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## **INCLUDING SOCIOLOGICAL PRACTICE: A Global Perspective and the U.S. Case**

by  
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### **Abstract**

This chapter contributes to the discussion about the shape of sociology by focusing on what has been learned from the development of a specialization in sociological practice (including clinical, applied and engaged public sociology) in the United States and by examining the relationship of sociological practice to the field of sociology. Topics that are covered include relevant definitions, the history of sociological practice, credentialing processes and the integration of a specialization within the discipline. The chapter concludes with comments about the importance of including sociological practice in our programs at all levels and the need for a detailed history of global sociological practice.

**Key Terms:** Sociological practice, clinical sociology, applied sociology, engaged public sociology, history of sociology, certification, accreditation

# INCLUDING SOCIOLOGICAL PRACTICE:

## A Global Perspective and the U.S. Case

### Introduction

This volume examines the shape of sociology. This includes looking at the number and kind of specializations that have developed within the field; the relation between the specializations and the core of the discipline; and the strength of the discipline in terms of unique contributions to knowledge and to quality of life in nation-states and globally.

To contribute to this discussion, this chapter focuses on one specialization – sociological practice – and particularly on developments in the United States, a country that has a century-old tradition of sociological practice (Fritz, 1985; Perlstadt, 2007). Sociological practice is first defined and then there is a discussion of the history and current situation of this subfield. The core of this article is about the development of sociological practice in the United States and the relation of sociological practice to sociology during that time.

### Defining Sociological Practice

*Sociological practice* – intervention and/or practical research – may or may not be part of a general definition of sociology. If sociological practice is an expected part of sociology, there might not be a need for an additional term or terms to describe practice. In countries where practice activities are not something that all or most sociologists could be involved in, there could be a need for a term or terms to cover practice and the different kinds of practice. For example, in Italy there is discussion of “professional sociology” and “clinical sociology” while “sociotechnics”<sup>2</sup> emerged in Poland.

In the United States, sociological practice is an umbrella term that covers *clinical sociology*, *applied sociology* and *engaged public sociology* (e.g., Fritz, 2008; Association for Applied and Clinical Sociology, 2010; American Sociological Association Section on Sociological Practice and Public Sociology).<sup>3</sup> While the terms are, at times, defined differently,<sup>4</sup> the general definitions provided here should ground the discussion that follows.

Clinical sociology is a creative, humanistic and multidisciplinary specialization that seeks to improve the quality of people’s lives (e.g., Fritz, 1985; Gargano, 2008:154; Fritz, 2008:1). Clinical sociologists (Fritz, 2008:1):

work with client systems to assess situations and avoid, reduce or eliminate problems through a combination of analysis and intervention. *Clinical analysis* is the critical assessment of beliefs, policies, or practices, with an interest in improving the situation. *Intervention* is based on continuing analysis; it is the creation of new systems as well as the change of existing

systems and can include a focus on prevention or promotion (e.g., preventing environmental racism or promoting community sustainability).

Clinical sociologists are employed, for instance, as managers, consultants, organizational development specialists, mediators, policymakers and therapists. While research (particularly needs assessment and evaluation) may be part of their work, these functions also may be carried out by others.

Applied sociology refers to research for practical purposes. According to Britt (2000:168), it is “policy-oriented (and) action-directed.” Harry Perlstadt (2007:342) has noted that applied sociology, “in its broadest sense, . . . encompasses evaluation research, needs assessment, market research, social indicators and demographics” in many areas such as medicine, business and education. Like others describing the field, Britt (2000:168) has indicated that applied sociology is not “oriented toward those who have a concern for the advancement of sociological knowledge. “ Instead, it is:

oriented more toward those who are making decisions, developing or monitoring programs, or concerned about the accountability of those who are making decisions and developing programs.

Public sociology, according to Michael Burawoy (2007:28), “brings sociology into a conversation with publics, understood as people who are themselves in conversation.” As examples of public sociologists, Burawoy mentions those whose works are “read beyond the academy, and . . . become a vehicle of public discussion about the nature of (the) society.” Burawoy includes as public sociologists those who write for the opinion pages for newspapers and the activists who work, for example, for community-based movements concerned with labor, women or neighborhood issues. *Engaged public sociology* - with a focus in areas such as public policy development, human rights intervention and/or community development - fits with what has been described above as clinical sociology and is included under the label of sociological practice.

Some general points about the three approaches are noted here: the *different approaches may be combined* in a practitioner’s work though most practitioners will favor one of the terms to describe her/his practice; practitioners have *different audiences* – clients and/or the public- in comparison to those sociologists who primarily or only speak to each other and students (those who are scholar-practitioners<sup>5</sup> usually have both audiences); practitioners and scholar-practitioners have an *orientation toward usefulness* (rather than mainly or only generating sociological knowledge); and there is an understanding that *practical problems foster the development and reformulation of theory and method*. Clinical sociology is usually explicitly defined as *multidisciplinary* in preparation and delivery (Fritz, 1985:xix); applied sociology (Perlstadt, 2007) and an engaged public sociology often are multidisciplinary, particularly in terms of theory, research methods and/or skills, but this may not be mentioned as part of the definition.

## **The History of Sociological Practice: A Global Perspective**

Sociological practice is as old as the field of sociology, and its roots are found in many parts of the world. Clinical sociology and engaged public sociology, for instance,

can be traced back to the fourteenth-century work of the Arab scholar and statesperson Abd-al-Rahman ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) (Lee, 1979:488; Fritz, 1985). Ibn Khaldun (1958; Lee, 1979) provided numerous clinical observations based on his varied work experiences such as secretary of state to the ruler of Morocco and chief judge of Egypt.

Auguste Comte (1798-1857), Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) and Karl Marx (1818-1883) are frequently identified as precursors to or initial figures in the development of sociological practice (e.g., Gouldner, 1956; Fritz, 2008). Comte, the French scholar who coined the term *sociology*, believed that the scientific study of societies would provide the basis for social action. Perlstadt (2007:342-343) notes Comte's "translational role" between basic research and "activists/interventionists." Emile Durkheim's work on the relation between levels of influence (e.g., social in relation to individual factors) led Alvin Gouldner (1965) to write that "more than any other classical sociologist (Durkheim) used a clinical model." Karl Marx, as Alfred McClung Lee noted in 1979, brought to his written work "the grasp of human affairs only possible through extensive involvement in praxis..., social action,... agitation, and... social organization."

Sociological practice has developed in a number of countries including France and Italy (Fritz, 2008). French is the language of many of the current international clinical sociology conferences, and many publications clearly linked to clinical sociology have appeared in Quebec, Canada, and France (e.g., Gaulejac, Hanique and Roche, 2007; Rheume, 2008). The French clinical sociologists emphasize clinical analysis and frequently focus on the relationship between psychology and sociology. They have a solid international network and have done an excellent job of attracting psychologists and professionals in other fields to their network. There is an extensive publication record including the writing of the Van Bockstaeles and their colleagues (1963), Enriquez (1997); Enriquez, Houle, Rhéaume, and Sévigny, R. (1993), Gaulejac and Roy (1993), Sevigny (1996) and Gaulejac, Hanique and Roche (2007).

During the last twenty years, Italians have hosted sociological practice conferences and workshops, offered a graduate program in clinical sociology, established associations of clinical sociologists and professional sociologists and published clinical sociology books and articles. Among the publications are ones by Tosi and Battisti (1995), Luison (1998), and Corsale (2008).

Sociological practice also is found in other parts of the world. Of particular interest would be developments in the Netherlands (Schultz et al., 1993), China (Li, 1999), Greece (e.g., Rigas and Papadaki, 2008), Brazil (Takeuti and Niewiadomski, 2008), Mexico (e.g., Taracena, 2008), Japan (Noguchi, 2008), and Malaysia (e.g., Wan, 2006). Mexico, Brazil, France, Canada, Italy, the United States and Greece are among those countries that have hosted international sociological practice conferences.

The international development of sociological practice is supported primarily by three organizations. The International Sociological Association is home to the clinical sociology division (RC46) that was organized in 1982 at the ISA World Congress in Mexico City and also to the division on sociotechnics/sociological practice.(RC26). Other major influences are the clinical sociology section of the Association internationale des Sociologues de la Langue Française (International Association of French Language Sociologists) and the clinical sociology division of the l'Association française de sociologie (the French Sociology Association). All these groups hold conferences and encourage publication. The clinical sociology division of the ISA, for example, has co-

sponsored a book about teaching clinical sociology (Fritz, 2006) and is developing a book about effective community intervention.

It is clear that a global interest in sociological practice has emerged. While there is a common core (e.g., conceptual framework, acceptance of a wide range of theories and research methods), there are differences. In some countries, for instance, clinical sociologists are more interested in providing analyses to policymakers and the public (e.g., France) than in undertaking intervention (e.g., the U.S.) and there can be differences in their areas of focus.<sup>6</sup> In some countries or areas of practice, practitioners may introduce themselves as *sociological* practitioners, clinical *sociologists*, public *sociologists* or applied *sociologists*, while in other settings, the labels used by practitioners may be connected to the work they do (e.g., analyst, consultant, policy research) rather than to the discipline of sociology. Finally, it should be mentioned that while scholar-practitioners in certain areas of the world (e.g., the United States, French Canada, and France) have had important roles in the development of sociological practice, there are now many other national and regional influences that will help shape the future of this global specialization.

## **The History and Contributions of Sociological Practice in the United States**

There is no excellent publication<sup>7</sup> about the history of global sociological practice. As Roger Straus (2002:16) has lamented, the “historic role of sociology in developing applied social research methods remains largely unknown and unacknowledged” and “sociological practice (has) become, literally, an underground tradition within our discipline.” That has been true globally and is often the case even within a country. The United States is one of the countries where the threads of the national history have been detailed to some extent (e.g., Bulmer, 1992; Fritz, 1985, 1991; Lazarsfeld and Reitz with Pasanella, 1975). Because the history for the United States is long (more than a century), a good deal of material is available about this important history and yet sociological practice is still not fully integrated in the discipline, this chapter focuses on the United States.

Sociological practice, in the United States, began in the late 1800s and early 1900s (Fritz, 1985). This period included the Progressive Era (mid-1890s through 1916), a time of reform as well as the emergence of corporate capitalism. At the turn of the twentieth century, there were social problems that led to public protests and the development of reform organizations. It is not surprising that many of the early sociologists were scholar-practitioners or practitioners who were interested in reducing or resolving the problems that faced their communities.

Words that referred to sociological practice appeared in presentations, publications and course titles beginning some 100 years ago (Fritz, 1985, Perlstadt, 2007). The roots of American sociological practice have been traced to the 1883 publication of Lester Ward’s *Dynamic Sociology: or Applied Social Science* (Britt, 2000:168), Albion Small’s 1896 “Scholarship and Social Agitation” (Fritz, 2007:353) and to many others connected to the “practical sociology” of the early 1900s (Krause, 2007:369).

The first known use of the words “clinical sociology” was in the late 1920s and early 1930s. The words appeared in course titles at the University of Chicago, documents written by a medical school dean at Yale who wanted to have physicians trained in what he called clinical sociology and a 1931 journal article, “Clinical Sociology,” by Louis Wirth that appeared in the *American Journal of Sociology* (Fritz, 2007). Public sociology is a more recent concept and the term may have first been proposed by Herbert Gans (1989:7) in his 1988 presidential address to the American Sociological Association.<sup>8</sup> The roots of engaged public sociology are in the same traditions as mentioned for applied sociology and clinical sociology.

The history of sociological practice in the United States has been chronicled by scholar-practitioners in articles and important books (e.g., Blasi’s 2005 *Diverse Histories of American Sociology*, Bryant and Peck’s 2007 *21<sup>st</sup> Century Sociology*). A chapter by Breslau (2007:59) in Calhoun’s 2007 centennial book on the history of American sociology, for instance, notes that in the late 1800s and early 1900s, surveys of sociology teachers in the United States showed “that practitioners and teachers of practical sociology were by far more numerous than the general sociologists, who were found in a small number of elite universities.” Breslau (2007: 59, 61) concluded that “all indications are that it was the demand for instruction in practical matters, rather than a demand for academic research, that drove the growth of the discipline in those decades” but also wrote that the founding of professional social work and public administration led to “the loss of (sociology’s) applied wing and its role as the credentialing discipline for practical sociologists...”

If the early 1900s has been characterized as a period in which many sociologists were focused on social problems, the periods that followed 1920 are seen as ones that focused on the development of empirical sociology and included the “growth of a more applied orientation” (Bulmer, 1992:318). Bulmer (1992:319) details reasons for the growth of applied sociology which include the scientific development of sociology, increasing importance of philanthropic organizations, impact of social science on policymaking at the national level and interest of government in social science.

Perlstadt (2007) also has detailed the many contributions of applied sociologists in the late 1800s and early 1900s. These include ones by Lester Ward (for most of his career a paleontologist with the US Geological Survey and who “brought the term applied sociology into the discipline”); Florence Kelley, the “activist researcher,” who with Jane Addams and others, developed the groundbreaking “The Hull-House Maps and Papers;” and the Sociology Department that was established within the Ford Motor Company. In discussing later periods, Perlstadt (2007:348) also writes about the initial interest in “social engineering” (and then the disinterest because of Soviet five-year plans and political developments in Germany) and the “substantial boost” - federal funding - that applied sociology received because of World War II and then the War on Poverty.

Doug McAdam (2007:423-4) discusses the 1950s through 1980s in the United States as a period in which there was “devaluation” of practical work by “mainstream” sociologists. He writes:

If the modal sociologist of the 1950s and early 1960s was a progressive social engineer seeking solutions to society’s problems, (her/his) counterpart, circa 1980, was an ‘outsider’ far removed from the mainstream institutions and practical

policy questions that had been the focus of so much scholarship in the postwar period.

McAdam continues by noting that there was a dramatic decline in both the “*status* and *visibility*” of practical work during that 30-year period

## **Contemporary Sociological Practice in the United States: Some Considerations**

In the last forty years, there have been many interesting developments in the sociological practice specialization in the United States. These include theoretical and methodological contributions that connect academic/basic and practical interests (Perlstadt, 2007), a very developed literature for teaching sociological practice,<sup>9</sup> workshops that support practice, the development of certification and accreditation practices and numerous publications in many different areas of application. This section will focus on a few of the accomplishments and concerns: the development of professional associations, a certification process for individuals, an accreditation process for programs and the level of the sociology programs that include a focus on sociological practice.

Support for practice activity in the United States now comes primarily from two professional groups. These are the Association for Applied and Clinical Sociology (AACS) and the section on Sociological Practice and Public Sociology,<sup>10</sup> part of the American Sociological Association. The names of both groups changed over the years to include new directions and combine constituencies. The predecessor groups of AACS – the Clinical Sociology Association which became the Sociological Practice Association and the Society for Applied Sociology – were particularly influential in the development of practice particularly in terms of sponsoring publications and developing credentialing processes for individuals and programs.

One particularly unusual aspect of sociological practice in the United States is that the Association for Applied and Clinical Sociology offers a certification process for individual practitioners.<sup>11</sup> The Ph.D. certification process was first offered by a predecessor organization in 1983 and certification was first awarded in 1984. Certification at the master’s level was available in 1986. The current process involves the submission of a portfolio, letters of assessment, university transcripts and documents that verify applied or clinical practice. If an applicant’s portfolio and application documents are approved, the applicant will be invited to give a peer-reviewed demonstration.

The Association for Applied and Clinical Sociology’s predecessor organizations also put in place the Commission on Applied and Clinical Sociology. The Commission is a free-standing organization that came into existence in 1995. It currently accredits undergraduate and master’s programs (full programs as well as tracks or concentrations) in sociological practice, clinical sociology, applied sociology and public sociology.<sup>12</sup> While accreditation is not essential, the accreditation standards help programs develop, promote and support quality sociological education and practice.<sup>13</sup>

The accreditation standards require the specification of learning outcomes and help programs look at how they integrate sociological theory, knowledge, methods, skills, professional orientation and ethics. The accredited programs currently are all in the

United States but the Commission was contacted by a university department in another country that developed its practice programs based on the Commission's standards. The department asked about the possibility of applying for accreditation and the Commission, after it completed a site visit, agreed to consider an application.

One indicator of the acceptance of sociological practice in the field of sociology is the level of the programs that have sociological practice options. If there are practice programs or concentrations, they usually are found at the undergraduate and master's levels. At both levels, the enrolled students may want degrees that will help them get work after graduation or increase their standing with their current employers. The master's programs usually offer more courses in the area of specialization.

Education at the master's level in the United States is the fastest growing area of graduate education (Snyder et al, 2008). Some of these students are enrolled in 5-year or combined bachelor's/master's programs. In sociology departments, the master's programs sometimes have two tracks – one for students who are interested in getting a Ph.D and one for students who will take positions as practitioners.

According to the 2008 draft report of the American Sociological Association's Task Force on the Master's Degree in Professional Sociology, the most common graduate degree in sociology in the United States is the master's degree<sup>14</sup> and, in the case of sociology, this degree "often represents the face of sociology to the public." The report also notes "the phenomenal rise in Master's education nationwide and across disciplines" which "suggests a significant demand in the workplace for the skills associated with Master's degrees." About 49 percent of the social science graduates are expected to go on to graduate school within 10 years and about 2/3 of these students will enroll in master's programs (Nevell and Chen, 2007; Redd, 2007). These students may – or may not – choose to enroll in a sociology program.

At the doctoral level, observers have noticed some interesting trends. McAdam (2007), for instance, writes that the situation "may be changing, but it is still the case that the most applied subfields are virtually absent from the highest-ranked sociology departments" and that this is particularly interesting as all this has happened while the "baby boom cohorts, attracted by the 'relevance' of sociology" entered the field.

The Task Force on the Master's Degree in Professional Sociology (American Sociological Association, 2008) wrote that some faculty members have indicated that they have noticed a trend at the doctoral level regarding practice. The Task Force indicated that several professors reported that there were students who are interested in applied research, but they connect this interest to their specialties (e.g., criminology or environmental sociology) rather than to an applied sociology specialization. The professors think this situation is different than some years ago when students might have been interested, for instance, in a specialization in health sociology AND in applied sociology rather than just choosing the first option. If this is a trend, questions will have to be raised about whether standard courses and traineeships are adequately preparing these students for applied or clinical work and what this might mean for the future of the specialization in sociological practice.



## Conclusion

Even in a country where the history of sociological practice is long and historically has involved many of the influential people in the field, the specialization has still not been embraced by the discipline and become a focal area or a combined concentration (e.g., environment and sociological practice) in our doctoral programs. Sometimes when the history of sociology is discussed, the early scholar-practitioners (some of whom were very important figures in the history of the discipline) are not even linked to the current specialization in sociological practice or to the long tradition of practice. This unfortunate reading of the situation has contributed to the fact that sociological practice, and particularly clinical sociology, are seen by some sociologists as something that is unusual and new rather than a continuing interest within the field. It also means that our doctoral students – many of whom will become professors – may have little exposure to sociological practice.

Incorporating sociological practice throughout sociology programs encourages faculty and students to combine substantive knowledge, critical thinking, and creative problem-solving with specific skills. A program does not have to give up an emphasis on theory and basic research to add sociological practice; these additional skills are added value for the students, faculty members, program and community.

It would be interesting to examine and compare the development of sociological practice in other political, economic and cultural settings. Doing so would be a step in writing that missing “rounded historical account” (Bulmer, 1992) of global sociological practice.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The author has had the opportunity to visit many academic institutions around the world. She also is a consultant for academic departments for the Department Resources Group of the American Sociological Association and a member of a commission that accredits sociological practice programs. In the latter role, she has had the opportunity to make national and international site visits.

<sup>2</sup> Adam Podgorecki (1979), a founder of the Polish school of sociotechnics, defined it in the following way: “Sociotechnics (social engineering) may be defined as the theory of efficient social action, or more concretely, applied social science, the task of which is to inform the potential practitioner in what manner to see effective ways and means to realize intended social aims, provided there is a given accepted system of values as well as a usable set of verified propositions describing and explaining human behavior” (Fritz and Clark, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> Sullivan (1992:19), in his book about applied sociology, wrote that “three spheres taken together (applied researcher, consultants, sociological clinician) constitute what is called sociological practice.”

<sup>4</sup> Some applied sociologists substitute the term applied sociology for the term sociological practice.

<sup>5</sup> Scholar-practitioners are those who are both scholars (frequently with university positions) and undertake some kind of practice (e.g., clinical or applied work).

<sup>6</sup> Clinical sociologists in Japan, for instance, have focused on the health sector (Noguchi, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> There is no “rounded historical account” as Martin Bulmer (1992) would put it.

<sup>8</sup> Gans (1989, p. 7) described public sociologists as “empirical researchers, analysts or theorists like the rest of us, although often their work is particularly thoughtful, imaginative or original in some respect.” He also said they “have to be academics or practitioners, there currently being no free-lance writing market to provide a living for even one sociologist.”

<sup>9</sup> The American Sociological Association (ASA) has many resources for practice programs and courses including *The Clinical Sociology Resource Book* (sixth edition) (Fritz, 2006); *Careers in Clinical Sociology* (Lehnerer, 2003) and curriculum books about applied sociology and sociological practice. The ASA also provides helpful research (e.g., Spalter-Roth’s 2008 survey of 600 practitioners).

<sup>10</sup> Information about the division can be found on the website of the American Sociological Association: <http://www.asanet.org/sections/SPSS.cfm>

<sup>11</sup> Complete application information is provided on the Association’s website: <http://www.aacsnet.org>

<sup>12</sup> . An applicant program has to complete a self-study and host a site visit. The Commission is always interested in hearing from sociology programs that want to learn more about the standards or have questions about the process.

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<sup>13</sup> Successful sociological practice programs at all levels are not just those with sufficient financial resources. Other factors that have been found to be important include: program culture (e.g., intellectually challenging, a supportive atmosphere, tenure/promotion standards encourage or are supportive of practice, commitment of faculty, embrace diversity), creative leadership; active learning experiences (e.g., studios, internships, traineeships, community-based/participatory research) and direct connection to the job market (American Sociological Association, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> Master's degrees account for 90 percent of all graduate degrees awarded in the United States (Council of Graduate Schools, 2005).