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Commentary

What's Wrong Is Right: A Response to the State of the Discipline

Feminist Scholars in Sociology:^{1,2} Tina Fitzgerald, Alice Fothergill, Kristin Gilmore, Katherine Irwin, Charlotte A. Kunkel, Suzanne Leahy, Joyce M. Nielsen,³ Eve Passerini, Mary E. Virnoche, and Glenda Walden

In the June issue of Sociological Forum, several authors addressed the question, "What's Wrong with Sociology." Answers included increased fragmentation of the discipline, and the lack of an identifiable cumulative core of sociological knowledge. This paper examines many of the claims made by the contributors to the June 1994 Sociological Forum, reframes their arguments, and by placing debates regarding the problems in sociology in a broader perspective, identifies many of the recent advances made by the discipline. Focusing on such notable contributions to the field as feminist and postmodern scholarship, we locate the positive side of multiple perspective research.

KEY WORDS: feminist research; multiple perspectives; fragmentation; cumulative knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

Sociology in the late 20th century is an exciting, dynamic, and challenging discipline. Like many other academic fields, its boundaries are being shifted, extended, and merged with subjects previously thought to be unrelated. In fact, sociological content and boundaries have always been debated. Currently, postmodernists, scholars in race and ethnicity, and queer and feminist theorists, among others, have broadened the debate and expanded our understanding of society.

¹Feminist Scholars in Sociology is a collective of researchers and teachers at the University of Colorado interested in exploring and sharing feminist theory and methodology.

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The June 1994 special issue of *Sociological Forum* entitled "What's Wrong with Sociology?" largely framed contemporary changes in the discipline as negative. Davis captured much of the tone of the issue in his comparison of sociology to "an organism with a weak immune system," which has a "hard time rejecting foreign objects" (1994:188). He elaborated: ". . . we have put up with an appalling amount of bunk (postmodernism, ethnic 'studies,' 'feminist methodology,' 'humanistic sociology,' 'critical theory,' ethnomethodology, 'grounded theory,' and the like) simply because we cannot draw a firm line between what is legitimate academic sociology and what is not" (188).

The reactions of Davis and other scholars are understandable in light of Kuhn's well-known historical analysis of major shifts in a discipline's paradigmatic structure. As Kuhn (1970) described it, those who are most deeply embedded in the logic and rationale of the paradigm are usually the most disconcerted with changes. Therefore, it is predictable rather than paradoxical that the current transitions are experienced within the field as both destructive and constructive.

While much of the June issue focused on the destructive, this response posits that, however uncomfortable, the changes are healthy, constructive, and a sign of growth and development. In other words, what's wrong with sociology is actually what's right. In this response we review some of the concerns raised in the June 1994 issue and briefly consider the contemporary context of those concerns. To support the thesis that what some have framed as detrimental to sociology is actually a strength, we highlight just a few of the contributions made to sociology by some contemporary theorists whose work was often categorically dismissed in the June issue as outside the boundaries of constructive sociological scholarship.

THE JUNE 1994 ISSUE REVISITED

Many contributors to the special issue of *Sociological Forum* portrayed sociology as a discipline in trouble. The critiques referred to disciplinary disintegration, internal fragmentation, indiscriminate inclusivity, a failure to progress like the natural sciences, and a lack of a unified mission and core (Cole, 1994; Collins, 1994; Lipset, 1994; Rule, 1994; Simpson and Simpson, 1994; Stinchcombe, 1994).

The core is difficult to maintain because we study changing phenomena and we focus on social reform over theoretical significance (Cole, 1994). Because we are not a "high consensus and rapid discovery discipline," we cannot make progress like the hard sciences (Collins, 1994:165). Thus, we

are unable to demonstrate a "consensus on sociological wisdom" because "the reach of our discipline exceeds its grasp" (Rule, 1994:241). Others wrote that sociology, in its lack of "genealogies of technology," is "condemned to the endless contention of positions" (Collins, 1994:169). Contributors chastised sociology for its failure to remain objective, scientific, and unbiased. Authors generally implied that subjectivity contributes to sociology's "self destructive" course (Lipset, 1994:212). Fragmentation, pluralistic membership, and democratic values, while sometimes necessary, contribute to the field's inability to identify elites and to advance adequately (Simpson and Simpson, 1994). For Stinchcombe, many of these problems with the elite and the core have left sociology with "a dim future" (1994:280).

Critics implied that the above-mentioned problems contribute to the disappearance of sociology departments, deans' disdain for the discipline, and the discipline's declining credibility, prestige, and influence. In summary, this state of affairs was characterized, alternately, as something inevitable and inherent that must be endured, and as something avoidable that should be fought vigorously.

THE JUNE ISSUE IN CONTEXT

New courses of inquiry, like the emergence of sociology in the late 19th century, are situated within the conditions and forces of contemporary society. It is no coincidence that much emergent theory today is reflexive and multiperspective. It is produced by an era whose boundaries are blurred and shifting as we redefine space, time, and knowledge. Yet code words such as "subjective," "relativistic," and "reactionary" are used to delegitimize new theoretical and methodological orientations. These new orientations wrestle with making sense of contemporary society using current approaches rather than frameworks created in and for another place and time. While certainly we can and should learn from past theories, their reification may blind creative theorizing.

Scholars have explained sociology's resistance to challenging theories by suggesting a masculinist bias (Nicholson, 1986:162; 1990:284), overzealous institutionalized gatekeepers (Foucault, 1984), and a movement of rationalized knowledge from charismatic openness to institutionalized closedness (Weber, 1949:112). Perhaps it is a little of each.

We have long outgrown the notion of value-free research. Feminism and multiculturalism have made their place among all the other political and social forces influencing the direction of sociological inquiry. Concerns previously ignored by white upper middle class women and men have been investigated with fresh eyes as new scholars enter the academy. Because

these scholars have asked different questions in different ways, they have expanded the breadth and depth of understanding of a plethora of social phenomena. In fact, according to traditional criteria of academic excellence, the “better” scholarship is that which is most inclusive—best able to explain most cases. In the next section we consider just a few examples of this type of research.

WHAT'S WRONG IS RIGHT

Our contention is that what some suggest is the downfall of sociology is actually one of its strengths. The benefits to be derived from contributions of marginalized perspectives far outweigh any short-term advantages that may arise from clinging uncritically to traditional explanations of the social world. Feminism, postmodernism, queer theories, and race and ethnic studies offer sociology the tools and the impetus to look critically at the core, to ask meaningful questions, and to obtain valuable insights. This opportunity challenges the discipline to expand and improve its knowledge base by reexamining existing scholarship, questioning assumptions, and creating new theories (Wallace, 1989).

Contributions made in the last decade illustrate the importance and the transformational qualities of marginalized research. By critiquing existing research, marginalized scholarship enhances mainstream scholarship. Fausto-Sterling (1985) challenges the assumptions of biological theories of gender and opens the doors for a social constructionist approach. Fuchs Epstein (1988) critiques the assumptions underlying most gender research, and concludes that the assumption of gender differences predetermines the finding of gender differences. She reveals that causation is proposed where only correlation exists (i.e., gender “causes” differences between groups of women and men). Her analysis demonstrates that social forces affect the finding of “gender difference,” as well as the interpretation of those differences.

These critiques, and others like them, allow for a new generation of theories and epistemologies based in critical understandings of social reality. For example, Judith Butler (1993) expands previous theories of presentation of self by analyzing sexuality and gender as performance structured by social regulations and proscriptions. Her analysis of the “dynamic relation” of sexual practice and gender position provide a backdrop for rethinking identity formation, status ascription, forms of social control, and the voluntarism versus determinism debate. Patricia Hill Collins (1990) introduces the “both/and” conceptual orientation in *Black Feminist Thought* that challenges the traditional dualism of either/or thinking. She suggests

alternative sites of knowledge production located in the experiences of subordinate groups.

These examples are just a minute sample of theoretical frameworks that provide fertile ground for reevaluating past research, formulating new research questions, and developing more exhaustive theories of society. Feminist methodologies have evolved as a result of the critiques of traditional methods to address new research questions. Rienharz (1992) and Nielsen (1990) document the diversity of methods arising in the field to meet the changing face of research. Feminist methods have transformed existing research methodologies by acknowledging, for example, the role of researcher as subjective and objective (Harding, 1986; Oakley, 1981), by placing women at the center (Fonow and Cook, 1991; hooks, 1984; Stanley, 1990), by questioning the power relationship between researcher and subject (Oakley, 1981), and by arguing for the emancipatory qualities of research (Oakley, 1981; Stanley, 1990). Newer methodologies give credence to the everyday experiences of diverse peoples and situate multiple views in the dynamics of the social world.

What is right amid all of this is the recognition that traditional theories and methods are not enough for a holistic understanding of modern society. What is right is the rethinking and often reworking of the old. What is right is the curious, reflective, and critical eye on the old and new—with the timeless goal of building frameworks for social understanding.

CONCLUSION

Many sociologists today are concerned, confused, uncomfortable, and even angry about what they call the dilution, diffusion, and disintegration of sociology. The current state of “crisis” is disconcerting to those who came of sociological age in a time of perceived great certainty. It was a time, perhaps, of greater consensus about “the truth” and sociological “cores.” At the very least there was greater homogeneity in the social origins of those participating in the debate.

While the academy may not be entirely comfortable with the emerging theoretical shifts, fields of study, and new membership, these changes have made possible much new knowledge. The breadth of quality scholarship produced by nontraditional perspectives has forced sociologists to revisit some basic epistemological issues such as (1) foundationalism vs. relativism, (2) the socially constructed and historically specific nature of sociology, and (3) the political underpinnings of knowledge production. Yet beyond the question-raising aspect of marginalized perspectives, it is important to recognize that this scholarship has already added to the substance of social

understandings. Such scholarship has not only rethought the past, but has started to build new foundations for current and future theoretical frameworks.

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