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## SOCIOLOGICAL PRACTICE

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Sociological practice is sociology focused on identifying and/or implementing social problem solutions, as opposed to “basic sociology,” devoted purely to formulating explanations of social phenomena.<sup>1,2</sup> Sociological practice was at the core of American sociology in the late 1800s (Fritz 1985), a time when many of the early sociologists were reformers interested in promoting social progress and intervention. What was termed “practical sociology” in the early 1900s (Barnes 1948:741) has influenced the contemporary field of sociological practice that reemerged in the 1970s after a long period of dormancy in mainstream sociology shifted away from application and intervention to theory and statistical testing.

There are two areas of contemporary sociological practice—applied sociology and clinical sociology—though many practicing sociologists do work that reflects aspects of both areas. A simple way of distinguishing between applied and clinical sociology is to say that applied sociologists are research specialists and clinical sociologists are change agents or interventionists. Applied sociologists use five general research methods: problem exploration, policy analysis, needs assessment, program evaluation, and/or social impact assessment (Olsen and DeMartini 1981). As such, applied sociologists produce information that is useful in resolving problems in government, industry, and other practice settings but they are not necessarily direct change agents. Clinical sociologists use a sociological perspective to design strategies for positive social change at any level of social organization. Clinical sociologists have areas of specialization such as organizations, health and illness, forensic sociology, aging, and comparative social systems. They work as action researchers, organizational development specialists,

sociotherapists, community developers, mediators, and social policy implementers, to name a few types of work roles and settings.

Most practicing sociologists today did not receive explicit training in sociological practice during their undergraduate or graduate education. They have had to invent their own strategies for using sociology. The sociological practice journey of Steven Picou, described below, is an illustration of one sociologist’s unanticipated shift from basic sociology to sociological practice.

### A SOCIOLOGICAL PRACTICE JOURNEY: AN OVERVIEW

On March 24, 1989, the supertanker Exxon Valdez ran aground on Bligh Reef in Prince William Sound (PWS), Alaska, releasing 42 million liters of oil into the local waters. It was the largest oil spill in U.S. history, covering more than 3,000 square miles of water and affecting more than 1,200 miles of shoreline. The Exxon Valdez oil spill (EVOS) led to the death of about 350,000 birds, between 3,500 and 5,500 sea otters, 30 harbor seals, 17 gray whales, and 14 sea lions.

As one Native Alaskan leader said, the day EVOS occurred was “the day the water died” (Picou et al. 1992). The populations of those communities contain large numbers of “subsistence economy” Native Alaskans and commercial fishermen. The lives of both groups are sustained by traditional subsistence activities that depend on the water in PWS being “alive.”

By August 19, 1989, sociology professor J. Steven Picou and his colleagues were in Cordova, Alaska, to

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conduct basic research on the long-term social impacts of the spill on the rural communities of PWS. The project initially did not include a sociological practice component. What Picou did not anticipate at the time was that this project would evolve into a highly instructive sociological practice episode in terms of many of the features of sociological practice today that will be discussed in this chapter. Specifically, Picou and his colleagues would innovatively and effectively develop a participatory research, or inquiry, approach rooted in a version of symbolic interactionist theory.

To digress briefly, this chapter will suggest that the participatory inquiry approach holds promise as a model for sociological practice in the twenty-first century. In this model, the practicing sociologist participates *with* clients individually and in groups in diagnosing/solving problems rather than performing “interventions” *on* them. The goal is to form an “outsider-insider team” relationship with clients viewed as active stakeholders, a relationship in which both sociologists and clients have equally valuable knowledge. Among other reasons, it will be proposed that the timing is right for sociological practice to adopt such an approach. There is emerging, in the human service professions, a new “partnership model” that is replacing the traditional “professional dominance model” (Darling 1996, 2000). Clients of human services today increasingly expect to actively participate in the process of defining the services they receive. Therefore, it will be argued that adoption approaches based on inquiry-focused partnerships between sociologists and clients will improve the marketability of sociological practitioners competing with other human service professionals for clients.

Picou’s EVOS project came to focus on stress. Picou’s research team documented long-term, chronic stress in the affected communities. And as time went on they effectively established strong insider-outsider bonds with many members of the affected PWS communities. Furthermore, as their bonds of trust with the communities grew strong, they worked collaboratively with these rural communities to organize a program to help the communities recover from their EVOS-induced stress. The PWS Regional Citizen’s Advisory Council agreed to sponsor them in organizing a participatory research-based program to reduce stress in the community. As a result, Picou and his colleagues worked collaboratively with the community in designing the “Growing Together Community Education Program,” the program that was shown to reduce EVOS-related stress in the community.

In this case, we see in action the five features of the participatory inquiry process that will be discussed in the chapter. Picou and his colleagues (1) were known in the community as sociologists; (2) contributed to theory about effects of technological disasters as a result of their close involvement with the community in problem-solving activity; (3) were accepted in the community because of the cooperative approach they took, in which they treated community members as equal partners; (4) were able to

mobilize the community for recovery because of the cooperative relationship they had established; and (5) became sensitive to and effectively responded to the sociopolitical situation they were operating in, probably becoming more effective practitioners because of that awareness. It is hoped that the work of pioneers such as Picou will foreshadow the day when it will be the norm for sociologists to be receptively and productively engaged, as practicing sociologists, in problem-resolving activities with members of the many publics of sociology.

### THE LEGACY OF THE CHICAGO SCHOOL AND SOCIOLOGICAL PRACTICE

The symbolic interactionist framework grew from intensive study of the social problems of Chicago. As Becker (1966) says, out of detailed examination of the community context in which these problems existed, symbolic interactionism emerged to systematize and make sense of the real-life observations. The picture that emerged, and that came to be formalized in the theoretical framework called “symbolic interactionism” (Blumer 1969), is that of individual actors (including groups as well as persons) imbedded in symbolic, or interpretive, interaction with others. *Symbolic* and *interpretive* in relation to interaction refer to the fact that actors are constantly engaged in a process of mentally, or cognitively, interpreting the meaning of each others’ actions by symbolically categorizing them and acting toward others based on the meanings assigned to the others. These meanings and actions are identity based. Individual actors act toward each other based on their cognitive appraisals of their own identities in relationship to that of the others.

From this standpoint, the social problems of the city such as homelessness or delinquency are the product of “interactional careers.” Delinquency, for example, arises from delinquent careers in a process by which individuals become delinquent through being appraised by others and through self-appraisal as “delinquent.” And, from the symbolic interactionist perspective, effective responses to the delinquency problem should be directed at changing the “shape” of delinquents’ interactional careers, at making their careers more conventional.

#### Urban Ecologists and Symbolic Interactionists: Contrasting Styles of Professional Retreat from Social Reform among the Men of the Chicago School

The impulse toward sociological practice defined as social reform was widespread among American sociologists in the late 1800s and early 1900s. This was particularly true at the University of Chicago, where reform-oriented sociology centered on the work of Jane Addams at Hull House and her male and female sociological colleagues (Deegan 1986). However, reform-oriented

sociologists began to experience the “double marginality” that practicing sociologists often continue to face in some degree today. They were attacked by the business and other elites of Chicago, who perceived that their vested interests were threatened by the reforms they sought. And they were discredited by their colleagues at the University who saw them as un-academic moralists.

Major displacements of key reform-oriented sociologists occurred as mainstream sociology retreated from social reform, both in Chicago and throughout the United States. Jane Addams was snubbed both by many of her sociological colleagues and by the elites. She responded by moving into the development of the new discipline of social work. Prominent reformist members of the early Chicago School, Bemis, Zeublin, and Thomas, were all forced out of the University. By 1918 (during the Red Scare), the only representatives of the reformist early Chicago sociologists remaining were George Herbert Mead and Albion Small (Deegan 1986:314).

Chicago sociology (and American sociology, because Chicago sociology was the trend setter) was now faced with a situation of role conflict that has been summed up succinctly by Ernest Becker (1971) as a “tension between these two poles: the human urgency of the social problem on the one end and the quiet respectability of objective science on the other” (p. 6). Two groups of Chicago sociologists adapted to this situation in fundamentally different ways. On the one hand, the urban ecologists, headed by Robert E. Park and Ernest Burgess, devised what can be termed a defensive strategy. They rejected one horn of the dilemma described by Ernest Becker and embraced the other. They rejected the human urgency of social problems and embraced the quiet respectability of objective science.

On the other hand, symbolic interactionists such as George Herbert Mead and William I. Thomas built and traveled on a different road toward resolution of the double marginality of sociological practice. They did not follow the “role segregation” pathway blazed by Park and Burgess. The symbolic interactionists’ project moves toward resolution of the “social problem versus social science” conflict through collaborative *unification* of social research and social practice. It is a project inherited from and continues the work of Jane Addams at Hull House (Deegan 1986).

The way symbolic interactionism does this is by conceptually elaborating and theoretically and methodologically formalizing the central insight on which the Hull House approach was based. This is the insight that the retreatist approach of the outside-expert, “value free,” sociologists (such as Park, Burgess, William Ogburn, and present-day followers of this approach) won’t work as a way of effectively responding to social problems. The sociologist, as a social scientist, must enter into and become part of the community to understand and to promote change in it. The point can effectively be understood in terms of Ritzer’s (1975) designation of the symbolic interactionist perspective as the “social definition paradigm.” What this

means in light of the present discussion is that for symbolic interactionists social problems result from collective definitions of certain social situations as “problematic.” These definitions of situations can only be understood and changed “from within,” by participatively entering into and thereby understanding and then helping modify the cognitive and communicative process that lead to the collectively recognized problem. What Mead did to resolve social problems clearly shows that it is valid to view symbolic interactionism metaphorically as a staging area for participatory research approaches to social problems. Mead’s general perspective was that

conflict in society occurred when people were unable to take each others “roles.” The remedy to social problems became more open communication. “Scientific information” collected in an “objective” manner provided a mechanism to understand the issues involved in any given problem. All the participants in the dilemma could then listen to and understand the different perspectives and situations. Since people were rational beings and desired a peaceful and sociable existence, social reform girded with liberal values was the logical way to plan social change. (Deegan 1986:107)

Mead wrote that there should be an ongoing process of collaboratively developing, testing, and revising “working hypotheses” for social betterment. This was, he said, a process through which science and scientists should enter into democratic dialogue with other members of society toward the development of a more “progressive” society. In his various social reform activities in Chicago, Mead attempted to put his ideas about a collaborative process of generating, testing, and revising working hypotheses into action. One of these activities will be used for illustration here. As part of a five-year study of the needs of Chicago Stockyards District done in conjunction with the University of Chicago Settlement, Mead and his colleague Charles Henderson studied wages in the meatpacking companies.

Mead and Henderson worked collaboratively with the board of the University of Chicago Settlement and with representatives of the Armour and Swift meatpacking houses as the final report was being prepared. The Armour and Swift representatives expressed concern about the interpretation of some of the data in the draft of the final report. They were concerned that the report suggested that their wages were too low and led to poverty. Mead and Henderson, in response, agreed (with the concurrence of the board) to also include in the report data showing that Armour and Swift were paying wages that were not out of line with the industry as a whole. After meetings with the packers, Mead agreed to some further modifications in controversial paragraphs of the report that were responsive to packers’ concerns about an “unsympathetic tone toward the packers” (Deegan 1986:114). The final report, which was not objected to by the meat packers, contained a striking critique of the meat packers’ wage policies. Data were presented that showed that according to a measure devised

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to calculate a “poverty level,” \$800 per year was a necessary minimum income for a family of five. In contrast, the report showed that the average family size in the district was 5.33 and that the average income was only \$634.80. It was clear from the report that, despite the implicit justification of Swift and Armour from an extensive comparison to other companies in the industry, families were able to survive only by strategies such as having mothers employed, pulling children out of school at an early age, taking in boarders, having all family members working for income, and enduring overcrowding, poverty, and ill health (p. 114).

## THEORY AND PRACTICE

Despite the early focus on practice, the discipline of sociology after World War I moved away from application and intervention and became increasingly focused on research dedicated to the development of pure theory and testing with data. As explained by Hans Mauksch, writing in the 1980s (1983),

As part of its thrust to be accepted as a pure science, sociology, similar to other disciplines, has accorded prestige, priority, and rewards to the pursuit of conceptual and theoretical issues with little regard to their application. This climate, pervasive even today, throughout many academic sociology departments—particularly at research universities—places great value on purely academic careers and labels as less worthy and somewhat tainted. (P. 2)

Members of the sociological practice community have expressed dissatisfaction with the discipline’s dominant model, as described by Mauksch, since the 1970s. They have, in fact, differed so strongly with the pure-theory-and-research model that they have formed two associations *outside* of the American Sociological Association (ASA). These are the Society for Applied Sociology (SAS) and the Sociological Practice Association (SPA), which have now merged into a single organization called the Association for Applied and Clinical Sociology.

### Social Engineering

More recently, among mainstream sociologists there have been increasing indications of dissatisfaction with the consequences of pursuing the pure-science model and even some increasing signs of displeasure with the model itself. In 1998, for example, Jonathan Turner authored a provocative article titled “Must Sociological Theory and Sociological Practice Be so Far Apart?” In the article, he advanced a strong appeal for greater connection between sociological theory, research, and practice, so that sociology can fulfill its mission to “make the world better.” Turner’s (1998:248) proposed strategy for bringing theory and research into closer contact with practice—social engineering—proved to be controversial. Theories supported

by research, he said, can be translated into practice if sociological practitioners develop an “engineering mentality.” Sociologists, he said, should break down theoretical principles into “rules of thumb” about how to build structures and to evaluate problems of structures.

Later, in a special issue of *Sociological Practice: A Journal of Clinical and Applied Sociology* devoted to the topic of social engineering, Turner (2001) presented a more detailed view of social engineering “rules of thumb.” He described for the practice-oriented readership of that journal rules of thumb derived from five bodies of academic theory and research: (1) people’s sense of justice and fairness, (2) people’s responses to having their expected levels of prestige and/or authority met or contradicted, (3) the impacts of group size and differentiation on the “personalness” of relations in the group, (4) the relationships between people’s dependence on others for valued resources and the power those others have over them, and (5) determinants of solidarity among people (such as frequency of face-to-face interaction, degree of status equality, opposition to external foes, etc.). Turner summed up his views on social engineering by saying,

Only if practitioners and theorists get together can Comte’s dream of positivism be realized, or more immediately, can the goal of virtually all early American sociologists become a beacon for twenty-first century sociology. . . . Social engineering—perhaps by another name but at its core a theory-driven activity—is the best approach, I believe, to making a difference in the world, one small step at a time. (P. 119)

Practitioners responding to Turner in the special issue of *Sociological Practice: A Journal of Clinical and Applied Sociology* argued that the engineering model leaves out the interactive social context in which problem solving occurs. They asserted that Comte’s dream does not recognize that effective problem solving grows “from the inside out”—from social interactions in which individuals and groups interpretively fit their lines of action together. As will be discussed in more detail below, interactionism may help correct the practitioner-identified weaknesses of the engineering model. Interactionism provides an account of the communication process through which individuals and groups interpretively formulate their responses to problems, their shared sense of reality (Sandstrom, Martin, and Fine 2003:13–14).

Melvyn Fein (2001) stated that Turner’s engineering approach fails to recognize that sociological practitioners cannot externally control events to the extent implied by the engineering metaphor. The engineering metaphor, Fein suggested, invokes the assumption that the sociological practitioner is “someone who can move social building blocks around the way one can steel girders” (p. 122). The mechanical engineer, he said, “may have to deal with the tensile strength of a metal beam, but the social interventionist must contend with other human beings who may have different goals and who are as clever as he/she in influencing events” (p. 124).

Robert Dotzler (2001) further developed the theme outlined by Fein, asserting that the “rule of thumb” approach is too removed from the social interactional context of the practitioner—client encounter. What is needed to bring theory and practice closer together, he said, is a framework that sees the practice encounter as a complex interactional event in which there are many stakeholders. In contrast to the asymmetrical relationship between theory and practice inherent in the engineering model, Dotzler argued for an alternate model. He asserted that both the theory and practice communities of sociology—and society for that matter—will benefit if the relationship between theory and practice is a two-way street, in which practice informs theory as much as vice versa. Fein (2001) also supported this reciprocal relationship in which the practitioner is a cocreator and tester of sociological theory.

### Efforts within the Sociological Practice Community

American sociological practitioners are working to institutionalize a situation in which the relationship between theory and practice is an interactive, equal-status, two-way street. In 2000, a major step toward that goal was taken by holding the Unity 2000 Meeting in Bethesda, Maryland. Unity 2000 was timed to coincide with the annual meeting of the ASA. The Unity 2000 Meeting brought together members of the two major extra-academic sociological practice organizations, the SPA and the SAS, with representatives of the ASA’s Section on Sociological Practice. Also present were members of the Commission on Applied and Clinical Sociology, made up of members of all three of the organizations mentioned above. The Commission’s overall mission is to develop, promote, and support quality sociological education and practice in applied and clinical areas. Jonathan Turner was the keynote speaker at the meeting, invited to present a stance that would challenge members of the sociological practice community to find a common purpose.

Melodye Lehnerer (2001), in her presidential address, identified six steps needed to further promote an interactive, equal-status relationship between theory and practice: (1) collaboration among the nonacademic wings of sociological practice community; (2) the work of the Commission on Applied and Clinical Sociology should be supported; (3) collaboration with the ASA Section on Sociological Practice should occur; (4) workshops promoting the viability of a practice orientation and its link to theoretical analysis should be developed; (5) the Commission’s effort to accredit sociological practice programs should be pursued aggressively, as should the SPA’s effort to encourage sociological practitioners to qualify and apply for certification as clinical sociologists. These efforts improve the visibility of sociological practice, she said. In sum, Lehnerer proposed that “we need to relish our diversity, not dismiss it, and tap into the energy generated from that diversity” (p. 154).

Since 2000, the Accreditation Task Force of the Commission on Applied and Clinical Sociology has expanded beyond its accrediting undergraduate programs and is now accrediting graduate programs in sociological practice. In August 2004, Humboldt State University’s Practicing Sociology M.A. Program became the first in the nation to achieve accreditation. In the spring of 2004, the journals of SPA and SAS were consolidated into a single journal, *Journal of Applied Sociology/Sociological Practice: A Journal of Applied and Clinical Sociology*, and in the spring of 2005, the memberships of SAS and SPA voted to consolidate into a single organization.

### TOWARD A PARTICIPATORY PROBLEM-SOLVING MODEL

The sociological practitioners cited above argue that a model is needed for engagement of practitioners in collaborative relationships with both nonacademic and academic groups. The need for such a model is also currently being widely discussed by sociologists outside the sociological practice community. Michael Burawoy (2005) and others call for development of a “public sociology.” In particular, the need is for a model of public sociology that allows academic sociologists to engage nonacademic publics such as media audiences, policymakers, think tanks, NGOs, silenced minorities, and leaders of social movements (see also Brady 2004; Burawoy 2003, 2004; Burawoy et al. 2004; Hausknecht 2002).

As Robert Dentler (2002:32) recently observed, the field of sociological practice today is theoretically and methodologically muddled. To a large extent, the increasing numbers of sociologists who work in practice settings are in uncharted theoretical and methodological territory. They have been taught in university programs that continue to follow William Ogburn’s 1929 advice to the discipline, be interested “in one thing only, to wit, discovering new knowledge” (Pettigrew 1980:xxii). Their training has not given them the capacity to use their sociology.

### Theory and Method in Prominent Sociological Practice Textbooks

I have reviewed the theoretical and methodological models improvised to guide sociological practice by the authors of five prominent sociological practice textbooks. The major difficulty I see with the theoretical and methodological models being used in all five of the textbooks is that they are all in some sense “interventionist.” They all tend to picture the sociological practitioner as an individual change agent, an agent who operates on a problem so as to solve the problem. Rebach and Bruhn (1991, 2001), Bruhn and Rebach (1996), and Darling (2000) explicitly use the term “intervention” to describe the role of the sociological practitioner in problem solving, while the notion is more implicit in the books by Steele, Scarisbrick-Hauser, and

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Hauser (1999) and Straus (1994). In this interventionist focus, the models they are using appear to be influenced by the traditional approaches that are prevalent in service professions such as medicine and social work. But these interventionist models don't provide adequate guidance for accomplishing what the sociological practitioners and seekers of public sociology cited above are calling for: ways of achieving *collaborative engagement* of people in relationships. "Intervention" doesn't appear to be an effective way to build collaborative relationships between people.

### **Beyond Intervention: Toward Participatory Inquiry Approaches Rooted in Symbolic Interactionism**

As indicated in the historical section of this chapter, the approach that appears to be needed is one of theoretical and methodological improvisation from a sociological script that grew up at a time in the history of American sociology when the discipline was highly practice oriented: symbolic, or interpretive, interactionism (see Blumer 1969; Denzin 1989). There has been some writing about the potential utility of symbolic interactionism as a guide for social work in general as well as for specific forms of practice such as family therapy (e.g., Forte 2004a, 2004b; Hurvitz and Straus 1991; Krause 1985; Maines 1997). There has been little attention to developing an appropriate general method for applying sociology with symbolic interactionism, however. Darling's (2000) attempt to incorporate symbolic interactionism into Bruhn and Rebach's (1996) biopsychosocial systems model is an exception.

Symbolic interactionism can promote collaborative relationships between practitioners and clients through its use to guide a participatory research or inquiry-oriented approach. In participatory research, informants become active participants with sociologists in the research. The approach is one in which sociologists and clients become collaborators: co-problem assessors and co-problem solvers.

There is great variety in the participatory inquiry approaches that practicing sociologists have devised. The approaches range from those where sociologists work with formal committees of stakeholders in local organizations, communities, and larger organized bodies to those where sociologists work informally with families or individuals to collaboratively develop and test problem-solving hypotheses.

Whyte, Greenwood, and Lazes's (1991) participatory action research (PAR) project with Xerox Corporation is an example of a participatory research approach to practicing sociology in a large organization. The practicing sociologists successfully worked with a formal stakeholders' committee on the problem of how to save \$3.2 million and retain 180 jobs. A more detailed discussion of PAR is provided below.

Simmons and Gregory's (1994) use of grounded therapy is an example of a participatory research approach to practicing sociology with individuals. Working informally

with the individual client as a coresearcher, Simmons constructs a preconception-free grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) of the therapy client's self-defined problem and a plan of therapeutic action for the client. Simmons and Gregory (2003) have more recently developed a generic practice approach rooted in grounded theory methodology that they call "grounded action" that generalizes the strategy used by Simmons in therapy to collaborative inquiry with stakeholders in any specific context focusing on any specific issue. Among the specific contexts and issues Simmons and Gregory discuss to illustrate grounded action are schools with a focus on problems related to bussing to achieve racial balance and hospitals with a focus on high turnover of nurses.

Yet another interactionism-based approach to sociological practice that qualifies as participatory inquiry is Nathan Hurvitz's approach to family therapy (Hurvitz and Straus 1991; Krause 1985). Hurvitz's symbolic interactionist family therapy revolved around helping family members form healthy "interaction hypotheses." Acting as a "mediator" and a "significant other" he encouraged family members to adopt an inquiry perspective, forming hypotheses about the causes of each other's actions. He encouraged family members to adopt "instrumental" hypotheses (those with problem-solving value) as opposed to "terminal" hypotheses (those that perpetuate the problem).

### **Five Features of the Approach**

Five beneficial consequences of using the inquiry-based interactionist approach may be identified. These may be seen as ways in which the participatory inquiry approach facilitates the bridging the academic—real-world divide and bringing theory and practice closer together. These are (1) ways this approach reduces the experience of "identity abandonment" among sociological practitioners, (2) ways the quality of theories in sociology will potentially be improved by the approach, (3) changes in society that may increase receptivity to this kind of sociological practice, (4) ways in which the dynamics of the social situation created by using this approach are conducive to producing social change, and (5) implications and consequences of the fact that the participatory approach exposes practitioners to the sociopolitics surrounding the problems in which they are trying to intervene.

### **Reduction of Identity Abandonment**

The first aspect of the approach is that sociologists don't have to go through the common experience of "identity abandonment" when they enter practice. This is the tendency among sociologists in practice settings to describe themselves using occupational titles other than "sociologist" (such as "evaluator," "social worker," "workshop consultant," etc.). They do so because the prevailing view outside the academy is either one of ignorance or that sociologists have nothing practical to offer, since they only

engage in the pursuit of “pure” knowledge (i.e., knowledge with no immediate practical use).

I believe that practicing sociologists who adopt the participatory research-based interactionist approach will be less shy about embracing the label “sociologist.” They will be able to identify with their academic roots and demonstrate the usefulness of those roots as they establish research partnerships with clients. The interactionist practitioner has received the academic sociological training in theory and research methods but transitions into applying them with a participatory approach. Hopefully her or his transition is facilitated by a training program in an accredited practicing sociology program, designed around the assumption that discovering knowledge and making the world a better place are compatible pursuits.

### Improving the Quality of Theories

The second aspect of sociological practice and participatory research that is guided by interactionist theory is that it has the potential to contribute to integrated sociological theory. If focused and supported by a consortium of associations, increasingly integrated theories may be created as part of the work of doing sociology. Middle-range theories summarizing principles of social structures, societal development and change, and microsocial features of group behavior and interpersonal relations can be formulated to serve as guidelines for the knowledge base of practice. Branches could build outward from each of these two trunks, each providing statements of key concepts in each of the main domains of practice. Theorists could occupy themselves fruitfully as well by keeping up with the flow of applied and clinical literature, extracting the most promising and prospectively generic ideas and assumptions that undergird the findings from and challenges facing practitioners. These men and women would be drawn from both the sociologist and practitioner “sides” of participatory research partnerships (see Dentler 1995:11–12).

### Societal Acceptance of Sociological Practice

Acceptance of this partnership approach to practice allows a focus to develop on collaborative, problem-oriented inquiry that is consistent with the public and private sectors. As Rosalyn Benjamin Darling (1996, 2000) observed, “Human services today are increasingly coming to be based on a ‘partnership’ model in which service users and service providers have equal status. This model is replacing the ‘professional dominance’ model that prevailed in the past” (1996:135).

According to Darling, there is a more widespread adoption of the new partnership model among service users than among service providers. Joyce Miller Iutovich and Mark Iutovich (1987) have argued that sociological practice as a field needs to become entrepreneurial in order to grow. These analysts state we must be mobilized and ready to respond as a professional community to opportunities

that present themselves. The opportunity for the sociological practice profession to grow through entrepreneurial action based on partnerships between sociologists and clients focused on collaborative, problem-oriented inquiry may be the entrepreneurial thing to do.

### Producing Social Change

Theory and research in social psychology point to the particular effectiveness of the method of sociologists and clients acting together as equals to solve common problems. There are three especially important social psychological factors among numerous others that operate to create collective buy-in in this situation: (1) the presence superordinate goals that create a sense of interdependence among the participants; (2) equality of social status among the participants, which gives each a sense of valued contribution to the group; and (3) a shared sense of freedom from constraint among participants, which reduces their resistance to the forward flow of collective activity (Fisher 1982; Stephan and Stephan 1990). The approach is focused on supporting development of competent action plans and scenarios that the participants buy into based on interdependence in the pursuit of superordinate goals, status equality among the participants, and the perception among participants that their actions are voluntary and not externally constrained or coerced.

### Sociopolitical Contexts

The fifth feature of the participatory inquiry approach to practicing sociology might be termed sociopolitical. All practicing sociologists are closer to and more affected by the sociopolitical interplay of multiple participants on various “sides” of the problems and social issues they address. But users of the participatory research approach have what might be called a more competently adaptive understanding of the multiple standpoints and perspectives of people making up the structure of an organization, community, family, or other social wholes than are both traditional academic sociologists and other practicing sociologists.

Of course, participative contact with members located at different vantage points in a social setting has its risks. This is especially the case when there are no efforts to link stakeholder groups into more unified action sets that include the sociologist, or when such efforts are ineffective. Becker (1967), in an article titled, “Who’s Side Are We On?,” explains two related kinds of risks for sociologists generally, which I believe are particular risks for practicing sociologists. However, practicing sociologists who effectively use the participatory research approach will reduce these risks considerably. He says the risks are greatest where groups have defined their relationships with each other in politicized, adversarial terms. Especially in such situations, the sociologist will tend to *become biased* and/or *be accused of bias*. Bias means falling into sympathy with one side in a many-sided situation and, as a result,

sociologically buying into and telling that side's story while neglecting or distorting the perspectives of the other stakeholders in a situation. Since in participatory inquiry the chances of adversarial relations are reduced, so will the tendency to a biased and/or labeled as such.

## AN OUTLINE FOR AN INQUIRY-FOCUSED PARTNERSHIP APPROACH TO PRACTICING SOCIOLOGY

### Participatory Relationship

The first step toward practicing sociology is to resolve our Burgess-type role conflict. What Martin Buber called an "I-it" relationship with those studied must be replaced with an "I-thou" or participatory relationship. The practicing sociologist departs from the view that says that truth and science flows from the social scientist to the community and society and not vice versa or reflexively. Rather, the sociologist cultivates a relationship with members of the social wholes where practice occurs, a relationship in which both sociologist and members value each other's knowledge. We need to cultivate what Mead was beginning to define: a relationship between a practicing sociologist and a member in which *action change* is the mutual goal.

### Changing What People Do

A number of specific models of action-focused participatory inquiry have spawned since Mead's pioneering work. Among these are community and organizational action research (Lewin 1946), action science (Argyris, Putnam, and Smith 1985), and program-evaluation techniques such as evaluability assessment (Smith 1989) and participatory evaluation (Cousins 1996). But the best-known contributor in this area is a sociologist, William F. Whyte, whose work is important for understanding the development of the bridge between social science and sociological practice originating in the Chicago School. He received his doctorate from the University of Chicago Sociology Department in the early 1940s, after receiving his initial research training at Harvard from 1936 to 1940.

Whyte (1984) said that at Harvard he "was conditioned to believe that if research was to be truly scientific, researchers' values must be set aside" (p. 19). Beginning with his experience in the Chicago sociology program, however, he has increasingly abandoned the idea that there must be a strict separation between scientific research and action projects. In a statement showing that he began working on the same bridge between science and social betterment that Mead envisioned, he says he "began exploring how research can be integrated with action in ways that will advance science and enhance human progress at the same time" (p. 20).

Whyte, Greenwood, and Lazes's (1997) approach to practicing sociology has come to be termed PAR, defined as follows:

In participatory action research (PAR), some of the people in the organization or community under study participate actively with the professional researcher throughout the research process from the initial design to the final presentation of results and discussion of action implications. (P. 111)

"To bring in the *values* I see in PAR," Whyte added the following sentence to the definition: "The social purpose underlying PAR is to empower low status people in the organization or community to make decisions and take actions which were previously foreclosed to them" (p. 112).

A well-known example of PAR took place after the Xerox management proposed to "outsource" much of the work being done by union members because of cost overruns. A consultant working with Whyte's guidance suggested to union and management leaders that they form a "cost study team" (CST). The CST would study ways to save money and jobs, thus making compatible the perspectives, and vested interests, of both stakeholder groups. The CST worked creatively for six months to find ways of doing the work less expensively at Xerox than through outsourcing. Ultimately, 180 jobs and \$3.2 million were saved (Whyte et al. 1991).

Two important aspects of Whyte's approach to promoting action change within the PAR format should be noted. The first is that he does not see it as a method of promoting action change through "intervention." Rather, it is a way of facilitating problem-responsive action through creation, identification, and/or dissemination of *social inventions*. Interventions cause change through imposition from outside the members' social world. Social inventions promote motivated change: changed actions because members of social worlds can *see* that the changes allow effective resolution of their own problematic situations—problems with which they have been grappling.

The second important aspect of Whyte's PAR version of the problem-solving partnership approach to practicing sociology is that it focuses on promoting change in actions that should be seen as occurring within *sociotechnical systems*. Whyte et al. (1997) says that he has come to see, based on his extensive work as a practicing sociologist in work organizations, that "the factory is not only a social system but also a technical system, consisting of the technologies and tools and work procedures required to reach the organization's objectives" (p. 57). This is a point with enormous implications for the practicing sociologist, because it means that, since the two systems are interdependent, "a change in the technical system necessarily impacts on the functioning of the social system, and a change in the social system has impacts on the technical system" (p. 57). Though Whyte only speaks about work organizations to illustrate his points, it seems to us that all social structures, ranging from microstructures such as families to macrostructures such as nation-states can be viewed as sociotechnical systems. Practicing sociologists can profitably consider ways in which any given targeted action change might be prompted via sociotechnical strategies.

## Changing the Definition of the Situation

Promoting action change cannot occur in a vacuum. The sociocognitive framework that gives action meaning and within which action occurs must also be attended to by the practicing sociologist. This collectively generated cognitive framework that gives coherence and direction to action was called the “definition of the situation” by W. I. Thomas (1928). The “definition of the situation” is really a collectively shared mental process of defining the situation (McHugh 1967) that exists in constant dynamic interplay with the collectively shared overt process of “act construction” (Blumer 1969). Social actors are in a continuous, dynamic process of defining and redefining to themselves and others “what is going on here” and constructing and reconstructing actions toward each other that correspond to the definitions. The “Thomas theorem” says that situations defined as real will have real consequences because people act on their definitions of what is “really” going on in the situation.

Roger Straus (1984) has proposed that the field of sociological practice focus its efforts on developing strategies for changing the definition of the situation. Straus appears to be saying that there are four “levels” of social actors, ranging from more microlevel to more macrolevel actors: persons, groups, organizations, and social worlds. Persons interact within groups, organizations, and social worlds and these latter entities may also be considered actors and interactors in their own right. Families, organizations, and social worlds also act and interact. Straus proposes strategies that can be used by practicing sociologists to change the definitions of situations that guide the actions and interactions of these varying levels of actors. He proposes direct, indirect, and cooperative approaches that are focused on encouraging redefinition of “who we are” and “what is happening here.”

Lack of the capacity or readiness to act collectively is the master definitional problem that we are confronted with in our postmodern era. It may be termed a “community problem” (see Bellah et al. 1996; Putnam 1995, 2001). Communal, which is to say mutually affirming, cooperative, social bonds are too much in a state of disrepair or rupture. Both within and between the groups, organizations, and social worlds in which we participate, we define ourselves too much as isolated and externally controlled. Individuals and groups see themselves as engaged in win-lose struggles against one another for scarce opportunities for material resources and social advancement. The specific “action problems” recognized in contemporary society (such as substance abuse, family violence, gang-related violent crime, poverty, racism, and war) can be seen as developing subsequent to, and partially as a consequence of, this definitional community problem. They represent defensive adaptational responses developing out of situations in which actors at these varying levels of social action define themselves as “disconnected,” “disempowered,” “degraded,” or “losing.”

As practicing sociologists, then, a first order of business is promotion of collaborative, communal definitions of situations among the social actors with whom we work. Such definitions of the situation promote readiness to act in ways that effectively respond to the myriad specific action problems confronting them. Depending on the level of social interaction where we work, our efforts in this regard should be dedicated to promoting social bonds both within and between groups. Philip Nyden’s work in Chicago as Director of the Center for Urban Research and Learning and with the Policy Research and Action Group illustrates the use of participatory research to build communal bonds within and between groups in the Chicago area (Nyden et al. 1997). In a variety of projects, university-based researchers (students as well as faculty) have worked in research partnerships with members of local organizations in developing innovative solutions to pressing urban issues. As a result, ethnically and economically diverse (often disadvantaged) groups have experienced empowerment in addressing issues such as services to the homeless, neighborhood revitalization, environmental racism, and myriad other issues.

## Insider/Outsider Teams

An important social invention in the participatory inquiry approach to practicing sociology for promoting collaborative definitions of situations as well as problem-responsive actions is insider/outsider (I/O) research teams. I also believe use of such teams will also help insulate practicing sociologists from the more punishing, marginality-producing sociopolitical dynamics of their work situations. These teams were essentially envisioned by the Hull House sociologists and by Mead as integral to the “working hypothesis” process and by Whyte and colleagues when they formed the CST at Xerox. However, they were named and analyzed by organizational development researchers Bartunek and Louis (1996).

The basic idea is that forming bonds of partnership between researchers and practitioners in I/O research teams can promote both a collaborative definition of the situation and action readiness among all the stakeholder groups present in the team. Bartunek and Louis (1996) note that both the outsider sociologist and the insider actor hold perspectives that are “situated,” that is, ethnocentric or biased. And, both perspectives are needed for effective problem solving. Bringing both of these perspectives together is clearly the goal of our inquiry partnership approach to practicing sociology. As noted, though, there are also sociopolitical dynamics in the working situation of practicing sociologists that make this difficult to accomplish, especially all at once and without guidance. Based on their review of the issues from the literature as well as on their own study of “the faculty development committee,” Bartunek and Louis have identified stages in the development of I/O research teams that practicing sociologists can follow in a step-by-step fashion to overcome these difficulties.

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Bartunek and Louis concluded that the most important yield of I/O research teams is a kind of positive marginality. This positive marginality contrasts with the punishing double marginality sometimes encountered by practicing sociologists who operate outside the context of an I/O team. This positive marginality is a marginality based on mutual interdependence and mutual respect that promotes effective problem solving. Bartunek and Louis (1996) wrote,

In insider/outsider pairings, the outsider's assumptions, language and cognitive frames are made explicit in the insider's questions and vice-versa. The parties, in a colloquial sense, keep each other honest—or at least more conscious than a single party alone may easily achieve. (P. 62)

### **SOCIOLOGICAL PRACTICE IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

I have described above how sociology experienced sociopolitical marginality at the turn of the twentieth century when sociologists were actively engaged in social reform. The discipline adapted defensively to their role-set problems, by retreating from reform into the active scientific pursuit of new knowledge. Ultimately, the field of practicing sociology, using tools fashioned out of the collaborative inquiry approach and spearheaded by the practicing sociology consortium of professional associations,

may contribute to leading mainstream sociology out of its long-standing defensive retreatism and back to an activist community role. Anticipating this development, Dotzler (2001) wrote at the turn of the century that

for sociology in the twenty-first century to flourish, it must institutionalize a strong, independent, professional practitioner cadre, i.e., individuals trained as sociologists situated outside the conventional academic milieu performing tasks that facilitate the use of sociological knowledge in decision-making situations. These practitioners must view themselves not only as "users" of the store of sociological knowledge, but as co-creators. These practitioners must distinguish themselves from their academic cousins by focusing on the processes by which knowledge comes into use. Also, they must define the special role practitioners have in providing substantive feedback to theorists on the fitness of their theories for use—a form of theory testing. Further, status equality between academic-based and practice-based sociologists must be established. (P. 134)

In the twenty-first century, we can anticipate that sociology as a whole will be able to come out of its academic closet and into practicing sociology in a work situation where such change-oriented practice is welcomed. This future situation envisioned by Dotzler may be more likely to come into being if inquiry-focused participatory problem solving informed by interactionist theory is widely adopted in the field of sociological practice.