PRACTICING SOCIOLOGY: THE ROLE OF THEORY IN APPLIED RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT: *The article argues that a degree in sociology provides an academic qualification rather than a professional qualification, and hence sociology cannot be practiced. The practice of sociology lacks scientific legitimacy and ethical legitimacy. Even though it cannot be practiced, sociology can be applied in the sense that it can be used in various fields. It informs decisions and actions either by using existing sociological knowledge and theories or by generating new knowledge through conducting sociological research. The article highlights that sociologists are taught in universities to conduct fundamental research rather than applied research, and that they conduct fundamental research regardless of context. This article presents the necessity of making a clearer methodological distinction between fundamental and applied research and proposes a clarification of the role theory plays in the latter. It emphasizes the idea that theory is not only not prioritized but is also not even mandatory in applied research.*

KEYWORDS: *applied sociology, sociological practice, practitioners, applied research, theory*

INTRODUCTION

The discussion often revolves around the occupation of sociologists: what sociology graduates who do not enter academia do – what do they work on, and how do they earn a living? There are discussions about the responsibility we

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(those in universities that produce sociologists) should have towards what the former become, especially considering the increasing number of graduates and the limited space in academia for everyone. Various labels and terms have been sought to differentiate non-academic sociologists and their work from those in universities (where we know what they do), and various authors have tried to characterize their work to inventory the positions they occupy or could occupy.

In specialized literature, labels such as "practicing sociology" or "sociological practice" are used when defining the work of sociologists outside academia. But can sociology be practiced? Can we call these individuals "practicing sociologists" or "sociological practitioners"? What does the performance of such a sociologist consist of? And, most importantly, is it legitimate? Various other labels have also been applied to these sociological performances outside academia. Firstly, there is the very old expression – "applied sociology" – which seems to have become a sort of branch or distinct field of sociology. Over time, within applied sociology, other sub-branches have emerged to describe various practices – clinical sociology and public sociology. But can sociology truly be applied, in the sense of being put into practice? What does it mean to apply it, and where, when, and how can it be applied?

I will attempt, through this article, to demonstrate that the issue of practicing sociology is a false problem because sociologists simply cannot practice sociology; they lack the scientific and ethical legitimacy to do so. The following expressions are contradictions in terms: "practicing sociologist" or "sociological practitioner," "sociological practice" or "performance," and even, in some of its meanings, "applied sociology." I will try to clarify the "applied" label often attached to the sciences and show that applied sociology means "only" its utilization as information in other fields.

Sociology informs other fields by drawing on existing knowledge or by generating the necessary knowledge through fundamental or applied research. I will show that the issue we should rather be concerned with is whether sociologists are trained in universities to conduct applied research, that is, to successfully fulfill the task of correctly informing sociology beneficiaries outside universities. I will demonstrate the need for a clearer methodological distinction between fundamental and applied research, emphasizing the role theory plays (or does not play) in the two types of research. In other words, sociologists should be qualified to also conduct research that is not aimed at testing or discovering theories but rather better fits the knowledge needs of beneficiaries.

THE SOCIOLOGIST DOES NOT HAVE A PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATION; SOCIOLOGY IS NOT AN APPLIED SCIENCE

University programs offer two types of qualifications or degrees: professional and academic. The professional one ensures the acquisition of specific practical skills – see qualifications such as doctor, engineer, or accountant. In other words, in university, students are taught to do things, such as treating dogs or building bridges. A professional qualification is complex, lengthy, and enables one to undertake a certain type of activity, carrying out a highly specialized type of work. On the other hand, the academic degree involves rather extensive theoretical preparation, with a serious orientation towards research – see qualifications such as historian, sociologist, political scientist, or philologist. However, this degree grants access to a wide variety of less specialized jobs.

Therefore, obtaining a degree in sociology does not mean obtaining a professional qualification; the qualification of sociologists is academic; they are not trained in universities to do something specific, they are not instructed to "perform" or "practice." They learn, for example, about the problems that may arise in an organization, but not the steps to solve them. They learn about conflicts, but not about whether and how to resolve them. They learn about election systems, but not which one should be applied in a particular society. Sociologists do not learn procedures, protocols, and algorithms in university; they do not have intervention pathways. Therefore, if sociologists undertake something, they have not learned how to do it at universities; if they practice something, they do so without scientific legitimacy.

Sociology describes and explains phenomena, contributes to understanding them, but does not offer solutions to practical problems, does not "solve" anything: we cannot "demand practical solutions from theoretical sciences" (Rotariu 2016: 39). In other words, sociology is a fundamental science, not an applied one: its role is "to provide knowledge related to the social realm, including social problems, but not to offer solutions to these problems" (ibid. p. 40).

It might be worth noting that I am referring here to the distinction between fundamental or theoretical sciences and applied sciences, and not to the distinction between logical-mathematical or theoretical sciences and empirical sciences. Sociology, even if it is a fundamental science, is also an empirical science, just as physics (a fundamental science) and meteorology (an applied science) are empirical. Sociology is an empirical science by the nature of the phenomena it studies (i.e., observable, sometimes measurable, and verifiable) and, at the same time, a theoretical science, its goal being to understand and explain phenomena, rather than to solve practical problems.

Being theoretical does not mean that it cannot be a valuable, even indispensable basis for various other sciences (including or especially applied sciences) or for all sorts of other existing or future qualifications (see qualifications in human resources or social work that claim the status of professional qualifications). Therefore, the fact that they do not offer direct solutions does not make fundamental sciences less important than applied ones. Just think about how medicine, for example, would look if there were no fundamental sciences behind it – see biology with all its branches: anatomy, morphology, physiology, pathology, genetics, etc., chemistry, and others. Similarly, what would engineering be without mathematics or physics, and so on?

Therefore, at least for now, graduating from a sociology faculty does not provide a professional qualification or the possibility to "put something into practice." It is possible that a sociology degree may become a professional qualification over time, although the likelihood is quite low according to Rotariu: "progress in fundamental social sciences is not as significant and rapid as that in natural sciences to provide an increasingly solid basis for the development of possible applied sciences in this field. I say 'possible' because I am not convinced that we can imagine 'engineering' social disciplines that do not raise issues of legitimacy, either scientifically or ethically" (ibid. p. 41).

Therefore, the issue of "practicing" as associated with academic qualifications or fundamental sciences arises not only from the lack of scientific legitimacy of intervention but also because of the lack of ethical legitimacy: "fundamental sciences do not offer practical solutions because they pursue only 'disinterested' knowledge (knowledge for knowledge's sake), while applied ones offer such solutions since their construction is based, centrally, on an objective, a purpose, operationalized in the form of criteria based on which what is good (functional, efficient, etc.) and bad (dysfunctional, inefficient, etc.) can be assessed" (ibid. p. 40).

A doctor can establish what needs to be done and "practice" because his/her undisputed goal is the patient's well-being – the patient's health. Similarly, an engineer must build a functioning machine or a bridge that remains standing. In sociology, it is not established what a "healthy," "functional," or "efficient" social "body," phenomenon, relationship, or process is, nor the means by which someone can "heal" it, make it functional or efficient. It is not within sociologists' competence to establish what needs to be done, or what is better, because there is no clear, unanimous "good" or "bad." Any intervention implies adopting a reference point which, in the case of sociologists, is not provided by the qualification (sociology); the sociologist's intervention, their option, "is more than the result of knowledge in that field, as it includes evaluations laden with ideology or other value orientations" (ibid. p. 39).

Therefore, there cannot be "professional sociological practices," "sociological practitioners," or "practicing sociologists" (I don't use the term "to practice" in the sense of being active in a particular profession but in the sense of putting something into practice). The expression "practicing sociologists" or "sociological practitioners" is incorrect because it is a contradiction in terms – i.e., nonsensical. The fact that sociologists become store managers, company administrators, political consultants, or anything else does not mean that they are practicing sociologists or sociological practitioners in those jobs. It just means that they occupy one of the many jobs that their sociology degree allows them access to; it does not mean that they practice sociology in those positions. What would happen if other graduates with different academic qualifications were in their place (these graduates being just as entitled as sociologists to be store managers, company administrators, etc.)? If they were economics graduates, would it mean that they practice economics in that job and that they are practicing economists? If they were political science graduates, would it mean that they practice political science there and that they are practicing political scientists? And here is another example: a historian could also be a good political consultant, but would they provide a historical service in that role, and could they be referred to as a practicing historian or a historical practitioner?

The fact that someone uses their sociological knowledge in work situations does not mean that they practice sociology there. A sociologist uses their sociological knowledge every day, in many ordinary or extraordinary life situations, not only at work (for example, when deciding what to buy at the store or when choosing a marital partner). No matter how useful their degree may be, in these situations, they do not practice sociology. Therefore, not only at work but also in general, in their lives, sociologists make decisions, choices, and take sociologically informed actions, just as other graduates from universities, in similar situations, act, decide, and choose based on the economic, artistic, or legal knowledge they have. But none of them practice their profession in these contexts; none practice economics, art, or law.

It is possible for a sociologist to be more suitable, more efficient, or more effective than an economist in the position of political consultant, but this may happen not because sociology has prepared one professionally better, and economics prepared the other professionally worse. Neither of them has been professionally trained to be a political consultant. It just so happens that someone's sociological knowledge and information may be more valuable or more adequate in that particular situation. Similarly, choosing healthy food, promoting or selling medicines may be done better by a doctor than by a sociologist, but this happens not because the doctor practices medicine in that situation, but simply because medical information is more valuable in that case than sociological information.

However, among sociologists, the mistaken idea has taken hold that sociology is practiced, and those who do so are called practitioners; more precisely, it is said that sociology is practiced outside the academic environment, and those who do so are called practicing sociologists or sociological practitioners. With this logic, it is somewhat difficult to understand why sociologists in universities could not also be called practitioners. How does one distinguish between a sociologist who teaches and one who runs a business or advises a politician? Education is a field where a qualification in sociology is indeed very valuable; a professor who is a sociologist by profession could be better at teaching (due to their knowledge of people) than a professor who is an engineer by profession.

It is certain that we have thus arrived at an absurd situation where sociologists are divided into two categories: those who practice (the practitioners, namely those outside universities), and those who do not practice (those within universities). Similarly, because instead of "sociological practice," the term "applied sociology" is used, sociology has been divided into two: applied sociology and basic or pure sociology.

I attempt to clarify these distinctions. It is possible that the idea of practice came from something that is actually done "practically," including in fundamental sciences: – the fact that research is conducted. Like any academic qualification, a degree in sociology (even more than many others) provides significant training in research. If anything is to be practiced, then the sociologist is qualified to engage in the activity of producing new knowledge. However, all sociologists practice in this sense (i.e., they conduct research), or can practice; therefore, the distinction between practitioners and academics is not quite apt. It is possible that this division arose due to the different types of research that are mainly conducted: fundamental research (also basic or pure) in academic settings and applied research outside academia. We talk about the capacity to produce new knowledge as research *for the sake of knowledge* (or fundamental research) and as research conducted to obtain information that allows for *the resolution of immediate problem situations* (or applied research).

Unlike many other academic qualifications, a degree in sociology is associated with a significant advantage. There are many situations (outside academia) that demand sociological research – there are companies with productivity issues, communities torn apart by conflicts, undecided electorates, dissatisfied customers, and so on. The world is full of situations that require the production of new social knowledge for the purpose of taking informed action (or making interventions). By comparison, the need (outside academia) for historical or linguistic research, and the like, is incomparably smaller, or in the case of other fundamental sciences, even non-existent.

But it is one thing to say that some engage in applied research and others in fundamental research, and another to say that some practice, and others do not. The use of the label "practitioner" alongside "sociology" or "sociologist" (to mean someone who puts sociology into practice) is, as already shown, incorrect and inappropriate; it generates confusion and a predisposition to improper associations of meanings. But if the label "applied" were used, would it be more correct? Are sociologists outside universities applied sociologists, and the others not? If "applied" is used as a synonym for "practical" (i.e., sociological practice = applied sociology, and sociological practitioners = applied sociologists), then it would again be incorrect.

The label "applied" is used in connection with many other sciences, not just with sociology; for example, applied engineering or applied informatics. But engineering and informatics are always applied (being applied sciences), therefore, it could be said that these expressions are pleonasms. In fact, these expressions are incomplete; they are abbreviations that indicate the application of certain sciences within other sciences, such as engineering or informatics, in medicine. In this case, the complete expressions would be "engineering applied in medicine" or "informatics applied in medicine." Thus, "applied" is not repetitive of the idea of the applied nature of the science but means "used," "utilized," "employed," "put into the service of…." Similarly, "applied" is attached to academic qualifications or fundamental sciences, indicating not that they are practical (which would be nonsense) but that they can be used in other fields – for example, mathematics applied in engineering or mathematics applied in astronomy. So, appending "applied" does not turn mathematics into a different type of science; it remains a theoretical one. Similarly, applied sociology does not denote any sociological practices but refers "only" to the possibility that different sociological knowledge can be used in other fields.

So, the term "applied" placed alongside sciences does not mean "put into practice," but rather "put into the service of…" An engineer who does not build machines or bridges but rather prostheses or orthoses practices because that is what an engineer does, not because the label for what they produce is "applied engineering." Similarly, "applied sociology" does not mean that sociologists put sociology into practice, because they cannot do so; sociology is theoretical, and when it is also applied, it "simply" means that it makes its knowledge or theories available to be used in other fields. It is that sociology that we use when making friends or advising a mayor; it is the sociology that informs decisions, choices, actions in other fields. It is not sociology that is applied in the sense of "being practiced," but one that is applied in the sense of "being used" (as knowledge). It is like mathematics applied in shopping or accounting; mathematics is not practiced, but different mathematical knowledge is used in different everyday life or work contexts.

Therefore, in the many situations where we use sociological knowledge to inform decisions or actions, we can say that we are dealing with applied sociology: in everyday life, in the occupation of a counselor, in managing a company, etc. To inform decisions and actions in other fields, sociologists can use not only existing knowledge but also produce new sociological knowledge on the spot through applied research. In fact, the basic sense of the expression "applied sociology" has always contained this correct core – i.e., to apply sociology means, according to most definitions offered in the literature, to offer or produce new knowledge outside academic settings so that decision-makers can make informed choices based on scientifical findings: "Applied sociology uses sociological knowledge and research skills to gain empirically based knowledge to inform decision makers, clients, and the general public about social problems, issues, processes, and conditions so that they might make informed choices and improve the quality of life." (Perlstadt 2006: 342, citing several contemporary authors supportive of applied sociology.)

Throughout its more than one-hundred-year history, the term "applied sociology" has always been linked to research on one hand, and the idea of informing others' decisions, not direct intervention, on the other. The earliest users of the term "applied sociology" clarified as early as the year 1900 that "a sociologist […] who takes sides on current events and burning questions of the hour […] abandons his science and becomes a politician" (Ward 1906 as cited inPerlstadt 2006: 344). Subsequently, presidents of sociological associations have argued over time that "the sociologist [has] to be there to discover new knowledge and relationships rather than as an executive, leader, or social worker who puts to use the information which the scientific sociologist furnishes," and that "the researchers should be free to follow the evidence and that they therefore must be sharply distinguished from the executives or policymakers" (Ogburn 1930 as cited in Perlstadt 2006: 347). In the 1980s, proponents of applied sociology continued to argue that "sociologists are ordinarily not directly involved in decision making, policy formation, or programme implementation" (Rossi 1980 as cited in Perlstadt 2006: 350). Perlstadt, the author of the history of use of the term "applied sociology" described here, concluded in 2006: "The heart of applied sociology is social research, and as long as decision makers want to know the social facts and people are trained to provide them, applied sociology will flourish" (ibid. p. 352).

Therefore, everything that has been added to the definition of applied sociology, besides the idea of informing (which is also done through applied research), has been added incorrectly. In fact, the whole discussion related to "practice" and "application as putting into practice" in sociology should not even exist. Sociology simply is not practiced but applied, in the sense that it informs

other fields; this is its nature; it is a theoretical science that can be used in other domains. It can inform through the knowledge it has already accumulated or through the knowledge it can instantly produce through sociological research.

Moreover, there are not two types of sociology – one theoretical, fundamental in academia, and the other applied; pure sociology is actually the one that is applied, the one that serves other fields. This artificial distinction between the two may come from the distinction between fundamental or basic research, which is conducted to enrich sociological knowledge (therefore serving "pure" sociology), and applied research, which is conducted in "applied" contexts, putting sociology in the service of other domains. But even if it is of no use here and now, immediately, sociological knowledge is constantly produced to be used someday, somehow. So, the distinction between pure sociology and applied sociology (as well as the distinction related to sociologists: academics and practitioners) generates confusion and predisposes to broader, improper associations of meanings.

In conclusion, there is sociology, a theoretical science that does not provide solutions, an academic qualification in sociology that does not allow for any putting into practice, and there are sociologists who possess information and knowledge about people and human entities and who know how to produce new information, knowledge about people and human entities in order to find applications for them (whether immediate or not). Sociology is applied when existing knowledge or new knowledge produced through applied research is used to support decisions to take action in different fields.

THE MOST EFFICIENT FORM OF APPLIED SOCIOLOGY IS APPLIED RESEARCH, BUT SOCIOLOGISTS LEARN IN UNIVERSITIES TO CONDUCT FUNDAMENTAL RESEARCH

As I have shown in the previous section, applied sociology involves using existing sociological knowledge or knowledge produced through applied research to address problematic situations in various fields. Authors of books on applied sociology especially and extensively discuss the use of existing knowledge, leaving the treatment of the production of new knowledge through applied sociological research to methodologists. Therefore, I will also divide the issue into two: applied sociology through the use of existing knowledge, and applied sociology through the use of knowledge produced instantly through applied research.

Existing scientific sociological knowledge is aggregated into theories; these are used in applied sociology, according to the literature, in two ways: either by "applying theory to practice" – "this is based on the idea that we should begin with theory and then explore how it can be used to fit the practice situations we encounter," or by "theorizing practice" – "it argues that it is wiser and more effective to begin with practice and draw on our professional knowledge base (theory) as and when required – we tailor the knowledge we need to draw upon to suit the specific circumstances" (Thompson 2018, Introduction).

The first situation would be one in which sociologists apply various concepts and theories to generate information of interest to beneficiaries. They would take theories and use them when called upon to put sociological knowledge in the service of problem-solving. This option is not considered particularly wise and effective because it does not start from the knowledge needs of the beneficiary but from the inventory of knowledge (i.e., regardless of the problem, we offer you knowledge about inequality, social identity, roles and statuses, and much more). In my opinion, this first situation is not even worth discussing from the perspective of applied sociology. Applying theory in practice is an endeavor of academic interest, of fundamental science, involving trying to rigorously construct the theoretical foundations necessary for applied sciences. It is primarily an endeavor that informs theory (concerning in what new situations it could be applied) and only incidentally immediate practice. Using this approach as an applied endeavor in itself is merely a "school" demonstration of how concepts and theories related to deviance, work, family, or change can be applied in different domains, without significant immediate effects on sociology's beneficiaries.

The "theorizing practice" approach would involve sociologists first examining the needs of the beneficiary and attempting to label them theoretically: for example, the problem appears to be one of trust, power, motivation, leadership style, organizational culture, etc. Then sociologists use the appropriate existing knowledge, theories about trust, power, etc., to inform decisions regarding problem-solving. If, for example, the problematic situation appears to be a conflict, sociologists could provide information about the typology of conflicts, their most frequent causes, the probable effects of these conflicts, and so on. Sociologists know these things or know where to find knowledge about them.

Existing sociological knowledge can be useful in all sorts of applied situations, but I believe it must be taken into account that if sociological theories were among those that are easily and immediately applicable in practice, and if sociology could offer solutions to various problematic situations through a simple appeal to existing knowledge, then perhaps sociology would already be an applied science. My opinion is that we can provide much more support in solving the

immediate problems of clients by producing, on the spot, in an adapted manner, new knowledge, i.e., by conducting applied sociological research. Applied sociology should emphasize the essential role that applied research plays within it. The production of new knowledge tailored to the immediate, local, particular needs of beneficiaries may be even wiser and more effective than the more or less forced matching of existing knowledge produced and validated in other contexts.

But do sociologists know how to conduct applied research? This, I think, should be the real concern – not whether we have more and more generations of sociologists who do not make it into academia, not what names they should bear, not how they differ from other sociologists, etc. The concern should not even be about what jobs they should occupy. The sociology degree is valuable; it provides access to a wide variety of jobs (perhaps the widest compared to other social qualifications), and sociological knowledge is valuable; it is adequate and predictive of success in many occupational situations (again, perhaps more than with other academic qualifications). See Onuț (2008) for more details on this topic. The concern should be about whether sociologists are truly prepared to handle the numerous situations where it is necessary to produce new knowledge outside academia, i.e., whether they are truly prepared to conduct applied research.

Because sociology is a fundamental science, the sociological research that students learn in universities is fundamental research, not applied research. Unfortunately, even though situations of applied research are numerous in sociology, most university programs ignore applied research or consider teaching fundamental research to be sufficient. Graduates are prepared for fundamental research, and they conduct fundamental research even in applied situations, which is a mistake that does a disservice to sociology.

Treatises on research, the textbooks that are taught in universities, are written by sociologists who mainly conduct fundamental research, and journals are full of articles describing the results of fundamental research. But the problems encountered by sociologists outside academia are different – sometimes very small, sometimes difficult to define, describe, label, categorize, etc., and what needs to be done to research them is also different: "These activities often challenge the skills researchers have learned in the classroom because the environment of applied research differs substantially from the environment of basic research" (Hedrick et al. 1993, Chapter 1).

However, textbooks on applied research are very similar to those on fundamental research (in fact, it is argued that "there is no meaningful difference in the nature of inquiry in 'basic' vs. 'applied' social science," Sherraden, 2000: 4): they cover topics like literature review, hypothesis formulation, the

deductive process of research, and all the rest. The only differences are in the examples of problematic situations and in the research contexts that are applied, but their approach is presented as perfectly identical (see Bickman–Rog (eds. 2009) or Hilton et al. (2019)). When admitting that there is a difference between the two types of research, the distinctions listed focus not on the research itself but exclusively on its management: budget planning, risk consideration, team support (even reconciling the different worldviews of its members), and others (see Russ-Eft et al. 2017). Similarly, Hall (2008) lists several peculiarities that may be challenging in applied research: inadequate consultation with stakeholders, time constraints, funding or access to information, and setting limitations.

In general, in literature, sociological research is described as either "theory building" or "hypothesis testing." As a general rule, sociologists are taught that there is no research without theoretical framing, not to mention the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of social research, which, in some parts of the world, are still obligatory to discuss within any research. Therefore, research is presented as strictly linked to theory (i.e., theory is involved in any research) and philosophy (i.e., any research has to expose its philosophical foundations of knowledge).

There are many authors who support the fundamental importance of theory in research. See for example the authors cited by Van der Waldt (2021: 2), such as Richards and Richards (1994), who "point out that the main task of qualitative research is 'always theory construction,' " or Jacard and Jacoby (2010), who "view theory as central in social sciences [...] and its construction is at the heart of the scientific process," or Hofstee (2018), who argues that "there are very few higher callings in the academic world than the development of new theories [...] it is what moves forward human understanding"; all "these scholars thus argue strongly that researchers should formulate theory, test it, accept or reject it, modify it, and use these foundations as guides to understand and predict specific research outcomes" (Van der Waldt 2021: 2). All these statements are certainly true, but with an extremely important caveat: this only concerns situations when the research that is performed is fundamental.

Van der Waldt cites authors who argue that "Research that is not theoretically informed, not grounded in the existing body of knowledge, or of the 'shotgun' variety that fails to raise and investigate conceptually grounded questions, is likely to generate findings of a narrow and ungeneralizable value" (Yiannakis 1992) or that "without an explicitly stated theory to guide social science research, the study can merely be regarded as 'naïve empiricism'" (Bryman 2016) (Van der Waldt 2021: 2). These things are true also, but again, with an important caveat: they refer only to fundamental research. In applied research, we do not

need more than what was described in the previous quotes: we do not need to extend the results beyond the particular situation in which we conducted the research, and the local knowledge gained in the field is the only indispensable one, no matter how naive and trivial it may be. In other words, "any discourse on the use of theory in research should be informed by issues such as the aim and nature of the research – basic or applied" (ibid. p. 3).

In the case of many applied research situations, the research pathway is not (or should not be) the one taught in universities at present. Outside the academic environment, no one is interested in testing theories, completing them, modifying them, contradicting them, or discovering new ones. This is what those who do fundamental research "practice" – those in universities. Outside universities, sociologists are called upon and paid to understand problems related to production in a factory, to identify why people leave a company, why they do not understand each other in an organization, or who the residents of a city would vote for as mayor.

It is useful, of course, that sociologists are familiar with theories about expectations, conflicts, trust, or needs. It is true that theory can be useful (in any situation, not just in research) and that it is even indispensable for identifying or measuring specific theoretical terms, such as self-esteem or motivation. However, not all applied research has such objectives (in fact, most does not). Most of the time, theoretical terms are imposed/forced in applied research by sociologists (not by the realities they study) because that is how it is done in fundamental research taught in universities, where it is mandatory to have a theoretical framework.

What I am discussing here is a technical, methodological issue related to the stages of research. It is not a debate related to the philosophy of science regarding aspects such as the relationship between methodology and theory and their mutual dependence or independence. It is not about positivist, empiricist, or pragmatic approaches, but only about one of the stages of social research – the theoretical framing, and about the obligation of its implementation in any type of research.

THE USE OF THEORIES MAY BE NECESSARY BUT IS NOT OBLIGATORY IN APPLIED RESEARCH

In fundamental research, the production of new knowledge in relation to existing knowledge is necessary, and comparing the results with previous sociological knowledge is mandatory, as the purpose of fundamental research

is to advance sociological knowledge. In applied research, the novelty and utility of the results are not related to the field's knowledge but to those of the beneficiary, to their needs (Scârneci-Domnișoru 2023).

Previous sociological knowledge guides research when we test the theories and hypotheses deduced from it. Therefore, the deductive approach of research is not (most of the time) an applied one; testing existing theories, applying them in different contexts to broaden the frames in which they are valid, are specific approaches of fundamental research. Not only are we not dealing with applied research in this case, but this "applying theory to practice" approach (an expression used in the literature of applied sociology) is, as already shown, an inappropriate, unproductive, and unwise way to approach beneficiaries' problems. For example, if the number of rejects at a factory inexplicably increases, and sociologists are called to find out what is happening, applying theory to practice in research would mean that sociologists try, on the spot, to test hypotheses/theories. For instance, they could test the hypothesis of a lack of motivation, as well as check if it is not a problem related to culture, group cohesion, authority, and so on, among many other possibilities. I wonder if any beneficiary would have enough time, patience, and money to let us test, one by one, the multitude of variants? And, especially, what kind of sociologists would we be if we did things like that?

This approach to knowledge problems outside the academic environment should not be encouraged, even when it comes to students (their bachelor's theses are often exercises of testing hypotheses within organizations). It should not be encouraged if we define this approach as applied research; it should not be encouraged if we let them believe that this is the path to follow in their professional life as sociologists outside the academic environment.

This would mean encouraging the use of theory to mask our incompetence: we do not know exactly what the client's problem is, but we can test, one by one, their leadership style, employees' performance, stress, or something else. It would mean encouraging the avoidance of work, the avoidance of the serious and necessary exploration of the problem. It would mean giving the impression that theories may be used as money-making tools (i.e., using the same theories, tests, and scales we know, regardless of the applied situation we face and for which we are paid).

Moreover, this approach is dangerous because, based on the information provided by sociologists, important decisions are made, such as to increase salaries, apply sanctions, or change business strategies. And in this context, legitimate and uncomfortable questions may arise to which I am unsure who could answer correctly and professionally: how was the theory that is used chosen, is it the most appropriate one, is it still valid, and can it be applied in the given situation?

To better understand why I consider this approach unsuitable for applied research, I will use an analogy. After we graduate from the faculty of sociology, we are dressed in specialist overalls (in concepts, theories, methods, etc.). If theories are the keys we have in the pockets of our overalls, what do we do with them when a beneficiary calls us for help? Do we take the keys one by one and try them on our client's stuck door? It is true that we do not try them all; instead, we choose a more suitable one for the lock's cylinder and try only a few keys. But what if a piece of paper is stuffed in the cylinder? What if the door is blocked by a chair on the other side? etc. Is the key a priority? Do we start by trying to solve the problem with it, or do we first look at the door, talk to those on the other side, and so on?

It is not correct, normal, or productive to try keys just because we have them when we encounter a blocked door. We might take out our polished keys, use the golden one, impress the client (as they might not have such keys), but would this actually open the door or just divert the latter's attention from it? While we parade the keys, someone could be dying behind the door. The process of testing theories is not suitable for applied research; it should not be the first option, much less a mandatory step in this type of research. In fundamental research, a mismatched key may represent a knowledge gain (i.e., the theory is not valid under conditions X, Y, Z), but in applied research, a mismatched key represents a significant loss (of money, time, prestige, or even more serious things like situations involving people's lives – for example, concerning their layoff or well-being).

In applied research, the priority should be the reality in the field (the context), not the theory. There may be situations where, after a brief look, you realize that key X is needed, you use it, and open the door, or situations where, after trying a few keys, you luckily find a suitable one. But these situations are not the rule, or surely, there are other situations for which we need to be prepared. Therefore, the priority should be the door (the context, the field), not the key (the theory, the library).

Applied research involves scientifically discovering new and relevant information to help beneficiaries understand the problems they face and make informed decisions that address them. For instance, it would require applied research to find out the electorate's agenda for politicians (to inform them how to organize their public speeches) or to identify the source of dissatisfaction of employees for managers (to reduce the number of employees leaving a company). In many situations of applied research, theoretical framing may not be necessary at all.

If we do not use theoretical terms in our research, this does not mean we have not conducted research. For example, when learning about Candidate Y's voters,

we find that they are mostly young women with limited education who obtain information from social networks. These are important pieces of information that meet the beneficiary's knowledge needs. The fact that we did not work with theoretical terms and do not make references to theories does not mean we have not conducted research.

In applied research, we produce new, local, particular, specific knowledge; we discover small pieces of information that our beneficiary does not know (information about their company, their employees, their voters, etc.) and that they need. For example, finding out what employees think about their boss, Mr. X: that he is an absent boss, unreachable when needed, inattentive to subordinates' needs, unable to resolve conflicts or explain tasks. These are pieces of information obtained through interviews, for example, that clarify the beneficiary's problem, the latter who did not know what was happening in Mr. X's department. Why would this beneficiary need general theories about relationships? What would be the use of abstracting information and labeling it with theoretical terms? The same applies if a beneficiary wants to know which political party citizens intend to vote for, which local TV station they watch, how often they go to church, what kind of alcohol they drink, and whether they participate in cultural activities. In general, the knowledge needs of beneficiaries of sociology are not theoretical, and the information about people and human entities they need is simple, common, and relevant in the here and now.

Of course, applied research situations are diverse and hard to anticipate. The use of theory may prove necessary at any time. But it is just as possible that it is not needed at all. This natural approach to problems is not presented as an option in the literature of applied sociology and applied research.

In applied research, we should always start from the reality in the field. If it is not clear what knowledge problems the beneficiary has (for example, if they do not explicitly ask us to measure employees' self-esteem), exploratory research is mandatory. We need it to define the problem in unclear situations, to be sure that the information needed to solve the problem is sociological in nature, to know exactly what kind of sociological information can be provided, to understand what we are dealing with, what is expected of us, and what we can provide. Returning to the analogy of the stuck door, exploration means that we look at the door, shake it, ask who last used it, and so on. Keys (theories) are not always necessary, or they are not always enough. Sometimes we just need to check the hinges; other times, we may even need to break down the door. Perhaps after we remove the chewing gum from the keyhole, the door will open, or maybe it is only then that the key (theory) becomes useful.

It is possible that as we explore, we attach theoretical labels to our findings, and it is also possible to theoretically embellish the results of exploratory

research. This would be the "theorizing practice" approach discussed in the literature of applied sociology. For example, we could say that what we have discovered can be labeled in theoretical terms as identity discrepancies, or that this is an authoritarian leadership style, or that this is an example of extrinsic motivation. From the perspective of applied sociology and applied research, this post-factum theoretical framing is undertaken with the idea that theoretical terms, corresponding to the studied problematic situation, can provide valuable additional information to beneficiaries. For example, if, based on the behaviors under study, we conclude that the literature labels the identified leadership style as authoritarian, then we can, based on existing theories, provide additional information about the contexts that enable this leadership style, the expected effects, and so on. And if an expected effect is, for example, a decrease in employees' work motivation, then measuring motivation with existing tests would be justified. So, we always have the keys (theories) with us and are ready to use them, but we do so only if and when necessary.

Even this post-factum theoretical framing of research should not be mandatory because it is not always necessary (and can be useless) and because it cannot always be done, as it can sometimes be very difficult, cumbersome, and at other times forced. For example, if we are interested in the electorate's agenda and list among our findings topics such as ongoing war, inflation, or global warming, these meet the beneficiary's knowledge needs without the need for a sociological theorization of them.

In applied research, post-factum theoretical framing is often more decorative; we do it rather to impress our clients, to show them that we are specialists who speak in theoretical terms, who are familiar with sociological theories. But the results of applied research should be evaluated based on their impact – that is, how useful they are in solving the beneficiary's problems (see Scârneci-Domnișoru 2023), and not on how good they look, on how well they are theoretically framed, or on what novelty they bring to the sociological literature. The mandatory involvement of theories in applied research can unnecessarily complicate the process, detach it from real-world needs, and have consequences such as client dissatisfaction, mistrust, and distancing from sociologists, among others.

It should be noted that it is possible for applied research to become applicative-fundamental research. It may happen that sociologists, besides informing clients, also contribute, through their research, to an increase in sociological knowledge. For example, it is possible that the results of some applied research may puzzle the researcher, that they may differ from what was obtained in similar research situations, or that they may contradict or complement previous sociological knowledge. The researcher can use the obtained information to

discover interesting patterns and novel relationships between themes, categories, or variables under study. For example, by analyzing information related to voters' behavior collected over different years, the researcher could propose a new theory regarding the cyclical nature of voting. It is possible, therefore, that initially applied research may lead to significant theoretical discoveries, perhaps even to the grounding of entirely new theories. This would be the situation where, lacking the necessary keys (theories) to open the door, we fabricate new ones on the spot.

CONCLUSION

Sociology is a fundamental science, and the qualification of a sociologist is academic. This means that sociology cannot be practiced, and there are no so-called "practicing sociologists" or "sociological practitioners." Instead, sociology can be applied in various fields. Sociology is considered applied when existing sociological knowledge is used in other domains or when new knowledge is produced for those who want to understand and address social problems they encounter.

The most efficient way to meet the particular, local needs of sociology beneficiaries is to produce new knowledge on the spot through applied research. Unlike other fundamental sciences, sociology has a significant advantage: the need for sociological research outside the academic environment is very high. We should take advantage of this and make applied research the core competency of sociologists who do not work in academia.

To achieve this, we should first clearly distinguish applied research from fundamental research and then better prepare sociologists to conduct it.
Unfortunately, sociologists are taught in universities to conduct fundamental research (a skill most of them will never need in their professional lives), and they apply this procedure regardless of the context. Conducting fundamental research in applied circumstances can have detrimental consequences for the prestige of sociologists, including inadequacy, distancing from the needs of the client, and providing irrelevant or unusable knowledge.

Therefore, applied research should be freed from the theoretical burden specific to fundamental research and placed into the portfolio of services of sociologists outside the academic environment and in the service of the beneficiaries of sociology.

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