

Can applied sociology be useful? An examination of different viewpoints

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Abstract

This paper is a literature review of different views regarding applied sociology. While universities often educate their students in general sociology, the demand for applied sociology has continually outstripped the supply of qualified professionals. Part of this gap could be ascribed to the failure of applied sociology to develop its full potential. There are, however, also critics who contend that sociology cannot be applied at all. Their main point is that there are prescriptive questions involved in policy, and science simply cannot provide the answer to prescriptive questions. Such criticism cannot be easily dismissed but they miss the different and broad ways in which sociology can be applied. These applications, as I will show, can roughly be categorized in three ways: Mapping and Social Indicator Research, Modeling Social Phenomena and Evaluation of Purposive Action. The potential of applied sociology might be reached by providing the specific education needed for it and decreasing the negative picture of applied sociology.

Introduction

As Ronald Wimberley (1998) said in his article about applied sociology: "Sociology does not immediately convey images of practical applications as do 'economics,' 'psychology,' or 'medicine'" (p. 14). Where economics, psychology and medicine have been known as applied fields for quite a long time now, the application of sociology (called applied sociology) has generally been far more controversial (Wimberley, 1998). Even the term "sociology" has been controversial in the past. To prevent confusion, I will introduce the definition of sociology as I will be using it in this article now: The study of humans and their social environment, and their relations with one another. I think that this definition at least involves the vital, but broad, aspects upon which sociologists agree. As I said, there is a lot of controversy on how sociology could be applied, and whether sociology ought to be applied at all. The key question this paper asks—How useful can sociology be?—is therefore scientifically relevant.

But the debate does not end at scientific relevancy. In the field of sociology, there are relatively few sociologists employed outside of academia compared to, for example, economists and psychologists (Rossi, 1980). However, there has recently been a marked increase in the demand for applied social research, leading to a gap between the educational systems which strive to prepare students for academic careers and the education needed to satisfy the demand for applied sociology. Scholars in fact would be quite happy to be educated more into the applied side of sociology, since it provides new job opportunities in a field that has generally not proved very marketable (Wimberley, 1998; Yiannakis, 1989). Given this state of affairs, Wimberley (1998) correctly asks: "Have we graduated and failed some of these students at the same time?" (p. 16).

The funds universities get for their research also depend more and more on showing the utility of the research (Freeman & Rossi, 1984). But first and foremost the fact that applied sociology, in theory, could improve the world we live in provides more than enough motivation to explore how this might be done. As Rossi notes cautiously (1980): "There is the possibility that the results of applied social research will do some good."

In this article, I hope to clarify in which ways applied sociology can do good (that is: be useful), and which ways it cannot. To do this, I will start by explaining the difference between general and applied sociology. I will then discuss some of the most important critics

of applied sociology and how they believe it cannot be used. After that, I will show where it *can* be useful. In the last sections, I will point out the changes that need to be made in the discipline in order to make applied sociology successful. The article will end with a conclusion where I answer the question: How useful can Sociology be? Since the articles span a long period, the “oldest” article dating from 1932 and the most recent published in 2013, this literature review entails arguments and ideas that span more than 80 years. Although a longitudinal analysis is not the purpose of this article, a careful reader might also compare the arguments and ideas that have arisen at different points during sociology’s history.

The differences between basic and applied sociology

The main difference that comes to mind when we make the distinction between general and applied sociology is the difference in goals. General sociology has the goal of obtaining and advancing knowledge, while applied sociology has the goal of using knowledge to solve or improve an existing problem. The difference can be made even clearer when we say that general sociologists’ ultimate goal is to publish their articles in well-known journals, since this will contribute to the field and enhance their own professional prestige, while applied sociologists are most happy when their work has contributed to the solution of an existing problem in society. These, of course, represent the two ends of a continuum. A lot of times applied sociology does contribute to the knowledge base of the field, while general sociology can often help to improve real situations.

Secondly, general sociologists can choose their own subject to research, while applied sociologists often do research at the request of their clients, meaning that they have less freedom to choose what to study. The fact that applied sociologists have to answer to clients has consequences beyond this lack of freedom. The client often demands answers fast, and this means that applied sociologists often have less time to do their work than general sociologists. Often, an applied sociologist simply cannot use the methods he or she would prefer because of this lack of time. Instead, “quick and dirty” methods must frequently be used to get the answers to clients quickly (Freeman & Rossi, 1984). This does not mean that the applied sociologists use bad methodology or do bad research, it simply means that they are sometimes forced to use quicker methods. A good applied sociologist, just like a general sociologist, never lets these circumstances force him to do bad research. In fact, Rossi (1980) notes that applied sociologists often need more technical skills than basic researchers, because the results of applied research might affect the lives of tens of thousands of people, which makes it important that it be done appropriately. The consequences of a mistake in applied sociology are likely to be greater than those in general sociology.

Finally, applied sociologists need to possess greater communication skills, since their findings have to be communicated to clients, politics, media and other parties. These actors often do not have the knowledge of sociological jargon and it is therefore necessary to cast findings into easily understandable language (Wimberley, 1998).

Of course, there are more differences between applied and general sociology, but the purpose of this section is not to list them all, but rather to give a general idea about the differences between the two in order to fully understand the rest of the article. In any case, the differences will probably become clearer as one reads the article.

The critics of applied sociology: What can’t be done by sociology

Some limitations of applied sociology have already been noted in the previous discussion of the difference between general and applied sociology. There are more serious limitations however.

First, and foremost, sociology cannot give the final answer to a problem. At most, it can help

answer a problem. A lot of sociologists (e.g. Rossi, 1980; Schnabel, 2013; Fairchild, 1932; Cole, 1957) agree on this, but this is also where the agreement ends. Why can we not give the final answer? The answer to this question is clearly summarized by Fairchild (1932):

“It is not the function of sociology, in either its pure or applied aspects, to say what ought to be done in society, by individuals or by society itself. The simple reason is that science can never determine what ought to be done. Such a determination lies outside the range of science. The notion of "ought" implies an objective. This objective may be based on another objective, and this on another, and so on indefinitely. But eventually any such chain winds up in a final objective, which is the explanation and justification of all the other objectives. The key to the whole situation is found in the fact that all final objectives, all ultimate values, are axiomatic” (p. 185).

In short, science simply does not provide a final answer to practical problems.

Secondly, and consistently with the first point, applied sociology can never judge whether a policy has ultimately been “good” or “bad”. Of course we can show whether a certain policy achieved its goals, but these goals are determined by values. Every policy aims at a certain goal. This goal is seen as desirable, but the question of what is desirable is a normative one. In the Western world, we generally adhere to Western values, and this determines our views of good and bad. Applied sociologists can answer whether policy is good according to values commonly supported, but not the ultimate question of right or wrong (Cole, 1957; Shahidullah, 1998). A related issue is the problem of interpretations. Ruud Abma (2011) argues that there is a public arena where multiple parties need to fight to determine the interpretation of a problem, since this interpretation will guide the search for interventions for the particular problem. He gives an example of problem families in the Netherlands. Despite the fact that problem families are in part determined by objective measures (e.g. rent debt and conflict within family), the label of problem families changed continuously. They became labeled as “inadmissible families”, “socially sick families”, “societally maladjusted families”, “deprived families” and “multiple-problem families”. Each interpretation of these families (and the corresponding label) was accompanied by different problem analyses and ideas about the appropriate interventions. It should be clear that simply changing the interpretation of a problem doesn’t solve the overall problem. Applied scientists should therefore not be concerned with changing the interpretation of the problem, and instead should be the ones that are objective and who stand above all the different interpretations. That is, they should not keep themselves busy with normative questions relating to these interpretations, but they should be objective in creating their interpretation and the interventions following this interpretation. This would provide the authorized interpretation that would have greater standing than the interpretations of all the other parties.

Thirdly, applied sociologists probably will not be able to bring about any radical change in policy. The assignment of applied sociologists often involves comparing multiple policy alternatives that are not that different from what is already being done now. The reason for this is that it is policy-makers, rather than applied sociologists, that have to be able to get sufficient support for their recommendations, and people generally do not like too much change (Rossi, 1980). Martin Bulmer (1978) summarizes the critics adequately: “The frailty of research findings, the intrusive problem of values and the nature of decision-making systems all get in the way of using social science in policy-making” (p. 131).

The potential of applied sociology: What can it do?

Freeman and Rossi (1984) provide three basic and useful ways in which sociology can be applied. The first of these applications is what they call: *Mapping and Social Indicator*

Research. As the name implies, this is mainly descriptive and merely provides facts about the problem and other facts that could be useful for policy. This is related to what is often called the *enlightening* function (Yiannakis, 1989; Bulmer, 1978; Shahidullah, 1998) of applied sociology. This means that the primary usefulness of applied sociology lies in providing policy-makers with relevant knowledge (often hard facts) in order to solve practical problems. Yet it should also be appreciated that explanatory knowledge can also be used to “enlighten” policy makers.

The second application is labeled: *Modeling Social Phenomena*. As Freeman and Rossi note, this application has the fewest differences with general sociology, where developing models of social processes are also a major task. But applied models must also include policy variables and may be interdisciplinary if disciplines other than sociology might provide help for the problem in practice. The idealistic *Social Engineering Model* (Yiannakis, 1989; Bulmer, 1978) is related to this application. This model describes in ideal terms what applied sociologists want to do: reconstruct practical problems into a form that is researchable and apply sociological methodology and theory to find solutions that clients can use to improve a problem. The difference between the enlightenment and engineering model can be simply explained as follows: the enlightenment model merely provides the conditions (i.e. knowledge) for a solution, whereas the engineering model provides the solution itself. As we saw in the previous section, “resolving a problem” is not as clear cut as this. To answer the question of how to work toward resolving a problem, is to answer a normative question as well. But is the matter that problematic? Not if the normative questions are answered by the policy-makers and applied sociologists simply study whether these normative goals are met. As Fairchild (1932) notes: “All the sociologist needs to ask is, ‘What is it that you are trying to accomplish?’ Having got this clear, his task is then to indicate what line of procedure will get the desired result” (p. 186).

The desired result is left to be answered by the systems of the policy-makers, and the sociologists need not be accountable for that. All the applied sociologists need to do is study how to get to the stated goals.

Another way of eliminating the “normative problem” is proposed by Cole (1957): Make a distinction between the applied sociologist as “social scientist” and “social idealist”, with normative questions only being discussed in the latter role. I will not elaborate on this method any further. The point is that there are more ideas to cope with the normative question. Another problem with the engineering model was the fact that policy alternatives used by policy-makers tend to be conservative. Sometimes the (more radical) suggestions of applied sociologists create a lot of conflict and controversy. For Rossi (1980) this can also be a positive thing. He argues that competition among people with different views (all of which are presumably supported by evidence) leads to higher quality in applied social research. Moreover, Paul Schnabel (2013) notes that at, least in the Netherlands, it gets more and more common to use research findings in making and accounting for policy.

Evaluation of Purposive Action is the third application. In short, this refers to studying and measuring whether the policy is achieving the goals it set for itself. By learning from what has gone wrong (and what has gone right) one can improve policy in the future. To provide a full understanding of the applications listed above would require writing multiple articles. For now, it is sufficient to know what the basics of the application include.

What has to change in order to make applied sociology successful?

As the last section showed, applied sociology can indeed be useful in a variety of ways, but many academics do not experience it that way (e.g. Scott and Shore, 1979; Bulmer, 1985). This may be due to the fact applied sociology does not live up to its potential. What has to be done to get to this potential?

First of all, applied sociology demands different education than general sociology does. As Wimberley (1998) notes, often in the “real” world there is no specific research to the problem available and there is no time to do research. Applied sociologists must adapt to this reality and use the theories and research available. They need to know the theory, research, and methods on the subject of the practical problem they are trying to solve. Since the real world is so different from academia, there is also a call for opportunities for learning by doing. This involves the universities being more open to students taking internships and thereby finding out how to apply their acquired skills.

Also, applied sociologists often deal with non-academics (e.g. politicians, media, citizens) who they have to convince of their rightness, therefore: “applied sociologists must know what they need to say, and then say it clearly and convincingly.” (Wimberley, 1998, p. 9). Clear and relevant communication with the non-sociologists is essential if we want broader support for acting on the findings of applied sociology. This is because in order to justify continued financial commitment, people want to understand why things work and this requires good verbal communication skills.

As noted before, applied sociologists sometimes find themselves required to think and act in an interdisciplinary fashion. As Bulmer (1985) notes, the boundaries between applied sociology and other applied social sciences are very fluid. Education in applied sociology does not take this into account and therefore poses what he calls intellectual challenges that need to be overcome. To put it briefly, education in applied sociology must be focused on the issues that are inherently related to the functions of applied sociology. Secondly, articles related to policy (e.g. in business journals, depositions in legal cases, policy documents) need to receive as much recognition in the academic world as the publishing of articles in scientific journals. Often the promotion, prestige and funds of academics are related to their publishing in scientific journals, but this leaves the applied sociologist nearly empty-handed (Freeman & Rossi, 1984). Therefore, to help the cause of applied sociologists, what we can call “applied publishing” should receive recognition alongside academic publishing. Many even see applied sociology in general as less worthy than general sociology (Yiannakis, 1989), and this of course also does not help to get talented individuals to practice applied sociology.

Finally, Rossi (1980) notes that applied sociologists can help their cause by designing their research in broad terms. A narrowly defined research study is only useful for the particular problem being studied, while a broader study could also help to answer questions that are also of interest in general sociology.

Conclusion

As we have seen, applied sociology does seem to have quite a few useful applications. Even though the critics do have some valid points, this does not take away the fact that there are numerous ways in which sociology can be useful. Furthermore, it has been shown that there are ways of addressing some of these points. Also, it seems to me that it is more useful to focus on the points where we can apply our knowledge than to focus on areas where we cannot. The latter gets us nowhere.

However, it has also been shown that a lot has to be done to make fuller use of the potential of applied sociology. This discipline needs a very different form of education from that provided in general sociology, and involves learning with a practical purpose, learning by doing, learning to communicate with non-sociologists and being interdisciplinary. In addition, applied sociology should get more recognition alongside general sociology in order for more people to want to be involved in applied sociology. If this is done successfully, we can indeed work on resolving practical problems by enlightening others, by providing tools for improvement and by evaluating what has gone well and what has not. Helping

society and knowing how society functions are both worthy goals. As Wimberley said (1998): "Perhaps it is time we sociologists start showing more and telling less" (p. 19).

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