Public Sociology

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Public sociology refers to the application and uses of sociology beyond the academy. The term has been used very broadly to describe any sociological theory, methods, research findings, or commentary by sociologists that are consumed (and, ideally, used) by non-sociologists. Its central aim is “to correct — that is, to make better, social conditions for the betterment of humanity” (Hanemaayer and Schneider 2014: 5). Public sociology has also been referred to more specifically as an approach sociologists use to participate in public discussions about social issues as “public intellectuals” (Burowoy 2005).

Every day sociologists are engaging with groups, communities, and organizations to actively help improve social conditions by applying the results of research and what we know about how society operates. Whether it is sociologists

• showing how the dynamics between nurses and doctors in hospitals impact patient care (Apesoa-Varano and Varano 2014);

• advising government organizations such as the National Aeronautics and Space Administration on how organizational culture in an era of technological prowess can lead to bad decision-making at NASA (Consultant 2008; Vaughan 1997);

• conducting interviews and making observations to design and implement a new technology driven by user needs and interests (Kelly and Farahbakhsh 2013);

• blogging about how programs that provide safe facilities to inject illegal drugs save lives and public dollars (Boeri 2015);

• providing research that informs court cases about issues such as affirmative action (Ancheta 2012),

sociologists use scientific methods and principles in ways that influence programs, organizations’ policies, and outcomes.

The public use and application of sociological ideas, methods, and findings have always been part of the discipline of sociology, but the perceived value of public sociology to the discipline has varied given the
context and geographic location (for examples see Wang 1981 and Webster 2004). The specific term "public sociology" has been newly popularized in the early twenty-first century, gaining its greatest use just before, during, and after Michael Burawoy's presidency of the American Sociological Association (ASA) in 2004. In his presidential address, Burawoy (2005) presented a four-field approach as an attempt to capture the varied work and positions of all sociologists. As one of the four fields – professional, critical, policy, and public sociology – Burawoy defined public sociology as distinct from other types of sociology that engage with people outside of academe (policy and critical sociology). According to Burawoy's conceptualization, policy or applied sociologists respond to the research needs of clients, while critical sociologists use their academic positions to criticize the state, markets, or other institutions that are often not questioned or problematized as part of the status quo. In Burawoy's four-field conceptualization, public sociologists work as public intellectuals to bring sociological findings to audiences outside of academia. However, since Burawoy's presidency, the term public sociology has taken on a broader meaning, including all types of engagement with publics (ASA Task Force 2005).

This chapter focuses on public sociology in its broadest definition, as the sharing of sociological lessons with publics beyond sociologists, and includes a range of activities from publishing opinion pieces to daily work in government, organizations, court rooms, classrooms, and communities around the world. Because many of the published works about public sociology are in response to the US-based Burawoy and the ASA, this chapter privileges the North American context. However, it must not be forgotten that public sociology has been and is being debated and practiced all over the world. Public sociology is flourishing in South Africa, Finland, China, Hungary, France, Russia, Portugal, Brazil, Germany, Taiwan, Lebanon, and England among other places (Burawoy 2008). Canada, in particular, has many sociologists writing about the value of public sociology (see Hanemaayer and Schneider 2014). For many, there is not a distinction between a professional or academic sociology and a public sociology; they are one and the same. Thus, the centrality of public sociology varies substantially depending on the country of one's training and employment, with public sociology being the usual way of doing sociology in many parts of the world (Kennedy 2009).

Other disciplines are also determining how to integrate the academic and public aspects of their work. For example, applied anthropologists are trying to determine whether to consider themselves part of a separate field or to integrate across specializations (Johnston 2012). Writing on the topic of public criminology, Loader and Sparks (2011) do not prescribe what they think academic criminologists should do or even how they should act in relation to a public criminology. However, they encourage a "sensibility or disposition, a way of being in and relating to public life...Criminology's public role is most coherently and convincingly described as...contributing to a better politics of crime and its regulation" (116–117).

Types of Public Sociologies and Public Sociologists

Public sociologists work in higher education (although not always in sociology departments) as well as in non-academic positions (Spalter-Roth 2007). About a quarter of all Ph.D. sociologists in North America work outside of higher education (Spalter-Roth 2007). No matter the occupational context, public sociologists use sociological tools to understand how society works and communicate their findings to various publics to have an impact on society. There are many specific types of sociology that fall under the public sociology umbrella. These include applied and clinical sociology and social engineering as well as work as teachers and public intellectuals.
Of the various types of public sociologists, applied and clinical sociologists have the greatest number of publications and conference papers, and likely the most practitioners. They work in a variety of areas including most types of organizations across business, government, and the non-profit/non-governmental sectors. These include health, law and criminal justice, military, marketing, education, demography, housing, etc. Some full-time academics also engage with community groups and conduct research as part of their work.

Applied sociologists typically conduct research in the form of program evaluations, needs assessments, asset mapping, and policy analysis. They usually adapt common sociological methods and analysis to fit the research questions and needs of organizations, communities, and policy-makers. (To learn more, see Chapter 34 in this volume.)

Clinical sociologists use their knowledge of demographics, systems theories, organizational theory, group theory, and social psychology to advise and direct individuals, groups, and organizations using interventions (Fritz 2008). A certification process exists to certify clinical sociologists as professionals in the field. (To learn more, see Chapter 35 in this volume.)

Social engineers take a larger, macro-systems approach, often reimagining how societies could work in ways dramatically different from what currently exists. Turner (1998) describes the social engineering done by sociologists as being concerned with “tearing down” and rebuilding existing structures and systems. The work of Erik Olin Wright (2010) on “real utopias” and some futurists could be categorized as social engineering in that they imagine, as in the case of Wright, how a completely different type of system (socialism) could be implemented that ultimately changes all parts of society.

Some have also argued that teaching and writing textbooks, especially at the undergraduate level, is a form of public sociology, giving students the knowledge and skills to take a structural, ecological, critical view of the world and social issues (Prentice 2014). DeCesare (2009) states that high school students are a growing audience for public sociology. And there are a growing number of textbooks that help students see the application of sociology to communities and organizations (for examples see Korgen and White 2015 and Nyden et al. 2011). More and more fields, such as medicine, healthcare, and social work, see the sociological perspective and approach to issues and problems as valuable. For example, the 2015 Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) recently added a required equivalent of one US semester each of introductory psychology and sociology for premedical students applying to medical school admission (Med School Pulse 2015). In addition, some disciplines with an applied or practitioner focus, such as marketing, management, criminal justice, communication, ethnic studies, and environmental studies, often apply sociological concepts, methods, and theories in a more public way than traditional sociology departments.

Being a public intellectual is also a way that sociologists working in academe have contributed as public sociologists. Mainly via editorials, blogs, and public lectures, public intellectuals generally bring a critical, reflexive take on social issues and discuss them in ways that allow for public understanding and consumption. For example, Philip Cohen uses his blog, Family Inequality (familyinequality.wordpress.com), to discuss issues and present new data about subjects both within and outside of the academy, C. N. Le's Asian-Nation (www.asian-nation.org/) website provides a sociological perspective on the Asian American experience and The Society Pages (http://thesocietypages.org/) provides lay and academic readers alike with a wide range of current and accessible sociological research.

For Martinelli (2008), such interaction with publics is extremely important, but

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1 For a full discussion and definitions of many types of public and applied sociology see Zevallos 2009. The website and blog were initially supported by the Australian Sociological Association.
he argues that sociologists must still keep a “critical distance” so as not to lose an “autonomy of judgment” and slip into ideology. Discussions about the role of public intellectuals are often where division between the roles of “value-free science” and “value-laden political activism” collide. Brick (2011) shows that C. Wright Mills, known for popularizing the idea of the “sociological imagination” for a mass audience, gains relevance and attention during times when he terms the “radical left” are ineffectual in mainstream politics. And Collins (2013) argues that intellectual activism must not back away from, but embrace and engage with politics. While discussions about the role of public sociology in the professional academy can break down because of fears that such work results in a loss of the scientific approach, sociologists continue to engage in activities that make research accessible for public consumption and discussion. The call for a more robust engagement often speaks to sociologists eager to bring to bear the knowledge and tools of social science to inform and imagine new possibilities.

In terms of training in the different types of public sociology, the American Sociological Association’s Guide to Graduate Departments in Sociology (ASA 2014), which includes 966 US and eighteen international departments, does not list all the types of public sociology, or even the term “public sociology,” itself, as specializations in its index. However, Applied Sociology/Evaluation Research is indexed and the guide lists forty-four departments with such a specialization. Policy Analysis is another such program indexed, and found in fourteen departments, and Public Policy is a third specialization in thirteen departments (there is overlap among the three areas).

Today, most graduate sociology programs and professional associations around the world train and support sociologists to work as academics producing research to advance theory, methods, and substantive findings for other sociologists. The reality, though, is that many sociologists with graduate training in sociology are spending most of their post-graduate careers teaching and/or doing research that reaches non-sociologists.

Recognizing the advantages for both the discipline and individual sociologists, more graduate programs are adding courses and programs in public sociology. Just the first two pages resulting from a Google search of “graduate studies in public sociology” reveals public sociology graduate programs at Indiana University, Humboldt University, Rice University, American University, Salem State University, George Mason University, the University of California at Berkeley, Boston College, Syracuse University, and the University of Illinois at Chicago. Some faculty advertise themselves as public sociologists on their Web sites. In addition, many traditionally trained academic sociologists are teaching themselves how to write for a public audience to make their research more accessible.

Public Sociology in Historical Perspective

Throughout history, sociologists have contributed to society by identifying how social structures — large and small, formal and informal — impact individuals, groups, neighborhoods, and societies (for an overview see Perlstadt 2005). Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Karl Marx — generally known as the founding theorists of sociology — provided public analyses of the rapid social changes of the mid-to-late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. For example, religion, as a dominant institution during that time, was one of the foci of these early sociologists. Durkheim showed that the larger cultural and structural components of the religion to which one belonged could determine one’s likelihood of suicide. Weber and Marx took a more critical look at religion, with Weber arguing that the similar values and ideals of capitalism and Protestantism allowed both to flourish and Marx noting religion’s role in dulling individual agency and collective consciousness.
These earliest sociologists were public sociologists in that their work not only advanced the social scientific perspective, but also took a critical view of dominant systems within society (Du Bois 1903). In Europe, social scientists as public intellectuals appeared to be acting in direct response to the role that philosophers played in society. Said Marx, "Philosophers have only interpreted the world in different ways, but the point is to change it" (quoted in Bodemann 1978: 388).

However, "the search for scientific legitimacy led many sociologists in the early decades of the [American Sociological] society to want to put as much distance as possible between its historical roots in social reform and its aspiration to status as an academic discipline" (Collin 1989: 57). There has always been a tension between an academic or, in Burawoy's term, "professional" sociology that aims to promote the "pure" academic scientific model that takes place primarily in the realm of academe and is consumed by other academics, contrasted against a more public, applied, or clinical sociology which happens primarily outside of academe and is consumed by non-sociologists.²

In the 1960s, applied sociology became more regularly acknowledged part of professional sociology associations. In 1962, the theme of the annual ASA conference was "The Uses of Sociology." The volume published after the conference on the theme focused primarily on applied sociology, helping to define the roles and types of clients and sociologists and the nature of their interactions in an organizational context (Lazarsfeld et al. 1967).

The 1970s saw particular attention paid to the use of sociology in policy, and in the 1980s applied and clinical sociology further evolved, forming smaller specialized professional associations that help keep public sociologists within the discipline of sociology. Today public sociologists, especially those working in the health sciences, are involved in "translational research" to translate the results of scientific research for practical use (Wethington 2010).

In 1989, Herbert Gans called for sociologists to pay more attention to the larger "lay" public who would benefit from knowing the results of sociological inquiry (Gans 1989). In 2004, Michael Burawoy (2005) traveled the world and spoke of the need to institutionalize public sociology into the discipline. Agger (2007) termed this a campaign of branding public sociology.

The institutionalization of public sociology has stalled many times since the inception of the discipline. The early years saw a backlash against the presumed politicization of the discipline by Marx in favor of a more objective science. In more recent years, Burawoy's description of critical sociology has put off many sociologists (Zussman et al. 2007), especially the notion that sociologists know what is best for society. As Christensen (2013: 40) asks, "from where do we (sociologists) inherit the moral high ground?" For others, the fear is that the adoption of public sociology as a form of sociology accepted by the discipline will result in the abandonment of sociology as scientifically based, subsequently resulting in a lack of respect for the field (Tittle 2004).

Despite the criticisms, there have always been practicing sociologists and proponents of a more accessible sociology (Agger 2007). As noted earlier, the earliest sociologists were public sociologists. Today, many argue that society's persistent social problems necessitate an integration of professional/academic and public sociologies (Calhoun 2007) and that such a merger would both unify the discipline and make its value to society more obvious to all (Jeffries 2009).

Products and Publications

One area of disconnect between the academic and practicing parts of sociology is

² Interestingly, the accountability and assessment demands that have now reached higher education institutions have caused administrators in post-secondary institutions to draw on the assistance of social scientists within their universities to measure outcomes.
the sharing of work. The lengthy review and publication processes of traditional outlets of academic sociology do not align with the need to share research results with publics in a timely way. Also, public sociologists often write reports, policy briefs, or opinion pieces that are not read or seen as valuable by academic sociologists. Some have attempted to ameliorate this problem by creating journals that uphold the scholarly expectations of peer review for work that has a more public focus. For example, in June of 1990 the first issue of Sociological Practice Review was published. The last issue was published in October of 1992. In 1999, the journal: Sociological Practice: A Journal of Clinical and Applied Sociology was established, and it published issues until 2002. In 2007, the Association of Applied and Clinical Sociology launched the Journal of Applied Social Science, which publishes two issues a year.

The ASA's creation of the journal Contexts in 2002 was an attempt to popularize and extend the influence of sociology beyond colleges and universities. Other professional associations have launched journals or parts of journals dedicated to public sociology, including the Journal of Public and Professional Sociology in 2005 and Social Currents, the official journal of the Southern Sociological Society, which dedicates some of its space in each issue to "short, theoretical, agenda-setting contributions and brief, empirical and policy-related pieces." In terms of books, however, sociologists have not managed to gain a wide public following. Gans (1997) conducted a study looking at sales of books by sociologists and found that very few had sold over 50,000. Longhofer et al. (2010) did a similar study in 2010 and found results similar to Gans.

In a search for various types of public sociology in the ProQuest library database Sociological Abstracts, the term "applied sociology" resulted in 2,937 books, conference papers, or journal articles starting as far back as the 1930s. A search of the term "clinical sociology" resulted in 971 books, conference papers, and articles. In contrast, a search of the more recently created term "public sociology" gave 369 results with the earliest citation in the 1960s. The term "applied sociology" is connected to fifty dissertations or theses; "clinical sociology" to none; and "public sociology" to seven, the first in 1998 and the other six not until 2007 or later, all evoking Burawoy.

The Future of Public Sociology

Current social conditions are optimal for the expansion of a more public sociology. The combined circumstances of an occupational demand for people who know what to do with data with a reduction in the proportion of full-time faculty at universities (Weissmann 2013) means that more and more sociologists will likely work outside of sociology departments. Colleges and universities are also under pressure to make sure that their graduates are employed. Sociologists and others trained in social science fields have options beyond academe. As noted above, graduate programs have begun to respond, with more offering public sociology courses and areas of concentration. The Commission on the Accreditation of Programs in Applied and Clinical Sociology (CAPACS) has researched and created standards that represent best practices and necessary components for accreditation for bachelor, master's, and doctoral programs to train students in applied and/or clinical sociology. And the Research Committees on Clinical Sociology and Community Research that are part of the International Sociological Association provide a dynamic venue for sharing among public sociologists all over the world.

Realizing the need for more "hands-on" training and experience for college students has resulted in colleges looking to offer more pedagogical approaches that use project-based learning, "flipped classrooms," and community-based learning experiences. These strategies are already in line with the way courses in public sociology are taught. The explosion of service learning in colleges and calls for civic engagement training for high school and college students are also.

3 Search took place on January 26, 2015.
similar to the aims and approaches of public sociology courses that actively engage sociological research with community and organizational issues and problems.

Further, the proliferation of print and Web sites that publish opinion pieces and other outlets for widespread dissemination of research beyond traditional journal articles and books as well as online courses via Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) provide easily accessible avenues for academics to reach a broader public. More organizations are being formed with the purpose of bringing academic research necessary to solve complicated, persistent, and long-standing public issues into the public realm. For example, at the clinical level organizations such as PART (Practice and Research Together; www.partcanada.org/about-part) work to make research easily accessible to practitioners; and numerous policy centers and think tanks both at universities and independent organizations work to conduct research that will inform policy decisions and implementation.

Sociologist Craig Calhoun, while president of the Social Science Research Council, advocated for a social science where applied and pure research inform one another and are not pitted against each other as separate enterprises. Says Calhoun (2004), "[s]ometimes work undertaken mainly out of intellectual curiosity or to solve a theoretical problem may prove practically useful. At least as often, research taking up a practical problem or public issues tests the adequacy of scientific knowledge, challenges commonplace generalizations and pushes forward the creation of new, fundamental knowledge" (14). As our societies and connections with one another in a global context become more complex, there is a need, as public sociologist Donald Light (2005) says, for sociologists and other social scientists to "de-mythologize and democratize knowledge" (650).

Further, the increased call for accountability in education, government, and other organizations has resulted in demand for data to drive decision-making (Haskins 2014; P/PV 2011). Fields typically seen as separate from the social sciences, such as engineering and finance, are realizing the need to better understand the human dimensions of their work and the problems they are trying to solve (Bastow et al. 2014). Globally, organizations are struggling to measure impact. Journalism programs are reimagining their curricula to figure out how to best train future reporters in the age of big data and digital technology (Weiss and Royal 2013). And Web-based information seeking has resulted in reams of qualitative and quantitative data that many without research skills are uncertain how to analyze. Sociologists are well trained to contribute to such work, especially in ways that are participatory (such as that theorized and practiced by scholars like Patricia Hill Collins (2007)) and in which sociologists "pursue original ideas that result from looking at society from new angles – especially bottom-up ones" (Gans 2010: 88). As a result, sociology programs need to actively train students to be able to transfer their sociological theory and methods knowledge to work in business, non-governmental and governmental organizations, widening the occupational choices of sociologists and also spreading sociological knowledge for the good of many.

Public sociology puts sociologists in the middle of the complicated "unscripted problems" facing organizations, communities, and societies in a globalized context. It demands that sociologists ask the kinds of questions raised in these complex contextual realities (Calhoun 2007; Gans 2010; Jeffries 2009) and produce theory and research that can be utilized by various publics and decision-makers to address them. Social conditions in the twenty-first century are ripe for the growth of public sociology and the influence of the work of public sociologists on society.

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