



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 8
Issue 1 *March*

Article 3

March 1981

Applied Sociology, Social Engineering, and Human Rationality

John W. Murphy
Ohio State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons, and the Sociology Commons

Recommended Citation

Murphy, John W. (1981) "Applied Sociology, Social Engineering, and Human Rationality," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 3.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.1438>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol8/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



Applied Sociology, Social Engineering,
and Human Rationality

John W. Murphy

Ohio State University

ABSTRACT

At this time social planning has come to be synonymous with technical forecasting. Because of this trend, the methods used by social planners are those of positive science. These methods, however, are not self-reflective, and are therefore naive about the epistemological assumptions which they inadvertently advance. As a result of this epistemological naivete, many times the social planner is guided by methodological assumptions that are totally incongruent with the social world to which they are to be applied. This type of social forecasting is referred to as irresponsible social planning, in that it is not sensitive to the needs and values of the individuals to be surveyed. The result of this type of technical forecasting is the development of abstract plans that have little social relevance. In order to avoid this type of irresponsible planning, the social planner must be self-reflexive, so that social planning comes to be viewed as the self-motivated projection and monitoring of social desires. This type of self-motivated planning is non-repressive and indicative of legitimate social management, and is the hallmark of the rational society. Only can social planning facilitate the growth of human rationality when it is guided by self-motivated goals.

At this time the idea of "applied sociology" is receiving more and more attention by sociologists. This concept of "applied sociology" has assumed many variegated meanings. For example, to some sociologists the label "applied" is attached to those sociologists who earn their living in non-academic settings, while to others a sociologist is of the applied variety when he/she employs the methods and knowledge accumulated by the discipline of sociology to solve or remedy a particular social problem. What both of these particular examples embody, however, is a differentiation that is either implicitly or explicitly present when the issue of applied sociology is discussed. That is, most all discussions of applied sociology make the distinction between pure

theory and applied research, in that the applied sociologist is thought to no longer deal with pure theory, but instead is believed to be oriented toward more practical or real issues. This conclusion, however, leads to many serious misunderstandings, particularly when the idea of applied sociology is thought to be similar in intention to what is meant by the idea of social engineering.

Social Engineering and Human Freedom

The process of social engineering usually carries connotations of serious finality. The social engineer, because of his/her belief in absolute rationality, is thought to suppress social spontaneity. This is particularly the case when the social engineer uses the scientific method to determine social policy through the implementation of rigorous research strategies. This more "objective" procedure for regulating social activities is thought to deprive the social individual of his/her volitional capacity, thus resulting in the sterile unfolding of an artificially developed collective destiny. Modern technological development is usually viewed as the paragon of this type of social planning. Understood in this context, the intentions of the applied sociologist are many times thought to be highly suspect.

Why, however, is it the case that systematic planning has come to be associated with repressive activities? Why has the idea of planning itself come to be viewed as an anti-humanistic activity? Or even more to the point, does the process of social planning have to be thought to compromise the freedom that is assumed to be indigenous to social life (Ballard, 1978; Ellul, 1964, Gorz, 1967; Habermas, 1979). My immediate answer to this latter query is obviously no, as should be noted from the rhetorical manner in which it is posed. Yet this answer must be elucidated further if the source of my conclusion is to be sufficiently clarified.

Theory and Objectivity

The origin of this confusion is the bifurcation that is thought to exist between pure theory and applied research. According to this typology, theory is thought to exist in some ethereal realm that is totally divorced from the exigencies of everyday life. Because of this it is always accorded a neutral status. Theories, therefore, are not thought to affect the social world in any way, but instead are understood to merely mimic what is presented as worldly or real. The obverse of this arrangement is that what is assumed to be worldly or real is viewed to be an inherent property of the world. The goal of scientific inquiry then is to somehow align a worldly fact to the theory which adequately explains it. Throughout this alignment activity it is never believed that theory orients any search for facts, in that the presuppositions of any

particular theory might actually define what eventually comes to be viewed as factual.

Of course, the aforementioned portrayal of the bifurcation that is thought to exist between theory and practice is somewhat exaggerated, yet my point should be clear. That is, when it is not thought that theory shapes the world-view held by the planner, the so-called scientific view of the social planner may in fact labor to outline a planning option that is of no relevance to a particular community. This is simply due to the fact that the social planner might be inadvertently advancing assumptions about what is thought to be relevant social action that are not at all similar to those held by the individuals to which all subsequent planning policies are to be applied.

What is the upshot of the scenario that is depicted in the foregoing paragraph? Stated simply, a supposedly neutral activity, or theory, is thought to discover through its explanatory power a similarly neutral social fact. How does this rendition of the relationship of theory to facticity outline the social position of the individual relative to the scientific application of sociological theory? In a word, the intentions of the social individual are essentially usurped of their power through the presence of both a neutral activity and a factual world to which he/she has no essential relationship. In the parlance of this so-called scientific enterprise, the individual is merely subjective, while both theory and facticity are provided the seigneurial status of being objective. The terms of such a relationship demand that primacy be given to the objective component (Frankl, 1967; Gadamer, 1976; Marcuse, 1968; Simonds, 1978). The individual is therefore eviscerated as a result of this relationship to the point of lifelessness.

Whose Reality?

In terms of the assumptions of the scientific enterprise, the ability to relate to the world circumscribed by that activity is incumbent upon the extent to which the reality of the social individual is congruent with the scientific world-view. If the world-view held by a society is not grounded in positive science, it is highly likely that those persons will be alienated from the resulting world which scientific theory demands. As Heidegger suggests (1971), at this time not many people orient their lives according to the meanings advanced by positive science. A similar belief is advanced by writers such as O'Neill (1974) and Luckmann (1978). It is no wonder, therefore, that applied sociology, when attempting to facilitate social planning through the use of its theories and methods, is viewed as a highly oppressive and, thus, stultifying activity. Sociological theory and method, as a result of their attempt to emulate the positive scientific approach of physics, do

not really describe the world as it is lived by most actors. In a word, positive science substitutes a particular view of the world for the entire world horizon. As a result of this, the application of sociology inadvertently denies the existence of the social life which it purports to be investigating. Because rational planning, likewise, is associated with scientifically motivated thinking, the idea of planning itself comes to be synonymous with the denial of social existence.

Modern social theory, that which is particularly associated with the movement referred to as hermeneutic philosophy, recognizes that the idea of a-historical objectivity is itself highly problematic. To be specific, such a thought would result in the simultaneous denial of that a-historical phenomenon. Due to the fact that all meanings must be worldly (historical), in that they possess parameters that are relational by nature, theory must be viewed as the process through which all meanings are mediated or brought to prominence. In a word, theory does not merely serve to outline an "objective" set of relationships, but instead is an integral part of the process whereby social/structural relations are established (Apel, 1980; Husserl, 1964; Scheler, 1980; Schroyer, 1970). Because of this, theory does not merely provide a descriptive function, but in direct contrast to this actually serves to construct meaning relationships, or to make their interconnection thematic.

A New Image of Social Planning

However, how does this shift in viewing theory and, thus, "objectivity" affect the idea of applied sociology? If applied sociology were to ever be used to provide evidence for the purpose of policy making, how would this modern rendition of social theory affect this process? Since the concept of positive objectivity is essentially denied by this recent shift in understanding theory, policy formation itself must be understood to be a part of the social process, instead of merely being viewed to be the rational necessity or outgrowth of a social destiny assumed to possess legitimacy sui generis. Accordingly, social policy does not merely facilitate world development, but much more fundamentally actually shapes the destiny of the social world. The world and, therefore, the development of the world must be thought to be a truly social activity.

Social engineering, moreover, must come to be viewed as self-management, as is outlined by modern Yugoslavian sociologists (Horvat, Markovic, and Supek, 1975; Sher, 1977). As Markovic illustrates, the application of sociology in the form of self-management requires that the social world adopt a renewed version of what it means to engage in social planning. No longer, as is the case with positive science, is the efficient development of an already sedimented social structure thought to be the goal of social planning. Likewise, predictions based on the possible growth of an assumed legitimate social reality,

formulated for the purpose of effective social adjustment, are not supposed to be the major product of social planning. Rather, the major product of social planning is to be the formulation or constitution of a popularly supported, i.e., historically constituted, course of social action, and subsequent to this the evaluation of the extent to which those historically developed plans have been achieved. Because this entire planning process is thought to be a social product, any plan can be altered or abandoned at any time by the persons involved in the planning process. The unfolding of any particular social plan must therefore be understood to be the result of the motivations and interests of the social participants. Self-motivated social planning is believed to be true social engineering, in that a society monitors its own developmental progress, instead of merely attempting to invent methods which will insure that a society will be capable of adjusting to a set of social demands that are not necessarily relevant.

Examples of Irresponsible Epistemology

In terms of making social planning non-repressive, what is needed is a responsible epistemology. A responsible epistemology is one which realizes that planning cannot be logically removed from interpretation, and therefore a planner must be fully aware of the "epistemological grid" (Foucault) that underpins any social world when social planning is initiated. At this time, however, the development of a real sensitivity to the epistemological assumptions indigenous to social planning does not appear to be of significant importance to social planners. A few examples should help to clarify what I mean by this statement, thus hopefully illustrating the consequences of an irresponsible epistemology.

At this time, for example, a federally funded method of program evaluation is being used to collect data that is totally inconsistent with the treatment philosophy of the programs to be evaluated (Murphy, 1979a). To be specific, most drug rehabilitation programs in the United States, which by definition operate according to an out-patient treatment philosophy, are being evaluated in terms of criteria which have been traditionally viewed as appropriate for the evaluation of in-patient treatment facilities. That is, it is currently the policy of the Government to treat a client in a federally funded drug program as successfully treated only if he/she is formally discharged from a program. However, according to an out-patient treatment philosophy a client may in fact be viewed as cured if the supportive counseling offered by an out-patient clinic allows the individual to function adequately in the community. In a word, formal discharge from an out-patient clinic is not a prerequisite for a client to be viewed as successfully treated. Yet if a client does remain in treatment in an out-patient clinic, while functioning adequately in the community, that client will never be counted as successfully treated, except,

maybe, when the clinic is finally closed and all clients must be discharged.

The result of this incongruence between treatment and evaluation philosophy is that the effectiveness of out-patient drug programs is seriously underestimated. Even though a successfully functioning client who is in treatment will eventually be detected when a clinic is finally closed, such a review policy is not going to help such a clinic secure funds for future operation, at least while that program is operating. Such a planning technique is hardly consistent with the notion of rational planning, and exemplifies irresponsible epistemology.

Another example of the current incongruence between planning and social reality can be discovered in the manner in which many social service programs are managed. Specifically, there is currently a total inconsistency between the management philosophies that are used in most social service programs and, for example, the philosophy underpinning the ability of the program evaluator to collect data systematically in those programs (Murphy, 1979b). It is well known that if an evaluator is to collect data in a systematic and, thus, valid manner, the evaluator must be capable of building extensive information networks throughout an organization. Yet most social service programs are organized in the typical bureaucratic manner, a la Weber. The result of this is that the program evaluator does not possess the organizational latitude to construct the intimate information networks that must be developed if valid information is to be collected.

The problem here is that many administrators do not take seriously organizational and management theory, and because of this do not really understand how that type of theory works to shape the atmosphere of an organization. Because of this, these administrators have not begun to understand that the serious problem pertaining to the underutilization of program evaluation generated data may be a management and not a research problem, in that the organization has not been properly prepared to foster the type of organizational environment in which program evaluation can be effectively operationalized. Likewise, many evaluators believe that program evaluation research should not be affected by organizational issues, because of its supposedly "value neutral" nature, and therefore do not concern themselves with the problem of integrating management and evaluation theory, so that both of these components of a program's operation can function at an optimal level. Much irrelevant data can be generated merely due to this incongruency existing between evaluation and management theory. As a result, social planning is quite haphazard.

One last example should render this issue of responsible epistemology perfectly clear. In the field of drug abuse, program planning is grounded in the needs assessment. The needs assessment questionnaire, for the most part, is not used to conduct these needs assessments due to cost limitations and the logistical difficulties which

are present when attempting to survey an addict population. Therefore, most evaluators choose to use a particular form of indirect indicator to assess the prevalence of heroin use in a community. This indirect indicator takes the form of a variety of mathematical projection or forecasting techniques (Murphy, 1978). Such techniques may be linear, non-linear, or may take the form of time series analysis, which is supposedly able to take into account a variety of data patterns. Nevertheless, each of these mathematical models make major assumptions about the world that are never thoroughly investigated. All an evaluator does is gather data about past drug use, usually in the form of the number of clients who have enrolled for treatment, and attempt to project that pattern into the future. As with all linear and quasi-linear models, there is really no certainty about what is meant by past behavioral performance, and subsequently what the future is supposed to mean is pure guesswork. However, major planning decisions are made in the field of drug abuse on data gathered through the use of this type of social indicator, with little or no serious attempt to assess what the data that is generated actually means socially, as opposed to mathematically.

The point of this brief exposition portraying irresponsible epistemology is to illustrate that theory is not irrelevant in social planning, but instead does in fact shape the world. Accordingly, all social planners should be ready to investigate their epistemological assumptions, so that the limitations of those assumptions are rendered apparent, and new planning options are made manifest. Only when this type of epistemological openness is exhibited by the social planner will non-repressive or relevant planning take place.

Summary

In this context how must the application of sociology be undertaken? The application of sociology must no longer be viewed as an essentially innocuous activity. Rather, as Walter Benjamin (1968) would say, an act of application is simultaneously an act of interpretation (cf. Morris, 1977; Nisbet, 1976). Stated simply, every act of application implies the presence of an existential orientation which, by definition, might not be universal by nature. This orientation will, likewise, outline a set of meanings and, thus, a social destiny that cannot necessarily be thought to possess universal application or validity. If this notion is not understood by the applied sociologist, any action on the part of the sociologist to apply the methods and theories of that discipline to produce information to be used in making particular policy decisions will most likely produce a highly alienating state of affairs. That is, if the presuppositions of a particular social interpretation that is rendered through an act of application are not verified against the presuppositions of the social world to which that application is to be made, then the resulting incongruity will produce either irrelevant

or oppressive social policy. Either result is inappropriate.

In order to reduce the possibility of this problem occurring the applied sociologist must remember that the social world is a continuous, as Simmel would say, process of socializing the world. Therefore, any process that is worldly must be viewed as concomitantly advancing and maintaining a rendition of what it means for the world to be social. Because the application of sociology is a worldly or historical activity, it must be remembered that it cannot be viewed as value-neutral, but instead must be understood to form or socialize the world through its application. If this idea is truly comprehended by the sociologist, the process of applying sociological theory and method must first include a consultation with the social world to which all applications are to be made, so as to insure that any application is consistent with the orientation of that social world. In order for the need for such a consultation activity to be rendered apparent, a shift must be made away from the prevailing attempt to assess the social fabric through the method and theory that underpins the positive scientific approach to conducting sociological investigations. If this shift is not made, the application of sociology will have little chance of overcoming the negative connotations that are currently associated with the idea of social engineering.

The only type of sociological application that appears to have any future is one that recognizes that all applications must be made within the social strictures outlined by the social reality to which all applications are to be made. In terms of this awareness, sociological application must come to be viewed as social monitoring instead of social engineering. As such the application process serves merely to bring a particular social orientation or reality to fruition. The social world, therefore, becomes self-managed, instead of being coerced into adhering to a destiny that might not be its own. It is really only this type of self-managed application of sociological theory and method that will result in the idea of social engineering coming to be viewed as a benefit to social existence.

References

- Apel, Karl-Otto. Toward a Transformation of Philosophy. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980, p. 245.
- Ballard, Edward C. Man and Technology: Toward a Measurement of a Culture. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1978.
- Benjamin, Walter, "The Task of the Translator," in Illuminations. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968, pp. 68-82.
- Ellul, Jacques. The Technological Society. New York: Random House, 1964, pp. 173-177.
- Frankl, Viktor, "Collective Neuroses of the Present Day," in Psychotherapy and Existentialism. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967, pp. 113-131.

- Gadamer, Hans-Georg, "The Nature of Things and the Language of Things," in Philosophical Hermeneutics. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976, pp. 69-81.
- Gorz, Andre. Strategy for Labor, A Radical Proposal. Boston: Beacon Press, 1967.
- Habermas, Juergen, "Historical Materialism and the Development of Normative Structures," in Communication and the Evolution of Society. Boston: Beacon Press, 1979, pp. 95-129.
- Heidegger, Martin, "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," in Poetry, Language, and Thought. New York: Harper and Row, 1971, pp. 145-161.
- Horvat, Branko, Marcovic, Mihailo, and Supek, Rudi. Eds. Self-Governing Socialism: A Reader. White Plains, New York: International Arts and Sciences Press, 1975.
- Husserl, Edmund. The Paris Lectures. The Hague: Nijhoff, 1964, pp. 10-11.
- Luckmann, Thomas, "Philosophy, Social Sciences, and Everyday Life," in Phenomenology and Sociology. New York: Penguin Books, 1978, pp. 153-217.
- Marcuse, Herbert, "The Affirmative Character of Culture," in Negations: Essays in Critical Theory. Boston: Beacon Press, 1968, pp. 88-133.
- Morris, Monica B. An Excursion into Creative Sociology. New York: Columbia University Press, 1977, pp. 90-121.
- Murphy, John W., "Drug Program Evaluation: Outcome Measures," Journal of Drug Education, 9(4), 1979a, pp. 309-314.
- Murphy, John W., "Program Evaluation and Organizational Structure," Evaluation News, 10, 1979b, pp. 15-19.
- Murphy, John W., "Drug Abuse and the Needs Assessment," The Loop, 7, 1978, pp. 3-5.
- Nisbet, Robert. Sociology as an Art Form. London: Oxford University Press, 1977, pp. 90-121.
- O'Neill, John. Making Sense Together: An Introduction to Wild Sociology. New York: Harper and Row, 1974, pp. 14-27.
- Scheler, Max. Problems of a Sociology of Knowledge. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980, pp. 118-122.
- Schroyer, Trent, "Toward a Critical Theory for Advanced Industrial Society," in Recent Sociology, No. 2, Hans Peter Dreitzel, Ed., New York: The MacMillian Co., 1970, pp. 210-234.
- Sher, Gerson. Praxis: Marxist Criticism and Dissent in Socialist Yugoslavia. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977.
- Simonds, A.P. Karl Mannheim's Sociology of Knowledge. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978, pp. 23-32.