



TASA The Australian
Sociological Association

Contact Email for November 2014

Greetings All,

“SOCIOLOGY MATTERS”

The big event for sociologists this month is the Annual Conference. For many, it will not be possible for you to attend. This is a pity, you will be missing the opportunity of mixing with other sociologists, making new friends, forming new networks and so on. The one thing the conference brings before all of us is that “Sociology matters”. This quote comes from the headline of an article in the latest edition of the ASA’s journal ‘Footnotes’. The article explains the functioning of the National Science Board (NSB), set up in 1950, which is the governing body of the National Science Foundation (NSF) which, in turn, is the official policy advisor to the President and Congress with authority to “recommend and encourage the pursuit of national policies for the promotion of Frontiers in Innovation, Research, Science, and Technology which included Social, Behavioral, and Economic Sciences. Congress added the mission to promote the progress of science; to advance national health, prosperity, and welfare; to secure the national defense.” Like in Australia there are those in congress who now ask what will the profit be from all this research.

With growing opposition from some republican congressmen and the threat of a 22% cut in funding, the board was asked, why should it remain essential for the US federal government to support nation’s basic research infrastructure. Joanne Tornow, the Assistant Director, challenged the critics in a stirring address: “Why study human behavior and social organizations? Because it matters:” She went on to say, “On the most elemental level, the Social, Behavioral and Economic sciences explain why you comprehend what I am saying. On a day-to-day level, it helps us navigate familiar and professional relationships, build stronger and safer communities and to run businesses efficiently and effectively. On a macro level, they enable us to better understand and address the vexing political, social, and economic challenges that dominate newspaper headlines:” Tornow then explained that the social sciences are sciences just like astronomy, astrophysics, chemistry, or biology. Social sciences work with “observational data and measurements;’ emphasizing objective intent. She noted that simply because examining human beings and their motivations may not be the same as dealing with some physical science inputs, does not mean the social sciences methods are less scientific.

Another Board member Kelvin Droegemeier, Professor of Meteorology at the University of Oklahoma, explained that the physical sciences need the input of the social sciences. He illustrated his point by reminding the Congressmen that the same number of people die today from tornadoes as they did in 1959. Even though we have made enormous scientific, engineering, and technological advances, what we do not yet have a large enough scientific knowledge base that will tell us how people react and understand. Without more social science research, he said, the benefits of other sciences and technologies cannot be translated into the meaningful enhancement of public wellbeing that is needed.

If you cannot get to the Conference, continue to stimulate yourself by keeping up your reading of sociology, both ancient and modern, across the wide spectrum that it covers, so that you can remind your employer, be they government, industry, service industry or welfare organisations or what ever, that they need the insights of sociology to achieve better outcomes. We need to continue the sociological study of human behavior and social organizations, because it matters.

There will be an Applied Sociology Thematic Group meeting during the Conference, Lyndal is not able to be with us and has asked me to chair the meeting. I look forward to seeing at least some of you there.

Alan Scott, Continuing Education Officer