

Presidential Address, delivered by JoAnn Miller at the Society for the Study of Social Problems Annual Meeting. August 14, 2010

Notes: Robert Perrucci generously commented on an earlier draft. This is the spoken version and a set of slides accompany it. The published version will be documented with social science and humanities references. Rather than number of library holdings, a book's percentile ranking in library holdings, based on its Library of Congress classification scheme, is analyzed.

[SLIDE 1]

Introduction

The Society for the Study of Social Problems is *not* a “professional association” per se. That is, the primary purpose or mission is not to advance people's careers within or outside the academy. We are different. SSSP's purpose is to facilitate, communicate, and promote the work that is done by those who use their scholarship to pursue social justice locally, nationally, and in the wider world.

[SLIDE 2]

My intent today is to plait related three strands of inquiry. I identify and summarize the key features of social activist and social advocacy scholarship that we all recognize as social justice work. Then, based on those features, I argue

that critical community engagement work is a type of social justice work – a type of social advocacy work -- that SSSP should promote.

To examine some of the best work, I will visit what we have honored, since 1964, with the C. Wright Mills award. Some of the award winners are exemplars of critical community engagement scholarship.

[SLIDE 3]

Before turning to our own work, I want to acknowledge that organizations, such as Project South and the Innocence Project, commit all their work effort to social justice. Further, I recognize the importance of what researchers do outside the social sciences. For example, natural disasters and greed-made disasters need responses – and better yet, preventive practices -- that depend on the expertise of scholars and practitioners from every imaginable field of work. As do some of the most persistent social problems, such as war, inadequate food, and unclean water. The social sciences cannot claim exclusive ownership of social justice work.

[SLIDE 4]

At Purdue, my home university, Gabisa Ejeta is an Agronomist and the 2009 World Food Prize winner. His research develops sorghum that is resistant to a specific weed that kills the grain. He does this work because he is deeply

committed to working on solutions for one of the world's most basic social problems, i.e., starvation.

[SLIDE 5]

He calls his works “Purpose-Driven Science.” His mission is to reduce hunger, especially in his native Ethiopia and other African nations, without making nations dependent on the United States to produce seeds. With Ejeta's approval, I use his terminology, “Purpose Driven,” throughout this talk today.

PART I: Forms of Social Justice Work

Activist Work

So, what do we, as members or friends of SSSP, typically do for work? We tend to engage in social activist work and social advocacy work.

Social problems persist, regardless of knowledge and social institutional practices that are designed to amend them.

[SLIDE 6]

We may disagree strongly on what explains this persistence. Nonetheless we recognize the urgent need to “do something” when a law, or a policy, or an event

harshly spotlights the problem. Thus, we organize, and we gather to protest, to demonstrate commitment to changing the problem.

[SLIDE 7]

Arizona Senate Bill 1070 provoked deep concern and criticism for its inevitable racial and ethnic profiling. Protests and demonstrations around the country were planned and executed **very** quickly. Activist groups discussed strategies to maintain commitments to oppose all legislation that discriminates against Latino, African American, and new immigrant populations. Of course, this is a battle that has only begun.

[SLIDE 8]

Successful and sustained social movements, those that respond to global problems, or to the problems caused by globalization, and rights movements within the United States represent a substantial portion of social activist work.

[SLIDE 9]

Social Movements from Within: Advocacy Work

Some social justice endeavors approach problems by working within and across organizations. The purpose of this type of work – social advocacy work -- is to bring about deep change within organizations or social institutions.

[SLIDE 10]

Advocacy research often depends on private foundations that are committed to improving conditions, such as employment or health conditions, which affect millions upon millions of people in the United States, and around the world.

The Sloan Foundation, for example, recently funded a study of a labor-management partnership -- in a unionized, continuous-operations plant. Researchers focused on how shift work affects employees and their families; and, they sought to develop practices to give workers greater voice in formulating shift-work policies.

[SLIDE 11]

A team of interdisciplinary researchers, from two campuses, collected survey data from managers, workers, and their families; and they made direct observations of workers and held informal conversations with them and their managers over a four-year period of time. (Almost all the plant employees are men.)

[SLIDE 12]

Researchers unexpectedly found greater job satisfaction among night shift workers. Compared to day workers, night workers felt they had greater control over their work time, and more support from their supervisors.

The research team also photographed one method that shift workers use to virtually bring their families *to the plant*. They titled the practice

[SLIDE 13]

“Bring Your Children to Work Day: Blue Collar Style.” Workers affixed photos of their children and their spouses or partners in their toolboxes.

This study is anything but discipline-focused, or dispassionate social science. The Principal Investigator said “[we] are working as embedded researcher[s]. When we meet with labor-management groups to discuss change; and there is resistance or disagreement ... we are not detached observers ... we are part of the process and [we are] implicated in the dynamics of the process.”

[SLIDE 14]

A Career of Work Dedicated to one Important Issue

Michael Radelet is a scholar whose career of work is focused on one issue, i.e., the abolition of capital punishment in the United States.

He was among the first to document empirically that victim race, rather than defendant race, is the strongest non-legal predictor of the death sentence. His work on capital punishment began almost by accident. Radelet was trained as a medical sociologist, in graduate school at Purdue; and through a post-doctoral fellowship at the University of Wisconsin Medical School. When he took his first academic job, he was invited to analyze death penalty data. In recent correspondence he explained his specialization to me this way: “Medical sociologists are known for their efforts to reduce mortality from such causes as heart disease or stroke. [I] have also used [my] training in medical sociology as a foundation for attempting to reduce deaths – deaths caused by electric chairs, gas chambers, and lethal injections.”

[SLIDE 15]

Radelet has testified in 75 death penalty trials; and, before U.S. House and Senate committees. Almost unheard of for a conventional academician, but not unusual for a social justice scholar, he has connected closely with the subjects of

his research over the decades. More than 50 executed persons invited him for their “last visits.”

[SLIDE 16]

Most of us who depend on the academy for a paycheck must produce journal articles and books. Radelet is well known for his scholarship of social justice. He has authored six books and numerous law review and social science articles, always making the case for the abolition of capital punishment.

Characteristics of Social Justice Work

I chose these examples of activist and advocacy work to illustrate the features of social justice work and social justice workers.

[SLIDE 15]

Persistent social problems within the United States or in the wider world motivate social justice workers to understand the major challenges. But we do not stop there. We work to communicate with our *varied* publics and audiences, including the subjects of our research. We talk about what needs to be done, or what needs to change. We explain how social problems are defined, and why some persist across centuries. Members of SSSP have done social justice work

for 60 years. Yet, this form of work is the essence of the recently rediscovered “public sociology.”

[SLIDE 18]

Social justice work is purpose driven scholarship. That is, the problem addressed by the scholarly work is the answer to the question “why do it?” Researchers, who are activists or advocates, depend on the most sophisticated perspectives, often interdisciplinary ones, to explain the problems. The purpose for the work is to understand, and then take the actions that are necessary to provoke change.

In other words, social justice work is action focused. It can advocate the abolition of the death penalty or the legality of death with dignity. It can protest offshore drilling, windmills, or nuclear power. It can provoke a demonstration or a work strike. It can fight *for* specific populations. It can challenge leaders, And, it can be used to inform them.

[SLIDE 19]

Rich, descriptive studies are not out-of-bounds for social justice work, whereas such scholarship may not find its way to the conventional or discipline-based social science journals.

Not to disparage basic science or pure academic inquiry, I do, nonetheless, ask an important question: Is the social justice worker motivated primarily to achieve a professional promotion? Or publication in a ‘top-tier’ journal? Of course, the best social justice work tends to end up in the most influential journals, and in the most influential books.

PART II: Critical Community Engagement Work

The second item on my agenda today is to make the case for critical community engagement as a form of social justice work that should be promoted by SSSP.

[SLIDE 20]

Community engagement work was recognized in the early 20th Century. The “Wisconsin Idea” is a mission statement prepared by Charles Van Hise in 1904. He argued that universities are closely connected to the communities in which they are located; and, to the state’s political and economic structures. Thus, Van Hise encouraged strong academic-community partnerships. He declared: “[I will] never be content until the beneficent influence of the university [is] available to every home in the state [of Wisconsin].”

[SLIDE 21]

Critical community engagement work is purpose driven and action focused work that is conducted within a local community. The local community may be the city of Lafayette, IN, a neighborhood in Los Angeles; or a village in Swaziland.

It is work that must reflect on the political and economic power structure of the local community. As a form of social justice work, it takes an approach to give voice to the least powerful -- the homeless, the incarcerated, the chronically unemployed, for example. It advocates changes in policies and practices on their behalf. And, the researcher negotiates changes in practices within the community.

It is the negotiation that makes this type of work somewhat different from other forms of social advocacy work: Researchers advocate and they negotiate change with community or organizational leaders.

[SLIDE 22]

Thus, it requires a continuous process of reflection, observation, analysis, and negotiation. Researchers must be vigilant to guard against cooptation by making sure they work *within and for* the community -- and not *for* the community leaders.

This form of research complements other forms of praxis. Critical engagement work brings a scholar's expertise to the community; and what the scholar learns from the community is translated into the scholarship of engagement.

Going to Lafayette

I was introduced to engagement work in 1985. A local attorney asked me to prepare testimony, *pro bono*, to argue in federal court against an Indiana law. The law prevented persons with felony convictions from receiving state-sponsored educational loans. To sum it up, I worked on behalf of prison inmates to sue the state of Indiana and won. And then I worried about my job security.

[SLIDE 23]

In 2004 I began a round of critical community engagement work when a state court trial judge invited me to join him and a team of criminal justice and mental health workers to design, fund, implement, and evaluate a set of problem solving courts.

Problem solving courts are judge-run, community-based programs. Participants receive services from agencies within the community, as mandated by the court. And, they assemble as a group for a special court session weekly.

Problem solving courts attempt to take a comprehensive approach, to address program participants' needs, especially housing, employment, health, and family issues – while simultaneously addressing the community's problems – such as a high crime rate, a high rate of family abuse, and homelessness.

In one of the Problem Solving Courts I worked with a PhD student in Communications, Jeralyn Faris; and in the others, I worked with a faculty member and graduate students in Child Development and Family Studies.

The Problem Solving Court collaborations have been productive, and they led to more work, resulting in a number of currently funded (a) Department of Justice grants; (b) a Health and Human Services Grant; and (c) a number of state housing grants that are all sponsored in part by Housing and Urban Development.

Initially, I brought to the table my academic specialization, which is the sociology of law, and my experiences within the community. I knew two things all too well going into my first problem solving court program:

[SLIDE 24]

First, I could not impose my supposed expertise on the judge who had ruled against defense motions following my expert testimony in two major felony

trials. In other words, I needed to form a collaborative partnership with him.

That depended on time, trust, and delivering the goods – i.e, program guidelines and court documents, and evaluation studies.

[SLIDE 25]

Second, I knew that I was taking on the responsibility for reporting evaluation study results to major stakeholders, though I was committed to working with and for disadvantaged populations: the seriously mentally ill, those in serious trouble with the law, and residents who lived many years in a state prison.

The challenge of data collection and analysis and report writing is addressed by social scientists who recognize that “the political right” is far more willing than “the political left” to use empirical data to support their positions.

Community engagement workers must use the tools that they command to influence decision makers. This does not imply that the data need to be manipulated or cooked in any way to support desired outcomes. It does, however, mean that the community-engaged scholar must be willing to collect and analyze the type of information that funders look at to determine if a program “works” and to make decisions about its future.

From my recent engagement work, I learned key organizational lessons.

[SLIDE 26]

1. First, community engagement work can promote *blended social organizations*. By that, I mean that the purpose or mission of a local agency can morph and incorporate the mission of another. For example, a mental health agency, treating clients referred from a Problem Solving Court, takes on the mission of corrections as soon as it administers drug screens to its clients.

2. Second, Non profits depend on performance measures to obtain or retain funding, whether those dollars flow from the federal government or the local United Way. Local nonprofit agencies, therefore, take great interest in community engagement programs that bring new federal dollars to town. In this climate of new privatization, agencies need to measure the services they deliver, the number of persons they serve, and what happens to their clients. Without intending to, a community engagement program can affect an agency's funding – in one direction or the other.

3. Third, social service agency workers and their supervisors interpret their conversations with, and their observations of their clients. Their clients include those referred from community engagement programs. The interpretations transform information into numerical codes to measure “input” “output” and

“outcome” measures. These transformations are purposeful. Workers need to account for their efforts and their successes. In some instances, these transformations can be extremely harmful for the community engagement program itself; or for groups or individuals with whom the researcher works.

[SLIDE 27]

Today I hope to convince you that critical community engagement work is a type of social justice work that SSSP should facilitate, promote, and communicate. Thus, I propose a column in every issue of *Social Problems Forum* that is devoted to our members’ engagement activities and their concerns; and I encourage all our special divisions to make room for such discussions in *their* newsletters.

I will write a proposal to the Editorial and Publications Committee and the Editors of *Social Problems Forum*. In the proposal I will commit to gathering information and editing a community engagement column for no less than five years.

A number of issues affect all community-engaged scholars and merit discussion in outlets such as our newsletters.

[SLIDE 28]

The engaged scholar, for example, must be willing to tell the story. She or he must be prepared to pick up the microphone at a public meeting or to stand in front of a television news camera or a newspaper reporter to communicate what the general population will hear or see about community engagement programs.

People tend to watch the local television news while eating dinner. So, a researcher needs to communicate why a community-based response to a social problem matters. The story must be told in a straightforward way; and in a way that whets the curiosity-appetite, rather than a desire to change the channel.

Community engagement work is an issue all academics need to address during the hiring process, and the promotion and tenure process. This type of scholarship should be rewarded, and not ignored or punished. Nonetheless, it is a form of work that the most traditional and discipline-focused academics refuse to recognize. This message is communicated clearly when a ‘conventional’ faculty member calls the work ‘service work’ or ‘outreach’ work.

Some very promising work on the tenure and promotion of the engaged scholar is documented by “Imagining America,” a consortium of nearly 90 universities that are dedicated to promoting all forms of public scholarship.

Craig Calhoun represented sociology on what is called its the tenure team initiative.

Some colleges and universities value engagement work at the highest levels of administration. Yet, within departments – in those same universities -- asking a promotion and tenure committee to consider the scholarship of engagement is like asking them to eat puppy chow for dinner. The challenge is to demonstrate the value of the scholarship of engagement to the departments that resist this form of work.

III. C. Wright Mills Award Winners: The Best Examples of Social Justice Work

Now, I want to turn to the third item on my agenda – that is, a discussion of the FIFTY-FOUR C. Wright Mills award winning books.

[SLIDE 29]

To begin, I bring to your attention three examples of purpose-driven and action-focused scholarship that received the C. Wright Mills award. They are outstanding examples of critical community engagement work.

The author of *Made in China* slept on factory-provided cots, and she worked with the “factory girls” – as they are called -- for eight months in an urban Chinese sweatshop. Her purpose was to understand how young women cope with the physical and emotional pain of their demanding work, and how some attempt to ignore work rules and regulations in order to get through their work shifts. She concludes her book with a very strong chapter on opening up new and organized fronts of resistance.

For the purpose of understanding the fair trade movement, the author of *Brewing Justice* lived in villages and towns in Oaxaca to study families working as coffee farmers. He concludes that depending on markets cannot generate fair trade. He calls for “grassroots movements to counteract the harmful effects of global free trade and to rein in corporate power” (2007:263).

The author of *In Search of Respect* spent three and a half years in a poor neighborhood, befriending crack dealers. He wanted to understand the economics of exclusion, and how it encourages urban drug dealing. He concludes his study with a call for “destroying the profitability of narcotics trafficking by decriminalizing drugs” (2003:321).

[SLIDE 30]

The first C. Wright Mills award was made in 1964 and honored a book, *Delinquency and Drift*, which has become a classic in the field of criminology. The book, however, did not drift far from a conventional academic approach. It is an example of a type of work, synthetic and discipline-focused work. The author states: “An alternative image of the delinquent can be developed by accepting the implication of soft ... determinism. One effect of restoring choice to man [sic] is to render feasible a joining of classical with positivist assumptions.” (1992:27).

During that same decade, the 1960s, the C. Wright Mills award recognized the finest and the most controversial urban ethnographies: *The Social Order of the Slum*, *Tally's Corner*, and *Tearoom Trade*.

[SLIDE 31]

At least six C. Wright Mills award winners went on to win other prestigious book prizes:

the Bancroft Prize in American History

the Pulitzer Prize in General Non-Fiction

The ASA Award for a Distinguished Contribution to Scholarship

One of the *New York Times Book Review's Best Books*

The Robert K. Merton Professional Award of the ASA

[SLIDE 32]

the Mattei Dogan Prize for the Best Comparative Book

and The Ruth Benedict Award of the Society of Lesbian & Gay

Anthropologists.

One book, *Doméstica*, won four book prizes following the C. Wright Mills award. Three are ASA section awards, and one is the Pacific Sociological Association's Distinguished Scholarship Award.

[SLIDE 33]

Over the decades, the 54 award-winning books have addressed global and local problems and some have embraced the controversial. A terrific example of synthetic and controversial work is *The Job Training Charade*. The author (Gordon Lafer) provides irrefutable evidence to demonstrate that two of the most prominent federal jobs training programs -- CETA -- replaced by the Job Training Partnership Act -- are unmitigated failures. They did not reduce poverty and they did not reduce unemployment. Nonetheless, these two programs garnered strong support from both Democrats and Republicans for decades,

illustrating how elected officials tend to ignore economic distress for the purpose of supporting programs that appeal to their constituencies.

A terrific example of controversial, and purpose-driven and action-focused work is *Cracks in the Pavement*. The author (Sanchez-Jankowski) conducted urban, ethnographic studies over a period of ten years. He focuses on key neighborhood features: the housing project, the small and local grocery store, the barbershop or beauty shop, the gangs, and the high school. His book provides neighborhood-level insights as he shows how poor neighborhoods can be supportive for their residents and creative in solving problems. Further, he advocates caution: Changing one neighborhood feature, especially housing, has consequences for all the other key features within the neighborhood.

[SLIDE 34]

Generally, the books that received C. Wright Mills awards tend to transcend the boundaries of any particular academic discipline. For example, the author of *Domestica*, advocates improved conditions for domestic workers in the United States, and especially California (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001). She accounts for immigration laws, the history of race and ethnic group relations in the United States, and labor and employment laws and regulations at the state and federal

levels. With this interdisciplinary orientation, she can explain two very important findings: employers strongly disvalue care work; and, employers are more likely to view a domestic worker as a “commodity” rather than an “employee.”

Seventy percent (N = 37) of the award-winning books present purpose-driven and action-focused research. That is, the answer to the question, “why write this book” is the author’s commitment to understanding the problem and doing something about it. Examples are *Stations of the Lost: The Treatment of Skid Row Alcoholics*, *Sidewalk*, and *Flat Broke with Children*.

Thirty percent (N = 16) of the books are synthetic or discipline-driven scholarship. Excellent examples are: *Pricing the Priceless Child*, *Black Feminist Thought*, *States and Social Revolutions*, and *The Contentious French*.

Seventy percent (68.7 percent) of the award winners are studies conducted within a U.S. city or community. Fifteen percent are cross-national, comparative studies; and 17 percent are studies conducted outside the United States.

[SLIDE 35]

Poverty and inequalities (including homeless studies) represent 28 percent of the books. Social class, and work (including organizational studies), or unemployment represent an additional 24 percent of the books.

Two research methods characterize the majority of C. Wright Mills winning books: ethnographies; and in-depth, face-to-face interview studies. There is little news value here. But, what is noteworthy is the percent of authors, 22 percent, who spent more than 3 years in the field to gather their initial data.

Pardon the expression, and with apologies to some of our colleagues: the ‘hard’ social scientists look at the social science citation index to show that a peer-reviewed journal article has impact on an academic discipline or an interdisciplinary field. With books, it is different. For books, we want to know how influential they are, and we must creatively use measures that can capture influence.

Two measures have been used in the humanities and social sciences. In earlier years, and in a recent issue of ASA’s magazine *CONTEXTS*, a book’s sales figures were used.

Contemporarily, a count of the libraries holding a given book, as reported in a national or an international union catalog, is typically used.

[SLIDE 36]

For this analysis, I used Purdue's access to WorldCat and examined the count or the number of libraries worldwide that hold each of the 54 award-winning books. I then summed the counts of the 54 books.

Though less than ideal, each book's count, or library holdings, is an indicator of the book's relative influence. All told, (as of June 15, 2010) libraries around the world hold 61,151 copies of books that are C. Wright Mills award winners. The count of library holdings range from 236 libraries that hold an award winner, to nearly 2,700 libraries that hold a C. Wright Mills award-winning book.

[SLIDE 37]

Generally speaking, the early award winners, compared to the more recent winners, are held by more libraries. The books held by the most libraries are: *Justice Without Trial* (1966), *Regulating the Poor* (1971), the *Social Transformation of American Medicine* (1982), the *Secret Trauma* (1986), and the *Truly Disadvantaged* (1986).

There are notable exceptions to this pattern of publication year and library counts. Among this decade's winners, *Flat Broke with Children* and *Off the Books* – are already held by a total of three thousand libraries.

Overall, variation in the number of libraries that hold C. Wright Mills award winners can be explained.

[SLIDE 38]

Controlling for the publication year, a number of characteristics significantly predict library holdings: Books that are purpose driven and action focused, compared to synthetic or discipline-focused tend to be held by more libraries. Books that present studies that were conducted exclusively outside the United States are likely held by fewer libraries. Author gender, race, ethnicity, and nationality do not significantly predict library holdings.

Suppose an author wrote a most compelling social problems narrative – worthy of a C. Wright Mills award. Over the years, one university press would make the award more likely. The University of California Press is responsible for publishing 22 percent of all the C. Wright Mills award winners.

[SLIDE 39]

Naomi Schneider, *one person*, is the editor of eight C. Wright Mills winning books. This year, the new Naomi Schneider imprint was launched. According to the University of California Press, “These books will highlight the lives and experiences of the disenfranchised; these select titles ... spur unconventional thinking about contemporary social and political [issues] ...” Clearly, the press matters; as do those who, behind the scenes, devote their intellects and direct their concerns to an unusual type of monograph.

Most of the C. Wright Mills winning authors are anything but “objective” and “dispassionate” – two terms we often hear when social *scientists* establish their bona fides. As a collection of books, this work is focused on understanding and explaining social problems *as they are experienced by the social groups most affected by the problems*. Authors tackle the underground economy, poverty and inequalities, and social movements; they observe and document conditions that make us wonder how some survive and thrive under the harshest circumstances; and they help us realize the need to challenge the basic inhumanities that characterize a number of social institutions.

[SLIDE 40]

There is indeed a connection between social justice work and C. Wright Mills award winning books. Social justice scholars tend to engage in two major types of work: social activism and social advocacy.

C. Wright Mills award winners fall into two types of books. One is the type of social justice scholarship that is purpose-driven and action focused. A second type of award winning book makes major contributions to a social science discipline. These disciplined-focused books are valuable for informing all of our work, including purpose driven and action focused scholarship.

[SLIDE 39]

In summary, when we glance at the scholarship that typifies what SSSP members do; when we examine different types of social justice work; and when we examine some of the books we treasure on our book shelves – the C. Wright Mills award winners – we can reach straightforward conclusion: (1) SSSP members have worked tirelessly to understand persistent social problems, and to do something about them. (2) Regrettably, we face no shortage of persistent or new challenges.