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Symposium on the History of Clinical Sociology

Howerth, Small and Sociological Practice

Jan M. Fritz
Georgetown University

The history of clinical sociology in the United States is still being written. In the last few years several pieces have appeared, though, which help us to better understand the development of the field. Among these are the symposiums in the first two issues of the *Clinical Sociology Review* (Fritz, 1982; Billson, 1984) and pieces by Clark and Fritz (1984) and Lee (1984).

This symposium includes two articles by scholars from the University of Chicago. These pieces were published in the 1890s and set the stage for a discussion of our history. The first, by sociologist Ira Woods Howerth, appeared in the *Annals of The American Academy of Political and Social Science*. His 1894 piece was entitled the “Present Condition of Sociology in the United States.” (It appeared just ahead of one entitled “The Improvement of Country Roads in Massachusetts and New York.”)

Howerth (1860–1938) finished his work for a master’s degree and joined the faculty at the University of Chicago the year the article appeared. He had written all the teachers of sociology in the United States and asked their views about the discipline. We are interested in general in the kinds of remarks his questions elicited from his 40 respondents and particularly the responses to his last question about the “relative importance [of the] treatment of the dependent, defective and delinquent classes.”

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Although Howerth was to work as a practicing sociologist—rewriting laws and suggesting reforms—as Secretary of the Illinois Educational Commission (1908–1909), his article really does not deal with practice issues except for the small discussion of treatment and the comments on social problems.

Howerth noted that in the 1890s there was “a great deal of thinking about social problems.” This picture is reinforced when one reviews the kinds of sociology courses offered—including pauperism, charity, unemployment, migratory labor, insanity and temperance—and when one reads other characterizations of early American sociology. Harry Barnes (1948:741), for instance, said that “probably the largest group of sociologists [were] what are usually called ‘social economists’ or ‘practical sociologists,’ namely, those chiefly interested in social work and amelioration.”

Two years after Howerth’s article appeared, Albion Small (1854–1926) published, “Scholarship and Social Agitation” in *The American Journal of Sociology*. Small, chair of the first graduate department of sociology, founding editor of *The American Journal of Sociology*, and one of the first presidents of the American Sociological Society, thought the main reason for the existence of sociology was its “practical application to the improvement of social life” (Timasheff and Theodorson, 1976:2).

One special paragraph in Small’s 1896 article speaks directly to his interest in sociological practice:

I would have American scholars, especially in the social sciences, declare their independence of do-nothing traditions. I would have them repeal the law of custom which bars marriage of thought with action. I would have them become more profoundly and sympathetically scholarly by enriching the wisdom which comes from knowing with the larger wisdom which comes from doing.

There are three themes in the history of sociology in the United States—science, art/humanism, and practice. Over the years, the concern for each of these themes has differed and that concern may have affected the way in which we have written the general history of sociology. Scholars interested in the history of sociological practice in the United States would do well to begin by reading the writings and studying the actions of the early American sociologists.

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