Accreditation of Sociology Programs: A Bridge to a Broader Audience

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Abstract: As more individuals trained in sociology find jobs outside academia, the demands for appropriate training, particularly at the undergraduate and master's level, have increased. Sociology must become mobile and perform a broader service beyond academia. This paper began with criticisms from the sociology of professions and then explored the problems facing sociology in academic service, its academic career, its interests in professional jurisdiction, and the employability of non-degreed sociologists in the United States. Accreditation is proposed as a foundation for embalming and a method of improving the quality of applied and clinical sociological training.

Résumé: Alors que de plus en plus de diplômés de sociologie trouvent un emploi à l'extérieur de l'université, le besoin de formation adéquate est de plus en plus pressent par le public. La sociologie doit devenir mobile et jouer un rôle plus large au-delà de l'université. Le sociologue doit ne pas être seulement professeur à l'université, il doit également être un professionnel dans les domaines de l'emploi et des affaires. L'accreditation est proposée comme une base pour améliorer la qualité de la formation en sociologie appliquée et clinique.

The future of sociology may well rest on its ability to build bridges to different audiences in academia, government, and the private employment sector. Building bridges involves bringing some congruence in the value orientations and practices of sociological scholars and practitioners. Sociology appears to lack an agreed-upon central core of knowledge and consensus on how to apply that knowledge to the service of society. As more sociologists find employment outside colleges and universities they apparently dissolve their ties with the discipline and, by implication, their identities as sociologists. Whether, how, and

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Sociology has always had one foot in the real world. The early sociological theorists—Max, Durkheim, Weber, Simmel and Mauss—studied the relevant social problems of their day. Their theoretical concerns were the by-products of their research interests, not a search for grand theory (Horowitz, 1993). A few prominent U.S. sociologists of the last half of the 20th century, including Lazarsfeld, Lipset, Blau, Duncan, Farrar, and Coleman, have done likewise. These individuals are boundary spanners between teacher researchers and colleagues dependent on professionals and practitioners or client-dependent professionals (see Friedson, 1970: 75; 1986: 211-212). Friedson (1986: 82) maintained that the division between academic and practitioners in the professions is hierarchical in nature and one around which there has been a good deal of tension and investment throughout history, at least in law, medicine, and engineering.

Almost 40 years ago, Talcott Parsons (1955) advocated the separation of sociology as a science from sociology as a practice by separating the study of the discipline itself from the discipline's role in the social world. Parsons has argued that sociology was of no direct value in a world of conflicts, and therefore that sociology is not a discipline in the sense of the sciences of knowledge. Parsons' view of sociology as a social science is based on the assumption that sociology is a science, and the demands for sociology to train practitioners for applied functions. Simpkins and Simpkins (1994) noted that as chair of the American Sociological Association Committee on the Profession, Parsons addressed both the threats to sociology posed by the licensing of psychologists in the late 1950's and the demands by sociologists employed in government, corrections, and industry for recognition. Parsons wanted to insulate the discipline from market forces and broader audiences that could damage the scientific pursuit of sociology as basic research.
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Person's response was also a reaction to the Lazerfeld model in which sociologists would produce a proprietary document for the business or agency that paid for the research — the paying audience — and then turn around and publish an academic study using the same material — the peer audience (see Buxton and Turner, 1992: 352 note 9). The fear was that the empirical researcher, especially in a government position, was liable to become a bureaucratic technician (Merton and Lorenz, 1951) or that commissioned and contract research would distort sociologists from the discipline in favor of clients outside the university (Stern, 1988). This parallels the disdain of the professional dance musician for his audience and the search for communal support from peers who appreciate technique and imagination (Brecken, 1951).

Although often perceived in sociology as a schism, Abbot (1988: 80) defined the link between a profession's disciplinary base and its work or practice to be its jurisdiction. He argued that professions must gain the support of three audiences to maintain their jurisdictional claims (Abbot, 1988: 59). These audiences are public opinion, the workplace which includes both public and private sector employers, and the law. But in Parsons correctly assessed, the audience for a discipline is much narrower. Unfortunately, many sociologists do not speak clearly to these audiences and may even confuse them by equating discipline with profession and separating them both from practice. Many sociologists also fail to make proper distinctions between certification and accreditation. The following discussion draws upon Dahkehn (1933), Weber (1947), Wilesland (1964), Prentice (1970, 1980) and Abbot (1988).

Profession, the broadest and most prestigious structural component, designates an occupation requiring a high level of educational competence which can be intellectual, artistic or technical in nature. Profession involves both the creation of abstract knowledge through its discipline and the application of knowledge to particular cases through its practice. A professional association, like the Canadian Medical Association, organizes and codifies knowledge, as does the medical that supports the maintenance and upgrading of skills through practice guidelines, continuing education, and certification. Certification is the endorsement by a professional association of the competence and training of an individual as fit for practice. Specifically, the individual is recognized as a specialist as a result of some combination of successfully completing a course of study at an accredited institution, supervised practice with an already certified individual, and passing an examination. The most prestigious form of certification is in medicine where physicians are board-certified in specialty and sub-specialty practice. Social workers can qualify for certification and become members of the Academy of Certified Social Workers (ACS).W.

Discipline is a branch of knowledge involving the generation of abstract knowledge through research and its dissemination through instruction and publication. The discipline is usually situated within an academic entity, the depart-

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ment within a university. A disciplinary association, like the Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association/La Société canadienne de sociologie et d’anthropologie, promotes research and teaching by sponsoring journals and conferences for the dissemination of abstract knowledge and new methodologies.

Accreditation is the endorsement by a professional association that an institutional program meets educational and training standards covering substantive content, supervised work experiences, staffing, and support services. Often the standards specify that some faculty members be hired and that certain methodology and practice courses or supervise internships. This places sociology at a disadvantage in gaining new faculty positions and other resources in those joint departments of sociology and social work that exist in some U.S. colleges and universities.

Practice is the application of the discipline's knowledge to diagnosis, advice, counsel, intervene, and treat clients, whether individuals, community groups, complex organizations or nation states. Practice, then, is usually situated in private and public and professional and social work practice, or situated specialists. A practice association, like the Canadian Society for Chemical Engineering/ La Société canadienne de génie chimique, seeks to enhance careers, create market opportunities, and limit competition through establishing minimum qualification for practice and securing licensure.

Licensure is the formal and often exclusive permission from a government agency to an individual to practice a profession or occupation. Registration, a lesser form of licensure, creates an exclusive right to use a particular title but does not establish or exclusive right to practice. In both Canada and the United States these are functions of provincial or state governments resulting in equivalent statutes creating problems that do not occur in nations with more centralized government. Prentice (1966: 67) pointed out that in New York state psychologists have exclusive use of the title psychologist and exclusive right to describe services by use of the words psychologist, psychology, or psychological. Similarly, only a licensed person may use the title certified social worker (CSW), but others are not prevented from offering the same services to the public. Therefore in some states the ability of a sociologist to offer social psychological services may be questionable, but offering social or counseling services is not. In other states, without such licensing laws, applied and clinical sociologists are not affected.

Problems Facing the Discipline in Applying Knowledge

Having detailed the terminology of the sociology of professions, the problems facing sociological practitioners and clinicians can now be explored. These problems are the nebulous nature of sociology, its interests in jurisdic-
The expansion of BA and MA applied and clinical sociology programs will produce a much larger class of applied sociological practitioners and supervisors most of whom will work outside academic organizations. Pescosolido's (1997) findings suggest that they are unlikely to gain support and professional identity within a disciplinary association such as the American Sociological Association (ASA) which is dominated by academic researchers and scholars who are successful in generating and disseminating formal and theoretical knowledge. While the ASA views itself as the potential unifying organization for the profession as a whole, its attempts at bringing together the discipline and practice sides of the sociological family or providing benefits and services to the practitioners have been mixed.

On the positive side, Simpson and Simpson (1994) found a steady if uneven growth and support for what they term professional functions or work issues other than research and graduate education. The number of professional committees in the ASA went from 1 in 1960 to 13 in 1992. During this period, ASA established both a Section and a Committee on Sociological Practice. In the early 1980's, ASA created a certification program in its applied areas: Social Psychology, Demography, Social Policy and Evaluation, Medical Sociology, Organizational Analysis, and Law and Social Control. But this was abandoned within 10 years after only 65 individuals had sought and been granted certification.

By 1993, approximately 17 percent of the ASA's budget was allocated to professional and program services (Simpson and Simpson, 1994). The Teaching Services Program sponsored workshops, produced a set of manuals and teaching materials for undergraduate, graduate, and applied programs, and trained people to conduct site visits for program review and improvement. In 1988, ASA initiated a Professional Development Program with the goal of increasing awareness of sociological practice in both the public and private sectors. It held seminars and made presentations at government agencies and corporations likely to employ or need sociologists. A Directory of Sociologists in Policy and Practice was published in the urging of Amira Eliaen, the 1994 ASA President. The ASA has recently revised its Code of Ethics which now explicitly covers concerns and issues associated with applied work.

The most striking failure to support applied sociology has been in publications. The Simpson and Simpson (1994) data revealed that in 1980, 10.2 percent of all American Sociological Review authors could be classified as having applied employment. This dropped to 5.4 percent in 1975, and 1.5 percent in 1983 before rising slightly to 2.4 percent in 1993. They noted that in 1980 ASA, launched a new journal, Sociological Practice Review, but it was very short lived and failed to attract enough subscribers to justify continuation.

The interests of the practitioners and those who train them have found a home in the Society for Applied Sociology and the Sociological Practice Association (SPA). The Sociological Practice Association (formerly the Clinical

Sociology Association) was established in the 1978 with the mission of promoting the application of sociological knowledge to intervention for individual and social change through scholarly and educational activities. It developed a certification process in 1983 to authenticate an individual's practice and clinical skills which are demonstrated before a review committee. Several individuals active in the SPA were instrumental in creating the International Sociological Association's (ISA) Research Committee on Clinical Sociology (RC-46). The Society for Applied Sociology was also founded in 1978 to provide a forum for sociologists and others interested in applying sociological knowledge and to increase the effectiveness of applied sociological research and training. It has worked cooperatively with the ASA Section and Sociological Practice in directories of applied programs and several of its members have been instrumental in bringing applied training and practice issues before various ASA committees, including ethics and professional standards. Its equivalent is most likely the ISA Research Committee on Socio-Techical/Sociological Practice (RC-26).

Accreditation in Other Disciplines

As a rule, the only professional or academic association that accredits sociology has had some difficulty acknowledging applied and clinical practice while remaining true to its place in a liberal arts undergraduate education, on the one hand, and its graduate research and scholarship training on the other. Some professions are better able to accommodate differences between training for basic research and training for practice and to include them under a single professional category (Abbot, 1985: 41). For example, the American Chemical Society has many members who are B.A./B.S. graduates, which may reflect both a consensus on relevant training and career paths that flow back and forth between academia and the chemical industry. The question of what professionals should know and what skills they should have introduces the interests of the practitioners into the disciplinary prerogatives of setting curriculum and regulating academic programs. Even Harvard (1993) warned to those off such an intrusion into the university and avoid the British situation in which specific tasks are defined for sociology.

In their comparative study of educational accreditations in the undergraduate and graduate levels in business administration, engineering, education, law, library science, nursing, pharmacy, journalism, and social work, Hogeveen and Stark (1989: 2-3) argued that accreditation helps define the parameters of practitioner education and, indirectly, the nature of the profession. Conflict over accreditation reflects disputes between the practitioner and discipline professional associations over who can establish the training criteria, monitor program, and enforce compliance. For example, the dominant position of the American Medical Association is evident in the fact that its Committee on
already occupied by other professions or not amenable to control by a single profession, and the difficulty of BA and MA sociology graduates gaining employment as "sociologists."

Several academics claim that sociology has become an anonymous entity. They perceive sociology to have lost all coherence as a discipline (Cottingham, 1990), lacking a clearly defined subject matter (Crase and Small, 1992), or dissolved into its parts (Hartovitz, 1993). Davis (1994:180) submitted as evidence of a lack of coherence the fact that texts are not written for the intermediate undergraduate audience and that a sequence of substantive courses that build upon or expand elementary concepts have not been created. Introductory texts are a smorgasbord of unconnected topics while monographs are too specialized and methodologically oriented. Stinchcombe (1994: 289) also argued that a discipline must agree on how to teach elementary courses. In contrast to chemistry, which can understand the accreditation guidelines and generally make it stick, Stinchcombe could hardly imagine what would be accredited in sociology or where the power to impose such accreditation would come from.

Additionally, the anonymous nature of sociology has led to jurisdictional conflicts with other professions. Some jurisdictions of interest to sociological practitioners and clinicians are already claimed or dominated by professions such as social work. Through a network of well staffed state and regional association officers, social work has closed opportunities for others to administer and practice in certain social service and welfare arenas. More recently, managed health care organizations have encouraged efforts to license or register behavioral and mental health counselors and therapists to protect themselves from liability law suits and to qualify for reimbursemens. The irony is that professions such as social work, public health, and mental health have strong roots in sociology as a discipline.

Other practice jurisdictions, for example marital therapy, are unable to enforce their common work into a single field (Abbott, 1988: 95). Whether or not they are state registered or professionally certified, sociologists who practice marital therapy are absorbed into a mix of psychiatrists, social workers, psychologists, and clergy. Emerging jurisdictions, such as evaluation, attract practitioners trained in a variety of disciplines and methodologies. Both marital therapy and evaluation have particular interests that are multi-disciplinary in nature. Eventually, these practitioner associations may attempt to establish graduate-level training programs independent of the disciplines and forge a new academic identity.

The number of sociologically trained individuals in the United States working for government, the media, non-profits, and business firms has grown steadily since the mid-1960s, to the point where over 30 percent of sociology's personnel are not in academic life and less than half of the new Ph.D.'s in sociology can be expected to enter teaching and related academic positions (Hornbuz 1993: 137). In contrast to many European nations, where sociologists are heavily involved in government and public policy, U.S. sociologists are generally not invited into the corridors of power or even used as commentators (Malofch, 1994). Halldin (1992: 12-13) argued that because sociology has no accessible clientele or audience outside the academy and no jurisdiction over an area of work, individuals with undergraduate or master's degrees in sociology are dispersed imperceptibly throughout the labor market. They are often hired to collect and interpret sociological and demographic data.

Some BA's and MA's work as technical specialists who may lack the expertise necessary to bring a sociological interpretation or perspective to the final product. Others, who possess some degree of reflective, creative or critical sociological thinking, may often overlook the ramifications of technical decisions concerning data collection. This bifurcation is the result of what Reiss (1992: 297) called the trained incapacity of sociologists. The connection between sociological knowledge and research, on the one hand, and practice, on the other, was further exacerbated when first social work and then psychology, criminal justice, and communication sciences separated from departments of sociology into independent graduate-professional departments, schools, or colleges (Holliday, 1992; Hornowitz, 1993).

In their efforts to find suitable work as qualified clinical interventionists and applied social scientists, BA and MA sociologists often join the ranks of social workers and psychologists both in title and practice; that is, in order to qualify for state licensure and any prerequisites, sociologists may be required to take courses available only through an accredited social work or psychology program. In a study of 151 graduates from undergraduate sociology programs in the Chicago area, Plichter (1997) found that 23 percent reported memberships in professional sociology associations compared with 37 percent who belonged to non-sociological professional associations. Over half of the latter indicated that their non-sociological affiliation offered them a credentialing option. In essence, their identity as sociologists is eroded, if not lost.

Firms or agencies that hire individuals with a BA seek to strengthen the recruit's loyalty to the workplace and to sever links with the academic discipline (see Abbott, 1988: 154). Training provided internally by the employer, which may be exactly equivalent to training provided by professional schools or academic departments, is not presented by the disciplinary teachers and researchers who developed the knowledge upon which the profession's expertise rests; rather, it is presented by practitioners and administrators who emphasize conventional approaches and pragmatic solutions (Pattow, 1999).

Such training may be typical of large accounting firms that hire BA sociologists with course work in organizational and industrial studies. This trend is evident in the policy, evaluation, and survey research firms which continually train interviewers, coders, and data managers to suit their specifications.
Allied Health Education accredits academic based training programs in medical record administration, occupational therapy, respiratory therapy, and physician's assistance (see Hagem, 1992).

Peterson (1979) identified programs for specialized professional study where accrediting associations are recognized by the Council for Postsecondary Accreditation. These include law, pharmacy, dentistry, optometry, theology, medicine, chemistry, journalism, librarianship, psychology, social work, architecture, nursing, art, and 24 technical and paraprofessional health-related occupations. For the most part, these programs bear the name of the profession rather than the discipline. The three exceptions are chemistry, psychology, and art. In contrast to chemistry which apparently is comfortable with a single identity and an umbrella association (American Chemical Society) covering liberal arts education, basic research, and applied research, the profession of psychology is facing deepening divisions between its academic research and its clinical practitioners.

The remaining accredited professional fields are more closely identified with the practice rather than the academic segment of the profession. Practice-oriented professional schools such as social work or journalism/communication arts and sciences already incorporate sociological theories and findings in their classes. Sociology, then, plays the role of basic science similar to that of physics with respect to engineering or of biochemistry with respect to medicine and nursing. Hence, the abstract disciplinary work in these fields is separated from its applied teaching and research. Accreditation of the professional school is often overseen directly or indirectly by the practice associations.

Political science and public administration present another interesting case. Master's degree programs in public affairs, policy, and administration are often housed within the political science department. The programs are accredited through the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration, which is totally independent of the American Political Science Association. The accreditation body includes faculty who teach or administer the programs as well as practitioners. Jennings (1989: 445), writing on the obvious tensions that exist, recommended that both academics and practitioners engage in a dialogue. Faculty need to accept the collective decisions of the practitioner community about what is meant by such concepts as problem-solving abilities and in determining jointly how these abilities can be taught and assessed. Public administration programs may be more successful at numerous law-related universities and those that grant only MA's.

Conclusion

Pearson (1992) noted that sociology is rather invisible to many audiences and that the profession needs to do a better job of marketing itself to various publics both inside and outside academia. He argued that sociology should work to redefine itself as a useful enterprise and find ways to make the public aware that a trained sociologist is filling a position by emphasizing the sociological preparation for that position.

The collapse of the ASA certification program indicates that doctoral level training is still oriented towards basic research and that individuals with PhDs do not need certification to do applied work. Sociology departments with PhD programs and faculty who are rewarded for formal or theoretical research and publications by the university, funding agencies, and the profession are presumably not interested in producing technicians, but something is needed to strengthen undergraduate and perhaps master's level training for technical and supervisory positions that use basic sociological knowledge and methods.

Accreditation is one means to promote the practice of sociology. The growing number of sociologically trained individuals employed outside academia have directed interest towards certification as a way of authenticating individual competence for employers and meeting some state requirements for professional practice. The continuing effort to curricular and license individuals inevitably rests on the quality of their education in sociology. In order to resolve any questions over the quality of educational experiences, clear fields from social work to family relations have moved towards accreditation. The purpose is to assure both private and public sector employers that graduates from an accredited program will have either taken prescribed courses or have met learning objectives under the guidance of a qualified faculty with adequate support services.

Graduates from these programs are expected to have acquired a common set of knowledge and skills, become familiar with professional ethics and practice, and have had a supervised internship or practicum. Accreditation standards based on learning objectives would explicitly indicate that a graduate from a sociology program understood the basic theoretical perspectives and levels of analysis and how they relate to social action, change, and intervention. Graduates would be familiar with research methods particularly relevant to applied social research and practice. They would have learned written and oral communication, computer, and group facilitation skills. It is not the case that most sociology programs do not offer these, but rather that such programs lack the total package that recognizes the bridge between academia and the broader labor market. It would make manifest the underlying core of theory, methods and applied or clinical skills that sociologies possess.

In the United States, accreditation may have a climate among community colleges and four-year undergraduate programs that need to show their audiences—students, parents, administrators, and, in many cases, taxpayers—that they are producing graduates who have specific career opportunities as a result of their substantive and technical training. Some college administrators do pay attention to career training in the undergraduate teaching program. In one
case, a sociology department chair was able to secure a new position in a city and a racial studies only after establishing a social science program with the local urban league and city agencies. In another, a special emphasis program in business, technology, and society provided justification for a new sociology course on gender in the workplace.

While these orientations and programs exist without accreditation, the process would strengthen them by providing guidelines, a degree of uniformity, and quality assurance. To this end, the Society for Applied Sociology and the Sociological Practice Association formed the Commission on Applied and Clinical Sociology, one of its goals being to establish accreditation in Applied and Clinical Sociology beginning at the undergrad level (Porteus, 1995, 1998). The Commission does not seek to accredit sociology programs as a whole; rather, it plans to accredit programs involved in the training of individual staff for entry-level and technical applied and clinical positions. The Commission's efforts will help shape of community colleges and four-year undergraduate departments to promote themselves to their students by showing that they have quality programs producing graduates who have specific career opportunities as a result of their substantive and technical training.

Of the three groups that Freidson (1986: 211) identified within the organization of professional occupations — practitioners, administrators, and teacher-researchers — sociology has primarily produced the latter. Nevertheless, the production of sociology practitioners is well underway, both at the technician or BA level and the administrator/supervisor or MA level.

It would be best for the future of sociology if it built a bridge to a broader audience and spanned the gap between the academy-based discipline and sociological practice. Otherwise, practitioners will be closed to sociologists and sociologists will be open to both respect and visibility with many audiences. Accreditation is a major step in the construction of that bridge.

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