

Applied Sociology

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Abstract

The term 'applied sociology' refers to a diverse group of practitioners all using sociology to 'understand, intervene, or enhance human social life'. Many different approaches to sociological application exist. We use the term 'sociological practice' or 'practitioner' to inclusively refer to applied, clinical, and public sociologists, as well as those who identify more with methods used across the social sciences: community-based researchers, participatory-action researchers, and translational researchers. With their work, all of these sociologists intend to impact groups of people in the present day. They primarily differ in the clients with whom they work and their level of engagement in implementing the action steps of a project.

Introduction

As Jim Wright points out (2009), applied sociology is and has been the foundation of basic sociology since the discipline began some 200 years ago. In the United States, Lester F. Ward called for applied sociology in his 1906 address to the first gathering of the [American Sociological Association](#) (then Society): "...sociology, established as a pure science, is now entering upon its applied stage, which is the great practical object for which it exists." The tradition of applied sociology grew with the Chicago School's focus on the social problems of that era and with the work of [W.E.B. Dubois and Lewis \(1999\)](#). (For a more direct discussion of this evolution, see [Miller Iutovich \(1997\)](#).) Social scientists applied sociology by evaluating the impact of the New Deal programs during the Great Depression and the impact of World War II on soldiers and families ([Hooks, 1983](#)). Today, applied sociology is a diverse field, encompassing clinical sociology, public sociology, community-based research, participatory-action research, and translational research. (Some scientists refer to this method as translation, others as translational.)

In light of this variety, we see the topic of 'what is applied sociology' as an ongoing conversation. Members of the applied community routinely discuss this in a variety of venues, including [the Association of Applied and Clinical Sociology](#) and [the Commission on Accreditation Programs in Applied and Clinical Sociology](#), as well as [the American Sociological Association's section on Sociological Practice and Public Sociology](#). Members of sister organizations often apply sociology too, including [the Association for Humanist Sociology](#), [Sociologists without Borders](#), [Society for the Study of Social Problems](#), and [the International Sociological Association](#), among others. With all these organizations and all these types of sociologists, there is much we could discuss here. We offer a few key points.

A Working Definition

Applied sociology is using the sociological tools to "understand, intervene, or enhance human social life" ([Steele and Price, 2004](#): p. 4). People apply sociology when they use

sociological methods, theories, concepts, or perspectives (tools) to address a social problem or issue ([Steele and Price, 2008](#)). Lots of social scientists 'use' sociological tools in their teaching or in their research. But only a subset uses those tools to plan or engage in direct, concurrent social intervention or enhancement. We generally refer to those that do as applied sociologists. Many different approaches to sociological application exist. We use the term 'sociological practice' or 'practitioner' to inclusively refer to applied, clinical, and public sociologists, as well as those who identify more with methodology used across the social sciences: community-based researchers, participatory-action researchers, and translational researchers ([Weinstein and Goldman Schuyler, 2008](#)).

Drawing on the works of [David Cooper \(2011\)](#) and [Price et al. \(2009\)](#), we argue that what unites these groups is their commonality in goals, tools, and conversations – all of them focus on 'use;' that is, use-based research and use-based applications. Members of all of these groups use sociological tools to "understand, intervene, or enhance human social life" ([Steele and Price, 2004](#)). These groups differ distinctly from academic sociology in that they usually do not work just for the purposes of publishing. With their work, they intend to impact a group of people in the present day. The types of groups they want to impact differ. And, the type of impact they want to make differs.

What Do Applied Sociologists Do?

Sociological practitioners come in many colors, and occupy a wide variety of occupations. Many receive their pay as professors and teachers in institutions of higher education. Federal and state agencies or nongovernment organizations employ a large variety of practitioners. Corporate or business enterprises hire some, with a smaller minority serving as private consultants and owning firms. Some impact groups via concrete suggestions for change inside of survey findings, evaluation reports, needs assessments, legislative summaries, or editorials in newspapers. All of these reach a much wider audience than a publication in a typical academic journal, the end goal for academic sociology. In contrast, some practitioners want to engage in the action steps of change – in not just

evaluating or assessing, but in implementing the improvements along with group members. Hence, a continuum of engagement runs along sociological practitioners.

Clinical sociologists usually identify or diagnose a problem with an organization and then design an intervention to impact the problem. Sometimes they engage in the implementation of their recommendations, but not always. It is called 'clinical' because practitioners apply a medical frame to social groups or situations; assess, diagnose, treat, and assess again. The methodology of clinical sociology mirrors that of translational sociology. While the two are not mutually exclusive, clinical sociology, as a set of ideas and values, does not specify that a researcher participate in the action steps of a social intervention. Translational sociology does. Some translational sociologists, like public sociologists, take the findings of sociological research and try to make them useful to communities or organizations. They 'translate' the findings into goals, objectives, and action steps for groups, thereby making sociological research more useful. Some take their 'use value' a bit further by involving themselves in every conceivable step of improvement on a given issue from grant writing, to community organizing, to researching, to implementing change, evaluating the implementation, and building programs to institutionalize the intervention. In this way, translational research represents a sustained commitment to an issue and a community. Many funding agencies now require translational work.

Participatory-action researchers and community-based researchers similarly apply sociological perspectives and tools to help local organizations and community members understand and improve local issues. They partner with the vested organization or community members, or part of the project involves acquiring community participation. Hence, the terms 'community' and 'participatory.' The members, not the researchers, 'own' the project. It is their community and an issue that directly affects them, likely for years to come. Theoretically, then, the community members will lead the application of the research findings with the researcher(s) help. Unlike translational research, community-based and participatory-action researchers may not remain with a project through the implementation of all the action steps. They may not have the time, as many are college professors with students in the research. Each semester brings new classes and new students. Some schools maintain a focus on a particular neighborhood or issue across semesters by starting a 'center' or 'institute' with organizational structure and resources (i.e., a professor works to obtain grant funding) to support the research. (For a discussion on how to start a local research center, see [Steele et al. \(1989\)](#).)

Public and applied sociologists vary widely in direct purpose and method from all of the above groups. If you look at all of the projects in which a given public or applied sociologist participated, you would likely observe more selection in goals, clients, and methods than the above groups. For example, they may or may not work with a community organization or involve community members. They may or may not use an intervention or participate in the implementation of action steps. We largely socially construct the difference between public and applied sociology. The term 'public' is a relatively new term (largely accredited to [Buroway, 2002, 2004](#)), and public science of all kinds is currently en vogue. Whereas, the term 'applied' existed for a 100 years earlier in the

United States and longer overseas. So your age and your mentors' ages largely impact whether you identify as an applied or public sociologist. That said, some tensions occasionally flare between members of the groups concerning how the two define 'client' and 'action.'

For a few applied sociologists, a client is a for-profit business from whom they receive monetary payment for services such as marketing products, satisfaction surveys, or utilization studies. This pushes the envelope for acceptable social 'enhancement' for some public sociologists. On the other hand, a few public sociologists remain too distanced from the 'public' and from concurrent, concrete action steps for some applied sociologist's taste. However, members of these groups increasingly put these differences aside and focus on the larger commonality – enhancing social life. As noted earlier, the Sociological Practice section of [the American Sociological Association](#) is now the section on Sociological Practice and Public Sociology. And [the Journal of Applied Social Science \(JASS\)](#) invites and regularly publishes public sociology, as well clinical and translational sociology, and community-based and participatory-action research.

Examples

To further illustrate applied sociology, we describe two projects from coauthor Jeffrey Will and [the Northeast Florida Center for Community Initiatives \(CCI\)](#). He and his colleagues manage numerous projects annually with local community organizations to help improve services or to impact local social problems such as hunger, homelessness, high-risk or adolescent pregnancies, and substance abuse. (For more information on projects that the Center completed, see https://www.unf.edu/coas/ci/Past_Projects/_Reports.aspx.) In one project they recently surveyed, interviewed, and observed 2117 clients of local food pantries to compose a demographic description of the client population ([Will and Milligan, forthcoming](#)). As part of that project they also documented their own observations and interactions with clients, staff, and settings. Subsequently, they informed the food bank of critical numbers from the data collection such as the percentage of clients below the poverty line and the percentage of food-insecure clients. But they also presented suggestions on organizational change that might allow the food bank to more effectively serve their client population, such as how to network better with other community organizations and how to make better use of their Web site. In another project, for a number of years CCI staff coordinated the local census and survey of the local homeless as part of a 1-day homeless count. Will and his team talked with as many people in shelters as they could find in 24 h. The survey data and the homeless count provided invaluable demographic data to the local social service agencies for planning purposes and to the state legislature for funding purposes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, many different approaches to sociological application exist. We use the term 'sociological practice' or

'practitioner' to inclusively refer to applied, clinical, and public sociologists, as well as to those who identify more with methods used across the social sciences: community-based researchers, participatory-action researchers, and translational researchers. With their work, all of these sociologists intend to impact groups of people in the present day. They primarily differ in the clients with whom they work and their level of engagement in implementing the action steps of a project. A great deal of commonality unites these groups – they all 'use' sociological tools to "understand, intervene, or enhance human social life" (Steele and Price, 2004).

See also: Academic Careers in Comparative Perspective; Academic Research and Employment: Recent Changes in Europe and the United States; Applied Social Research, History of; Homelessness in the United States; Needs Assessment; Participatory Action Research in Social Research; Peer Review: Organized Skepticism; Sample Survey Methodology, History of; Schools in the Social and Behavioral Sciences: Concepts and Historical Relevance; Science and Politics: Value Neutrality; Social Science Learned Societies and Professional Associations; Social Scientists as Experts and Public Intellectuals; Sociology, History of.

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