

**Article: “Expanding the Domain of Policy-Relevant Scholarship in the Social Sciences”**

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# Expanding the Domain of Policy-Relevant Scholarship in the Social Sciences\*

William Julius Wilson, *Harvard University*

As a former President of the Consortium of Social Science Associations (COSSA), I am very pleased to be a featured speaker on the contributions of social and behavioral research to public policy and to help celebrate the Consortium's twentieth anniversary. In my talk this afternoon, I want to address the important issue of expanding the domain of policy-relevant scholarship in the social sciences.

The 1996 Gulbenkian Commission Report on the Restructuring of the Social Sciences stated that the traditional boundaries in the social sciences have been weakened by pressures for change (*Open the Social Sciences* 1996). These pressures include those associated with the rapid expansion of the university system that created increased specialization and in turn "encouraged reciprocal incursions by social scientists into neighboring disciplinary domains"; and those from feminist and other groups that have challenged the parochialism of the social sciences (*Open the Social Sciences* 1996).

In the process there has been, according to the report, a growing recognition "that the major issues facing a complex society cannot be solved by decomposing them into small parts that seem easy to manage analytically, but rather by attempting to treat these problems, human and nature, in their complexity and interrelations" (*Open the Social Sciences* 1996).

But, the report does not discuss another major pressure felt by the social sciences that I believe will ultimately have an impact as great or even greater than those pressures that have emerged during the past several decades. I refer to the impetus to address policy-relevant issues that are associated not only with the country's emotional and economic adjustments to the events of September 11, but, more fundamentally, that grow

out of the struggles of nation states to adapt to the impact of rapid technological and economic changes on individuals, families, communities, institutions, and the society at large.

Technological innovations are occurring exceedingly rapidly and the lagging societal adjustment to these changes in many areas of life have placed a strain on our basic institutions and challenged traditional practices in preparing individuals to fulfill adult roles and responsibilities. Take, for example, the impact of the decline of the mass production system. The skill requirements of this mode of production were reflected in the system of learning. Public schools in the United States were principally designed to provide low-income native and immigrant students the basic literacy and numeracy skills required for routine work in mass production factories, service industries, or farms. Today's close interaction between technology and international competition has eroded the basic institutions of the mass production system. In the last several decades almost all of the improvements in productivity have been associated with technology and human capital, thereby drastically reducing the importance of physical capital and natural resources (Marshall 1994).

Moreover, in the traditional mass production system only a few highly educated professional, technical, and managerial workers were needed because most of the work "was routine and could be performed by workers who needed only basic literacy and numeracy" (Marshall 1994). Accordingly, workers in the United States with limited education were able to carry home wages that were comparatively high by international and historical standards. Not so today.

At the same time that changes in technology are producing new jobs, however, they are making many

## Editor's Note

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William Julius Wilson is Lewis P. and Linda L. Geyser University Professor at Harvard University, where he has taught since 1996. He is a past president of the American Sociological Association and COSSA. A MacArthur Prize fellow from 1987 to 1992, Wilson has been elected to the National Academy of Sciences, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the National Academy of Education, the American Philosophical Society, and the Institute of Medicine. He is a recipient of the 1998 National Medal of Science, the highest scientific honor in the United States. As Felice Levine noted in her introduction of Wilson, "He's been a central figure in social science, advancing significant policy issues and building those bridges" (between social science and social policy).

others obsolete. The workplace has been revolutionized by technological changes that range from robotics to information highways. A widening gap between the skilled and unskilled workers is developing because education and training are more important than ever. While educated workers benefit from the pace of technological change, lesser skilled workers face the growing threat of income stagnation and job displacement.

The impact of technological change has been enhanced by international competition. In order to adjust to changing markets and technology, competitive systems are

forced to become more flexible. Companies may compete more effectively in the international market either by improving productivity and quality or by reducing workers' incomes. The easier approach is this latter low-wage strategy, which the United States has tended to follow. Many new jobs have been created, but, except for the last half of the 1990s and the year 2000, incomes of lower-paid workers have been in stagnation, despite incredible job growth (Marshall 1994).

These changes puzzle many policymakers, and as they have turned to economists for some of the answers, the limitations of relying solely on a paradigm embedded in a single discipline could not be more apparent. The traditional economic models failed to explain the strange recent phenomenon of a tight labor market and low inflation in the United States. In the latter half of the 1990s into 2000, the United States experienced one of the tightest job markets in memory, yet this low unemployment did not fuel inflation, and, especially prior to 1997, did not lead to significant increases in wages. What now seems clear to an increasing number of social scientists, including economists, is that a strictly economic explanation is no longer sufficient to explain the relationship between employment and inflation. Sociological and psychological explanations about workers' responses to the growing internationalization of economic activity, including the threat of job displacement, are now being integrated with the economic explanations. Allow me to elaborate briefly.

Between 1993 and 1997 the U.S. economy gained more than 14 million jobs. And in 1997 the unemployment rate declined to 4.3%, the lowest in 30 years. Yet, prices did not increase very much during this period, in part because wages, the main element of costs, did not increase much either.<sup>1</sup> Despite high levels of employment and labor

shortages in some areas, workers were surprisingly hesitant to demand higher wages. Few would have predicted that kind of behavior in such a favorable job market. As the economist Paul Krugman pointed out in November 1997, "Apparently the

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recession and initially jobless recovery left a deep mark on the national psyche" (Krugman 1997, 21). He pointed out that workers' confidence had been shaken by downsizing and the specter—real or imagined—that many of their jobs could be done for a fraction of their salaries by workers in Third World countries. Indirect evidence of workers' anxiety could be seen in the rate of voluntary resignations. Usually, when unemployment drops, voluntary resignations increase because the favorable job market enables those who resign to find new jobs, presumably at higher pay. However, the "quit" rate actually declined in 1997, a period of low unemployment.<sup>2</sup>

In a 1997 survey of a random sample of the American public, 68% of the respondents overall and 72% of the noncollege graduates surveyed, expressed concern about the exporting of jobs overseas by American companies (Krueger 1997). Reflecting on the situation in 1997, the economist Krugman argued that workers in the United States feel that they cannot rely on weak unions to bargain effectively for higher wages, and if they lose their jobs they feel compelled to take other employment soon on whatever terms they can get. "With such a nervous and timid workforce," states Krugman, "the economy can gallop along for a while without setting in motion a wage/

price spiral. And so we are left with a paradox: We have more or less full employment only because individual workers do not feel secure in their jobs.... The secret of our success is not productivity, but anxiety" (Krugman 1997, 22).

In retrospect, this argument may have been overstated, especially given the rapid increase in productivity growth in the late 1990s and its dampening effect on inflation, but Krugman's argument does provide a clear example of how pressures to confront policy-relevant matters are forcing social scientists to address complex issues with explanations that integrate perspectives from different disciplines. This kind of pressure contributes to the erosion of rigid disciplinary boundaries.

But I believe that the pressure to confront policy-relevant issues will not only contribute to the integration of the social sciences, it will also increase policy-relevant research within the various disciplines. Moreover, I predict that the disciplines that most rapidly and widely respond to these pressures will attract the largest share of public and private foundation resources for research and institutional expansion. Nonetheless, there remains strong resistance to the practical application of social science research. And our vision of the domain of policy-relevant scholarship in the social sciences is limited and will have to be expanded, as I shall now endeavor to explain.

Those of us involved in policy-relevant research are fully aware of the intense pressure to address problems that concern the nation. Yet many social scientists argue that we ought to wait until a sufficient amount of good data are accumulated before we make any policy recommendations or enter the policy debate.

However, as Robert Lynd pointed out in his classic volume, *Knowledge for What*, published over six decades ago, if social scientists wait for more data before offering policy recommendations, or if they avoid issues of public controversy because of lack of data even though their theoretical ideas or hypotheses would elevate the level of the debate and broaden perspectives, decisions will be made and policies will be formulated anyway—without their input (Lynd 1939).

I fully agree and would like to take this opportunity to further challenge

the assumption that the social sciences should not attempt to influence the national agenda until there are “sufficient” or “adequate” data by arguing for (1) a broader conception of the use and application of policy-relevant data, even preliminary data; and (2) an increase in the role of theoretical ideas, hypotheses, and concepts in national policy debates.

Let me begin with the first point—broadening the conception of the use of policy-relevant data. Just as one will rarely find in the social sciences a data set that would unambiguously and incontrovertibly determine the validity of a major theory or the correctness of a major factual question (Liebersohn 1989), so too is it uncommon to produce a data set that would unambiguously and incontrovertibly resolve a public controversy. Although any social scientist would like to have the greatest confidence in his or her data, sometimes preliminary data may be used to reveal the narrowness of a public debate or to challenge the general consensus on an issue, and thereby demonstrate the need to take other factors into consideration.

For example, a few years ago the public policy debate in the U.S. over the causes of the breakdown of the poor black family narrowly focused on the adverse affects of welfare. In a paper first presented at a national welfare conference in Virginia in December 1984, Kathryn Neckerman and I argued for the need to consider the role of male joblessness in the growth of poor, single-parent African-American families (Wilson and Neckerman 1986). The aggregate census-type data we presented in support of our position clearly suggested, rather than firmly established, a positive relationship between male joblessness and solo-parent families.

Nonetheless, the paper drew a lot of attention. It not only altered the terms of the debate in academic circles and triggered a round of new research among poverty researchers, but it made policymakers on Capitol Hill more aware that the issues surrounding the rapid growth of single-parent poor black families were more complex than had been previously assumed. Today male joblessness is routinely identified as one of several important factors in the growth of solo-parent families and the discussion of contributing

factors no longer narrowly focuses on the receipt of welfare.

Furthermore, any discussion on the need to expand the domain of policy relevant scholarship has to address the problem of what the Harvard sociologist Stanley Liebersohn calls, the “formalistic fallacy,” the view that data for generating policy

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recommendations ought to be obtained from the use of certain formal procedures or techniques (Liebersohn 1992). Non-quantitative research—for example, ethnographic research—is therefore considered inappropriate for generating policy recommendations.

Although all scholarly work should be subjected to critical review, concern should focus on the logic of inquiry—the structure of explanation, the significance of concepts, and the nature of evidence—not on the procedures or techniques used. Let me briefly elaborate on this point as it relates to public policy-relevant research.

Quantitative social science established its hegemony in the 1970s. Ethnographic research in fields such as urban poverty, which had been revived in the 1960s, was basically dormant in the 1970s. In the 1980s, however, we began to see a shift in focus away from quantitative versus qualitative research to an approach that emphasized integrating the two strategies in empirical studies that focused on problems such as urban poverty.

There are several intellectual and practical issues involved in the integration of quantitative and qualitative techniques. These issues relate to the important distinction between the context of discovery and the context of validation. Whereas the context of discovery concerns the way in which fruitful concepts, hypotheses, and theories are discov-

ered, the context of validation concerns the evaluation of the products of science and therefore with making the evaluative criteria as explicit as possible.

I emphasize this distinction because a number of people have maintained that the best way to integrate ethnographic and quantitative research is to use the former in the context of discovery and the latter in the context of validation. In other words, it is argued that ethnography ought to be used to generate hypotheses that could then be tested with quantitative research.

More specifically, the major objection to using ethnographic research in the context of validation is the inherent difficulty in generating a sample representative of a larger population. However, there is another type of sampling crucial to theory testing that addresses the issue of whether the conditions specified by the *theoretical assumptions* that guide the research are represented. This is known as theoretical sampling, defined as selecting a number of natural cases that fit the conditions appropriate to the assumptions of the theory (Willer 1968).

For example, in my book *The Truly Disadvantaged*, I outlined a theory of the social transformation of the inner city and a number of the key hypotheses incorporating the notion of “concentration effects”—the effects of living in highly concentrated poverty areas (Wilson 1987). One of these hypotheses states that individuals living in extreme poverty areas are much less likely to be tied into the job information network system than those living in marginal poverty areas.

I contend that this hypothesis could be tested by a participant observer who selects a neighborhood that represents an extreme poverty area and one that represents a marginal poverty area, and who observes patterns of work-related interactions in each neighborhood over an extended period of time. Some people may want to question the degree of rigor involved in

testing such a hypothesis with participant observation techniques, but this approach is clearly consistent with the logic of validation.

Ideally, one would want to test this hypothesis with more quantitative sources of data that would include a large number of individuals from a variety of urban neighborhoods. But the ethnographic research, including leisurely conversations with people over extended periods of time, could uncover many subtle patterns of behavior and experiences that are difficult, if not impossible to ascertain, with the more conventional research techniques. To eschew such research in the policy domain on formalistic grounds is to limit the potential of the social sciences to influence or contribute to important policy discussions.

However, the contribution of the social sciences to the policy arena need not be based on empirical studies or research findings. As Carol Weiss of Harvard University has pointed out, the theories, ideas and concepts of the social sciences "may also help to shape what it is that the public thinks about and what it is that governments do." Weiss argues:

Although good data are useful and build credibility, equally important is the [social science] perspective on entities, processes, and events.

Participants in the policy process can profit from an understanding of the forces and currents that shape events, and from the structures of meaning that [social scientists] derive from their theories and research. (Weiss 1993)

An important function of social science is to use existing theories or theoretical frameworks to advance our understanding of social processes or structures. In other words, social scientists can provide "enlightenment" (Janowitz 1970). "Sociological ideas, more than discrete pieces of data, have influenced the way that policy actors think about issues and the types of measures they have been willing to consider," states Weiss (1993). The social sciences "bring fresh perspectives into the policy arena, new understandings of cause and effect; they challenge assumptions that have been taken for granted and give credibility to options that were viewed as beyond the pale. They provide enlighten-

ment." Likewise, political scientist John W. Kingdon points out that although social scientists "can be very good at documenting the existence, frequency, incidence, and intensity of a condition," they are also frequently "able to show policymakers that the world works in ways that might not have occurred to them," and that social scientists' knowledge of the way the world works enables them to make better cause and effect connections than others (Kingdon 1993). For all these reasons, I believe that it would be shortsighted to discourage or overlook the use of theoretical insights from the social sciences to inform public policy debates.

In summary, I have tried to make the case for expanding the domain of policy-relevant scholarship so that we can (1) be more flexible in the kinds of data that we use and the ways in which we use them, and (2) recognize the important role of social theories, concepts and ideas in the formulation and discussion of public policy issues. I firmly believe that we will become more active and influential players in the social policy arena as a result.

## Notes

\* Portions of this lecture integrated materials from two previous publications, William Julius Wilson, *The Bridge Over the Racial Divide: Rising Inequality and Coalition Politics*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999; and William Julius Wilson, "Can Sociology Play a Greater Role in Shaping the National Agenda?", *Sociology and the Public Agenda*, ed. William Julius Wilson, Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1993, pp.3-22.

1. In addition to the stability of wages, other factors have kept prices from rising significantly. As Uchitelle points out, a rise in the productivity rate since 1997 has also kept prices in check. Workers are producing more goods and services per hour on the job and the extra revenue from the sales of these "additional goods and services has helped maintain profits without price increases." He also notes that the economic crisis in Asia is helping to hold prices down "in two ways.

Asian currencies are falling in relation to the dollar, making American products more expensive in those currencies. To compete, United States exporters are cutting their prices in dollars. Imports from Asia, on the other hand, are less expensive in dollars, also dampening inflation." Louis Uchitelle, "As Asia Stumbles, U. S. Stays in Economic Stride," *New York Times*, 7 December 1997, sec. A.

2. Ibid.

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