

Applied Sociology Thematic Group
For Sociologists who work outside University

Contact email for May 2012

Greetings everyone,

There were several responses to my last contact email suggesting that we use the Canadian descriptor 'Sociology Practitioner'. In addition one person also makes the point that "Perhaps we should use this instead of the turgid 'sociologists outside academe'?" They also report that a friend of theirs, was deeply opposed to any name or definition that identified someone by what they were not and adds, "'Practitioner' is certainly more positive than 'outside academe'. It does not define us by our relation to the (dominant) academy."

This prompted me look at word meanings. The word 'Practitioner' is defined in Samuel Johnson's dictionary (1755) as: "One who uses any sly or dangerous arts." Today, the Concise Oxford Dictionary (COD) tells us we have moved on a little from that and it now means "a person actively engaged in an art, discipline, or profession". (Presumably sly or otherwise.) So to that extent we can certainly make a claim to the descriptor but I think that will mostly be a personal choice. Some at least would see 'Sociologist' as sufficient. It would probably work better for us as a plural descriptor where, instead of using 'sociologists outside universities or academia' we can use 'Sociology Practitioners'. Our generic descriptor 'Applied' (Sociology) is defined by Johnson as an antiquated term meaning 'to keep busy' (at sociology). Although it seems the word has taken on a new life and now means (COD) 'practical rather than theoretical.' So 'Applied' sociology could be said to give a negative interpretation to mean "Non-theoretical Sociology". I don't even want to get into the discussion raised by the descriptors "Pure and Applied" (Sociology). In the end a name becomes what you make of it and that becomes its definition for you. Let me know what you think.

All this got me thinking how do we know we are 'doing' sociology? A skim through one or two fairly old applied sociology text books, brought me to seeing their usual approach was to raise a subject area, then add a few papers that fitted the subject. This seems to me to be what I would call the lawyer's approach. You have your given statements (theory) about the issue and you set about applying them. For me applied sociology is about the sculptor's approach. The sculptor gets a commission, the commission is not the problem, the problem is the block of granite. To solve the problem the sculptor must be ready to use any or all the sculpting techniques to get the desired result. This approach in sociology is not a one theory approach, it requires a wide knowledge of the discipline so that you can apply, blend or develop the best technique at each stage of the project, to arrive at a meaningful final product.

Your comments welcome.

Alan Scott, Convenor