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On the occasion of the American Sociological Association's centennial, The Chronicle asked seven sociologists to discuss what attracted them to the field, what they consider to be the discipline's fortes and failings, and where they'd like to see it go from here.

SOCIOLOGISTS ON SOCIETY

Wishes for the Discipline's Future

By HERBERT J. GANS

When I was a graduate student, in the late 1940s, some of us thought of sociology as the queen of the social sciences. Unlike economics and political science, which each studied basically one part of society, we sociologists investigated everything social: what people do with, for, to, and against each other in intimate and informal groups, formal organizations, communities, nations, and other social bodies. We awarded ourselves royal status because we were sure we could transcend the narrower social sciences.

We were guilty of graduate-student braggadocio, to be sure, but our view contained and still contains a sizable kernel of truth. Sociologists do study everything; there are currently 43 official subfields in the American Sociological Association, and the number continues to rise.

However, sociology is no longer as distinctive as it was -- or as we thought it was -- for by now the other social sciences have borrowed ideas and methods from us, and we from them (though not always wisely). Besides, the sociological research program, like those of all the social sciences, is now decided by the priorities of the grant givers, in government and the foundations primarily, as well as by the ideas and interests of the researchers themselves.

But if I could influence the future of sociological research, here's some of what I would ask for:

- Do more "populist" research. Unlike economics and political science, which have mostly studied elites, sociologists have focused on ordinary people and should continue to do so. At the same time, sociologists should study corporate and public decision makers and their organizations, but with an emphasis on how they and ordinary Americans cope with, struggle with, and affect each other.
- Emphasize ethnography. Sociologists have a unique place in the social-science division of methodological labor. They hang out with and talk to people, employing ethnographic

field research and long interviews. As a result, they get closer to the people they study than other researchers do, making their work more scientific than the sociology produced by impersonal methods like the overly simple, general, and limited-choice questioning by survey researchers and the even more impersonal methods inherent in quantitative analyses. Ethnography is particularly good at supplementing journalistic accounts and for debunking stereotypes and inaccurate conventional wisdom. Consequently, ethnographers' findings are often provocative and better reads than other sociological works.

- Go "backstage." Erving Goffman, who saw society as a stage on which social life is performed, bade us study the backstage to see how social performances are constructed. Remember the scene in *The Wizard of Oz* when Dorothy and her friends go behind the curtain to see how the wizard produced his wizardry? We ought to do more of that. Just think what sociologists could learn backstage at the White House or Microsoft.
- Strengthen public sociology. Sociologists should communicate the insights and findings of their research in clear, nontechnical English, especially when they study topics that the public wants or needs to understand better. We also must undertake more research specifically on the issues and problems that most concern, and vex, America and Americans. But public sociology can take other forms, too, like action research, which can provide findings useful to activists and other concerned citizens. For example, sociologists could find out how the causes that activists pursue go over with the people the activists are trying to mobilize.
- Do more focused comparative research. Sociologists should focus some of their studies of other societies, including those in the developing world, to shed light on our own. We could learn how others overcome common challenges in everyday life; reduce economic, political, and other inequalities; and deal with problems that now escape solution in America.
- Update the epistemological infrastructure. Now that sociologists have helped to popularize the notion of "frames" and "framing," we need to inquire into our own framing -- how and why we organize research and choose concepts and measures in the ways that we do.

At the same time, we need to pay more attention to how intellectual, political, cultural, and other ideologies, explicit and implicit, influence what we study, how we conduct research, and what we learn.

- Finally, I wish all of the social sciences would start thinking about coming together in some way, giving up the unscientific division of labor that we have inherited from the intellectual and bureaucratic past.

Indeed, eventually the social sciences may have to unite or coalesce to defend themselves against the burgeoning genetic and other life sciences. Recall that the sociobiologist E.O. Wilson not so long ago proposed "consilience," his euphemism for the virtual takeover of the social sciences by the life sciences.

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