Whom Will Sociology Serve? Transforming the Discipline by Engaging Communities

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Abstract
This article examines the debate on public sociology through the community-based work of the authors and their students. Critiquing the continued focus of public sociology on policy makers, funders, and other sociologists, we argue that sociologists must reorder their priorities by serving the public itself. Although large-scale studies play an important purpose in the discipline, sociology must once again value smaller-scale “organic” research grounded in local communities to remain relevant. Furthermore, a “critical constructionist” theoretical framework offers a conceptual approach that counters the distanced, ameliorative standpoint of mainstream sociology. We offer programmatic ways sociologists can combine their teaching, research, and community service to engage students in learning the discipline through change-oriented work.

Keywords
organic public sociology, critical constructionism, humanist sociology

Reflexive Statement
Both of us seek to create a more just and equitable world through our work in our local community, engaging our students with and through that work. We also seek

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to transform sociology into a discipline that is actively engaged in community life. Pennell has been engaged in local efforts to limit the privatization of public schools, establish a living wage for poorly paid workers, reform campaign financing, and develop a local food system. Maher’s focus has been on local decision-making processes, gentrification and incumbent upgrading in inner city neighborhoods, pollution and environmental sustainability, and projects involving students and their universities in resident-driven community development initiatives.

Who exactly is the public in public sociology? On one hand, sociologists seem to be concerned about practical relevance today. Public sociology appears to be a statement about being relevant and making a difference in the real world. On the other hand, universities, even those that heavily emphasize teaching, continue to pressure faculty to publish in elite journals and gain the accolades of their professional peers, regardless of the practical importance or impact of that work. Even the literature on public sociology doesn’t seem as concerned about the public in many respects as in the issues in our discipline or staying relevant in the minds of policy makers and big grant funders.

Interdisciplinary groups such as Campus Compact (www.compact.org), Inventing America (inventingamerica.org), and the International Association for Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement (IARSLCE; www.researchslce.org) that emphasize university engagement of communities have provided opportunities for those in the academy to attempt to bridge the divide between their university work and the world they commonly study at arm’s length. Campus Compact has been an important resource for funding, sharing of strategies, and scholarship opportunities for faculty across disciplines at our university. However, generally sociologists have not flocked to these groups or the kind of work they advocate that is locally engaged and focused.1

In this article, we seek to elaborate on an argument we began over a decade ago (Maher, Pennell, and Osterman 2003). We provide a more fully developed framework for understanding what we seek to accomplish in our work. We report on our efforts to do research that draws on the knowledge and skills we have as sociologists but that does not serve the more esoteric demands of our discipline to produce large-scale, theoretically driven research that attempts to move theoretical knowledge forward. Our approach is also not indebted to the demands of big funders. We discuss how we have developed service and research projects that attempt to serve our local community while providing our students, including undergraduate students, with opportunities to develop their understanding of, and skills at, doing research and working for change. We also share our struggles to maintain institutional support for this work, and why professional organizations such as the Association for Humanist Sociology (AHS) and publication venues such as Humanity & Society are important resources for challenging institutional convention. We begin by situating this work in a somewhat different location than is being touted in much of the public sociology literature.
Sociology for Whom?

This question was the title of Alfred McClung Lee’s 1976 American Sociological Association (ASA) address that was expanded into a book (Lee [1978] 1986) and frames our own concerns here. Sociologists have long vacillated between engagement with society at large and academia and the elite sectors of society academia typically represents. Karl Marx famously championed the notion of writing for the working class, although some of his writings are difficult for educated people today to work through. W. E. B. DuBois, likewise, saw a need to communicate sociological knowledge to a wide and frequently nonacademic audience, especially through editorship of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s Crisis publication. As Marx helped advance the cause of the working class, so DuBois helped define and advance the early Civil Rights Movement. Concurrent with DuBois, Jane Addams, not having a clear idea of how to serve the public, established Hull House and set about researching and organizing to transform the local community. Her purpose, as with Marx and DuBois, was to bridge the gap between expert knowledge and working people in struggling communities.

By the 1930s, American sociology saw a dramatic shift away from close engagement with nonelite communities or enterprises and toward the needs and desires of large foundations, government agencies, and philanthropists (Feagin 2001). Granted, Addams certainly was concerned with raising money as well to keep Hull House open and fund programs. Hull House benefited from Addams’ privileged upbringing and wealthy friends and patrons. Her work, however, never wavered from her initial desire to use sociological knowledge for the common good.

Although the profession seemed to come under the sway of elite universities, foundations, and corporations, there was opposition among the ranks. C. Wright Mills blasted the abstract empiricism of his contemporaries, conducted controversial research, and ultimately was essentially blacklisted by foundations that refused to fund his research. Later, Alfred McClung Lee, among others, rejected the dominance of the discipline by corporations and foundations and its professional organization, the ASA, and founded the AHS, a professional organization devoted to sharing sociological knowledge and insights with the public in order to work toward needed social changes (Ballard 2011).

While these were courageous moves on the part of these academics, their actions did not free universities, especially elite universities, from corporate dominance. That corporate dominance puts severe pressure on academics, mostly from middle or upper-middle-class backgrounds, to follow the foundation/corporate line and avoid messy, socially controversial issues that could jeopardize future funding opportunities. Those funding opportunities allow for large studies; publications in prominent journals and books; and the accompanying academic rewards of tenure, promotion, and invitations to media interviews and related national publicity.

More recently, Michael Burawoy made a call to public sociology. In his presidential address at the 2004 ASA meeting (Burawoy [2005] 2007), he distinguished
public sociology from professional sociology, critical sociology, and policy sociology. These “ideal type” distinctions are fairly well known, and beyond the scope of what we want to address here, although he admits there is overlap among them. But we agree with him that professional as well as critical sociology tend to be oriented toward academic audiences. More important for our purposes are his distinction between traditional public sociology and organic public sociology. Traditional public sociologists make pronouncements based on their expertise from “opinion pages of our national newspapers, where they comment on matters of public importance” (Burawoy [2005] 2007:28). As he notes, the public being addressed in this work “are generally invisible in that they cannot be seen, thin in that they do not generate much internal interaction, and passive in that they do not constitute a movement or organization, and they are usually mainstream” (Burawoy [2005] 2007:28). He does not say this, but many of these sociologists are mainstream (or in his terms, professional) sociologists or critical sociologists. These are the elite sociologists who have the time to do this sort of work and have the reputation to attract the attention of a national editor.

Burawoy distinguishes the traditional public approach to “organic public sociology,” the sociology of Jane Addams and W. E. B. DuBois. The sociologist of this second persuasion “works in close connection with a visible, thick, active, local, and often counterpublic.” Although Burawoy is supportive of organic public sociology, he privileges traditional public sociology (Horowitz 2011). As he notes, “In the best circumstances traditional public sociology frames organic public sociology, while the latter disciplines, grounds, and directs the former” (Burawoy [2005] 2007:29). This privileges macro-level theorizing and short changes theories and insights that are generated at the local level or that conceptualize the world in more situated and contingent ways. As Horowitz (2011) observes, even symbolic interactionists who might have some affinity with organic public sociology, who primarily focus on small group, organizational, or community research and commonly participate in groups as a research strategy, tend to eschew the activism of Addams and DuBois (as well as George Herbert Mead, John Dewey, and even Herbert Blumer in some respects, she notes). Dale and Kalob (2006) make the same point about critical sociologists such as C. Wright Mills and Alfred McClung Lee; both were interested in a sociology that would serve humanity but as an intellectual rather than an engaged activity.

A primary concern of the critics of public sociology (e.g., Smith-Lovin 2007; Stinchcombe 2007) harkens back to Weber’s concern about mixing politics with sociology—that value-oriented commitments might limit sociologists’ ability to examine claims and evidence in an impartial or value-neutral manner. We think this concern is not borne out by our actual practice in working with groups on value-laden issues and isn’t borne out by the many examples of engaged sociology going back to Marx. Although Marx came down on the side of workers in the final analysis, he was critical of his own and other socialists’ assumptions about the course of history. He was also appreciative of the power of capitalism as a system and
integrated much classical economics into his analyses. He turned classical econom-
ics on its head by asking for whom does it serve and what is its logical development 
over time. Marx was a friend of labor, but to borrow the term popularized in educa-
tion a couple decades ago, Marx was a “critical friend.”

Psychology has created a division of labor in its discipline between researchers 
and clinicians. There are some who do both. However, even clinicians who primarily 
work with clients adopt a clinical demeanor of deeply understanding their clients, 
while also distancing themselves from that understanding and the emotional attach-
ments it might include to make judgments rooted in their therapeutic framework or 
even helping clients make judgments that the clinician may ultimately not agree with 
on a personal level. Why do we think sociologists are not capable of adopting a car-
ing but critical demeanor? Critical friends have an eye not only on what is best for a 
group, organization, or community but also on the theory and research findings of 
their discipline. Horowitz’s (2011) account of her participation as a sociologist on 
medical licensing and disciplinary boards that work to protect the public cap-
tures well the dialectical, reflexive tacking an engaged sociologist experiences 
in navigating relationships, situated experiences, and disciplinary knowledge and 
commitments:

> It requires carefully assessing the evidence and presenting it in a measured fashion, 
standing somewhat apart from the group while remaining inside, and always asking 
yourself and challenging others to decide what the public interest is. (2011:15)

In addition to seeking an engaged sociology, we seek a stronger presence for work—
research, learning experiences, and change projects—pursued at the local level. As we 
will discuss further subsequently, this is not simply a matter of convenience, but the 
local is where our lives are grounded and where much social change gets done. As 
Vaclav Havel (1993) notes, the real revolutionary act is the planting and nurturing 
of the seeds of social transformation, not celebrating the “victory” of one side over 
the other. Without the planting and nurturing (often outside the attention of the media), 
the “revolution” can easily be taken over by other groups with different agendas. This 
appears to be the case with many of the countries that experienced the Arab Spring. 
Organic sociologists are engaged in the groundwork of transformation that those in 
in more cloistered ivory towers fail to recognize until these transformations percolate 
up. The latter’s work rarely translates down, and when it does, such work is often 
in the form of underdeveloped policies that inadequately grasp targeted publics.

**Sociology and Social Change: Local Community Research as 
an Alternative Disciplinary Strategy**

Our first effort to articulate a framework for making sense of our work was in a 
discussion of service learning (Maher et al. 2003). We argued for the importance 
of creating service learning experiences for students that were situated in cross-
institutional, organizational relationships that sought transformative change in
neighborhoods, not just individualized experiences to assist with the amelioration of problems. We argued that education needs to move from a psychological and individualist model of civic engagement and service learning to a sociological and institutional model that focuses on transformative change for students, the communities we work with, and the educational institutions for which we work. At present, the individualist model that dominates, especially in service learning, does provide some opportunity for transformation at the individual student level but mostly ignores or sees as irrelevant the community and institutional transformation that is the focus of our work. We think working at the local level for change is an important component of societal change.

In a recent article coauthored with Mavis Morton and Corey Dolgon (Morton et al. 2012), we emphasized the need for broad social movements to provide a focus for student activism. We highlighted the important role of sociologists in past movements and the need for those in the discipline to take on that responsibility today. In the same article, Maher offered a counterpoint that learning to start or stimulate change at the local level, even without the media attention of a national movement, was at least as important and valuable, and maybe more so, than organizing for a national movement (Morton et al. 2012:18). Change that pursues social justice for all certainly requires organizing at different levels—local, state, national, and increasingly global. Developing a sociological understanding of social problems and possible solutions rooted in empirical evidence is a central charge of our discipline, as traditional public sociologists argue. But it is important to consider where successful movements are formed. Do they arise spontaneously at the societal or global levels or are they initiated and nurtured in local community settings in face-to-face interactions with others? Where, or at what level, movements are formed to be successful is an important consideration.

The point we would like to emphasize here is that we think local change work should be seen as an equally valuable part of the sociological enterprise both because such activity is a means to change and it can serve as a foundation for, and corrective of, our knowledge. Social change is often fomented by local efforts that take on importance by serving as examples, inspiration, and sources of theoretical insight. Acts of resistance and protest and alternative social practices and institutional arrangements commonly develop as local responses to national and global circumstances. These local acts and arrangements are not simply visceral responses, although they are often imbued with emotion but have theoretical underpinnings and a body of knowledge, including historical and contemporary examples and accounts, that provide an alternative understanding to structural arrangements. However, descriptive and analytical work at the local level is not valued in our discipline and is often lost. Our discipline has relegated much of the knowledge work done at this level to journalists and historians, and most of the change work done at this level to social work and psychology, at great cost to our ability to be heard as a discipline locally and nationally. Besides limiting sociology’s ability to be heard, relegating such work also limits the discipline’s ability to attract young people to the discipline.
It leaves change efforts to disciplines that conceptualize change as a phenomenon involving great individuals and/or aggregated individuals. Social qualities such as community and solidarity are reduced to instrumental relations.

Table 1 provides a framework for thinking about sociological perspectives by social level and the kinds of relationships that are featured at those levels. Our discipline is dominated by and rewarded for work that is conducted at the societal and global levels. Mainstream work that is either explicitly or, increasingly, implicitly structural functional is the dominant theoretical paradigm. If this work addresses social problems at all, it seeks to ameliorate or fix society’s problems through broad findings, big projects, and changes around the edges of mainstream society. Critics of this ameliorative approach tend to come from critical and Marxist perspectives, but typically focus their work at this societal or global scale in the tradition of much of Marx’s work.

Critics of the scale of the societal–global approaches (functionalist or Marxist) for understanding human action tend to come from the symbolic interactionist perspective. The Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction is an organization that provides a home for those who work within this framework. Symbolic interactionists’ work focuses on interpersonal relationships and the situated character of those relationships mostly at the local level. By local, we mean those being studied often interact face-to-face or are readily available to interact. They are accessible to each other. Of course, those whose social circles are higher in status and power may be local by this definition (e.g., government officials in Washington, DC), but they can also influence the circumstances of distant others in ways less available to most people by determining rules and available resources. As noted earlier, interactionists today still tend to focus on problems from a descriptive or ameliorative perspective.

There is a smaller group of sociologists who work across the social–structural emphasis of critical theories and the interpersonal focus of symbolic interactionism,
attempting to bridge these two paradigms. We will use Robert Heiner’s (2012) term “critical constructionism” to describe this synthesis. Those who adopt this approach seek to engage the social world in a reflexive rather than in an instrumental way. They understand how social structures can shape opportunities. But they share the symbolic interactionist assumption that these structures are reproduced or resisted in situations, and it is at this level that the living operate. As noted by Horowitz (2011), the philosophical pragmatism of John Dewey and George Herbert Mead also captures this approach.

In Table 1, we have left out electronically mediated relationships—the Internet, cell phones, televisions, and radio—that blur the distinction between local and societal/global in some ways. This consideration is beyond the scope of our concern here, but since many electronically mediated relationships can be interpersonal and they disrupt the ties between space and time (Giddens 1990) that historically have made the societal and global levels impersonal and somewhat remote or distant from local interaction, they are an important consideration for future analysis. These media certainly provide ways to communicate and foster coordinated action at levels previously unknown and may result in the reconfiguration of social theory and its preoccupation with societies.

Our Local Situation: Organizing Academic Work to Engage Students with the Community

We share an interest in engaging students in applied sociological research and learning experiences that are oriented toward social change. The model at many large universities, including those where we earned our PhDs, usually involves developing a large project with federal or foundation funding, then funding graduate assistantships and paying for some faculty release time from teaching. Low faculty teaching loads and release time are also subsidized by the university through graduate teaching assistants, adjuncts, and lower-level courses taught in large lecture halls. Undergraduate students end up indirectly subsidizing faculty and graduate students and receive a rather passive learning experience in the bargain.

We work at a small but growing private, urban university of about 5,500 students that continues to tout small class sizes and instruction by full-time faculty as recruiting points, despite pressures to “innovate” through large lecture courses, graduate teaching assistants, and online or hybrid (combined classroom and online) courses that reduce the need for classrooms and coordinated meeting times. Our university is in line with the general trend of courses increasingly being taught by adjunct faculty. Teaching loads are heavy, currently 25 credit hours or about 4 three-credit courses per semester and an additional hour that is often taken up by directed readings and the supervision of service learning experiences and field practicums. Given our heavy teaching loads, we have had to develop strategies for doing scholarly work and service by integrating our teaching with our scholarship and service to the community and engaging students in that enterprise. By adopting a project-based approach to our teaching and reaching out
to community organizations and groups to serve some of their needs for quality information, modest funding, and personnel, we are able to engage in work that benefits students, the community, and ourselves. This integration of teaching, scholarship, and service does not provide the university with the national attention and the funding our leaders clamor for. At times, this work challenges the politics of the local power elite and university donors (who in some cases are the same people).

Maher began his career at a research-oriented university deeply engaged in studying community issues such as gentrification, displacement, and environmental racism/classism in collaboration with local government and community groups. While providing the neighborhoods with valuable information, he was also able to produce high-quality, publishable research articles that added to the discipline’s understanding of the issues. He moved to the more teaching-oriented University of Indianapolis (UIndy) as chair of the Social Sciences Department in 1989.

In 1996, UIndy’s provost asked Maher if he would take over a committee that was then called Volunteers in Service (VIS) and work to expand service learning across all majors and programs. He agreed to it, but told the provost that he was going to use a sociological model, not the kind of individualistic model that had been the norm. VIS became the Community Programs Center (CPC) as a way to begin the process of institutionalizing community engagement and service learning across the curriculum. With the help of an advisory committee, a minor in “Civic Engagement and Community Leadership” was created as another step in the institutionalization process. Establishing a presence on campus (with the CPC) and a presence in the curriculum (through the minor) helped spread community engagement across most of the colleges and schools on campus. The next task was establishing an extensive network of community-based collaborators willing to work with our students.

Many service-learning programs send students broadly throughout their community with little if any attention paid to the actual impact on the local community. Using a sociological model, we focused most of our students’ efforts on a single, large inner-city neighborhood (the lowest income part of the city) with the conscious intent to create transformative change in our students, in the community, and in the university itself. We began to structure collaborations that effectively transferred money, resources, labor, and expertise to the Fountain Square/Southeast Neighborhoods in exchange for the opportunity to engage some UIndy students and faculty virtually across all aspects of community life.

Pennell came to the university in 1998 after writing a grant proposal that engaged university faculty with local urban schools and teachers during the school year and faculty and teachers with children from urban and suburban schools at the university during the summer. He also began working with university students assisting a local urban school in an effort to engage working class parents in their children’s learning. He served on the Community Programs Advisory Committee established by Maher and taught the first credit-bearing social problems service-learning lab. Pennell’s interests shifted from educational change to broader community change efforts during a local living wage campaign and a state campaign finance reform effort. His
reassignment as chairperson of the Social Sciences Department in 2002 provided more opportunities for him and Maher to collaborate, expanding community engagement, service-learning curriculum, and research opportunities in the undergraduate and Master of Arts (MA) in sociology programs.

A 2005 Public Broadcasting Service documentary (Neighborhood at the Crossroads) highlighted the transformation of the community from 1994 to 2004, focusing on the integral role played by the university. These collaborations came about only because Maher was given substantial release time to spend in the neighborhoods. Overcoming the community’s suspicions of higher education and large wealthy institutions in general took a great deal of time, finesse, patience, and street knowledge. Being at meetings at night and on weekends, participating in neighborhood cleanups, eating at local diners, shopping at Bud’s Supermarket, being there day after day, week after week, year after year was key to the success of later collaborations and partnerships. Establishing this foundation of local credibility was time consuming and provided few items for annual faculty evaluations, but it was absolutely essential. There is no shortcut to local credibility.

Two very concrete manifestations of this sociological model of community engagement are the Wheeler Arts Community (WAC) and the Fountain Square Center (FSC). These are viable, busy community places that represent community–campus collaborations in the form of university space (classrooms, offices, labs, and theater) in community-run facilities. The WAC project, a collaboration between Southeast Neighborhood Development (SEND) and UIndy, took a structurally dangerous, abandoned factory and turned it into 36 Housing and Urban Development (HUD) subsidized apartments designed for artists and a UIndy classroom, theater, and office space. SEND is a neighborhood-run community development corporation and frequent partner with the university on community projects. Located three miles from the UIndy campus in the Fountain Square neighborhood, WAC is now in its 14th year with full occupancy and a two-year wait list for apartments. A half dozen sociology classes are offered every year in the WAC classroom and UIndy students are regularly involved in WAC-related activities.

The FSC project is a collaboration between HealthNet (a low income health provider), South East Community Services (a social service provider), and UIndy that created a health/social services/higher education facility also located in the low-income neighborhood of Fountain Square. University faculty and students collaborate with these two service providers to expand and enhance learning opportunities for UIndy students and likewise to expand and enhance the services available to neighborhood residents.

Since neighborhoods increasingly had a need for data to attract funding, community leaders identified research as one way to engage the academic sociologists and students increasingly engaged in their neighborhood. Our first collaborative research project for the Marion County Community Court involved Pennell’s qualitative research methods class, Maher’s community connections as Community Program director, and the Dean of occupational therapy at our university as well as some
of the latter program’s graduate students. The modest funding from our community court research collaboration led us to seek the university administration’s recognition of the Community Research Center. They approved our request without funding and gradually the concept was filled in with a director and some modest assistantships for students, but nowhere near the level of Research I universities. These efforts segued into other works that engaged us and our students with the community. Over the years, studies for the Southeast Umbrella Organization, SEND, the Indianapolis Housing Agency (public housing), and others have provided rich sources of research experience for UIndy students. The neighborhoods got needed data (and a better understanding of themselves), while students benefited from real-life research experience and often times coauthorship of conference presentations and/or journal articles. But the community engagement did not stop with research. The academy has much more to offer than research and number crunching, especially if promotion and tenure and annual evaluation systems support that. Fortunately, our university at that time emphasized teaching and service in those systems. Scholarly work was also valued but defined very broadly. Scholarship that served students and/or the community—for example, white papers, technical reports—was seen as providing a needed service and gave university faculty high standing in the community. We turn to a more analytical description of the different ways we engage the community in the next section.

**Integrating Teaching, Service, and Research by Engaging the Local Community in Transformative Work**

As noted previously, forming community relationships requires being in the community regularly and for a sustained period to know key people and learn about community needs. There is no shortcut or substitution for the creation of immediate and long-term social bonds. Partnerships can be formed in concept, but they are built over time. This is the lesson of Hull House and the early Chicago studies that has been lost in sociology. Brief and tangential community relationships that are common in many community–campus relationships will not provide the depth and range of opportunities that are possible through an intensive immersion process in the local community. Students develop knowledge and skills grounded in contexts. A practical benefit is that it is easier and cheaper to involve students at this level than in national or international work, although local settings in other places can also provide grounded learning experiences. Focusing on the local community and its larger contexts provides students the opportunity to better understand the situated and contingent nature of knowledge and action.

In the following, we attempt to lay out some of the central features of our community engagement approach and the different roles university faculty and students play. A central component of our community engagement model is providing “scaffolding” from initial experiences to skilled work for students. Many of our students come from rural and small town Indiana and surrounding states desiring an urban
experience but carrying stereotypes and fears that must be addressed. Initial experiences are in the form of “labs” connected to courses such as social problems or community: learning and serving. The lab experiences tend to be relatively short (28 to 42 hours in the community) and students are assigned to partners familiar with some of the baggage students might be carrying. Appropriate behavior, common misconceptions, and students’ experiences are addressed during class time through direct instruction, discussion, and written work. Students can then opt to pursue more extensive experiences and projects through other courses with service learning labs (including longer service learning labs), field practicums, research practicums, directed readings, topical seminars, and community projects (e.g., designing programs and writing small grants). Some of our standard sociology courses have team projects integrated into the classes. With the extended network of partnerships, UIndy students can move from relatively elementary community work to positions of responsibility. It is at this level that sociology is most alive. It is here where sociology is in its natural element. It is here where future sociologists find inspiration.

In our faculty roles, we work to connect the classroom and textual materials with what our students are experiencing in the community. We are commonly engaged in the community with them and do team projects. Simply sending students out on their own does not provide us as faculty with the necessary contextual knowledge to make meaningful connections. We do receive assistance from our CPC in placing students in introductory courses, but the director and her assistant are graduates of our MA program and we collaborate on appropriate placements with skilled community partners. Some of these community partners teach part time in our undergraduate program, and some are graduates of our MA in Applied Sociology program. We also collaborate with students and occasionally interested community members in creating reports, doing paper presentations, and occasionally writing a manuscript for publication. The annual meeting of the AHS has been a supportive venue for presentations with our graduate and undergraduate students. We have also taken away much from these meetings due to their heavy focus on engaged sociology. AHS has provided us with a supportive cadre of colleagues at other universities who understand the importance of doing transformative work (see Pennell 2010, for a personal account of many AHS members’ contributions to this work.)

University faculty, students, and at times, administrators play a number of roles in the community. In our view, the primary role universities should play is facilitative and supportive. An important kind of support is research support for community groups and organizations. The aforementioned community court study is a prime example. This work is often evaluative and not deemed publishable in our discipline. However, due to our long-standing relationships in the community, we are often able to work with partnering groups to build in research questions that go beyond their immediate needs. This work is often suitable for conference presentations and occasionally publication. Pennell has used his qualitative research methods course to assist community partners with their research needs. Modest internal funding has given students opportunities to extend this research into summer months and also
present at conferences. Senior sociology students have also explored local issues and conducted interviews for community as part of a team project. Two of our graduate students have become professional researchers in our community.

As noted previously, students also play supportive roles by serving as human resources for local organizations that are often poorly funded and short on personnel. Students are introduced to a variety of local organizations and issues in our required (at both the undergraduate and graduate levels) applied sociology course. Faculty also advise students to learn about their interests and goals, make suggestions, and help shape their experiences. By collaboratively preparing students across classroom and organizational settings, we commonly move students from providing temporary support to permanent employment in the organizations they know well. Students may temporarily get their feet wet sorting clothes or serving food at a local community center or assisting with establishing a community garden, but they move into roles with more responsibility as they become more knowledgeable of organizations, the clients they serve, and the various needs of both. While working with a particular organization, students also commonly have opportunities to learn about other organizations in the community and form professional networks. Recently, we have partnered with colleagues in other programs (English, international relations, earth–space science, and biology) to create an environmental sustainability major and minor that give students more opportunities to engage the community from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Funding is important to community partners and can enhance project collaborations by providing temporary paid positions for our students. In our graduate grant writing course, students often assist community partners with the background research and collaborative work that goes into a successful proposal. Faculty also partner with community partners to pursue funding. And faculty also pursue funding that gives students opportunities to work on projects. We especially seek funding for work that is transformative in nature. For example, a $200,000 HUD grant provided support for students and an adjunct faculty person to study the impact of the transformation of a public housing project into a privatized HOPE VI mixed unit (public housing, voucher, and marker rate) development. The research focused particularly on the provision of supportive services to help former residents adapt to the new expectations and requirements. Policy issues, such as a new requirement that all residents submit to drug testing, were a central part of the students’ learning experiences.

Finally, some of our community-focused work fits into the mold of what Burrewoy seems to be reserving for traditional public sociology—critical work that comments on public issues from a sociological perspective. However, the focus is local (although the issues commonly transcend the local situation) and the work is sustained over years. It is not the off-the-cuff editorial of the professional sociologist, weighing in on a topic that may or may not be near his or her expertise. For example, Maher and some students conducted research, developed a report, and presented that report to community groups to inform them of the environmental hazards and issues with cleaning up a dangerous coke (coal) plant. Pennell involved two qualitative
research classes in exploring transportation issues in Indianapolis. Students engaged in fieldwork, examining the shortcomings of the city’s bus system, sidewalks, and bicycle paths. University students, faculty, and staff were surveyed to determine their needs and preferences. Findings (along with supporting photos) were shared with city transportation officials and university administrators at community meetings. Six years later, sociology students reexamined the improvements or lack thereof in these transportation alternatives.

There are occasions when universities need to step up and drive community change, initiating it or playing a strong role. Unfortunately, those efforts are most often focused on positioning university administrators or faculty in the power elite and/or seeking to attract money to the university’s coffers. Making a big splash for the university rather than for the community is a primary method for moving up and often away. Yet, occasionally universities will come to the table with money instead of asking for it. The founding of WAC in Indianapolis is a good example. UIndy committed to a lease that made it possible for SEND to secure funding to convert an abandoned carburetor factory into federally subsidized housing. The benefits have been many, but the financial rewards to the university have mostly been indirect and difficult for administrators to see on ledger sheets.

Conclusion

In capitalist societies, transformative change work that seeks to alter institutional arrangements for the benefit of those in the bottom half (or more) of society tends to happen in the interstices. Those social spaces are usually at the local level, where countertrends can most easily happen through the efforts of a concerted few. Broad social change is often initiated at the local level and picked up by other locales, fueled by personal and organizational networks. In the last 100 years, electronic media have facilitated this sharing of ideas, actions, and events. Yet, sociology and the universities in which it is primarily taught and practiced have maintained their distance from direct action, fearing that they will be accused of bias, lose their status advantages, and lose their funding. Except for applied professional fields such as business, education, psychology, and social work, and some interdisciplinary groups such as Campus Compact, Imagining America, and IARSLCE, universities have emphasized teaching and research that is distant from the communities within which they reside. There is a gradual change as service and experiential learning gain a foothold, but the theoretical frameworks and commitments that frame those experiences are often suspect.

We agree with Hays that sociology as a discipline requires transformation. As she notes, simply adding public sociology to the list of things sociologists do without seriously challenging what we do and how we do it will likely result in “simply compartmentalizing public sociology within the discipline—thereby reproducing its second-class status” (Hays 2007:80). It must not only be seen as a fundamental part of our jobs as sociologists in addition to teaching, research, and publishing, but integrated into that work. We also agree with Dale and Kalob (2006) that sociology must
regain its activist roots not only to inform its inquiry but because it should part of the core of the discipline. We not only agree with them, but we are committed to and engaged in the work of creating the humanist sociology practitioners they advocate as our students assume jobs and community roles outside the university.

We have sought to develop a general approach and set of strategies that put at the center the needs of those in our society whose benefits of membership are shrinking and that seek to transform local institutional arrangements to better serve those members. In our view, these transformations can serve as examples of what can be that ultimately can benefit all members of our society and the world through greater equity and justice and an improved quality of life for all.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes
1. Our colleague and friend, Corey Dolgon, is a bit more optimistic about public sociology and the move toward community engagement in sociology than we are (e.g., see Dolgon 2013). We share a common vision with him of a more engaged sociology, but think he overestimates the extent and especially the nature of that movement in our own discipline.
2. Abstract empiricism is implicitly structural functional in its tendency to accept the status quo.
3. There are exceptions to this societal-level focus in Marxist-informed research, for example, Paul Willis’ (1981) Learning to Labor and Jay MacLeod’s (1987) Ain’t No Makin’ It.
4. Garner, Hancock, and Budrys (2013) seem to be speaking of a similar paradigm as Heiner’s that they label “conflict constructionism,” but they do not indicate any familiarity with the term Heiner appears to have coined in 2002.
5. Anthony Giddens (1979) provides a somewhat different framework with his structuration theory. We acknowledge some compatibilities or shared concerns about addressing micro–macro relationships between these two approaches, but Giddens approach is more indebted to Weber and adopts a less critical stance. A discussion of these compatibilities and differences is beyond the scope of our focus here.

References


