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Teaching Sociological Practice: Starting With Something Special

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A scholar-practitioner might want to decide what concept, value, or framework in sociological practice is particularly important for students to know at the very beginning of a course. This "special emphasis" approach is detailed using four examples: cultural competence *in a course on mediation skills;* humanism *in courses or presentations on social theory, ethics, social planning, or intervention;* participatory action research *in a social science research course; and* empowerment *in intervention, community, social planning, or social policy courses. Clinical and applied sociologists are invited to consider an "up front and personal" approach in at least some of their courses and to choose and explicitly emphasize, in their own special way, an important value, concept, or perspective at the beginning of a course.*

KEY WORDS: sociological practice; clinical sociology; cultural competence; humanism; participatory action research; collaborative research; empowerment.

Clinical and applied sociologists teaching in sociology programs at the university level may be involved in a concentration or a program in sociological practice or they may teach the department's one or two courses in this area. Advice is available for those putting in place or developing concentrations or programs (e.g., Commission on Applied and Clinical Sociology 2000a,b; Fritz 2001a). We also have models for those teaching specific courses such as sociological practice (Sherohman 2001), social service internships (Disch 2001), and methods for practitioners (Darling 2001; Trier 2001). We have not spent much time, however, discussing how a clinical or applied sociologist might approach her or his individual courses.

I would like to suggest that a scholar-practitioner might want to decide what concept, value, or framework in sociological practice is particularly

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important for students to know as they begin a course—what is crucial to really understanding course materials from a practitioner's perspective. I would like to propose that not only should these concepts, values, or frameworks be included as topics in the courses (practice courses as well as others) but that it might be useful to start a course with such a special emphasis. This idea came to me one day when I noticed that some of my favorite concepts, values, and ideas seemed to have been creeping to the beginning of my courses . . . refusing any longer to be buried in lesson 7 or 12. I begin here with some program considerations and then discuss some of my personal choices.

PROGRAM CONSIDERATIONS

An article in *The Clinical Sociology Resource Book* (Fritz 2001a, pp. 10–18) outlines what is needed for the successful development of a practice program. The guidelines begin with a list of general considerations. I repeat these considerations here:

1. The program should match the basic values of the field. This means, for instance that the content should be humanistic and multidisciplinary. There should be a basic concern with improving the human condition.
2. The program should not be purely utilitarian. It should have strong theoretical base in sociology and the other social sciences. This does not mean, however, that a traditional sociology program becomes a practice program by adding a few practice courses.
3. The program should be developed in light of any existing program standards.
4. Faculty members should identify the key strategic issues and problems that are vital to the "survival, success and growth" of the program or concentration over the next three years. (Cacioppe 1998, pp. 44–45)

The Commission on Applied and Clinical Sociology (2000a,b) provides standards for sociological practice programs at the undergraduate and graduate levels. The following standards[2] are included in the section on learning objectives:

- (Programs in sociological practice) shall establish a learning environment for the . . . student that . . . fosters a professional identity that is demonstrated through leadership, ability to supervise, and a client-centered focus; infuses professional ethics that guide sociologists in their practice throughout the curriculum and learning experiences; prepares students to practice with diverse populations and in diverse settings; (and) prepares students to practice with an awareness of limitations created by social and contextual factors. (Section 3.0)
- Theory and methods together provide the necessary direction for addressing applied or clinical sociology issues. (Section 3.1)
- The Program (in sociological practice) shall implement a mechanism to insure that the students who complete their practice experience will be able to . . . identify personal value orientations and perceptions about individuals and groups, and issues that applied and clinical sociologists bring to the work environment. (Section 3.4.5)

[2]There is a slight difference in the wording of the standards for the graduate and undergraduate programs. These quotes come from the standards developed for graduate programs.

While these documents were intended to be guides for program development and assessment, they also are a helpful start for professors. Parts of these documents remind scholar-practitioners that they need to "pay attention" to the basic values of the field. This article, "Teaching Sociological Practice: Starting with Something Special," goes beyond the idea of just paying attention to basic values and encourages professors to act in a bold way.

PERSONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Adopting a "special emphasis approach" to teaching is a bold way of beginning a course with what the professor thinks is important. It allows extra time to see that a major point (perhaps THE major point) does not get lost somewhere in the course coverage. Different courses may require different emphases and the emphasis may change over a period of time. The emphasis selected may be the result of a number of factors such as the background of the students, the problems of the times, the awakening of the teacher, or questions from students. The best way to explain all of this may simply be to walk through some examples.

Cultural Competence

I teach a course on mediation. While I put students through the usual (and some not-so-usual) mediation exercises, I was often bothered by the homogeneity and limited experience of students enrolled in some of the mediation or training courses. A class or training group, for instance, might have many with the same major area of study, from a similar age group, with the same racial or socioeconomic background, and from the same area of the country. There may be no students from minority groups and few having had a range of cultural experiences. Mediation requires that the mediator make parties comfortable even when they all may come from very different backgrounds. For me, it is most important that students and trainees embrace the idea of cultural competence.

Cultural competency is an ongoing process as well as a goal toward which systems, agencies, and/or individuals "must continually aspire" (Rorie *et al.* 1996, p. 93). Cultural competency refers to a set of attitudes, behaviors, policies, and procedures that enable a system, agency, and/or individual to function effectively with culturally diverse individuals and communities (Chung 1992; Lecca *et al.* 1998, p. 4; Rorie *et al.* 1996, p. 93; Siegel *et al.* 2000, p. 92).

The components of cultural competency (Fritz 2002) are cultural assessment (a periodic assessment of one's own individual or agency cultural

background and how it may affect practice); cultural sensitivity (appreciation of other cultures and subcultures); cultural knowledge (education about the variety of cultures and subcultures); cultural skills (methods that are appropriate to use with particular cultures and subcultures); cultural encounters (having direct interaction with people from other cultures and subcultures), and advocacy (taking action in some way toward any kind of oppression). Some discussions of cultural competency do not include the assessment or advocacy components, but I think it is appropriate for scholar-practitioners to include these items.

The concept cultural competence goes beyond the usual course coverage of race, ethnicity, gender, age, physical or mental challenges, or social class. The idea of cultural competence can be included in courses emphasizing these topics but also in a range of sociological practice courses.

I start courses in mediation (and training workshops) by introducing participants to the idea of cultural competence. I ask students to first write about their own cultural background. The focus should be on recalling and assessing the experiences they had growing up as well as in recent years. Then each student is to pick a new experience. Some students will attend meetings with those having a different cultural background while others will have service-learning[3] experiences with new groups. Each student will discuss her or his impressions of the event or activity with someone who has attended the same event and later with one or more people who did not attend the event or activity. To complete this assignment, the student writes about her/his experiences and discusses at least part of the experience in class.

This assignment introduces a range of experiences in the classroom. While I don't think students have changed their views by taking part in short assignments or discussing the experiences of others, the experiences help to expand the base of our class discussions and give a reality-base to mediations that involve role-playing. By introducing the concept of cultural competency at the beginning of the course, it is a major, visible thread that runs the length of the course. Everyone leaves the course knowing that I think that it is very important to strive for cultural competency.

Humanism

I was one of three faculty members who gave presentations to an international group of PhD candidates in sociology. The 19 students had been

[3]Service learning combines an organized activity that meets community needs with academic coursework. Service learning "fosters civic responsibility and enhances student learning by integrating classroom theory with practice" (Fritz 2001b). Unlike a practicum or internship, however, "the experiential activity in a service learning course is not necessarily skill-based with the context of professional education" (Bringle and Hatcher 1996).

selected (based on a description of their dissertation projects, academic records, and references) to attend a 1-week workshop focusing on social theory and the improvement of their dissertation projects.

The first faculty presentation was from Piotr Sztompka, a well-known Polish sociologist, whose specialization is theory. Professor Sztompka chose to begin his presentation with a short list of what he thought should be included in a sociology program. I decided this was an excellent way to begin a faculty presentation and so, later in the week, I too began my lecture on theory and sociological practice by discussing what I thought was important. I talked about humanism.

I had reviewed social theory materials before beginning the workshop as we would be dealing with theoretical approaches used all over the world. I also had reviewed all that the students had written and found explicit or implicit references to humanism frequently were missing. I wanted to show how humanism is important in sociological practice and how theoretical work could be reviewed using a humanist framework.

Humanism is "an ethical, scientific and philosophical outlook" that is said to have "changed the world" (Kurtz 2000, p. 7). The emphasis in humanism is on individual choice of "values and meanings . . . within a social and cultural context" (Glass 1972, p. 9) and it has provided a framework for universal human rights (Kurtz 2000, p. 7). According to John F. Glass (1972, p. 9):

> The main task of humanistic sociology . . . would be to ask which institutions and social arrangements, supported by which values and norms, promote the capacity and ability of groups and individuals to make free and responsible choices in light of their needs to grow, to explore new possibilities, and to do more than simply survive.

A humanistic approach to teaching sociological practice, according to Glass (personal communication, December 14, 2001), aims at "empowering people" as well as "enhancing human energy potential and creativity in social systems." This approach would emphasize such areas as "experiential learning, self knowledge, cultural (considerations), interdisciplinary sensitivities, participant observation (and) social analysis."

Humanism, as an identified approach, seems to have almost disappeared from the texts that provide an overview of the field of sociology and from the journals. The exceptions to this statement include the journal *Humanity and Society* (the journal of the Association for Humanist Sociology), a forthcoming special issue of *The American Sociologist* (Nichols 2002), and the Association's cosponsored teaching resource book on humanist sociology (Goodwin *et al.* 2000). Also, clinical sociologists connected to the Sociological Practice Association always have written that they use a humanistic approach when defining the field but the attention seems to have ended at that point.

In the past we counted on Alfred McClung Lee (e.g., 1973) and John Glass (e.g., Glass and Staude 1972) to keep us focused on the humanistic approach, but there have been few that have followed them. It may be time for our social theory courses, introductory sociology textbooks, and the variety of practice texts to emphasize humanism. I have found it useful to do so particularly when beginning courses or presentations on social theory, ethics, human rights, or intervention.

Humanism, as discussed here, is not an anthropocentric (human-centered) view that focuses solely on the human condition in comparison to a biocentric approach, which "extends moral consideration to all living things" (Weston 2001, p. 367), or an ecocentric approach, which focuses on whole natural systems (including all animals and nonliving elements such as soils and rivers). For clinical and applied sociologists, it is not a matter of choosing among these approaches. Humanism involves creating conditions to increase the "capacity and ability" (Glass 1972, p. 9) of all people to make responsible choices including choices about the living and nonliving in our environment. The humanism espoused here can be part of a biocentric or ecocentric approach.

Participatory Action Research

I teach a course called Social Science Research that introduces graduate students to the range of qualitative methods and selected quantitative research methods. It never seemed to matter which of the research methods was covered first but, gradually, I have seen the value of starting the discussion of methods by talking about participatory action research.

Participatory action research (Fals Borda and Roshman 1991; National Community Foresty Center, National Forest Region 2001) involves both action research (the systematic collection and analysis of information to assess and possibly change a situation) and community participation. The community identifies the research questions, carries out research activities, analyzes the information, and decides on how the results will be disseminated. It is particularly important to know if the community finds the research to be useful. A trained researcher can be part of this process but is not the prime mover in each stage of the research. If the researcher is dominant at some point in the research experience, the research may be characterized as collaborative rather than participatory.

The discussion of participatory research really turns on its head the approach to research that many of us learned as far back as elementary school. That approach to science valued hypotheses for testing, quantitative methods, and experiments. The researcher was the dominant, deciding force who controlled the research. It is true that qualitative research

methods— with the use of research questions rather than hypotheses, the value on meaning rather than quantifying, and the idea of entering the research cycle at different times—called into question much of our original approach to scientific research. While qualitative methods raised questions, participatory research really is the wake-up call.

Once the students understand the power of the participatory approach, each method covered in the course can be examined in terms of how it could be used in a participatory or collaborative way.

Empowerment

Over 20 years ago, James Laue, a clinical sociologist, and Gerald Cormick wrote an excellent piece dealing with empowerment. Laue and Cormick (1978, pp. 206, 221, 210) proposed a set of ethical principles for community intervention and thought that justice, freedom, and proportional empowerment were the basic values for their principles. Proportional empowerment, the intervenor's contributions to structural changes, was defined as follows:

> It refers to a condition in which all groups have developed their latent power to the point where they can advocate their own needs and rights, where they are capable of protecting their boundaries from wanton violation by others, where they are capable of negotiating their way with other empowered groups on the sure footing of respect rather than charity.

Laue and Cormick (1978, p. 221) thought that it was the intervenor's responsibility "to promote the ability of the weaker parties to make their own decisions" by "helping them obtain the necessary information and skills to implement power." As the authors saw it:

> The intervenor should assess the relative level of information, negotiating skills, and analytical ability of the parties and, if there is a considerable differential, help even the odds through training or other forms of advocacy.

The intervenor's role envisioned here is an active one. The intervenor is expected to be very familiar with the dynamics of power and the possibly oppressive situation at hand (e.g., sexism or racism), and the intervenor's actions should contribute to the empowerment of the less powerful. While Laue and Cormick were discussing the role of the intervenor in community disputes, their points are appropriate for many types of interventions.

Beginning any kind of intervention course or a course in community, social planning, or social policy with an examination of the concept of empowerment sets the tone for the course. All intervention strategies and social

policies that are covered will then be examined from the vantage point of empowerment.

CONCLUSION

Whether clinical or applied sociologists are teaching practice or non-practice courses, they may find it very worthwhile to move what they care about most to the beginning of a course. Here I have made a case for focusing on cultural competency, humanism, participatory action research, and empowerment. I invite other clinical and applied sociologists to also consider an "up front and personal" approach in at least some of their courses and to choose and explicitly emphasize, in their own special way, an important value, concept, or perspective at the beginning of a course.

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