Special Collection: Sociology's Role in Responding to Inequality.

Sociology’s Role in Responding to Inequality: Introduction to the Special Collection

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Abstract

Inequality has long been a central focus of sociological research, but some argue that sociology as a discipline has actually done little to reduce inequality in society. This special collection asks whether sociology, and the social sciences generally, have more to offer. Two main articles make the case, the first by exploring the potential of sociology to move from framing inequality to examining responses to inequality and the second by laying out six pathways through which social science research can contribute to inequality reduction. These articles will be followed by a series of commentaries.

Keywords
inequality, social change, race and ethnicity, sociology of knowledge

For more than a century, inequality has been a core subject for sociology. And yet economic inequality in the United States is higher today than it has been in decades, and the searing examples of antiblack violence we have witnessed in recent months testify to the depth of persisting racial inequality. Likewise acts of hostility toward immigrants, particularly those of Asian and Latinx origins and those from Muslim countries, are witnessed on a near daily basis, and the nation has recently awakened to its long history of sexual violence, harassment, and discrimination. If inequality is conceived as the overall distribution of a valued good, such as income or education, it is evident that there is too much inequality, it is socially divisive and a drag on our economic productivity (Gamoran 2014). As for inequality in the sense of ignominious group differences, like the black-white wealth gap, no social or economic justification exists for it at all.

What has been sociology’s role in responding to inequality? By one reckoning, not much. Sociology has excelled in aiding our understanding of inequality: how much inequality exists, what its sources are, and what consequences ensue. But sociology as a discipline has contributed far less to reducing inequality, that is, to identifying the specific programs, policies, and practices that must be undertaken to change the course of inequality in the United States and elsewhere.

This special collection in Socius takes account of sociology’s contributions, and its possibilities, in responding to inequality. It begins with two articles. The first, by Thomas A. DiPrete and Brittany N. Fox-Williams, explores sociology’s stance on inequality and considers its potential, as a discipline, to do more than it has in the past. The second, by Andrew Nalani, Hirokazu Yoshikawa, and Prudence L. Carter, provides concrete examples of how sociologists and other social scientists can contribute to reducing inequality. These two main articles will ultimately be accompanied by a series of commentaries.

In confronting sociology with this challenge, we are somewhat late to the party. Today, public discourse on inequality is widespread. President Barack Obama in 2013 declared that income inequality is “the defining challenge of our time.” Numerous recent books expose inequality and its pernicious effects, led by Thomas Piketty’s (2013) best-seller Capital in the 21st Century. In 2014, Michael Brown’s killing in Ferguson, Missouri, was a catalyst for heightened attention to antiblack racial violence in the age of social media. Among the sectors responding to this environment was philanthropy, perhaps most visibly the Ford Foundation, which in 2015 shifted the entire focus of its grantmaking to reducing inequality (Daniels 2015). Although research has

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little place in Ford’s inequality portfolio, as most of its grants support advocacy and service organizations that respond directly to inequality, other funders, such as the Russell Sage Foundation, have long focused on understanding and addressing social inequality. Since 2014, the William T. Grant Foundation has supported social science research on programs, policies, and practices to reduce inequality in youth outcomes. What contributions can research in sociology and other disciplines make to this agenda? That question is the focus of this special collection.

Although contributions from sociology to reducing inequality are rare, we are far from the first to call for sociologists to play a greater role in advancing social justice. Three recent presidents of the American Sociological Association (ASA) made this issue central to their agendas. In calling for public sociology, Michael Burawoy (2005) urged sociologists to bring their scientific knowledge into the public sphere. Although Burawoy distinguished between “public” sociology, directed toward enlightening the public about social issues, and “policy” sociology, aimed at using sociological insights to identify policy directions, both are instances of sociologists reaching audiences outside the academy. Importantly, he did not denigrate the contributions of “professional” sociology, that is, the sort of academic investigations that end up in scholarly journals. On the contrary, he insisted that professional sociology played an essential role in development of a meaningful public sociology by furnishing the knowledge base upon which public sociology would stand. Likewise, in describing sociology’s role in envisioning real utopias, Erik Olin Wright (2012) called on sociologists to reject an assumption that the world we have is the world we must have and hence to embrace the notion that the inequality we confront today is not inevitable but is responsive to policies that can be imagined and rigorously investigated in sociological research. Wright encompassed his search for real utopias in what he termed “emancipatory social science,” which “seeks to generate scientific knowledge relevant to the collective project of challenging various forms of human oppression” (p. 10).

Most recently, Mary Romero (2020) called for a sociology that centers social justice, reversing the long-standing marginalization of scholars engaged in applied research whose primary aim is to meet social problems head on. “Sociological data is wasted,” she argued, “if our studies fail to affect public understanding of social issues or if research is not applied to improving social conditions” (p. 25). A crucial facet of Romero’s stance is that the empiricist tradition of objectivity in social science has tended to denigrate sociologists from the communities that are often the targets of research. By foregrounding social justice within the sociology of inequality, the discipline can also elevate the work of women and persons of color whose contributions are too often unrecognized.

But the notion that the concepts and tools of sociology should be applied not just to understand inequality but to reduce it has far deeper roots than the agendas of twenty-first-century ASA presidents. For W.E.B. Du Bois, founder of the first scientific school of sociology at Atlanta University in the early 1900s, applying sociology to overturn inequality was a central feature of the young discipline (Itzigsohn and Brown 2020; Morris 2015). As Morris (2015) explained, “his mission entailed understanding the sociological and political foundations enabling the oppressed to dismantle racial inequality” (p. 154). A key difference between Du Bois’s approach and that of the rival Chicago school of sociology, led by Robert Park, was that whereas Du Bois advocated using scientific evidence to advance social change, Park encouraged his students and colleagues to take a more neutral stance, aiming to describe the social world but not necessarily to change it. Quoting Lewis Coser’s (1971) characterization of the Chicago school, Morris recounted the competing visions for sociology at the dawn of the twentieth century:

Even before the turn of the twentieth century, Du Bois had become a public intellectual who developed sociology relevant to social change and utilized it in his efforts to emancipate the oppressed. In doing so, Du Bois broke radically from those social scientists who promoted their investigations as pure objective scholarship. This was true for the Chicago school, whose scholars followed Park’s advice that “their role . . . was to be that of the calm, detached scientist who investigates race relations with the same objectivity and detachment with which the zoologist dissects the potato bug.” Du Bois inhabited a different world from white social scientists; he was often the victim of racism, and he abhorred the pain it inflicted on him personally and on his race. . . . This standpoint led Du Bois to pioneer public sociology, becoming the discipline’s first preeminent public scholar long before such a role was lucrative and celebrated. (pp. 133–34)

Were it not for the racism of the U.S. scientific enterprise, including its university leaders and funders, which ultimately stifled Du Bois and came to regard Park as a founder of scientific sociology in the United States, sociologists of the twentieth century might have pursued a different course with respect to their stance on using sociological research to bring about social change. Or at least, had the Du Bois–Park rivalry been allowed to flourish on equal terms, there might have been two well-recognized paths for sociologists to pursue with their research on racial and economic inequality. Instead, Park’s “detached” approach prevailed, and nearly a century would pass before twenty-first-century ASA presidents would call on sociologists to adopt a more public-oriented, activist agenda.

Romero (2020) further established that Du Bois was not the only early sociologist who might have steered the discipline toward confronting the social problems of the day. Following Deegan (1988), Romero made the case that
“settlement sociology” pioneered by Jane Addams advanced an applied, social justice–oriented approach to sociological research. Yet the bureaucratic leadership of sociology was more interested in theorizing the problems of the real world than in solving them, and just as in the case of Du Bois, research focused on identifying specific pathways to advance social justice was disrespected.

In their contribution to this special collection, DiPrete and Fox-Williams raise and respond to questions at the heart of this debate. They distinguish between “frame-shifting” research, which aims to provide a clear depiction of how social systems work and to spark interest in change, and “rational reconstruction” research, a term taken from James Coleman’s (1993) ASA presidential address that called for sociological research to develop and test alternative social structures to “optimize” outcomes. The history of twentieth-century research in sociology was largely of the frame-shifting variety, and DiPrete and Fox-Williams note that little evidence supports the notion that frame-shifting research has been consequential for social change. A major question resulting from their review is whether sociological research that focuses on reducing inequality is feasible and has greater potential to drive action. They find hints of an affirmative answer in several counter-examples to the dominant narrative of understanding rather than reducing inequality.

Answering the question of feasibility is the driving purpose of the contribution to the special collection from Nalani, Yoshikawa, and Carter. Their article focuses on the specific role of research, by sociologists and other social scientists, to contribute to inequality reduction. If research is to make a difference, how? In response, the authors identify six pathways through which research may contribute to large-scale social change, and they illustrate these pathways with specific examples drawn from recent and ongoing research. They stress that to identify these pathways, one must draw from multiple disciplines, and they draw implications from their findings for the practice of research and for the training of researchers.

Taken together, the two articles challenge social scientists generally, and sociology as a discipline, to rethink their role in social change. The authors’ purpose is not to abandon the objectivity of social science, nor to claim that social science should supplant the democratic political process in making decisions about how to organize society and distribute resources. Rather, they respond to a long-standing debate about whether social science can be useful in demonstrating not just why things are as they are, but how things might be if we made different decisions. Whether to make those decisions will still be a matter of politics and values, but the decisions might turn out better if they were more richly informed by social science research.

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Adam Gamoran is president of the William T. Grant Foundation, a charitable organization that supports research to improve the lives of young people, focusing on reducing inequality in youth outcomes and improving the use of research evidence in decisions that affect young people. His own research addresses educational inequality and school reform.