognize the dependence of their theoretical frameworks and methodologies on untestable assumptions about human nature. They both must realize that they have responsibilities to people in the form of agencies, foundations, industries, governments, and clients of all sorts as well as to knowledge, and that these responsibilities may dictate and limit both theories and actions. Finally, both must confront the dependence of their thoughts and actions on macro-social and historical factors that form the context of their work.

McIver's second basis of distinction, generalization vs. specificity, has been much less challenged by recent scholarship than the first argument; yet, we hope to show that it is equally troublesome. The central problem, both with art and science and the analogical extension to social work and sociology, is that this approach treats as an exclusive characteristic what is really a matter of relative emphasis. Generalization and individualization or abstraction and concreteness are better seen as points on a continuum than as dichotomous qualities. Both science and art rely on elements from both ends of the continuum: patterns and generalizations at one end and unique details at the other.

The scientist, whose business it is to find, through properly controlled variables, the patterns of reproducible events, must distill these patterns from the unique. Generalizations come from clinical studies, testable hypotheses from observation, mathematical models and computer programs from a review of intuitive findings. On the other hand, the artist and critic, who wish most to produce a moment of unique feeling, both express themselves through patterns. In order for a work of art to affect an audience, some common ground must exist. All subject matter and media have some inherent pattern.

(Leighninger, 1971, p. 30)

It is true that scientists and artists have developed different styles of communicating as well as different emphases on the continuum of generalization/specificity. One must also note differing emphasis on sensory or affective intensification and on the size of the audience being addressed. However, none of these characteristics are sharp enough to serve as boundary criteria separating art from science. (Leighninger, 1972a) It might even be argued that the similarities are more important than the differences.

The implications of this for McIver's argument is that it may be very misleading to think of social workers as dominated by the concrete details of their specific case situations. Whatever a social worker does in a particular situation will be influenced by basic assumptions about man and society and by theoretical frameworks, partial or systematic, overt or unrecognized. The fact that one has less chance of controlling, simplifying, or experimenting with the complex details of situations may actually increase rather than decrease dependence on generalizations. (Malinowski, 1954, p. 79ff)

This leads to another dimension of McIver's second argument: the concept of "experience." McIver, Richmond, and Douglas all make frequent reference to experience as a way of talking about an individual's encounter with specificity and concreteness. Douglas states most clearly and in the extreme what both McIver, Richmond, and others seem to have in mind:

Any form of scientific analysis involves the imposition of some form of presuppositions upon the "raw" experience of everyday life...all analyses of human experience that go beyond the practical considerations of goals and means involved in an immediate situation do in fact wind up changing everyday experience. At the least, they add to that experience the conclusions for reflection which were not part of the experience itself. (1971, p. 187)

This picture has a certain attractive romanticism but does little to help us understand everyday experience, much less the experience of the artist or the social worker. It can be argued that everyday experience is far from "raw" in the unorganized and unreflective sense that Douglas seems to mean. (for a review of physiological and psychological pre-conditions to perception presented for use in social work education see Goldberg and Middleman, 1973; see also Blumer, 1969, pp. 1-60) The presuppositions are already there in all likelihood and may even be essential for experience itself. Only if the scientific presuppositions are different from the folk presuppositions can experience be "changed". Perhaps Douglas assumes that these presuppositions are always different. In any case, the experience of artist and social worker, which we are most concerned with here, cannot, it seems to us, be unreflective and insensitive to larger issues and problems if effective art or casework is to result.

Let us look again at the basis of the analogy: the artist. A working artist, particularly the ones we would regard as the "best," most serious, most successful and enduring, can be observed to take considerable pains with his product. It is the subject of deep reflection. If it indeed deals with the specific, concrete details of everyday life and can in fact help us understand "important realities" where science cannot (Douglas, 1971, p. 187), it does so through careful organization, thoughtful selection, and controlled stylistic technique. It may even be considerable as a sociological theory itself. (Leighninger, 1972b) For detailed testimony to this by an artist one might consult Ben Shahn's The Shape of Content. (1957) From the sociologist's point of view, the theories of Mead, Dewey, and Kenneth Burke (discussed in this context by Duncan, 1968) all stress the overlap of experience that the artist must have with his audience in order to communicate and provide the understanding valued by McIver, Richmond, and Douglas. One would think that the successful social worker would likewise be one who is diligent in using personal experience, empathy, and generalizations (theory) to orchestrate a response adequate to the complexities of the situation. (Bruyn, 1966; Blumer, 1969; also c.f. the kind of sympathetic introspection suggested by Mills, 1959, p. 196)

We hope that the conceptual distinction of sociologist and social worker based on an art/science dichotomy may now be regarded with some suspicion. Let us continue with a brief discussion of developments in sociological theory that further undermine an easy and clear division

of labor and instead contribute to what some social workers would call "role blurring". As we have said, McIver's discussion of separation is based on Weber's separation of values and scientific knowledge. This position has not only dominated American sociology but has also resulted in the deemphasis of other Weberian doctrines on the process by which sociological knowledge might be acquired. As the dominance of Weberian value-free sociology ends, the Weberian stress on social meanings and interpretative understanding may receive more attention. A re-discovery of Marxist sociology and the sociology of knowledge together with the emergence of ethnomethodology and the resurgence of interactionist sociology (Sprietzer and Reynolds, 1973) provide other spurs to a reconsideration of the business of acquiring sociological knowledge and putting it to use. In this new discussion of the relation of theory to practice, social work and sociology come closer together than they have been in half a century.

Unlike the fact/value distinction which dominates mainstream sociology, Weber's argument for the importance of understanding social meanings has been taken seriously only by those on the margins of sociology. Those sociologists most responsible for keeping alive the tradition that the meaning that social acts have for the actors themselves is a central datum for sociology and that the sociologist, in order to adequately represent those meanings, should become an active participant in the group he wishes to understand, are the Symbolic Interactionists. They have their own version of Weber's argument which derives from the social psychology and pragmatist epistemology of George Herbert Mead. For Mead, "the structure of society lies in... social habits, and only insofar as we can take these social habits into ourselves can we become selves." (Strauss, 1964, p. 33) Individual action

...is a construction and not a release, being built up by the individual through noting and interpreting features of the situations in which he acts...[and] group or collective action consists of the aligning of individual actions, brought about by the individual's interpreting or taking into account each other's actions. (Blumer in Manis & Meltzer, 1972, p. 148)

In order to study society, according to the interactionist, it is necessary to "...catch the process of interpretation..." through which social action is structured. "To catch the process, the student must take the role of the acting unit whose behavior he is studying." (Blumer in Manis & Meltzer, 1972, p. 151)

Another development in sociological theory, ethnomethodology, which is in part an outgrowth of the interactionist tradition incorporating elements of European phenomenology, places even more emphasis on the everyday meanings of social acts. Participant observation, a standard research method of the interactionists, has become even more flexible under the influence of phenomenology, which places stress on the intuitive benefits of participation. (Bruyn in Filstead, 1970)

The rediscovery of Marxist sociology has been another impetus to the reexamination of questions on how sociological knowledge is acquired as well as to what uses it is put. Marxists urge a more direct relationship of theory to practice, a dialectical relationship requiring constant interaction. Marx's eighth "thesis on Feuerbach" states:

All social life is essentially practical. All the mysteries which urge theory into mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.
(1947, p. 199)

Although the activist imperative of most Marxist sociologists is not shared by most ethnomethodologists and many interactionists, all seem inclined to agree that more direct involvement by the sociologist in the substance of his inquiry is essential for adequate sociological knowledge. Involvement is not only a source of strategic information for the student of social processes, but it may also be seen as the only way to interpret the findings of other, more traditional methods. Survey research, laboratory experiments, demographic data all may require comparison with data from "natural observation" and experiments in "natural settings". As Jack Douglas has concluded, summarizing all these trends:

...as our conceptions of society change, our conceptions of the nature of (scientific) sociological knowledge will also change. We shall come to see sociological knowledge and all scientific knowledge, as necessarily grounded in our personal involvement in common sense practical activities, we shall become convinced that the real question is not whether but how we should be involved.
(1970, p. 210)

(Despite the criticisms leveled above at one small part of Douglas' discussion, the piece as a whole admirably covers many complex issues; and much of our argument is indebted to his clear and comprehensive presentation.)

Though we are probably not likely to see the distinction between sociology and social work disappear under the converging trends of sociological theory combining involvement with reflection and practice with theory, we may at least imagine a period where transit between the two different activities will be easier. Moreover, as pressures for vocational training threaten to lead to greater curricular specialization, it cannot hurt to think occasionally of the things that social worker (or any practitioner) and sociologist (or any social scientist) have in common:

1. They both need to confront the influence of values on their theories and actions;

2. they both must recognize the influence of patrons (people who pay them) on what they do, and
3. deal with possible conflicts between those interests and the interests of those they would like to help;
4. they both theorize, developing general explanations for the things they encounter and general strategies for getting more information;
5. they both practice, test, or act in the complexity and concreteness of social reality.

If a focus on common or shared traits seems to obscure important facts, one must remember what is obscured in the focus on separation. It hides from the social scientist his reliance on values and practical involvement and his possible dependence on patronage. It shields from the social worker his reliance on theoretical frameworks, his responsibility to think beyond particular situations and cases and to help create new knowledge. If a political scientist can move from wholehearted involvement in getting someone elected to a critical analysis of the whole political system, why can't sociologists and social workers switch jobs now and then? This has its practical and conceptual perils, but it might lead to a more realistic and effective performance by both.

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