

## **APPLYING CRAFT FOR SOCIOLOGICAL PRACTICE: PLACE IN ODYSSEY\***

**GEORGE K. FLORO**

*SUL ROSS STATE UNIVERSITY*

### ABSTRACT

In this presentation it is assumed that craft for sociological practice, an applied side of the discipline, could be expanded if sociologists knew how to do the craft or, if they already know, want to engage in the practice. Its potential is illustrated in one sector. The selection, when associated with decisions or action, comes out of public participation in collective life, often in the framework of an entire society or some action center in it. The name often associated with it is *Sociological Imagination*. An associated task is to identify “contradictions” and to explore ways to resolve them as social problems. One may often see social studies going toward either an affirmative or an oppositional sociology, but social realities studied may determine the direction.

The odyssey in which the proposals in this discussion emerge call for bringing grassroots producers, who validate their roles with accomplishments, together in cooperative relations with experts, who also may ignore, and sometimes deny, the status barriers that keep them apart. Bringing together what goes together, a major task of sociological imagination is an applied goal. The craft for sociological practice, of course, is not limited to sociological imagination, which is apparent in publications on applied sociology.

Something else to anticipate at the outset is that the direction of the inquiry may be toward fulfillment in social life as in an affirmative sociology. The craft of Charles Horton Cooley (1927) suggests this direction and that of C. Wright Mills (1959) leads toward change in social structures, an expectation in an oppositional sociology that favors the critical analysis. Of course these two styles of sociology can be “brought together” as equally valid when selected for different sets of social realities being studied. In further study an attempt can be made to bring them together as background in sociological imagination for a story in agriculture: one of the three sectors covered in the odyssey, the “narrative” is on the author and his experience raising animals. (Through much of the odyssey he was an affirmative sociologist who was accepting [not challenging] the oppositional adaptations of some of his professional associates. In the odyssey, shifts to an oppositional

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sociology increased as controls became more centralized and centered upon external control of industry by distant bureaucrats and indifferent or combative professionals.

References listed at the end include papers prepared as professional submissions to sociology conferences (Floro 1986; 2003a; 2003b; 2004; 2008a). They were prepared as contributions within one sociologist's odyssey. An odyssey approach may often cut one off from mainstream currents in the discipline. Attempts to overcome this disadvantage have been taken. Not shown in this paper is a three-part inquiry guide called *Basics in Revitalizing Collective Life*. Two of its three parts have been completed. Another response is in this paper. The proposals, for the most part, are offered out of the experience both as a sociologist and as a grassroots producer – bringing the two together. The content and proposals are offered as if what was stated came out of Sociology 101, with the suggestion that sociological practice be acknowledged as the applied side of the discipline. So that whatever a sociologist may be doing in the discipline one can ask: What is the practice side of this if none is presented? Answers are to be found in the craft of inquiry to make discoveries within complex social realities. How complex are social realities? Look at the series of what appear to be separate examinations Erving Goffman (1959) makes of social interaction. A concern with practice, of course, goes beyond recognition of complexity and discovery as requisites.

A published source in rural studies that attempted a revitalization program similar to the one in this paper may be most likely to get the attention of rural sociologists. Rural sociologists who discussed the alternative case separated themselves as an attempt that failed. For themselves they offered alternatives in a more mainstream instructional role for applied sociologists. As a footnote

attachment, a review of the rural development report is presented in its entirety.<sup>1</sup> Selections from it were presented in the 2008 Goat Bulletin (Floro 2008b).

What is needed is a beginning with discovery from inquiry, which may be an understanding that is sufficient in some ways for applicability. An example of what represents such a discovery in social practice is reported in a paper from agriculture extension workers at Cornell University (Peters et al. 2003). The desired outcomes were unfortunately not sustained when confronted with bureaucratic resistances. Other attempts, even in a paper coming out of an odyssey, might be attempted. This I have done.

### SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION: BRINGING CRAFTED CONTRASTS TOGETHER

Putting what belongs in appropriate unities is a widespread intellectual undertaking. It is common practice in many fields of life and of inquiry from the arts to the most advanced sciences. Scholars can find examples from close at hand experience. For example, my wife of many years had the mentality of a poet. When she was only fifteen years old she could already bring a beginning of life view together with the ending of one's life. They go together when the subject is life.

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<sup>1</sup>Participatory research and public sociology programs have led to reassessments of mainstream practices in agricultural extension work. Perhaps intervention efforts have gone in opposite directions: to revitalize the mainstream of established extension programs or to call for a change back to already established practices. The questions to be answered undoubtedly are for extension workers themselves to answer. Peters et al., (2003) attempt to do this in "The Craft of Public Scholarship in Land-Grant Education." The authors write about a successful (revitalized) extension program in wildlife management and relate how two extension personnel at Cornell University provided leadership for it. The authors outline the process, but they do not give it the widely used name in sociology, sociological imagination as craft, but their "craftsmanship in scholarship" may do as well. The basic task is to bring things together that go together leading to discoveries and reassessments. Social analysis relates what is studied to what is happening in related fields and within the entire society. What they had unfortunately witnessed, they note, is that this valued inquiry with craft is not being adopted and extended throughout the field of extension work. What will happen in the future is still uncertain. Yet, extension workers are not mobilizing to carry this breakthrough on beyond the described model. What may be unexpected by those extension workers accustomed to the mainstream work is that much more leadership is required to get the higher levels of achievement in participatory programs. That is a theme in the 2008 Big Bend People and Goats, Inc. poster (Floro 2008a). Other references to their paper on "craft of public scholarship" are made in the third handout for the poster on "Leadership for Utilizing Contributions in Passions and Craft."

Other contrasts are sited in her poem that has a promise of fulfillment (see Appendix).

The sciences at times appear to be in perpetual imbalance between those who see success as coming from increased specialization and those who reject this expectation on grounds of increased fragmentation. The outcome of overspecialization can be judged by its critics as *crazy*. All knowledge is related! A separate field of inquiry does not cover an entire discipline. Sociological imagination, which at its core is bringing together in social analysis what goes together, is not introducing something that is not widespread in some form in the world of intellectual pursuits.

Another place of entry is to begin with analytical capacity for contrasts. Some scholars are going to be remarkable in making the contrasts but remain far from sociological imagination, the bringing of the contrasting alternatives together. Without sociological imagination the goal is likely to be putting one above the other. Of course there may be a place for that but it is not sociological imagination. When engaged in an internal struggle sociological imagination may lead toward what needs to be done (a cultivation of resources) rather than as a defensive course of action restricted to what cannot or dare not be done.

An odyssey has advantages as well as disadvantages. It leaves a record of what was done. Sociological imagination was not to be understood as only one sociologist's contribution, no matter how remarkable that contribution might be. In a paper on sociological imagination with a volitional dimension I attempted to leave Mills' contribution until others had been reviewed. His elitism appeared to be something to resist: the ambition to be a world wide intellectual and perhaps to locate to live and work where one's status is supposedly highest. I was familiar with a high level of elitism in a department colleague. For him as well as some guest speakers to raise the status levels locally seemed to have similar biases. New York and Los Angeles had acceptable levels. Between, across the country, was an intellectual wilderness. When my colleague retired he went to the west coast where I visited him and continued to enjoy our relationship. Yet reading what he wrote was not the friendly walk for me compared with what Charles Horton Cooley wrote. (Cooley's instruction was that one should read the author, not the book. Authors should disclose themselves.)

I was never tempted to associate sociological imagination only with Mills. I could find it in sources before Mills wrote his wonderful representations of it, which were located in the midst of sociological studies and theoretical analysis. Nonetheless I was restrained in my support. When I read his major work in

sociology on sociological imagination, I wanted to write somewhere in my copy a critical statement: “the local is more than an adaptive unit in society.” In my paper entitled “Imagination Strategies for Social Analysis” I left a review of Mills until last (Floro 2004).

When sociological imagination becomes sociological practice, he did not always seem to practice it himself and many of his strong supporters ignore the craft in their own work. It may be the most controversial part of Mills’ work, perhaps because it exposes what is happening.

### TENDING THE ODYSSEY

Thus far I have stated the central theme of social revitalization led in programming in large part by the cofounder in a corporation (Big Bend People and Goats, Inc.) but extending beyond the odyssey in a series of activities. Included were: sponsoring a USDA research and development project in the regional area, annual exhibits on the courthouse lawn of one of the three area counties (every year since the formation of the group), annual publication on such activities as participation in parades and shows, and the participation by several members (grassroots and/or experts) in academic conferences. Animals were placed with new goat raisers through the corporation, as well as by individual members with less stable programming (although an attempt to set up three centers to support these was made). The impact of the odyssey has been pervasive enough, however, that deliberate attempts to get rid of it all would undoubtedly take several years if the group continued that long.

To initiate such a revitalization program some guidelines might be drawn from the Big Bend People and Goats (BBPG) case. Anyway, what BBPG had going for it, much of it through the cofounder’s odyssey, will be suggested. Keep in mind that ideologies about increased opportunities for participation eliminates the necessity for leadership (the opposite was found) or others that merely state a goal without recognizing that it is something yet to be achieved. Also consider that an attempt to bring contesting groups together can sometimes at least double the resistance to revitalization efforts. It can come from either side or both sides simultaneously.

An overriding task in the programming is to bring the grassroots producers and the experts in the field together. If skill in craft is essential for the shifting back and forth for sociological imagination then recruiting participants with some work background in both social settings may be an asset.

An asset for me was that my work experience had extended in both directions. I had first and last work roles as a grassroots producer. Between these was the

adventure of becoming a sociologist, something made possible by the GI Bill funding after World War II. As a youngster I was reared on a five hundred acre duck marsh on the edge of Lake Erie in Ohio. My father was the caretaker and I had my first contact with wealthy people, members of the Club. I was also reared in a small sectarian church, which prepared me for a society in which status resources are highly valued and well known by all. Much later I could make a distinction between being "harassed" and being "targeted." (The second appears to come from an external source where the struggle is to capture and control industries.)

Discoveries can be made in associates among grassroots producers, as well as from the professional side. The setting is that of myself as someone coming out of a sectarian world view into a larger world of others. I was secularized in the church college.

To form a revitalized collective enterprise recruits may come from workers who already demonstrate that they can do something that validates their roles. Those in BBPG came forward out of the retired segment in an area considered a good place to retire for missionaries and people with some surplus financial resources of their own.

An opportunity for a demonstration of a valid producer role came to me during a summer while still in high school. An older and aging neighbor who was a fisher in Lake Erie provided me an opportunity to become a fisher with my own row boat to be towed to the reefs with those of as many as seven or eight experienced fishers "who knew the lake" from years of experience. My "mentor" had me prepare my own equipment: making and tarring my own buoys and lines for 500 hooks and swivels for a trout line a mile long. Anchors were placed every quarter mile. Among these older fishers I was called "the kid" and assigned the task of going back through the line of row boats, one after another, to secure anything that had become loose due to rough seas. These were things for "the 'kid" to do. At those times when I got the most fish, I learned to conceal that fact until we had come back and gone up the river to the dock. The "kid" was not supposed to catch the most fish! Such experience was validation for a craft. I could do something! Once the pattern is established, it may be likely to occur in other work areas. Much later while teaching at the University I became one of those professors who built his own family house, a split-level house on forty acres of land. Improvements included pine trees, gardens, a deepened fish pond, and buildings for a goat dairy. (I built the house and assisted in the work of doing the improvements.)

Searching for redeeming capacities seemed to often be a source of discovery. A favorite professor during graduate school years was a professor who centered much

of his sociology in social status. I resisted this but found much in his sociology that had redeemed him fully for me; if he were a smart Alec, he was “smart” and had much to teach.

Before retiring from teaching sociology in the classroom I became a goat raiser, starting that in the early 1970s. This was another opportunity for grassroots production validating a work role. At this time I was a charter member of a local dairy goat association. I also had membership in the state dairy goat association and was the editor of two goat producer association newsletters, one at a northern regional area and the other for the entire state. During these years one of my upper-level teaching assignments was a sociology course on voluntarism, which at an advanced level included studies of associations and national surveys exploring levels of passionate commitment for producers in different farm animal associations. Owners of goats and Morgan horses out ranked other raisers of farm animals on this volitional dimension.

From 1987 until 1995 I published what was called *Voluntarism: Review and Reporter* distributed mainly to subscribers in the field of Voluntarism. Reviews included current books and mainly journal articles, although some non-science reporting was included. The reports included visits to some research and development centers, especially those adopting participatory programs. All copies of this publication are now being uploaded to the internet in pdf format.

#### FULFILLMENT FROM COLLABORATION

Mainstream professional sociologists seek a career. Those on collaborative and applied-side learning within an odyssey of many years may speak more of “the promise” or “promises” of sociology. There must be some promises, for example for professional sociologists to complicate their lives by placing their work within groups of both experts and grassroots – producers in the society. That may be asking for trouble and there may need to be some promises to justify doing it. Sociologists know that it makes a difference if you are just one person speaking or a person within a collectivity who has come out of a collective experience. It is not just one person speaking. Much is learned from failures and even assaults, although I am pleased there is only one message on my telephone answering service that says “The Führer.” One of my unstated tasks as a project director of a national-funded research and development project was to keep some participants from stealing the money.

The most fulfilling sources appear to have volitional resources from no less than being able to do something in work roles. In both an affirmative sociology and an

oppositional sociology the place to look for its source is in what people have become in collective life. Like the service volunteer one must become somebody. Crafts are to be discovered, mastered, and applied in one's work as a sociologist. Fulfillment through one sector of society may provide a background for what can be done in other sectors as well. As for sociologists experiencing an increase in passionate commitment in one sector may be rediscovered in work within other sectors. These participatory developments may also extend beyond local areas to what is happening in larger areas to regional, national and global networks.

#### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Like many sociologists **George K. Floro** was attracted to the discipline of sociology for its service commitments. Opportunities were found especially in state and regional associations where service needs were inescapable for an understanding of sociological practice. His odyssey took him from Wisconsin and other Midwest states to Louisiana and other southern states, to the Big Bend area of West Texas and even to islands in the Western Pacific. Despite having different understandings of craft – in the Floro odyssey, defined as the ability to do something – the Wisconsin Sociological Association is presenting its service award in the name of George Floro.

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## APPENDIX

A poem by Martha Josephine (Ford) Floro at age fifteen:

"Source"

Just to live is the best thing I know,  
To walk among the verdancy of life's day,  
Or to its close companion to the snow and sleet;  
In either place I'm led to meet the primal Source of dawn and dusk.  
Beginning is the end,  
The time or setting is immaterial,  
The thing that matters – I have found that source.