

Introduction: Applied Research and Social Justice

Laurie M. Joyner and Edward J. McCaughan

THIS ISSUE OF *SOCIAL JUSTICE* EXAMINES HOW SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH CAN contribute to the pursuit of social justice through its direct application to resolving concrete social problems, aiding organizing efforts, informing public policy, influencing legislation, or changing institutions. We begin with Laurie Joyner's essay, which delineates the boundaries between basic, applied, and clinical sociological research. Joyner argues that "the call for social science research to be 'value-free' is untenable and that a legitimate role for the sociologist involves using one's disciplinary perspective and research to inform program and policy development in an attempt to improve the quality of life for marginalized groups." Drawing on her own extensive experiences, Joyner discusses the promising role of applied research in contributing to program improvement and incremental change geared toward social justice both within the community and the academy. She also highlights the potential challenges of integrating applied work into an academic career and suggests strategies for altering academic culture and the faculty recognition and reward structure in ways that support applied research directed toward social justice issues.

We continue with Jay Weinstein's historical examination of the theoretical and practical relationship between applied sociology and democracy. Weinstein argues that from the beginning of the discipline, "the development of sociology and the related social sciences...was clearly driven by an attempt to apply scientific knowledge to improve human relations." Following a provocative and insightful review of applied sociological thinking from Sir Patrick Geddes through W.E.B. DuBois and the Students for a Democratic Society, Weinstein concludes that "the concept of participatory democracy lies behind the many different terms used by applied sociologists when referring to the best informed and most effective system for articulating and managing group interests."

Theresa Garvin and Renée Gravois Lee's essay adds a cautionary note to the first two authors' optimism about developments in the field of applied research. Garvin

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and Gravois Lee focus on the increasing demand to illustrate the policy-relevance of research. They raise a number of important questions, such as “What are some of the potential dangers of the policy-relevant turn and how it may subtly change how investigators approach their work?” As researchers committed to applied social research, the authors reflect critically on the potential of such policy-relevant pressure to influence each stage of the research enterprise — “from conceptualizing the problem, to collecting and analyzing data, *as well as* communicating findings.” Besides acknowledging the importance of policy-relevant work, the authors also consider how such an orientation can result in narrowing our research focus and parameters in ways that limit our understanding of social phenomena under study and undermine the creation of well-informed policies or programs geared toward social justice.

A different set of red flags, as well as distinctly positioned optimism, about the potential of applied research are raised in Manu Aluli Meyer’s challenging essay, “Hawaiian Hermeneutics and the Triangulation of Meaning.” Writing from the perspective of an indigenous Hawaiian educator and researcher, she uses hermeneutics, “the art and science of interpretation,” to challenge the sort of empiricism that characterizes much of Anglo-American approaches to knowledge, research, and education. She uses the example of “knowing what type of *limu*, seaweed, washes on Hāmākua shores during winter swells” to illustrate the epistemological assertions that “place educates, beauty develops our thinking, and time is not simply linear.” With regard to established notions of what constitute “objective” research practices, Mayer insists, “We are not ‘dumbing down’ methodology when we wish to sit and listen — for years.” She questions the academy’s assumptions about proper etiquette for maintaining the anonymity of her dissertation research informants: “It was absolutely vital that people knew who was talking. That matters because in our community, knowledge that endures happens when you know where it came from.” And Meyer challenges the emphasis in current educational policies on standardized tests by insisting that we look at “the larger triangulation of meaning — Body, Mind, Spirit.” “The languaging of Anglo-American intelligence,” she observes, “comes with specific vocabulary, a speedy disposition, and with very prescribed ways of seeing the world.” Meyer’s optimism stems from what she sees as the efforts of indigenous Hawaiian researchers to “articulate a new/ancient consciousness” and to redefine “the things of value with regard to knowledge and how we wish to live out our lives.”

Theresa A. Rosner-Salazar highlights the potential of community-university partnerships in transforming both the academy and the community. Specifically, she focuses on the potential of multicultural service-learning and community-based research to develop a sense of “critical consciousness” among future human service practitioners, while meeting identified community needs. She argues that such instructional and research approaches “are aimed at preparing professionals to meet the needs of a growing multicultural population while promoting social justice and systemic change in educational institutions and communities.”

Examples of how one might incorporate these curricula-based, active-learning and research strategies into specific courses to enhance learning and empower disenfranchised communities are provided. She concludes her essay with recommendations designed to inform the work of others interested in using such instructional approaches to promote cultural competence among students while promoting social justice within diverse communities.

Randolph Haluza-DeLay offers a case study of a community-initiated research project on racism in Thunder Bay, Ontario, a city in which aboriginal peoples make up roughly 12% of the population. His assessment is that the project was successful in that the public release of the research study, which documented racial incidents and racializing social practices in the community, contributed to “effectively promoting social change.” Yet Haluza-DeLay also describes many of the thorny issues involved in such a project, including “practical issues in the research process regarding research questions and methods, the intersection of theory with practical knowledge, research as disguised activism, research criticized as divisive to the community, and research as knowledge production.” He warns that academic research aimed at promoting social justice “will have to be creative in communicating with marginalized community groups that have seen the ivory tower well-gated and academia often serving to reproduce conditions of marginality.”

The next article, by Charles Tolbert, Forrest Deseran, and Troy Blanchard, recounts their efforts, on behalf of the Clinton Justice Department, to conduct research and serve as expert witnesses in litigation (*Hays v. Louisiana*) over congressional redistricting. The case centered on an attempt to create a majority African American electoral district in Louisiana. The authors cite the late federal judge, A. Leon Higginbotham, to explain why they believe that the creation of “majority-minority” electoral districts is fundamental to the promotion of social justice: “In the context of American history and contemporary reality, minority-majority districting is often the only way of fully achieving the pluralist aspirations of American politics and remedying the longstanding exclusion of African Americans from full participation in government.” Their article focuses on their analytical approach and the statistical results of their social demographic research on the fourth congressional district in Louisiana, as well their interactions with the Department of Justice legal team and their experiences in depositions in federal court.

Next, Gwendolyn Mink describes the efforts of a group of feminist social policy scholars to intervene in the national debate about “welfare reform” through lobbying, call-in campaigns, ad placements, the development of teach-in materials, and the drafting of alternative legislation. “Our primary message,” writes Mink, “was that caregiving is work, including when it is performed for one’s own children and other dependents. We worked to bring the caregiving issue to the welfare debate, and so to expose the race- and class-based double standard behind efforts to strip poor mothers of economic security through stringent welfare requirements such as mandatory work outside the home and time limits.” Following Mink’s introduc-

tion, we reproduce three primary documents to illustrate the results of their efforts: (1) the NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund's summary of HR 3113, the late Congresswoman Pasty Mink's attempt to offer "a progressive, feminist legislative intervention" in the debates to reauthorize the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF); (2) excerpts of HR 3113, including its main findings; and (3) a position paper, "No Promotion of Marriage in TANF!," authored by Martha Fineman, Gwendolyn Mink, and Anna Marie Smith, in which they state their opposition to the inclusion of "marriage promotion" language in welfare legislation, "because it violates women's right to shape their own intimate lives, diverts valuable resources, and does nothing to address poverty."

We end this issue with Cathleen Burnett's essay that highlights the "academic profession as vocation" and illustrates how activism can shape and strengthen one's research agenda. Burnett considers multiple roles when conceptualizing the relationship between research and social action, including academic, volunteer, activist, and applied researcher. She uses her own experiences "to disentangle these roles and illustrate how the academic role can integrate activism and research as a response to one's passion." Her extensive involvement with a group dedicated to abolishing the death penalty provides the context within which she describes her shift from volunteer to social activist. Further, she highlights how her own social justice research agenda emerged from her service commitments and activism over time. Burnett then explains how her applied research is informing the ongoing debate over capital punishment through its incorporation in legal briefs and post-conviction appeals. Like a number of other authors in this issue, Burnett highlights tensions resulting from the lack of structural support for activist work within the academy. She concludes by arguing that academic-activists be "intentional about the dynamics between teaching, research, and service" in order to "live meaningfully at the intersection of passion and vocation."