

What are Applied and Public Sociology?

Carol L. Glasser, Ph.D.

Introduction

Sociologists seek to better understand human society by examining social institutions, organizations, and cultural expectations using. Most of this is done for the sake of forwarding academic knowledge (academic sociology), however, the same theory and methods can serve—and might more direct implications for—current social problems. Sociology can help organizations and businesses better understand and market their products (applied sociology), or help to directly create positive social change (public sociology).

There was a wave of concern among sociologists about the need for and promotion of public sociology with publicly oriented outcomes in the 1960's and 1970's. However, this wave slowly died out and gave way to a more traditional and academic emphasis in the discipline throughout the late 20th century. At the turn of the 21st century, the call for such a public sociology returned. In 2004 Michael Burawoy, then president of the American Sociological Association (ASA), made a call to the discipline for a public sociology in [his Presidential Address](#) at the annual ASA national conference. This address sparked debate, but also garnered support and has been associated with the current wave of support for applied and public sociology.

Burawoy summarizes the challenge and need for publicly oriented sociology:

Responding to the growing gap between the sociological ethos and the world we study, the challenge of public sociology is to engage multiple publics in multiple ways. These public sociologies should not be left out in the cold, but brought into the framework of our discipline. In this way we make public sociology a visible and legitimate enterprise, and, thereby, invigorate the discipline as a whole. (2005:4)

Defining the Discipline

Sociology geared toward a public audience is sometimes called applied sociology and sometimes called public sociology. Burawoy's definition of a sociology for the public encompassed both of these concepts. He forwarded six types of sociological knowledge. At the base of all sociological practice is "instrumental" and "reflexive knowledge." Within academia, sociologists choose either the route "professional sociology," which is geared toward speaking directly to the discipline and working within scientific norms, and "critical sociology," which seeks to grow and provide foundational knowledge within the field.

Burawoy conceptualizes publicly oriented sociology as falling into one of two camps: *policy sociology* and *public sociology*. He defines (2005: 16) policy sociology as being "concrete" and "pragmatic" and geared toward meeting the needs of clients. This is what is now more commonly called in the field, *applied sociology*. Public sociology aims to be "communicative", relevant to current social issues and trends and interested in "public dialogue" (2005:16).

Academic sociologies are concerned with empirically testing and developing theories whereas public sociologies are concerned with applying sociological theory and methods to meet specific needs. Professional sociology is accountable to peers in the discipline (e.g. peer review) while publicly oriented sociology is accountable to its clients, including those who hired the sociologist in the case of applied sociology or a specific social group or cause in the case of public sociology.

Why Applied and Public Sociology for Students?

Sociologists have the tools—intellectually, methodologically, and theoretically—to understand the links between systemic and institutional structures and individual circumstances. Through public sociology, we can produce work that can directly help disadvantaged groups and that can address real-world problems. Through applied sociology, we can engage in work with real world application. These applications of the discipline make sociology more culturally relevant and helps expand the scope of our work.

Students of sociology also need public and applied sociology because it can help them truly understand how their classroom learning applies to the real world. Public and applied sociology provide for students an element of praxis. They develop a higher level of critical thinking and engagement in the world with which they can intellectually understand the link between the theory and methods of the classroom to the world that they are living in. In addition, students are able to pragmatically bridge the gap between the academy and the public by learning that they have the tools and agency to be change makers. With public and applied sociology, students can be empowered to improve their communities and to actively link what we teach them to the lives they live.

Applied and public sociology also provide students a pathway to jobs and careers. A common question students ask is, “what can I do with a sociology degree?” A well-structured applied and/ or public sociology program can help prepare students for careers that utilize research, work with diverse populations, and seek to empirically understand the efficacy of interventions and programs. Such job titles include program design and evaluation, research assistant/associate, program coordinator, case manager, education consultant, project manager, qualitative analyst, and the list goes on.

Preparing sociologists for an applied setting is particularly relevant for students who come to sociology out of a passion for social justice, as many do. The types of jobs listed on “do-gooder” job sites like Idealist.org are often centered on applied sociology skills such as program planning and evaluation and applied research skills. In addition, public sociology skills such as policy development and analysis, working with diverse populations, and serving as a conduit between such populations and institutional/ bureaucratic structures, are useful job skills.