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From Research to Policy: Roles for Sociologists

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Research is often commissioned for the purpose of influencing policy and enabling change. Sociologists can play important roles in facilitating the communication of research results and the implementation of change. The help wanted ads seldom advertise such positions, but the need is there. Almost 20 years ago, a study by the National Academy of Sciences (1978), recommended that more effort be expended on the dissemination and application of research findings on social problems. That study inspired me to explore related consulting opportunities—and I've been busy ever since, responding to this need and assisting in the process of promoting change.

As a consultant in the Washington metropolitan area, I have focused on facilitating the communication of research for various government and private sector organizations. The skills I use are threefold. First, I use my knowledge of quantitative and qualitative research methods in order to assess and accurately represent research findings. Second, I use my analytical and writing skills to simplify and synthesize research findings and present them without jargon to diverse audiences. Third, I use interpersonal skills and an understanding of social systems in listening to both researchers and potential users and in organizing briefings, workshops or other communication events that facilitate the use and application of the research. In exercising each of these skills, much diplomacy is required. I am assisting technical experts to communicate their findings and achieve their objectives. Entrepreneurial skills help too because I must market my skills and find technical experts or decision makers who are willing to pay me for this work.

Much of my work has been in international development, but I have also

worked on national social problems. Initially, I focused on social research, but soon I was asked to work with experts in agricultural research, natural resources management, economic reform, and many other areas. In each area, the problems were similar. The technical expert could talk to other experts, but had great difficulty explaining the research to non-technical audiences (decision makers). The technical expert could write a 20-page paper on the work he or she had done, but had great difficulty writing a one-page synthesis or explaining major results to a busy decision maker within a few minutes. The technical expert was steeped in detail and welcomed assistance in synthesizing the essence and developing a strategy for communicating with others.

A few examples will illustrate how my work has added value to research products.

Clarifying the Policy Implications of an Evaluation

As a pilot program in nutrition education was ending, two nutrition experts conducted an evaluation of the program. Their report, 147 pages in length, with many complex charts and detailed footnotes, was excellent, but it was not user friendly to the managers who had to decide what to do next. My assignment was to digest that research and write a report entitled, "Policy Implications of an Evaluation." My report was 15 pages in length, with five of those pages devoted to policy recommendations. The report was organized for quick reading with a minimum of technical terms (glossary provided), with major findings presented as headings, and with the rationale behind policy recommendations clearly outlined to facilitate assessment. My report was a key document in a workshop that decided how ongoing nutrition education programs would be structured.

Synthesizing the Essence of a Complex Change Effort

Having worked to achieve policy reforms in the maize-marketing system of Zimbabwe, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) wanted to explain its achievements to senior management and to missions in other countries undertaking similar efforts. An economist involved with the effort wrote a 10-page paper detailing how USAID had assisted the process and presenting the results of several research studies that showed changes in employment patterns and reductions in the cost of maize to consumers. My task was to explain the essence of this complex development effort in everyday language in a two-page paper (approximately 1200 words).

After reviewing numerous research reports, I traveled to Zimbabwe to visit rural areas where entrepreneurs had opened small mills. I interviewed entrepreneurs, government officials, USAID personnel and consumers and took photos to help tell the story. The research studies provided me with the statistics. They documented that policy reform had resulted in the abandonment of centralized maize marketing and the creation by small entrepreneurs of more than 10,000 small mills in rural areas. These mills provided employment for more than 20,000 Zimbabweans and enabled rural populations to grind maize locally. As a result, the price of a staple food had decreased 20 percent. The interviews I conducted made these statistics come alive. I was able to tell the story of real people, with quotes and photographs that helped readers understand what was happening to those who had been affected by the reforms. My paper was published in a USAID publication, excerpted for a Congressional presentation, and adopted in at least one undergraduate economic course to help students understand how policy reform works.

Facilitating the Understanding of Research Findings and Promoting Action

To assist in developing recommendations and action plans, another client planned a workshop and invited numerous researchers to share their findings. My assignment was to assist in planning an agenda that would achieve the desired results and to facilitate the process of developing a synthesis while the workshop was taking place. The agenda for the four-day workshop included numerous plenaries where research findings were presented. After each plenary, participants adjourned to small-group discussions. The small groups were given specific assignments that encouraged them to clarify major findings and identify recommendations for action. Reporters in each group synthesized the discussion and forwarded it to me. I managed the synthesis process, synthesizing materials received from all reporters and creating a draft that a committee of experts reviewed at regular intervals.

The results of this effort was a 10-page synthesis of substance and recommendations that was presented in plenary at the closing session of the workshop and distributed to participants, politicians and press. This draft helped participants write their trip reports (and convince supervisors the time was well spent), improved the quality of press reports, and provided politicians and everyone else with clear guidance on the next steps recommended by workshop participants.

Opportunities for Sociologists

In each of these assignments, I believe my sociology training and my sociological perspective have been valuable. Though I define myself as a management sociologist, most of my clients are oblivious to job titles. They want the job done. And they want it done by someone they can trust to do it properly. They need someone who can master the subject matter, pick out what is important, and synthesize it accurately. They want someone who is able to make independent decisions, but who is a diplomatic team player in negotiating changes or planning workshops and other communication events. The goal is to make the research findings user-friendly and to create an environment for learning and decision making.

Sociology has much to contribute to public policy debates, but it can only contribute if some sociologists are actively involved in synthesizing research and facilitating its use in public fora. The skills required may not be taught in graduate schools, but they can be learned and shared. I know from experience that such work is available, challenging and rewarding. I welcome email from sociologists who are doing similar work and wish to share their experiences. Perhaps together we can encourage an expanded role for sociologists in the dissemination and application of research.

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