

INTRODUCTION TO THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

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INTRODUCTION

As a youth in the 1960s, sociology was a good path to understand and respond to various human rights movements and urban discontent. Consequently, my involvement with sociology has almost always been driven by concerns tied to practice rather than theory. The twenty-year period after college was taken up with various social justice causes and with developing and managing various human services programs. During this time, I watched as steel and auto workers from the Midwest moved to Tulsa after having their jobs eliminated and camped out at area lakes as they looked for jobs. I watched as native Tulsa workers lost full-time jobs that paid well and were eventually only able to find work in low paying jobs without benefits. I watched as the number of homeless increased and the unemployed children of friends were incarcerated. I came to consider the old saying about human services programs being an effort to rescue drowning victims as they floated downstream. As I noticed more and more victims floating downstream, the real question emerged— “Who or what is throwing these people into the stream?” At age 40, I quit my job and went to graduate school in sociology to work on that question. These com-

mentaries –in various ways– represent attempts to answer that question.

The articles in this special issue are based on a purposefully local analysis of data regarding Tulsa or the State of Oklahoma. I can remember making arguments before fundraisers and politicians, using national studies and datasets, only to get the response, “But we aren’t like that here.” So I wanted to look at how we are here. Thankfully *Free Inquiry in Creative Sociology (FICS)* was a source for publication willing to consider studies on policy and practice as much as on theory and that would consider local studies as much as national studies.

The first three studies in this issue are my primary response to the question, “Who or what is throwing people in the water upstream?” My response in brief is: Changes in the labor market that have occurred since the 1970s. At least since 1970, employment in Oklahoma –and the United States– is losing good paying jobs with benefits and gaining jobs that pay wages lower than what is needed to sustain a household over the long run with few if any benefits. In fact, employment is providing more jobs at the poverty level over time.

The first of these studies, “Little Examined Elements in the Welfare Reform Debate: The Diminished Male and the Decreased Value of Education

in the Labor Market" (*FICS* 1998 26:1), was initially motivated by a conversation I had with a colleague at work one day. She was complaining that she could not find anyone to date. She was a minority female who had been married twice before and had a child from each marriage. In my flippant, off-handed way, I suggested that her standards must be too high. What did she want? She indicated that she wanted a man who had a full-time job, a car, and did not live with his mother. How hard could that be? I went to work with my new demographic skills and compared the number of full-time employed men in her age cohort and race to the number of women. From my reading, I knew that the incarceration rates for minority males in Oklahoma was over four times what it is for whites and that being a felon basically locks one out of the labor market. I knew that changes in the labor market more negatively affected minorities than whites. But what I found was sobering. By my friend's criterion of employment alone, half of the women had no available acceptable mate. While it wasn't as drastic for non-minority women, it wasn't good.

In that study, I found that the negative effects of the emerging labor market since the late 1970s—lower wages, part-time work, no benefits—directly affected men more negatively than women. Yet women across the board still lagged behind men in earnings. Given my friend's criterion and the fact that marriage tends to be stratified by educational background and occupational cluster, women in lower paying occupational clusters and educational levels were more negatively affected

than women in higher educational clusters. It is little wonder that there has been a pretty steady increase in single female-headed households at or near the poverty level.

The next essay, "Deindustrialization and the Reorganization of Occupations: The Reorganization of the Labor Market in Oklahoma Between 1970 and 1990" (*FICS* 2001 29:1) was motivated in part by my reading of Bluestone and Harrison's *Deindustrialization of America* in graduate school. From Bluestone and Harrison (1984), I knew that the United States had been undergoing deindustrialization in that we were losing manufacturing jobs while gaining service and retail trade jobs. In addition to adding lower paying jobs while losing higher paying jobs, it meant that jobs capable of supporting a family that were open to high school graduates were being replaced by jobs that would not support a family on one income. From a study of north Tulsa that I did for Raymond Rosenfeld in the late 1970s, it was also likely that the occupational mix within industries was changing. Finally, I spent some time working for the City of Tulsa in the 1990s. During that time, I kept coming across employees in our department who were temps. I included that in my analysis as well.

In 1970, I found that Oklahoma had a lower concentration of manufacturing than the U.S. average. Between 1970 and 1990, manufacturing jobs decreased as service jobs increased. Moreover, the occupational mix within industries over this time period changed. The shift from craft, laborer, and administrative support occupations to service, sales, and managerial

and professional occupations increased significantly more than expected from the change in the industrial distribution alone. This shift in occupations hollowed out blue and pink collar occupations that paid living wages and replaced them with both lower paying occupations and higher paying occupations. Finally, the proportion of part-time employment in every occupation almost doubled between 1970 and 1990.

One often hears commentators bemoan how we don't have any power to do anything about the shift in employment by industry because of globalization. I found out in this study that the shift from manufacturing to services was not as troubling to incomes as the change of the mix of occupations used by employers and –most important– the shift from using full-time employees to using part-time employees. Those changes disrupted career ladders and reduced benefits– such as health care and pensions. Those are changes that took place here in Oklahoma and could be amenable to policies and practices here.

The last of the first three articles, “Testing Some Truisms about Poverty in Oklahoma” (*FICS* 2010 38:2) evolved from my attempt to do some voluntary research for a policy group. As I indicate in the article, the truisms seem common stock of the rhetoric used by both conservative and liberal politicians in Oklahoma with respect to poverty.

The first truism is that welfare makes people dependent and thereby causes poverty. History provided a test. Between 2000 and 2006, the proportion of poor families participat-

ing in the TANF program dropped in half. Instead of a decrease in poverty as one would expect if dependency was the principal cause of poverty, the poverty rate in Oklahoma increased by three percentage points. That mirrored the increase in jobs that paid a poverty level wage for an average family in Oklahoma.

I knew a person working in a training program for TANF clients during the time period who provided a window view into how the program worked in one county. Instead of first placing clients in training to position them for better paying jobs, clients were required to look for work, which was usually at minimum wage. A full-time minimum wage job will provide barely enough income for a household of one to earn more than poverty level. Since the average household in Oklahoma is just over two and the average family is three, full-time minimum wage jobs leave families in poverty. While the requirement to work first for minimum wage jobs does not get an average household of family out of poverty, it does increase competition for bottom end jobs and thereby holds down wages.

The second truism is that increasing education levels decrease poverty. From 1999 to 2006, I observed that the increase in educational levels correlated with an increase in poverty level. I also cited a study by the state that projects a significant growth in low-income jobs that require only a high school education or less. While I agree that getting an education is required to compete for better paying jobs, in the short run, it does not create those jobs. Employers create

those jobs. Moreover, people with educations are more mobile than companies that require serious capital investment to move. It is more likely that educated workers will move to where better paying jobs are than better paying jobs moving to where educated workers are.

The third truism that is being put forth these days is that race and sex no longer matter. After 40 years of various acts that theoretically protect minorities, one would expect race and sex to no longer matter. Yet, as I found, they still matter both with respect to the segregation of occupations and wages for occupations for various races and sexes. A labor market split on the basis of race and sex is another strategy to hold wages down. As an "antipoverty" program, simply ending racial and sex discrimination would make a difference.

The fourth truism is that a rising tide —economic growth— raises all boats. I found that, between 1999 and 2006, average hourly wages adjusted for inflation declined by one percent in Oklahoma while average gross domestic product per hour worked adjusted for inflation increased by six percent. That is similar to the national trend. Here one has a rising economic tide with none of it benefiting the average hourly wages of workers. So, if the state used all sorts of tax breaks and other giveaways to attract business, the result would be no improvement for the average worker's hourly wage. Note that average workers would be paying the taxes to improve the profits of companies without improving their hourly wages.

The distribution of economic growth

is not even over all incomes or occupations. I found that the bottom wage income quartile benefited least in Oklahoma from increases in per capita gross domestic product; the middle two wage income quartiles benefited a bit more but still less than the top income quartile. But even with the top income quartile, the benefit was not as great as one would expect from the change in per capita gross domestic product.

Finally, I found that one of five jobs in Oklahoma in 2006 paid a poverty level hourly wage rate based on the poverty level for the average family size of three. If wages had improved at the rate of the growth of gross domestic product per hour, only one of ten jobs would have paid a poverty level wage rate. Poverty is rooted in the labor market.

The fourth article in this edition, "Identifying Possible Impediments to Fair Housing in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Using Less-than-perfect Home Mortgage Disclosure Act Data" (*FICS* 2001 29:2) does not directly address poverty. It focuses on discrimination in mortgage lending. At the time of the study (the late 1990s), the Home Mortgage Disclosure Act Data included the census tract in which the loan was made, which made it possible to distinguish effects of characteristics of individual loan applicants from the effects of characteristics of neighborhoods of the properties for which loans were applied on lending outcomes. The study found that lower income African American households that were headed by women or contained a couple as applicants were less likely to receive loans than equivalent non-African

American households. Since the home is the principal vehicle for accumulating wealth for average working Americans, discrimination in lending inhibits the accumulation of wealth by African American households.

The last article, "A Critical Analysis of the Concept of Power: An Interactionist Revelation of Its Moral Nature" (*FICS* 1990 18) was chronologically the first written and published. While it might look theoretical, it is an attempt to try to understand how power is exercised. In practice, one is almost always involved in the exercise of or resisting power. From my analysis, I concluded that the exercise of power involves a violation of someone's preferences. Resisting the exercise of power requires making responsible parties explicit and rendering relevant moralities relative and preferential. Otherwise, social analysis emasculates the fundamental moral resources available to resist by accepting the moralities and social organization of those exercising power and its outcomes as given.

After more than twenty years of researching and thinking about the cause of poverty, where do we stand? My studies of Tulsa and Oklahoma are consistent with national studies. Mischel (2012) recently discovered rising inequality –and with it poverty– was the result of increased inequality of wages and compensation, an increased share of income going to capital rather than labor, and increased inequality of capital income.

Second, most individuals and groups who claim to "fight poverty" only provide assistance to the poor. While that helps the poor to survive, it

does not stop the basic impoverishing dynamic of the labor market since the late 1970s. Even foundations that appear the most enlightened regarding poverty often focus erroneously on education as the tool to eliminate poverty. While it gives some individuals a better ability to compete in the labor market, it does not change the structure of the labor market, which has inequality and poverty built into it.

Third, strategies to actually fight poverty would be strategies that would alter the inequality and poverty in the labor market. As noted in the Russell Sage Foundation study used in "Testing the Truisms", raising the floor on wages tends to reduce poverty by forcing the sharing of income. Increases in minimum wages were found to raise the floor on wages. Strong unions were found to be associated with more income going to wages, a higher floor for wages, and a narrower difference between higher paid and lower paid workers. These outcomes would require practices significantly different from the general practice of simply providing help and education to the poor. Since I assume that capitalists would not go gentle in that direction, it would take the equivalent of bringing back Saul Alinsky. It would take organized actions such as shareholder actions, strikes, boycotts, sit-ins, unionizing, lawsuits, lobbying, and political campaigns. It would also take strategies to overcome the federal/state split in laws and regulations such that states could no longer be used by capitalists to "beggar thy workers" for profits.

On some level, capitalists such as Henry Ford knew that consumption re-

quires income, and consumption is the basic driver of an economy. Although he was probably responding to threats of unionization, he paid his workers reasonable wages so they could buy things like his cars. Income inequality chokes off consumption by distributing too little income to too many and so much to so few that –with low consumption– there is no good place to invest for a return for those who have. In this vein, Berg and Ostry of the International Monetary Fund (2011) suggested that widening inequality since 1980 probably reduced the United States' economic expansions by as much as a third. From the capitalist side, the problem is that no capitalist will make the move to share income unless forced to do so. Can capitalist act in that enlightened collective way or –as maximizing individual entities– do we need the equivalent of Saul Alinsky to create the conditions that force them?

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