

Trends in American Sociology

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The popularity and support for American Sociology rises and falls with larger cycles in American Society. Currently, not only is there a crisis of institutional support for Sociology, but Sociologists appear to have relatively low images of their discipline. The nature of American Colleges and Universities is changing as are the students and their goals. Sociologists must use their tools of analysis to understand and strengthen their position in American academic institutions.

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American Sociology began partly as a church-related discipline addressing social problems and social improvement. Very early it cut its ties to its religious beginnings but it has a long tradition of concern with social betterment and the elimination of social problems (Gans, 1992:5).

Sociology in America underwent a period of rapid development during the 1920s and 1930s as the country struggled under the rapid social changes brought about by high growth rates, assimilation of large immigrant populations, and, in the 1930s by the economic depression.

From 1965 to 1975, Sociology grew again as the United States reeled under the results of the War in Vietnam, the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power, and the War on Poverty. Not always presenting a welcome perspective, Sociologists were constant contributors to our analysis and understanding of events in that decade.

This period witnessed a large growth of enrollments in Sociology classes, and expansion of Sociology departments and curricula. Perhaps not by accident, this popularity of Sociology was also a time in which a demographic wave, we call the baby boom, hit American campuses.

New state universities and community colleges were opened in all regions of the country. Faculty were in short supply and found themselves in the enviable position of entering a "seller's market". Perspective faculty found themselves insisting on an face to face interview, while employers were often contented with a "hire" by phone or letter. Beginning salaries for assistant professors reached record heights, as universities struggled to staff expanding classes.

After 1975, Sociology departments, and their university settings experienced decline. The 1980s witnessed a downsizing of most departments, an erosion of the high salaries of the 70s, and a dwindling of college and university enrollments, in general. Demographers had warned of this impending slump as the last of the baby boomers entered their 20s and finished their first try at college or university, but few forecasters were prepared for the additional effects of the economic downturn and the energy crisis.

The 1990s, in spite of slight increases in enrollments, have nevertheless seen a further erosion of support for departments of Sociology with the closing the department of Sociology at American University at St. Louis, and two years ago, the threatened closure of the Sociology department at the University of California at San Diego, recently averted. Other departments and programs appear to be in danger.

For almost 20 years, Sociologists have been split in a debate, between two modes of analysis of these developments. One side takes an individualistic mode of analysis and says

"What mistakes have we made to bring about this situation?" The other side adopts the structural position of C. W. Mills and asks "What historical and social structural factors have brought this situation about?"

Where is American sociology going and what are our problems? In order to assess how American sociologists answer this questions, one can look at **Footnotes**, the official newsletter of the American Sociological Association.

Looking over the last 6 issues of Footnotes, there is a mix of analyses. Naturally, no one says "its all our fault, we are stupid and lazy". On the other hand, no one says "the current situation is due to factors beyond our control, and we are powerless to change it". Most analysis says "higher education in the United States is undergoing changes which we as Sociologists are well suited to comprehend. The discipline of Sociology is in trouble. We must alter our traditional thinking and strategies, and if we do so, we can continue to play an important role in American higher education."

SOME BAD NEWS

One of the most alarming articles in **Footnotes** is titled "A Discipline in Trouble: Why More Sociology Departments May be Closing Shortly", written by a team of sociologists active in studying the profession for past decade (Lynch, et al., 1993:3-4). They conducted a survey of deans and faculty from a sample of Universities across the United States.

They say Sociology departments are being targeted for closure because deans believe that Sociology departments are weaker in both teaching and research than other departments in their universities. What is more, many Sociology faculty seem to agree with this assessment.

Only 8% of the Deans rated Sociology as doing "outstanding" research (v. 33% for Biology). 18% of the deans rated their Sociology departments as doing "outstanding" teaching (v. 38% for Biology and 36% for History)

In a disturbing parallel, the sociologists' own ratings, while higher than the deans, tended to be the lowest of all the departments surveyed (Lynch, et al., 1993:3).

One intriguing finding was that, compared to their colleagues, Sociology faculty spend a smaller proportion of their total time in teaching related activities, although they taught similar class loads. This might suggest that Sociologists work long hours, but place their research in a higher priority.

Not surprising, Sociology faculty reported that their teaching was of lower importance in tenure decisions, with less than 50% saying it was an important part of a tenure evaluation.

Sociologists were less likely than others to believe that faculty committees were influential, and Sociology appeared to be the most disenfranchised field which was studied.

This survey reveals some very disconcerting information. Sociology departments appear to have a serious image problem on university campuses and the authors suggest a number of strategies to combat and improve this negative image of Sociology faculty by their deans:

- Keep deans informed of departmental achievements as soon as they occur. Send them regular informational memos.
- Collect evidence of departmental achievements in all categories for use in reports, often needed on short notice.
- Put departmental faculty up for membership on all major university committees.
- Encourage departmental members to be "good citizens" by attending retirement ceremonies, celebrations and other University-wide social events.
- Develop a long rang plan for the department, involve the Dean in the process.

- Stage interesting intellectual seminars and events. Bring speakers to campus and publicize widely on campus.
- Invite the dean to at least one departmental meeting per year; make up some excuse if a good reason does not come up.
- Communicate with other Sociology department chairs in your area or region to share strategies (Lynch, et al., 1993:7).

The authors of this study avoided discussion of the major issue of relative balance between teaching and research in the careers of Sociology faculty. These suggestions, rather than calling for different and better teaching, propose a "public relations" campaign, advocating better visibility, stronger political representation and a "more professional" appearance.

THE CHANGING NATURE OF AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

The American system of higher education has been changing since the rapid period of growth of the baby boom years of the 1970s and the decline of the 80s. Enrollments are again slowly growing, in the face of predictions of further decline. Now, the children of the baby boomers are in our classrooms, but enrollments are growing even faster than this traditional 18 to 24 year old group.

The current growth of our student populations comes from a variety of sources:

- More older adults are coming to campus to continue their education. In earlier times a woman might pursue a degree, but marry and stop school to support a husband. Now she may return. She may need to attend a college near her home.
- Some adults attend university to help them achieve career changes. Many attend classes in the evening after work.
- A growing proportion of High School graduates perceive college or university as necessary to reach their career goals. These are new students, often carrying different expectations about their educational experience than the traditional liberal arts student.
- An extended period of economic downturn has made many potential students unemployed and propelled them towards cheaper, regional institutions of higher education.
- As we live longer, and have smaller families, a "second career", following motherhood is a distinct possibility for many women.

A university degree is an important first step.

None of these students fit the "traditional" model of student, and one of the ways this is evident is in their choice of a regional campus over a large, well known, residential state university (Sernau, 1993).

In a recent Footnotes article, Scott Sernau discussed the role of the regional campuses (1993:5). He says this means that the majority of new jobs in Sociology are at regional campuses, traditionally seen as having less status. These campuses are seen as academic quagmires, where faculty go and "get stuck". Sernau maintains, however, that regional campuses can offer some real opportunities.

Students at regional campuses are far more diverse in terms of Race, Social class, age, and life experiences. These are good places, and good students, with which to "do" sociology. The problem with the shift to this new location is that some of our older understandings of profession and career need to be reevaluated.

Traditional professional evaluation in sociology was based on how highly we ranked among the national competition. We were expected to have a national reputation. But attaining a national reputation has always been difficult, and is nearly impossible for a Socio-

logist teaching at a regional campus. Sernau suggests that few Americans know the name of more than one famous Sociologist. State legislators who fund universities, similarly don't know or much care about famous sociologists. Such a system dooms the largest proportion of sociologists to obscurity. The majority of the participants in this system "fail" today (Sernau, 1993:7).

The idea of a "regional scholar" is an important new idea in our profession. Regional scholars most likely spend more time teaching than doing research, in line with the demands of their institution. When regional scholars do research, they often involve their students in the process, thus continuing their "teaching" orientation.

Successful regional scholars often gain reputations "beyond" their discipline's boundaries, becoming known in the region as a specialist on a problem, thus being drawn into more interdisciplinary approaches. Policy makers who rarely look in Sociological journals will enthusiastically discuss problems and seek solutions with local "experts" from the regional campus.

Regional associations have never been more important. Organizations such as the Midwestern Sociological Association, South Eastern Sociological Association, and the Pacific Sociological Association are experiencing growing membership. Their meetings produce papers and presentations which are diverse and regional in emphasis.

Professional evaluation is a problem involved in the new "regionalism". Large graduate schools need to accommodate and recognize the importance of the regional scholar.

Most Phds are trained by a "famous" mentor. Realistically, most mentors can reproduce themselves only once. Like the Chinese "one child policy", more than one protege would rapidly crowd the limited space in these schools. Graduate programs must recognize that they now will produce a majority of their graduate for regional positions, and it is important that these are not seen as places of academic exile, but sites of stimulating intellectual activity and professional growth.

This graduate preparation should emphasize new and effective means of teaching Sociology to students, the integration of teaching and research, and techniques of involving students in the research process. Some students will be oriented towards a more cross-disciplinary approach where they, as sociologists, will work with economists, political scientists or biologists to study local or regional issues.

Sociology is facing some important challenges as it continues to play a role in the changing American Society. Most of us are paid by state legislators, yet we remain politically aloof and alienated. Our deans are concerned about the quality of our teaching, but we substitute other priorities. Some of us bury ourselves in "pure research" topics while our students are asking us "what good is a sociology degree?" Many of our colleagues are located at regional institutions with diverse multi-ethnic and class populations, yet they wish for the white Anglo-Saxon male dominated graduate programs of the past.

SOME GOOD NEWS

There is an increase in women scholars and teachers in our field, and to some extent, they are attempting to refocus research more historically and humanistically.¹⁾

The profession is somewhat more open to ethnic and racial minorities. We still have a way to go. The American Sociological Association continues to address this problem with its Minority Affairs Program. One its more recent projects is MOST, or Minority Opportunities through School Transformation, supported by a grant from the Ford Foundation. In

¹⁾ In communication with Richard Colvard, sociologist, Southern Oregon State College, October 1993.

this program, 15 undergraduate departments will work for 5 years to improve curriculum, academic climate, and mentoring of minority students, working to train students of color to take on a leadership role on campus and in our profession (Torrecilha, 1993).

American sociology has become far more internationalist in its approach. It is less a western, or national sociology. Sociology is one of the few disciplines in the US which has organized a Teaching Resources Unit (TRC) in its professional organization which develops materials as well as programs to help improve our teaching skills and approaches to specific courses (DeFleur, 1992:3). Recently the TRC has been actively promoting:

- Giving students an opportunity to do field work and have other research oriented experience early in their academic program.

For example, students may do small surveys on campus, or do observations or descriptions of work sites or dorm settings.

- The inclusions of capstone courses in all undergraduate Sociology major programs. The capstone course is a supervised research project for the 4th year students where they plan and carry out, and write about their own research project. The results can range from mediocre, but technically correct work to exciting and significant new perspectives.

- Integrated/stepped curricula. Class are arranged in a hierarchical fashion, with prerequisites, rather than the more traditional "smorgasbord" fashion of many programs today.

- Integration of gender and race issues into all the material in sociology texts (and classes), rather than treating them as separate topics.

- Encourage the viewing of teaching as scholarship. Urging that reviews, texts and articles on teaching methodology be considered in promotion and tenure decision.²⁾

We are still filling our classrooms with interested students. Our students don't always share the opinions of the deans, mentioned earlier.

C. W. Mills told us in 1959 that what our students need..." is a quality of mind that will help them to (see).. what is going on in the world and ..what may be happening within themselves. It is this quality...that...may be called the sociological imagination (Mills, 1959:3-5).

Not all Sociologists will teach. But those who do will be the ones who must weather this current storm with new commitment and enthusiasm for teaching. They must turn their analytic tools upon the system which hires them and figure ways to communicate the potential importance and stature of our field in the larger institution. They must participate in redefining our Sociological world.

²⁾ In recent conversation with Cecile Baril, sociologist, Southern Oregon State College.

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TRENDOVI U AMERIČKOJ SOCIOLOGIJI**BRYCE JOHNSON**

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Popularnost američke sociologije raste i pada slijedeći općenitije cikluse unutar američkog društva. Trenutno, kriza se ne iskazuje samo u slabljenju institucionalne podrške sociologiji već, kako čini se, i u opadajućem ugledu struke u očima samih sociologa. Američka se sveučilišta mijenjaju, jednako kao i studenti i njihovi ciljevi; sociolozi moraju upotrijebiti sva svoja analitička oruđa kako bi razumjeli i ojačali svoju poziciju u američkim akademskim institucijama.