

**Presidential Address, Annual Meeting of the
Association for Applied and Clinical Sociology
October 17, 2008, Jacksonville, Florida**

**Three "Great Truths" Facing AACS
The Problems, Practicality, and Promise of Applied Sociology**

Jeffrey A. Will, University of North Florida

FIRST, I WANT TO WELCOME YOU ALL TO THE 2008 Association for Applied and Clinical Sociology Annual Conference. I also want to say a few things about language over the course of my brief remarks. First, these are my points (except where I cite or borrow from my predecessors and other scholars) and not the position of folks on the board or others. So don't blame them. And, I acknowledge that I tend to talk about applied sociology generally—but when I do, I mean the term to include those in clinical sociology, public sociology, and those who prefer sociological practice, as well as those who do applied sociology and don't even know it! Indeed, as Jim Wright points out in a forthcoming paper, applied sociology is and has been the foundation of basic sociology since the idea for the discipline was broached some 200 years ago.¹ With that, let me offer just a brief discussion of our collective past.

A BIT ABOUT THE PAST

Let me start my comments about the past by stating up-front that I am humbled by the fact that I was asked to serve as President of AACS, particularly when I look at the folks we have in this room, some of whom have been here since the "beginning," and not just of AACS, but of our foundation organizations, SAS and SPA.

As some of you know—and I learned over the past couple of months—the history of applied sociology is not that old. This is not to say that there were not folks doing applied sociology, rather that the organizational structures are somewhat recent. For example, SPA was founded in 1978 as the Clinical Sociology Association and thus would be 30 years old and celebrating its pearl anniversary this year. SAS came about around 1983, and would be celebrating its silver anniversary. In a move that has been both successful and, to some, suspect, the two organizations made what I have come to believe was a brilliant decision some five years ago and merged to form the Association we are here to celebrate today. That it was a brilliant decision does not preclude the fact that we have had a rocky road and that there are some tough times ahead.

From my own perspective, I am amazed at the fact that I am in this position to talk to you all. While I was a member of one of the foundation organizations, I was not all that active. I learned the importance of applied sociology from my mentors, first at Ball State University doing community survey research work and social activism with Joe Tamney, then at the University of Massachusetts working with Peter Rossi, Andy Anderson, Mike Lewis, and, of course, Jim Wright, who delivered

our Keynote today. Interestingly, Peter Rossi also delivered the Keynote Address to that foundation organization at least twice: 1986 and 1990.

When I arrived at the University of North Florida (UNF), the main goal I had was the development of a community-based research center with my colleagues Hank Camp and Charles Owens. Thus, the Center for Community Initiatives was born in the mid-1990s. At that time I did not call myself an applied sociologist, I was just doing sociology as I had been mentored to do by the folks mentioned above. It wasn't until the late 1990s that I started going to the meetings of one of the foundation associations. And, to be honest, I didn't really feel all that connected. The meetings often seemed more clubish than I had experienced in the other, area specific, associations to which I belonged. But I found a few kindred souls and attended a majority of the meetings leading up to that fateful day in Philadelphia where the merger was consummated.

And here we sit at the third Annual Conference of the Association for Applied and Clinical Sociology. Over the next few minutes I would like to talk about 1) some of the problems and prospects we may face over the next few years; 2) about how now, more than ever, applied sociology and applied sociologists are needed, and 3) the promise that I believe AACS as an organization holds for the future of applied sociology. To accomplish this, I have conducted a "mini SWOT" analysis addressing what I see as the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (although not necessarily in that order) facing AACS. Again, in the respect for time and the party that awaits, and in the hopes of using this outline to spur discussion for the final version, I will only outline my SWOT findings in this talk.

STRENGTHS

I really believe that AACS has a solid foundation with a number of strengths that should get us through the next few years of development. First and foremost, we have a dedicated core; members, our board, and support. We have a couple of new faces and some stalwarts. I am particularly thrilled with the international members who have joined our association, attend our conference, and indicate an interest in getting actively involved on the board. Thus, I believe that one of our strengths is the fact that we have leadership now to get us through at least the short term and a good cadre of members here with us as well.

We also have the *Journal of Applied Social Science* as our flagship, and the first few years have seen excellent scholarship. While we still have a way to go, with our strong editor, editorial board, and availability now on search engines, I think we are poised to have the journal, in the near future, enter the "prestige rankings" ASA puts out on an irregular basis.

And finally, given what is happening in the world, it is clear that the times we are in call for more applied sociologists! I find this fact perhaps the most powerful strength AACS brings to the table.

Recent Nobel Economics winner Paul Krugman, (really a sociological economist), when asked on Jim Lehrer about his background and why he became an economist, stated that his interests were grounded in a "... very old series by Isaac Asimov, the "Foundation" novels, in which the social scientists who understand the true dynamics save civilization. And that's what I wanted to be."² Folks, that is who we are, it is applied sociologists whom I believe are best poised to understand the true dynamics of society. And I say that in spite of the fact that I am a curmudgeon when it comes to my outlook on the future! I will come back to that at the end of my talk.

WEAKNE

As with al
is our core
the board
last year's
this is an i
bership (a
folks bring
engaged.

A seco
Now I knu
visit this i
to me and
ago, Kevii
that repre:
zations, a:
unduplica
ing of the
deliverabl
usable pot
be looking
we need t

THREATS

Allow me
see it, we
not new th
Direction:
organizati
that have l

First, I
I use that
who was c
ill-will th
the vitriol
half-life. T
here with
haps our r

A seco
presidenti
it is the ag
serious so
derstand t

WEAKNESSES

As with all organizations, AACS has both strengths and weaknesses. In my mind, our first weakness is our core: While truly a strength, it is also a weakness in that we are not drawing new members into the board as I believe we should. Of the four newly elected board members, two are recycled from last year's board, and one other is a long-term member of a foundation organization. And I don't think this is an intentional outcome. As I recall, we sent out four or five calls for nominations to the membership (and to the "Big List," see below) but only received a handful of nominations. Again, these folks bring very strong skills to the board, but I believe we need to figure out how to get more folks engaged.

A second, and related, weakness is our limited ability to recruit/expand the base membership. Now I know there were issues when AACS formed that affected our initial membership (I will revisit this in the next section), but that we are only around 130 members is interesting and troubling to me and I am not sure what to make of it. At the Ypsilanti mid-year board meeting some 20 months ago, Kevin Mulvey and I spent the entire Saturday evening merging and massaging a bunch of files that represented mailing lists (membership, conference attendees, etc.) from the foundation organizations, as well as the Commission, and the Section on Sociological Practice, and came up with an unduplicated file of almost 1,000 names, addresses, and emails; the "Big List." After further cleaning of the database (and a lot of work by AACS Executive Director Fonda Martin cleaning out non-deliverable emails that clogged her Eastern Michigan email account) we ended up with almost 700 usable potential members. Even accounting for a 50 percent bad contact situation, we should still be looking at a couple of hundred members. We are not there yet, and this is an important weakness we need to address.

THREATS

Allow me to next address the threats to AACS, as I see them, before I go to the opportunities. As I see it, we have three threats that I believe we face in the coming few years; note also that these are not new threats. While I came to see these issues as threats somewhat independently, in reading the *Directions in Applied Sociology*,³ a collection of presidential addresses from one of the foundation organizations compiled by Steve Steele and Joyce Iutovich in 1997, I realize that these are threats that have been seen for a while.

First, I think we still face a serious threat that I first experienced in the immediate aftermath (and I use that word purposely) of the merger that formed AACS. From my vantage point as an outsider who was originally indifferent, then opposed to, then for the merger, the "radiation fallout" from the ill-will that we saw in the last meeting (held together) of the separate foundation organizations and the vitriol that permeated the listserve in the first months following the merger has not passed its half-life. There are still torn relationships and rivalries, ironically coming mostly from people not here with us today, that inhibit our ability to recruit new members to the organization. This is perhaps our most serious threat.⁴

A second major threat can be summed up by paraphrasing Joyce Iutovich's introduction to her presidential address in 1995: "It is the best of times, it is the worst of times; it is the age of wisdom, it is the age of foolishness. . . ."⁵ One of the strengths I mentioned earlier was that, in this time of serious social problems, economic concern, and extreme need, the call for "social scientists who understand the true dynamics . . . [to] save civilization" has not been stronger. Yet, we are, as a group

and as individuals, facing some of the same uncertainty (particularly economic, but also organizational) that plagues our friends and colleagues in the real world. Economically, at least for many of the folks I have talked with, funding for applied and clinical research projects has dropped dramatically, as nonprofits and local governments scrape by and can no longer sustain past funding levels. Funding for research is often the first things such agencies eliminate. At universities and colleges, budget cuts are making it virtually impossible for applied scholars to travel to meetings, much less carry out the needed research projects formerly covered by agencies. While I do believe that the call for the applied side will return, the threat we face as an organization and as individual applied sociologists, particularly those in nonacademic practice, is real.

Finally, I see a threat previously noted some fourteen years ago by Irwin Deutscher that as we "choose our future" whether we going to be a "social movement or a friendly social club." In his presidential address for one of the foundation associations, he stated that whether a club or a movement, "the options for both are good, but they are very different."⁶ Indeed, from what I have gleaned from conversations with many folks in AACCS, this difference was manifest in the differences between the foundation organizations. And, indeed, from what I have heard and what I have observed, and remember I was an outsider in this arena until two years ago, this difference in organizational culture seems to be behind much of the radiation fallout discussed above.

Now I never met Irwin Deutscher, and I gather from his article and others that the debate over a club or a movement was pretty intense some years back. Again, from my angle, it still is. It appears the goal of the merger was to actually develop something of a synthesis of the two organizational cultures; a movement with a friendlier, social-club approach. Now I don't question the ability for us to find that synthesis, but from my perspective our inability to become the social-movement component of this synthesis, a social movement I believe the world so needs in these precarious times, represents a serious threat to the viability of AACCS. This isn't to say that we can't or shouldn't have fun at the conference (of course, I would never have fun at a conference!), but we need to ensure that AACCS moves forward as the organizational leader of applied sociology.

OPPORTUNITIES

Now you may be saying to yourself: "Self, this doesn't sound like so rosy a picture," and "Self, can't the curmudgeon say anything positive?" The fact is, I am, despite my usual nature, very optimistic about the future of AACCS assuming we can take advantage of some very real opportunities in our grasp. I would argue that if we deal with these weaknesses and threats as I believe we can (and must), the opportunities we have on our horizon provide both hope and direction. So what are a few of these opportunities?

First, regardless of the results of the 2008 presidential (and congressional) election, there will be a need for oversight, research, evaluation, and program development. Indeed, the need has been there and now the point is to exercise our position as the applied sociology organization in the world—as *the* organization that sets the agenda on what to do.

Second, while we grapple with the "Movement versus Club" issue, the rest of the world is progressing without us. The growth of programs in applied sociology at the undergraduate, masters, and PhD level is amazing to me. Indeed, at my last count we have seven or eight applied sociology masters programs and one PhD Program in Florida alone. When I was working on designing the UNF Applied Program in 2000 or so there were none. As I understand it, this phenomenon is not limited to Florida. Yet we only have a handful of departments as organizational members of our association. And we only have five or six departments that are accredited or somewhere in the accreditation

process with the Commission on Applied and Clinical Sociology. In addition, community engagement is a major focus in higher education across the country, and applied programs are sprouting up in many disciplines at many institutions of higher education. What a better fit for academic applied sociology. Thus the opportunities for applied anything, but mostly applied sociology, are there for the taking.

I also see us developing some extremely important partnerships with national and international agencies, nonprofits, and NGO's. In fact, one such partnership that could improve the presence of AACS nationally is one I am working on with the newly formed National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD) Center for Girls and Young Women. While ostensibly a local project/partnership for my Center for Community Initiatives, it includes possibilities for AACS. One of the products of the project will be to develop a clearinghouse through which nonprofits from around the country can connect with applied researchers (sociologists and others) in their area who can provide research and evaluation support and consulting. Think of it as the Click and Clack approach from *Car Talk*. On their website cartalk.com, they have a link to help you find an honest mechanic anywhere in the country. We want to develop it so that we have a place on the AACS website where a person could find a sociologist anywhere in the world to, say, evaluate a program for the homeless. As envisioned, AACS will serve as the home of this clearing house. That means that we will have more responsibility but also more visibility if this comes to fruition. There is a lot more that can be explained about this possible relationship, but the point here is that these types of partnerships offer an amazing opportunity for AACS and applied sociologists.

The final opportunity I would like to briefly mention expands on the partnership idea. As an international association, we are particularly well placed to address the social problems and prospects that transcend borders. Our diverse, international membership, combined with our linkages and networks with the American Sociological Association, the International Sociological Association, the International Institute of Sociology, Sociologists Without Borders, and NGOs around the world can and will provide AACS the opportunity to expand our international reach. With these connections we can extend the social movement in applied sociology that is our future.

IN CONCLUSION: THE THREE "TRUTHS": PROBLEMS, PRACTICALITY, AND PROMISE

In conclusion, there are three truths that I see in the future of the Association for Applied and Clinical Sociology. One, the Association and society in general face some serious problems ahead in regard to recruitment, interpersonal issues that linger from the merger, and economically. But I think we can handle those problems.

Two, we are getting our organizational footing as AACS despite the threats and weaknesses mentioned earlier in this talk. Many opportunities, partnerships, and collaborations are being created to get us where I think we need to be as an association. We are seeing a change in culture. The world is becoming more applied and engaged. Hence, our association and the world are becoming more practical.

Third, the promise is real. I am not normally one to be very optimistic about things. I am often asked how I can be even the least bit optimistic given the social problems that I study, particularly in the Jacksonville area, that tend to persist despite our research. Since I have been given the privilege of leading this Association over the past year, I have come to believe, indeed to be very optimistic, about the promise that is applied, clinical, and public sociology.

In closing, I would like to share a reflection about our keynote Speaker, Jim Wright, who was brought up here for a very good reason. Jim Wright is probably not aware that he was not asked to

come up here today just to be the keynote speaker, but for more personal reasons as well. He has had a big impact on where I am and what I have become. And a while back, despite my curmudgeon-ness and despite my cynicism, he gave me a way to look at what I am and what I do that has guided me for a long time. In 1990, in an address to the graduating class at Tulane University, Jim talked about the "Pomposity of Sociology." How many in the academic world believe sociologists to be pompous. Well, I believe in the pomposity of applied, clinical, and public sociology! As Jim indicated in his speech, which, even after eighteen years, is still very relevant to what we do, after discussing the pomposity of "theory of everything" and the pomposity of people engaging in "earthquake prediction" and the social consequences such theories ignore, he aptly closed by saying:

No one expects quick, easy, scientific or technological "fixes" for the problems of violence, over population, poverty, or hatred. All these problems, and many others have deeply social roots; it falls, therefore, to the social sciences to explore those roots, understand them, and propose solutions. If at times our proposed solutions seem impractical, if the very effort itself seems pompous and outlandish, then so be it. It is far better to be annoying than trivial.⁷

Thank you!

NOTES

1. James D. Wright (Manuscript under review, Spring 2009).
2. http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/business/july-dec08/nobelkrugman_10-13.html.
3. Steele, Stephen F., and Joyce M. Iutovich, eds. 1997. Directions in Applied Sociology: *Presidential Addresses of the Society for Applied Sociology 1985-1995*
4. In the post-conference survey of attendees, several people commented on the continuing animosity between some corners of the group that lingers from the merger.
5. Steele, Stephen F., and Joyce M. Iutovich, p. 253.
6. Steele, Stephen F., and Joyce M. Iutovich, pp. 245-248.
7. 1990 Graduate Commencement Address at Tulane University, as reproduced in the December 1990 *ASA Footnotes*.

ABOUT THIS JOURNAL

The Journal of Applied Social Science, ISSN 1936-7244, is the direct amalgamated successor of two previously published journals:

The Journal of Applied Sociology, ISSN 0749-0232, and
Sociological Practice: A Journal of Applied and Clinical Sociology, ISSN 1552-3442.

The Journal of Applied Social Science is an official, peer-refereed publication of the Association for Applied and Clinical Sociology (AACCS). Reflecting more than 24 years of journal sponsorship by AACCS and its predecessor organizations, the Society for Applied Sociology and the Sociological Practice Association, *JASS* publishes research articles, essays, research reports, teaching notes, and book reviews on a wide range of topics of interest to the sociological practitioner.

The ISSN of the on-line version of this journal is 1937-0245.

SUBMISSIONS

All submissions are processed electronically. Please e-mail your word-processed paper (not a pdf) file as an attachment to: Jay Weinstein, Editor, *JASS*, at jay.weinstein@emich.edu. Word documents are preferred. Please include an abstract of no more than 150 words, and a brief biographical statement. Manuscripts follow ASA guidelines online at www.asanet.org/galleries/default-file/asaguidelinesnew.pdf. Tables and figures must be camera-ready.

If you are not a member of the Association for Applied and Clinical Sociology, you must mail a check for the \$10 processing fee to Jay Weinstein, Editor of *JASS*, Association for Applied and Clinical Sociology, Department of Sociology, Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, MI 48197. This fee is waived for members of AACCS.

For further information on journal policy, officers, bylaws, and membership application, visit our Web site at www.aacsnet.org.

PUBLISHING AND COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

ISSN: 1936-7244

Copyright © 2009 the Association for Applied and Clinical Sociology

Published in the United States by Paradigm Publishers, 3360 Mitchell Lane, Suite E, Boulder, CO 80301, USA

Paradigm Publishers is the trade name of Birkenkamp & Company, LLC, Dean Birkenkamp, President and Publisher.

Printed and bound in the United States on acid-free paper that meets the standards of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials.