

# Professional Socialization for What?

by David Yamane, University of Wisconsin—Madison

As sociologists' attention turns to our upcoming annual meetings, I knew the importance of "professional socialization" of/for students would inevitably be stressed (cf. "Professional Socialization and ASA Membership," *Footnotes*, March 1993). From the first time I heard of "professional socialization" while an undergraduate fellow of the ASA's MOST program in 1990, I have been ill-at-ease with the concept. It is only now, as a graduate fellow of the ASA's MFP at UW-Madison, that the cause of my disease is becoming increasingly evident to me. Events here have helped to clarify the issue for me.

This semester, my fellow graduate students have been busy planning an assortment of events to facilitate our conversion to "the profession." The Editor of the *ASR* was tapped to talk about "getting published"; a faculty panel was convened to discuss participation in professional conferences; most recently, a department-wide conference was held during which students had the opportunity to present their own research, ASA meeting-style. Such activities are all an enactment of and contribution to "professional socialization."

What troubles me about these "professional development" workshops and exercises--and about "professional socialization" generally--is how narrowly the "profession" to which we are socialized is defined: it is wholly limited to the creation of knowledge through research and the dissemination of that knowledge to other professionals through journals and conferences. This restricted view of the role of the scholar is not limited to sociology. As Ben-David (1972) notes, all academic professionalism is institutionalized around the pursuit of research and the training of professional researchers.

Clearly, this narrow definition does not exhaust the possible roles sociologists can play, in and out of the academy. It is nonetheless the case that this constricted conception of sociology as a profession, for which I and my cohorts are being socialized, is colonizing a coexisting but devalued conception of sociology as a vocation or calling, for which I and many cohorts chose to study sociology. While one cannot survive without the other, the balance between the two has shifted too far in the direction of narrow professionalism, and negative outcomes are the result.

## Sociological Professionalism And Its Consequences

There is no doubt that the professionalization of academic work has an enormous influence on aspiring and practicing sociologists. Professionalized sociology shifts the bulk of concern of practitioners toward that which brings *prestige and status*. Reece McGee (1992:1), chairman of the sociology department at Purdue, is very open about this when he writes, "Prestige, both personal and institutional, is, of course, the great currency of the academic profession today. ... We--both personally and departmentally--live and die by professional prestige. Not only do we perceive our rewards and opportunities being structured by its possession or lack, we evaluate self-worth in the same way." Needless to say, prestige and status are allocated according to the *research* one does and the resultant *publications* in professional journals.

Given this situation, professional sociology's attention is increasingly turned inward and conversations are privatized, housed within the walls of academic institutions and directed toward other professionals. A major consequence of this sort of sociological professionalism is alienation of sociologists from a variety of potential audiences, notably *undergraduate students* and the *general public*. This alienation is reproduced through professional socialization, as presently defined.

As an undergraduate at UC-Berkeley, it was obvious to me that for most faculty in the sociology department teaching undergraduates was a tertiary activity, at best. Pedagogy was virtually unheard of. It was only when I crossed the line from undergrad to graduate student (read: "future professional") that I came to see why. In today's academy, research is valued over teaching, and this value is transmitted to sociologists-qua-apprentices from sociologists-qua-masters via professional socialization.

Students are taught implicitly and at times explicitly to devalue teaching. Case in point: a fellow student was considering taking a seminar on "Teaching Sociology" which is offered every couple of years and decided to consult with her advisor. When she sought this professor's input on taking the course, his response was: "I'd prefer you take a real seminar." This is a remarkable attitude to take in a field in which the *vast majority* of practitioners will work in college and university settings, and in which a *minuscule minority* will be sufficiently successful in selling their research services on the open market to consistently buy off their teaching time (Halliday, 1992:20).

Remarkable though it may be, it is nonetheless the case that the advancement of the cultural purity of the discipline results in this alienation from its undergraduate student constituency (Baker and Rau, 1990:172). That the attitude of the individual professor above is endemic in the profession is reflected in Klug's (1991) finding that only 10% of graduate departments of sociology require a course or seminar on teaching as part of its training program. Another 37% of departments mention an optional "specific course, program, or orientation session designed to train students in teaching, whether offered by the department or another unit with the university" (Klug 1991:435). That leaves over half (53%) of sociology departments with no explicit commitment to training its graduates to teach, though this is something most sociologists will have to do as professors.

The neglect of undergraduates is not offset by commitment to other extra-professional audiences. Professional sociologists are no less alienated from the general public than from students. In his ASA Presidential Address, Herbert Gans (1989:12) made an appeal to his professional colleagues to address the 240-plus million non-sociologists in America: "The public, general and educated, cannot understand or even see the justification for much of what we produce, since in too many cases our work appears to have no benefit, direct or indirect, for people's understanding of society or for their lives."

Of course, this is a generalization, but it is one which is supported by many indicators. For example, I suspect most Americans probably could not name a single sociologist. The fact that *Footnotes* has a column listing "Sociologists In The News" suggests how limited such activity is. Since

*The Lonely Crowd* in the 1950s, among works by sociologists, only *Habits of the Heart* has become a national best-seller. Most telling for me, however, is an individual case: that of Paul Starr. Shortly after becoming the first and still only sociologist to win the Pulitzer Prize for general non-fiction, Starr was denied tenure at Harvard (Jacoby, 1987). Though outsiders will never know exactly what the grounds of that denial were, in a *New York Times* article of 21 April 1985 on the Starr case, the sociology department chair at Harvard was quoted as saying: "If I want to be a free-lance journalist then I should quit Harvard and go be a free-lance journalist." This is indicative of the low regard in which "popularizers" are held in the profession.

Given Starr's experience, his views on the alienation of professional sociologists from the public are not all that surprising. Starr (1988:7-8) has criticized "the effort by some to make disciplinary involvement the final test of value of a sociologist's work and, in particular, to drive out the more publicly involved from the field because they are not really sociologists. But," Starr continues, "if to build a discipline you must create a desert, that will be no victory." No victory, indeed.

## Sociology As A Calling

In contrast to the narrow professionalism which seems to be the fate of those currently socialized into the discipline, I would like to forward the notion that sociology can and should be seen as a *calling*.

First off, we should note that historically the German concept *Beruf* meant "calling" or "vocation." By the 20th century, with the rise of an industrially organized economy, this concept had taken on the distinctively modern meaning "profession." In contemporary German, the concept *Berufung* has taken over this older meaning of *Beruf* which I want to invoke here.<sup>1</sup>

So, what is a calling? According to Robert Bellah and his colleagues (1985:66), "In the strongest sense of a 'calling,' work constitutes a practical ideal of activity and character that makes a person's work morally inseparable from his or her life.... The calling is a crucial link between the individual and the public world." "Morally inseparable" in this context emphatically does not mean that one's life's goals should be subordinated by one's life's work, but that one's life's work becomes part and parcel of fulfilling one's life's goals.

It should be obvious that in this conception, one's life's goals are not formed as a lone individual, but in and through a community which is a "cosmos of callings" (Bellah, et al., 1985:298). Ideally, the university should approximate this type of community, and provide a model for all of society.

Those called to sociology are, in Janowitz's (1983:xxi) words, driven "by a sense of moral responsibility for the collective well-being"--not the collective well-being of *sociology*, but the collective well-being of *society*. This purpose can only be realized once our attention is given to the alternative audiences noted above: students and the general public. The calling of sociology involves *responsibility to all* of its various audiences--one of which happens to be other professional sociologists, but only one.

As we can see from the its Latin root - *spondere* (to promise)--the responsibility of sociology is inextricably intertwined

with a *promise*. None has spoken more persuasively about that promise than C. Wright Mills. In the opening chapter of his classic treatise, Mills (1959:7) lays out what he calls "The Promise" of The Sociological Imagination: "it is by means of the sociological imagination that [people] now hope to grasp what is going on in the world, and to understand what is happening in themselves as minute points of the intersections of biography and history within society." In laying out *The Promise*, Mills (1959:4-5) takes great care to note that the sociological imagination is a "quality of mind," not restricted to sociologists, nor even to scholars. It should be carried forth to a variety of publics. This, to me, is the calling of sociology.

For purposes of institutional survival, our discipline needs to be professionalized, and graduate students must therefore be professionally socialized. But socialization to the narrow conception of the sociological profession discussed above makes me extremely uncomfortable. The creation and dissemination of knowledge through research is but a part of what we as sociologists should be about. And when that part is mistaken for the whole, the calling of sociology is stillborn (Halliday, 1992:32).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Wolfgang Streeck raised this possible distinction with me in a personal conversation but has not endorsed the usage herein. Thus, he deserves any credit which the distinction merits; however, any liabilities should be attributed to my own misuse. Harvey Goldman (1988) has argued that both Max Weber and his contemporary Thomas Mann attempted to *reappropriate* and renew the debased meaning of *Beruf* in their own time. This is most evident in Weber's late major lectures on "Scholarship as a Vocation" (*Wissenschaft als Beruf*) and "Politics as a Vocation" (*Politik als Beruf*).

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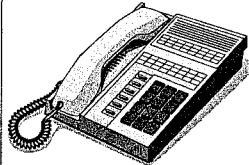
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