PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

Pluto, Prisons, and Plaintiffs: Notes on Systematic Back-Translation From an Embedded Researcher

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During my year as president of the Society for the Study of Social Problems, something amazing happened—something that is telling, something that is inspiring, and something that relates to what I want to talk about today. The universe quite literally changed—it was reconfigured by knowledge, scientific knowledge to be exact. The solar system as I knew it growing up had nine planets. Pluto was my favorite planet. As the so-called “ninth planet,” Pluto is the planet farthest away from the one with which I’m most familiar, thus it was the most mysterious planet from my point of view. Also, because it is so darn small, it was easy to overlook—and I’ve always been interested in things that get overlooked (planets and otherwise). As the last planet to be “found,” Pluto was identified and named in the Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff, Arizona in 1930, making it the only planet discovered in the United States. Finally, it has a cool name intentionally referencing both a modern day cartoon character and the Roman god of the underworld.

So, you can imagine how I felt when, in August 2006, Pluto was excised from the solar system as a planet and demoted to the status of “icy or gaseous object.” Along with my feelings of loss, I was once again reminded of the power of science and the power of democracy. It turns out, scientists voted to decide Pluto’s fate.1 This serves as a reminder that knowledge can, quite literally, reconstitute our environment. In this case, new knowledge changed the solar system in which our planet resides. Now, kids in grade school learn that there are only eight planets in our solar system and posters displaying the solar system reveal it as such; this is quite a different reality than the one revealed on the poster that hung in my bedroom when I was in elementary school. Tellingly, however, this reconfiguration of our solar system—as we now know it—continues to be contested; I hope the kids are learning that too!

The plutoization of our solar system reminds us that “facts”—and indeed bodies of knowledge more generally—are always, at some level, provisional, negotiable, and by implication

1. According to Space.com, the vote involved just 424 astronomers who remained for the last day of a meeting of the International Astronomical Union (IAU) in Prague. “I’m embarrassed for astronomy,” said Alan Stern, leader of NASA’s New Horizon’s mission to Pluto and a scientist at the Southwest Research Institute. “Less than 5 percent of the world’s astronomers voted” (Britt 2006).
contestable. As the above cartoon from the New Yorker suggests (see figure 1), there are a variety of types of facts, mostly distinguished by who owns them, how much “we” agree upon them, who constitutes the we that determines them, and how they get deployed. As Marc Galanter, a former president of the Law and Society Association, explained: knowledge “is not the mechanical recording of something out there—it is an interpretation of what we encounter, informed by our hopes and fears and by our pictures of how the world is” (Galanter 1983:61). This cartoon narrated by Galanter’s observation raises all sorts of questions and opportunities related to how and why we construct our world—physical and social—the way we do; this is true for “scholar-activists” as well as anyone else.

This historic scientific tidbit reveals in stark terms that knowledge produced by natural scientists routinely and, perhaps more to the point, demonstrably “matters;” I want the same to be true for those engaged in social inquiry. Consequentially, I chose the theme of this year’s conference: “Research Matters: Creating Knowledge, Policy, and Justice.”

My wish for research that matters rests on six overlapping observations. First, I am both amused and haunted by another New Yorker cartoon (see figure 2), which I suspect many of you have seen. I think the message conveyed by this widely circulated cartoon is clear: sociologists are not relevant in the so-called “real” world.

Second, I can’t help but think about books that decry the demise of the public intellectual in modern life. Twenty years ago we were warned about “the last intellectuals” (Jacoby 1987); since then, public intellectuals have been described as “anxious intellectuals” (Michael 2000)
“in decline” (Posner 2001), and thus an “endangered species” (Etzioni and Bowditch 2006). The books keep coming, and I keep worrying about my place in the world.

Third, I frequently observe the desire—often unfulfilled—of many colleagues and students who sincerely want to “make a difference” by using research to contribute to the amelioration of social problems, especially those related to inequality and injustice.

Fourth, like many of you, I find myself participating in discussions among scholars about such things as “public sociology,” “engaged sociology,” “use-inspired research,” “direct action research,” and “applied research” that—at least in my experience—are as long on expressed commitment and stated promise as they are short on actual impact.

2. For recent examples, see Currie (2007) and Stein (2004).

3. In 2007, Harvard University, arguably the most prestigious university in the United States, was implementing plans to revise its curriculum to emphasize applied knowledge (Caplan 2007). According to Derek Bok, then interim president of Harvard University, this historic plan was justified on the grounds that “students will be more motivated to learn if they see a connection with the kinds of problems, issues, and questions they will encounter later in life” (quoted in Caplan 2007:60). A series of reports, including a Kellogg Commission report on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities report, “Returning to Our Roots: The Engaged Institution (1999),” have emphasized a pressing need for academic scholarship to apply state-of-the-art knowledge to “real world” issues facing society.

4. Consistent with my experience, in a recent article in Theoretical Criminology, aptly titled “Against Marginality: Arguments for Public Criminology,” my colleague Elliott Currie (2007) laments that “despite its accumulated theoretical and empirical heft, the discipline of criminology has had distressingly little on the course of public policy toward crime and criminal justice” (p. 175).
Fifth, the raison d'être for the Society for the Study of Social Problems is, and I quote from the mission statement, to “create social justice through social research.”

Sixth and finally, my own recent experiences with public sociology, which I want to share with you today, have left me perplexed, inspired, frustrated, smug, heartbroken, and, on occasion, fulfilled. Most importantly, these experiences have changed how I think about doing “work that matters.” More on this in a moment. First, let me set the stage.

A Presidential Address of the Middle Range

Last year, in her compelling and timely presidential address, Claire Renzetti called on us to “be sure our own house is in order” (Renzetti 2006:168). I applauded her then and I applaud her now. It is always important—indeed crucial—to get your own house in order. As Mayhill Fowler (2007) recently observed on the Huffington Post, increasingly one of my favorite online sites for political commentary: “It’s always easier to spot an injustice in the distance than the wrong close to home.” Years before Claire’s address, I also applauded my colleague and friend Kitty Calavita (2002), when, in her presidential address to the Law and Society Association, she encouraged her audience to pursue “the big questions”—like “where does [social] structure come from? How do we bridge the apparent divide between agency and structure; daily practice and the institutional; resistance and power” (p. 6)? These presidential addresses, given by two people I like and respect a lot, who, coincidentally, happened to attend the same graduate program in 19 . . . well, let’s just say “way back when,” continue to provoke my curiosity and inspire my work.

Our house and the big questions aside, this year I’m calling on us to cast our gaze toward the work we do that is or could be consequential for others as well as organizations and institutions that drive systems of inequality and injustice. I’d like to direct attention beyond our house, but—for reasons that will soon become clear—not quite as far as the big questions, much less the icy or gaseous object that used to be called Pluto. Think of this, then, as a presidential address of the middle range because it requires us to think beyond our house, but not outside the realm of organizations and institutions that anchor social life here on our planet.

Insofar as a presidential address is supposed to be a “call to action” and an occasion to share the president’s research interests, my call is informed by my experience as a sociologist listening to many presidential addresses over the years, by my reading of the ongoing debates around public sociology, by my recent experiences as an embedded researcher in the prison industry, and by my growing sense that “creating social justice through social research” can be a seductive and a tough business for scholar-activists like those in SSSP.

In his much-discussed presidential address to the American Sociological Association in 2004, Michael Burawoy invited sociologists to engage in “public sociology.” As he explained:

We have spent a century building professional knowledge, translating common sense into science, so that now, we are more than ready to embark on a systematic back-translation, taking knowledge back to those from whom it came, making public issues out of private troubles, and thus regenerating sociology’s moral fiber. Herein lies the promise and challenge of public sociology, the complement and not the negation of professional sociology (Buroway 2005:5).

Focusing on “systematic back-translation,” I’m reminded of what Maya Angelou, a well-known source of legendary wisdom, said on The Oprah Show on the occasion of her 70th birthday: “I’ve learned that you shouldn’t go through life with a catcher’s mitt on both hands; you need to be able to throw some things back.”

5. Renzetti (2006) reports that “as Joe Feagin said to me in a recent conversation, if sociology—arguably the most liberal social science—cannot get its act together in this regard, then there is little hope for other academic disciplines, let along society at large” (p. 164).

As “eminent sociologists” continue to debate the promise and the peril of public sociology in an academic way (Clawson et al. 2007), I want to interrogate systematic back-translation, a process so crucial to public sociology, in a concrete, experiential way. To do so, I am drawing on an autoethnography (of sorts)—what a nonacademic friend of mine playfully called “your basic kiss and tell”—of my recent research experiences.

“Moral fiber” aside, what are the promises and perils of taking knowledge back to those from whom it came? And, what does doing so mean for scholar-activists? I recently gave it a try and learned a few lessons—some of these are certainly familiar to those who engage in such work, others may be new, all are relevant to the complicated goal of “creating social justice through social research.”

An Autoethnography of a Research Process

To set the stage for my autoethnography of systematic back-translation, consider a poem I coauthored 20 years ago with John Wood, a fellow graduate student, while we were struggling to get through an advanced statistics course. The poem is aptly titled “Real World Survival Kit”:

I entered sociology young and full of energy
to gain knowledge and debunk right hegemony.
But now I’m convinced it’s only wasted idealism;
I’ve seen the light and switched to abstract empiricism.

Poverty, racism, greed, and war —
the real world has all of this and more.
Socioeconomic oppression is totally endemic,
but there’s little we can do, we’re only academic.

Liars and thieves have the run of the nation,
but I crunch my numbers or no dissertation.
I don’t waste time with Karl Marx or Max Weber —
ASR doesn’t appreciate alienated labor.

When the six o’clock news drives me out of the house,
I head for the lab to play with my Gauss.9
Sometimes scatter plots cannot cure my depression.
At my wits end, I turn to multiple regression.

So don’t let those qualitative types pull you in;
the big money grants are about to begin.
Concern with social problems is childishly masochistic,
when the real world beckons, go run a statistic.

That was how I saw it 20 years ago during late hours in the computer lab, also about the time I first started coming to SSSP meetings. Fast forward to “now,” after publishing in ASR, after

7. For an example of this tradition, see my colleague Elizabeth Loftus’ (1986) presidential address, “Ten Years in the Life of an Expert Witness,” to the American Psychological Association.
8. Gans has embraced the call for public sociology, but cautioned against Burawoy’s call to “regenerate sociology’s moral fiber.” For Gans (2002), a public sociologist is more identifiable as a teacher than an activist: “A public sociologist is a public intellectual who applies sociological ideas and findings to social (defined broadly) issues about which sociology (also defined broadly) has something to say. Public intellectuals comment on whatever issues show up on the public agenda; public sociologists do so only on issues to which they can apply their sociological insights and findings. They are specialist public intellectuals (to borrow a Posner phrase). Actually, we are all public sociologists manqué when we teach undergraduates, for college prepares them to become members of the educated general public. The public sociology I have in mind comes in four varieties, of which the first and most important is speaking out and writing whenever an issue shows up on the public agenda to which we can contribute.”
9. “Gauss” refers to a statistical software package named after Johann Carl Friedrich Gauss (1777–1855), a German mathematician and scientist who contributed significantly to many fields, including number theory, differential geometry, geodesy, magnetism, astronomy, and optics. Sometimes known as “the prince of mathematicians” and “greatest mathematician since antiquity,” Gauss is ranked as one of history’s most influential mathematicians (Wikipedia nd).
running many more statistics than I care to remember, after securing a “big money grant,” and after becoming an embedded researcher.

What do I mean by embedded researcher? The current war in Iraq has been reported on by “embedded journalists”—journalists working within and under the control of one side in a military conflict. Drawing on this imagery, I use the term embedded researcher to talk about something much more robust, something that provides multiple vantage points from which to view the scene: occupying multiple locations within and under the control of a single field of play while also moving from one site to another, one host to another, one level of analysis to another, and one constituency to another—ultimately having a presence as a didactic participant throughout a field of play.10 In my case, the field of play is the California prison system—often a field of battle rather than play.

My story about becoming an embedded researcher begins in “the suites” and ends in “the streets.” In September 2004, the director of the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (from hereafter the CDCR), the largest state agency in the most populous state in the United States, invited me to her office in the state capital, Sacramento, to discuss research on sexual assault in California’s 33 prisons.11 “Wow,” I first thought, “what an incredible opportunity! I can get paid to study the intersection of socially marginalized people, sexuality, and social control.” The story ends—at least for now—on “the streets.” Last month, I was standing on the street corner outside the Superior Court building in San Francisco pondering how to make sense of what must be a rare pretrial motion in a civil case involving a male-to-female transgender inmate suing the CDCR for failing to provide adequate protection from rape in Folsom State Prison.12 The deputy attorneys for the attorney general in California defending the CDCR filed a pretrial motion to require the plaintiff to enter the courtroom in masculine clothing and adornment, be called “Edwin” (the name he was born with) rather than “Alexis” (the name she identifies with) throughout the trial, and be referenced with masculine (rather than feminine) pronouns throughout the trial.13 “Why,” I wondered, “does the state want to constitute the plaintiff as male rather than female? Why is there no place in law

10. The term embedded researcher can refer to something as simple as a “researcher-on-site” or, as is the case here, it can refer to becoming a “player” in the very process or scene as it unfolds because of proximity and previous engagement. As Perrucci, former president of SSSP and former editor of Social Problems, explained with regard to his work on a research project involving the effects of shift work on employees and their families that included helping study participants redesign their work schedules to satisfy the needs of workers as well as supervisors, “one of the challenging things about this project is that you are working as an ‘embedded researcher.’ Working as the detached observer is very difficult as you are constantly drawn into the action” (quoted in Sloan Work and Family Research Network 2004). Award-winning ethnographers, such as Grindstaff (2002), have demonstrated the value of multisite embeddedness in ethnographic research, but here I am extending the idea beyond immersion in the typical way it is promoted among ethnographers (see, for example, the epilogue in Grindstaff’s [2002] ethnographic account of the making of television talks shows to include a sustained didactic element in the engagement.

11. Prior to getting this call, my colleague, Joan Petersilia, a preeminent figure in the field of corrections and correctional policy, encouraged the director to contact me to do research on prison rape. Given Professor Petersilia’s stature in corrections, both inside academe and within the corrections industry, this recommendation went very far!

12. For more details on the case, see Alexis Giraldo v. the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation in the Superior Court of California, City and County of San Francisco. Case No. CGC-07-461473.

13. The motion reads: “Defendants move this court to issue an order in limine preventing plaintiff’s attorneys from referring to plaintiff in the feminine at trial. Additionally, defendants request that the Court issue an order preventing plaintiff’s attorney from attiring plaintiff in woman’s [sic] clothing. Argument. The Court should issue an order preventing plaintiff’s attorneys from referring to plaintiff in the feminine or using feminine pronouns at trial because such practices raise a danger of prejudice and of misleading the jury (see Evid. Code, § 352; Garfield v. Rusell (1967) 251 Cal.App.2d 275, 279). Specifically, the jury would be unfairly prejudiced against defendants if the jury gets the impression that defendants housed a female individual in a male prison. This would be an inevitable conclusion from having plaintiff’s attorneys referring to plaintiff in the feminine or attiring plaintiff in feminine clothing. Additionally, an order in limine should [sic] issue because allowing plaintiff’s attorneys to address plaintiff in the feminine or attiring him in female clothing would confuse the jury. All the documentation regarding plaintiff that will be submitted at trial will refer to “Edwin Giraldo.” Similarly, most (if not all) of the witnesses know plaintiff by his legal name. Thus, having attorneys and witnesses continually switch from one name (or gender) to the other in referring to plaintiff will cause undue confusion for the jury” (Defendants’ Motion in Limine No. 4 in Giraldo v. The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, et al. CGC-07-461473, p. 2).
for anything other than two choices when it comes to gender? And what does it mean that this case is being heard by a jury in San Francisco, a widely-known “city of misfits.”

The story I want to tell today is best told through a series of “moments,” each of which are illuminated through the voices that defined them and can be see as “acts” in a larger field of play. I want to share these moments, these voices, and these acts with you today, and then relate them to larger concerns about research embeddedness, systematic back-translation, and activist scholarship.

**Act 1: The Voice of Experience**

Consider the first testimonial presented in *No Escape: Male Rape in U.S. Prisons*, published by the Human Rights Watch (2001):

I’ve been sentenced for a DUI offense. My third one. When I first came to prison, I had no idea what to expect. Certainly none of this. I’m a tall white male, who unfortunately has a small amount of feminine characteristics. And very shy. These characteristics got me raped so many times that I have no more feelings physically. I have been raped by up to five black men and two white men at a time. I had knives at my head and throat. I had fought and been beat so hard that I didn’t ever think I’d see straight again. I explained to the officer what the issue was [and] he suggested I find a man I would/could willingly have sex with to prevent these things from happening . . . He also said there was no where to run to, and it would be best for me to accept things . . . I probably have AIDS now. I have great difficulty raising food to my mouth from shaking after nightmares or thinking too hard on all this . . . I’ve laid down without physical fight to be sodomized. To prevent so much damage in struggles, ripping, and tearing. Though in not fighting, it caused my heart and spirit to be raped as well. Something I don’t know if I’ll ever forgive myself for (p. xv).

**Act 2: The Federal Mandate**

Signed into law on September 4, 2003 by President Bush, the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) has many objectives, but the overall purpose of the Act is provide funding to protect inmates from being sexually assaulted.

Prior to the passage of the PREA, Senator Edward Kennedy (D-Massachusetts) opened hearings on prison rape by recognizing that:

An extraordinary coalition of churches, civil rights groups, and concerned citizens have joined together to act on this issue. It is not a liberal issue or a conservative issue. It is an issue of basic decency and human rights. I commend this coalition for its impressive moral leadership.

Shortly after these hearings, the PREA passed through both the House of Representatives and the Senate unanimously and with surprisingly little discussion and no contestation.

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14. For example, see Top Ten Sources n.d.
15. The text of the inmate’s letter is reproduced without correcting spelling and grammar.
16. Specifically, the PREA is designed to: (1) establish a zero-tolerance standard for the incidence of prison rape in prisons in the United States; (2) make the prevention of prison rape a top priority in each prison system; (3) develop and implement national standards for the detection, prevention, reduction, and punishment of prison rape; (4) increase the available data and information on the incidence of prison rape, consequently improving the management and administration of correctional facilities; (5) standardize the definitions used for collecting data on the incidence of prison rape; (6) increase the accountability of prison officials who fail to detect, prevent, reduce, and punish prison rape; (7) protect the Eighth Amendment rights of federal, state, and local prisoners; (8) increase the efficiency and effectiveness of federal expenditures through grant programs such as those dealing with health care, mental health care, disease prevention, crime prevention, investigation and prosecution, prison construction, maintenance, and operation, race relations, poverty, unemployment, and homelessness; and (9) reduce the costs that prison rape imposes on interstate commerce (Prison Rape Elimination Act of 2003, 42 U.S.C. § 15601-15609, p. 117).
18. For a more detailed analysis of the legislative history of the PREA, see Jenness and Smyth 2007.
Act 3: Getting an Invitation from the State of California

Jeanne Woodford summoned me to her office in the fall of 2004 to commission me to do research on sexual assault in California prisons. As a former warden at San Quentin State Prison, undersecretary, and acting secretary of the CDCR, Ms. Woodford is a well-known advocate of prison reform and a highly visible administrator unabashedly committed to the rehabilitation of inmates. For example, she is credited with—and condemned for—bringing yoga and gardening to San Quentin State Prison—the oldest prison in California and home to California’s death row inmates and California’s only gas chamber. Perhaps sensing my hesitation to accept her invitation, Jeanne (as I came to know her) expressed a heartfelt commitment to implementing the PREA and promised me unfettered access to official records (for data collection) as well as any set of prisons in the state from which to collect original data from a sample of inmates. More importantly, she promised the CDCR would not interfere with the research or, in any way, attempt to control the findings. She emphasized: “this is a serious issue, not one to be subjected to politics.” As she spoke, she struck me as something rare: a high ranking public appointee completely unafraid of research; indeed, she opined that she needed research to do her highly politicized job well—a job that includes preventing sexual assault in prison and, when it does occur, ensuring corrections officials respond appropriately.

Act 4: Considering the Prospect

A handful of friends and colleagues warned against allowing myself to be “commissioned” by the state; most memorably, one said “Val, you don’t have to do this kind of research, you have a perfectly fine academic career.” True or not, this comment provoked me to raise that nagging question once again: “What contributions beyond research have I made?” Heartfelt advice aside, I wondered: “Would the largest correctional system in the Western world—the CDCR (Petersilia, 2006:n1)—really let me see ground zero, their much-criticized prisons?” And, there is much to criticize. Operating at “roughly 200 percent of their design capacity” (Petersilia 2006:2), California prisons—both men’s and women’s—continue

19. In April 2006, Ms. Woodford resigned as acting director of the CDCR. Later she explained her reasons for resigning in an article appearing in the Los Angeles Times aptly titled “Why I Quit the Prison System: California’s Last Corrections Chief on What the State Needs to do Next” (Woodford 2006).

20. Built by inmates housed on the prison ship Waban, San Quentin State Prison was opened in 1852. As such, it housed both male and female inmates until 1934. The prison occupies 275 acres of oceanfront land overlooking the bay, making it one of the—if not “the”—most valuable prisons in the world. In 1960, Johnny Cash brought media attention to the prison when he held a televised concert for inmates. Just this year, a former warden from San Quentin, Steven Ornoski, described it as follows in an article in the New Yorker: “the worst prison in the California system: it’s old, filthy, noisy, poorly laid out, and understaffed. I told people I’d been dropped on the Titanic—after it hit the iceberg” (Friend 2007:65).

21. In recent years, the gas chamber has been used to carry out lethal injections.

22. As of April 2007, there were 161,309 men and women incarcerated in California prisons, 6,073 convicted felons in community correctional facilities, 152 housed in Department of Mental Health State Hospitals, 355 incarcerated out of state, and 4,496 men and women in camps (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation 2007). The total institutional population exceeded 172,000 people and more than 120,000 are on parole (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation 2007). The institutionalized population exceeded 172,000 people and more than 120,000 are on parole (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation 2007).

23. As Arriola (2006) recently summarized in an article aptly titled “Debunking the Myth of a Safe Haven,” which appeared in the premier journal devoted to bringing social science knowledge to bear on pressing criminological (and by extension correctional) concerns, Criminology & Public Policy: “Conducting research in correctional settings is extremely difficult. Inmates (and any other institutionalized population for that matter) are considered a special population deserving of additional research protections. Thus, getting Institutional Review Board approval for research in correctional settings is difficult. Moreover, many correctional administrators may not see research as a priority and not want researchers “poking around” for fear that they may discover something less flattering. Additionally, multiple levels of approval may be needed before the research can move forward (thus, gaining entry may be difficult), and inmates are generally distrustful of researchers and therefore may be less willing to serve as research participants than those who are not confined” (p. 138).
to face an overcrowding problem and a recidivism rate\textsuperscript{24} that led Governor Schwarzenegger to declare a state of emergency for the prison system in October 2006. And when “The Governator”—as he is called in California—says something is a crisis, you know it is something big. Shortly after acknowledging this crisis, he put into place plans to send more than two thousand inmates to private out-of-state prisons (Nelson 2006; Warren 2006). A recent report by the Little Hoover Commission, an independent bipartisan state oversight agency charged with investigating state government operations, declared: “the bare facts have earned California’s Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation an ignoble distinction for systemic failure” (Little Hoover Commission 2007:np). This report is not alone in critiquing the CDCR; indeed, calls to put the entire system into federal receivership continue to circulate (Domanick 2006).

In both constructionist and objectivist terms, the California prison system constitutes a social problem, to be sure. In constructionist terms, I’m hard pressed to identify another state agency that has taken so much heat from such a diverse array of claims-makers, including federal judges, independent commissions, the correctional officers’ union, outside evaluators, academics, inmates, and taxpayers. In objectivist terms, I’m hard pressed to identify another state agency that is so crucial to public safety, the lives and civil rights of hundreds of thousands of marginalized citizens, and the fiscal health of California.\textsuperscript{25}

The more I thought about it—the voices of experience, the federal mandate, the invitation from the state, the nature of the social problem, and my limited experience with the type of research that was called for—the more wary I was of getting involved in a project that required a significant shift in my research agenda. Robert Merton (1985) captured my hesitation when he noted that for Schopenhauer, “the chief sin against the Holy Ghost of the intellectual life is to put down one’s own work in order to take up another’s” (p. 484). I was also overwhelmed by the thought of managing over $400,000 in funding, securing approval from the University of California Institutional Review Board (IRB) to interview inmates about sexual assault and consensual sex, work with and for what is routinely called a “dysfunctional organization,” and put together a research team that could accomplish the victimization study being called for. Indeed, at the most practical level (and in my most private moments), I asked myself: “Why should I be distracted from my research agenda? What business do I have doing this study? And, eventually, who can I get to help me with a project I have no business doing?”

Finally, and most importantly for the purposes of this address, at least initially I was not inspired by the thought of becoming a researcher for the CDCR; indeed, the prospect was at odds with my identity as an independent, university researcher with a reputation for “basic” (rather than “applied”) interests. Consistent with my socialization, I was suspicious of the “pull of the policy audience” for all the reasons others have inventoried, analyzed, and debated.\textsuperscript{26} But, I also wanted to make a difference.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{24} Recent empirical work by Fischer (2005) demonstrates that, compared to other states, California’s high recidivism rate is, in large part, a function of technical violations rather than new crimes committed by parolees.

\textsuperscript{25} The fiscal health of California is no small matter because California has the sixth largest economy in the world (behind the United States, Japan, Germany, the United Kingdom, and France).

\textsuperscript{26} See, for example, Sarat and Silbey (1988); the exchange between Musheno (1997) and Leo (1996) on “the pull of the policy audience” in the study of policing, and, more recently, Savelberg, King, and Cleveland’s (2002) empirical analysis of the association between state actions and the production of scholarly knowledge about crime and crime control.

\textsuperscript{27} To be specific, I wanted to make a difference in a way that comports with Chilton’s (2001) presidential address to the American Society of Criminology in which he promoted the pursuit of research agendas that are independent of political influence and conventional wisdom in the hope of developing “criminal justice programs that are better than those of the last half-century” (p. 7).
To consider doing a victimization study of prison rape for the state, I needed to learn something about prison rape in a way that made sense to me as someone with decidedly sociological and constructionist inclinations. I learned something about the history of prison rape in the United States: it was recognized as early as 1826, when the Reverend Louis Dwight of the Boston Prison Discipline Society condemned it as “dreadful degradation.” In the modern era—in 1994, in Farmer v. Brennan to be exact—the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed that “deliberate indifference” by prison officials to prison rape constituted “cruel and unusual punishment.” Nonetheless, some high-ranking law enforcement officials do not take prison rape seriously. For example, consider what California Attorney General Bill Lockyer said in 2001 during the height of the Enron scandal: “I would love to personally escort Mr. Lay to an 8-by-10 cell that he could share with a tattooed dude who says ‘Hi, my name is Spike, honey.’” Lockyer is not alone in considering prison rape an appropriate punishment for convicted felons. According to a Boston Globe survey, 50 percent of those polled agreed with the statement, “society accepts prison rape as part of the price criminals pay for their wrongdoing” (The Boston Globe 1994:22). Perhaps Robert Weisberg, Professor of Law at Stanford University, said it best when he said: “the truth is that the United States has essentially accepted violence—and particularly brutal sexual violence—as an inevitable consequence of incarcerating criminals” (quoted in Weisberg and Mills 2003). Indeed, for our popular culture, prison rape is a comedic mainstay for stand-up, film, and television.

As I became familiar with the politics of prison rape, I saw all sorts of publication possibilities for a social problems scholar like me. However, the thrill of these visions was offset by the grim reality that a study of the social construction of prison rape as an emergent social problem was not going to be easily funded; a victimization study of prison rape was.

Act 5: Taking the Plunge

Within this morass of contemplation, I took the plunge along with my colleague and co-PI, Cheryl Maxson, a professor with considerable expertise related to studying perpetration and victimization. I did so for a host of reasons, some of them not so honorable—like wanting summer salary, wanting to please a dean who desires more external funding for graduate students, and wanting to sound important when I tell folks outside academe about my research. Trust me, when telling the stranger next to you on a flight what you do for a living, saying, “Oh, I study the social construction of hate crime as a recently invented legal concept” does not get you as far as saying “I study prison rape.” The former motivates folks to immediately look for the in-flight magazine, while the latter invites a series of comments and questions. Quite apart from making conversation on a flight, the more honorable reasons for doing this project included: wanting to hear the voices of inmates who are asked about life in prison and wanting to see the environments in which they are expected to “rehabilitate;” wanting to take seriously my job as a public servant; and wanting to do something other than what comes naturally—sitting in my office critiquing the criminal justice system in general and the prison system in particular. Truth be told, I was intrigued by the idea of doing research that requires working closely with a much-maligned institution that is easy to critique and equally difficult to reform. After all, as that well-known sixties saying goes, “if you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem.”

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29. Although I am officially listed as the PI and Professor Maxson is listed as the co-PI on this project, we worked on this project in a truly collaborative fashion. Thus, the conventional distinction between PI and co-PI does not apply here.
Act 6: Doing the Work: Listening, Learning, and Documenting

Together, Cheryl and I completed a study of coercive sex among inmates incarcerated in male prisons in California. 30 To do so, we trained a team of interviewers to travel up and down the state of California to interview a random sample of inmates in six prisons and a purposive sample of transgender inmates in one prison. We downloaded official data on inmates from the CDCR, analyzed data from 361 interviews lasting somewhere between 10 minutes and over three hours each that include reports of 621 incidents of violence—sexual or otherwise.

Briefly, this report details the prevalence of sexual assault in prison: 4.4 percent for the random sample of inmates and 59 percent for the transgender inmates. We also analyzed characteristics of vulnerable victims in prison: those with nonnormative gender identities and sexual orientations, mental health problems, a nonwhite racial status, and small physical stature. Finally, we assessed the contextual and relational features of sexual assault incidents in California correctional facilities. In other words, we detailed the who, what, when, where, how, and the whys of sexual assault in California prisons. Just what the state asked for.

In addition, we documented the voices and stories of inmates who reported being sexually assaulted while incarcerated in California. For example, a 50-plus-year-old inmate I interviewed, a black heterosexual inmate who has been incarcerated for over 19 years, told me he was raped by his cellmate in 2003. As he described it:

Later that evening he got drunk or high. I went to sleep on my [bottom] bunk. He starts hitting me and then he pulls a knife on me. I fought but I was asleep and on medication. Anyway, he told me to take my underwear off. I said, “Come on man. I can sense where this is going.” He held the knife and sodomized me. I don’t scream because I’m worried about the police [that’s the guards]. They take too long to get there. I thought this guy would kill me. I just wanted to stay alive, to live to see another day. He did what he did. He told me to clean up. I did . . . I want revenge. He shamed me.

When I asked this man what could have been done to avoid this, he explained:

[T]here’s nothing to do. I say anything and I get labeled. I told my mother and father. They told me not to pursue it. They reminded me that I have [a] 20 to life [sentence] so I don’t want a snitch jacket. This is really personal . . . that I’m telling you. Now they tell me to “find someone to live with.” I thought he was someone I could live with (Jenness et al. 2007:51–52).

Qualitative data like this was not what the state asked for, but we gave it to them anyway.

These data and the report they anchor reveal that not a single inmate saw correctional officers as allies in the pursuit of personal safety in carceral environments. As the final paragraph of the report asserts:

It is important to recommend the obvious: CDCR officials should spend more time thinking about how to create carceral environments in which “fighting or fucking” (to quote inmates) 31 are not the only options in some situations (Jenness et al. 2007:64).

Strong admonishments, I thought. All the harsher coming from academics who have never been charged with running a prison and don’t know, from an experiential point of view, what I—as a former academic department chair—call “the five Ds of administration”: details, dictates, dilemmas, difficulties, and disasters.

What I do know is that by doing the research I have described thus far, I sometimes inadvertently and sometimes purposely became an embedded researcher. Unlike with other research I

30. To complete this report, we drew upon the considerable talent and work ethic of two project managers, Kristy Matsuda and Jennifer Sumner. Therefore, both are appropriately listed as coauthors on the report (see Jenness et al. 2007).

31. As we learned throughout this research, fighting or fucking is a mantra of sorts among inmates; likewise, we learned, “be tough and strong” is a mantra of sorts among correctional officers. In an unfortunate way, these two mantras are compatible and speak to a shared culture.
have done, I found myself deeply and didactically engaged with the larger field at play. From the top to the bottom and off to the side, I found myself engaging in systematic back-translation.

**Act 7: Getting Embedded, Going Public, and Engaging with Communities**

At the “top,” for over two years I worked closely with CDCR officials to develop a research design and logistics protocol that would direct our efforts; at this point, “our” refers to my team at UCI and Wendy Still, associate director of the CDCR, and her team in what is colloquially called “agency.” Over time, our “teams” became closely intertwined. Early in the research effort, for example, I presented a working plan for the research design and logistics protocols at a wardens’ meeting. During and after this presentation, wardens and their associates from 33 prisons had an opportunity to hear about, critique, and shape the research design. For example, they expressed concerns that we might believe inmates’ reports when, in fact, they are not substantiated; throughout the project CDCR officials reminded us that inmates lie. Not to be outdone, however, inmates routinely told us that corrections officials lie! More relevant to getting this research done, CDCR officials let us know—in no uncertain terms—what could and could not be done in the name of research inside the walls of their prisons, constantly invoking “safety and security” concerns—for us, for inmates, and for CDCR personnel—as the highest priority at all times; these concerns dictate every decision and every action. While we determined site selection and sample selection procedures, corrections personnel determined the conditions under which we could enter prisons, interview inmates, and otherwise collect data. We were pleased that they allowed us to randomly select inmates to be interviewed, which ensured the need to put on stab-proof vests and interview inmates in administrative segregation (i.e., “the hole”). I tell you this to reveal that we were given latitude, but it was their latitude to give. We were dependent upon them. In short, we were embedded.

More recently, when I presented findings from our report at another wardens’ retreat, I was struck by the many responses I received: some were suspicious of inmates’ reports, asking “how do you know they are not lying?”; some were glad to know that undetected sexual assault is being documented, commenting “this has been going on for years”; and some were confused about what it all means for their daily work life, asking “so what does your research mean for what we should do?” In this pool of telling commentary, one of the most revealing comments came when I was told that after the Q & A one warden said to another, in a seemingly casual and confidential moment: “She’s one of us.” This and other comments always stopped me short. We were certainly dependent upon wardens, but I didn’t want to think I had become one of them!

32. I am using “off to the side” to refer to engagement with entities that are external to both the top and the bottom of the prison system, but central to the field of play nonetheless. Others, for example Grindstaff (2002), refer to this as “up,” “down,” and “sideways” (or “across”), but then warn that such locational language runs the risk of artificially and inappropriately reifying problematic assumptions about the relative status and worth of the players in the field. That is not my intent.

33. It was not lost on us that these concerns also served to keep control over outsiders, including researchers.

34. As just one example, it was a requirement for each interviewer to conduct face-to-face interviews with inmates in a confidential setting (i.e., a setting in which the interview could not be overhead). Privacy was defined by sound, not sight. The particular interview environment varied depending on the available space at each prison. Interviews were conducted in correctional counselors’ offices, chapels, and visiting rooms (with and without glass separating the interviewer and the inmate), as well as conference rooms and what appeared to be custodial closets. Interviewers were ultimately responsible for ensuring a private setting for the interview, while correctional officers were responsible for securing a safe environment for the interview. This division of labor worked well, even when an interviewer indicated an unwillingness to do an interview in a particular setting and/or an officer indicated an unwillingness to allow an interview to be conducted in a particular setting.

35. As another example, more recently a high-ranking CDCR official quipped “Good correctional awareness there, girl!” when I observed two different spellings of her name. I’m sure these types of comments were meant as a compliment, but they caught me “off guard” (no pun intended) for a whole host of reasons relevant to being an embedded researcher rather than a warden.
At the bottom of the organizational chart, we were likewise dependent upon the inmates with whom we were embedded. Early on, colleagues, advocates, and prisons officials alike told us—that "inmates will never talk with you" and "if they do talk to you, they will not talk about sexual behavior" and "if they do talk about sex, they won’t talk about sexual assault." If this proved true, I knew we would fail.

The key to success was to get inmates to not only talk, but to talk about sexual assault among inmates—a topic they have good reason to avoid. Although we made many mistakes along the way,

36 By pilot testing our instrument, we got a good sense of what works and what doesn’t. As just one example, I remember learning the hard way that writing "PREA"—the acronym for Prison Rape Elimination Act—on a ducat (the official permission form that enables an inmate to legitimately move throughout the institution for a particular appointment or responsibility, such as a work assignment, medical appointment, or interview) does not work. In a pilot interview an inmate told me he was "very stressed out" because he didn’t know what P-R-E-A meant, had a friend look it up at the prison law library, fixated on the word "rape," and presumed he was going to be charged with raping a female correctional officer.

37 As explained in the report (Jenness et al. 2007:21), 429 inmates were invited to participate in the study. Of those, 370 (86.2 percent) inmates agreed to participate in the study and indicated their agreement by signing an informed consent form. Our sampling and informed consent procedure yielded an 85.3 percent active participation rate for the randomly selected sample and a 93.5 percent active participation rate for the transgender sample. The active participation rate reflects the rate at which inmates who were contacted by interviewers agreed to participate in the study and signed an informed consent form (Esbensen et al. 1999).


If this proved true, I knew we would fail.

The key to success was to get inmates to not only talk, but to talk about sexual assault among inmates—a topic they have good reason to avoid. Although we made many mistakes along the way, an extraordinary participation rate—over 85 percent of the inmates we approached consented to be interviewed—reveals we did not fail on this front. It turns out, talking honestly with inmates, which included telling them we could not offer them anything for being interviewed, ensuring confidentiality, and acknowledging our outsider status, sufficed.

During the data collection and thereafter, we continued to hear from inmates—not just in the interviews, but via post interview correspondence. As a letter I received from an inmate reveals (see figure 3), inmates are “interested in educated society’s opinion of my people and our little piece of hell we got going on in the darker side of the golden state.” Despite our distant locations—inmates in a little piece of hell and me in the Ivory Tower—we have some things in common. Our difference is obvious—they are convicted felons living in controlled environments and I’m not. Our commonality, upon reflection, is not surprising: like me, they too care about their families, want respect, and desire social change.

Finally, along with dialogue at the top and at the bottom, there was considerable engagement “off to the side.” By off to the side I mean to point to locations external to both the top and the bottom of the prison system, but in the field of play nonetheless. Two quick examples will suffice. Early in the research and after the report was completed, the only watchdog group focused exclusively on the issue of sexual assault in detention facilities, Stop Prisoner Rape, invited dialogue. When I presented the findings from this research to the executive staff of Stop Prisoner Rape, they engaged Michael Smyth, an advanced graduate student who interviewed inmates for the project, and me in a spirited discussion about which findings were true and which were suspect. From their point of view, the finding about transgender inmates—that they are significantly more likely to be sexually assaulted while incarcerated—was absolutely believable; however, the finding that inmates’ age and length of time incarcerated, in and of themselves, do not predict sexual assault was suspect and calls for more and better research were articulated. After the meeting, in a “thank you” e-mail, an executive level officer explained: “Your report is an incredibly important tool for us, confirming several of the patterns and dynamics that we have sought to highlight for years based on our own anecdotal evidence.”

In a more recent instance of off to the side engagement, I gave four hours of testimony in San Francisco Superior Court after being subpoenaed to appear as an “expert” in the highly politicized legal case— the one I mentioned earlier in the article—in which our report was
entered into evidence as “Exhibit 1A.” My testimony was given in front of an array of stakeholders, including the law—in the form of a Superior Court judge; the aggrieved party—in the form of a transgender inmate who alleged being serially sexually assaulted in a California prison; the accused parties—in the form of a handful of defendants, including rank and file officers, clinicians charged with the care of inmates, and finally, the CDCR—in the form of Wendy Still, the very person I came to know as my CDCR “teammate” in the research.39

The courtroom was, to say the least, a “tense” environment and I was seemingly “caught in the middle” and undeniably on public display. Predictably, in our adversarial legal system, the audience was bifurcated. There were those representing the rights of inmates, in this case the plaintiff’s attorney and members of San Francisco’s transgender community in the gallery. They opposed male-to-female transgender inmates being treated as, to use their terms, “live bait in a shark tank.” Then there were those defending the performance of the CDCR, in this case the state’s attorneys and my valuable “teammate” Wendy Still. They wanted to convince the jury that correctional policy is sound and that correctional personnel did not behave outside the scope of policy. Both sides oriented to my report, Exhibit 1A, to their advantage. For me, the quick lesson here is to remember how to compute and explain a chi-square test off the top of your head and under oath—testimony in cross-examination can require it!

39. As we explain in the acknowledgements in the report, “from beginning to end” Wendy Still “ensured unfiltered access to California prisons and inmates, encouraged wardens at prisons from which data were collected to cooperate with our efforts to collect data, authorized and facilitated the acquisition of CDCR data, and generally provided a level of institutional support that is virtually unheard of in prison research” (Jenness et al. 2007:np).
Looking Back to Look Forward (or “Lessons from the Field”)

By the time this project was finished, I was perceived by some as having fallen prey to “the pull of the policy audience” and, in the process, perhaps most easily identifiable as a “hired gun” for the CDCR more than an independent researcher working for the University of California. For others, I had finally taken an opportunity to use my research skills to “do good” in a bad system that purports to embrace “evidence-based” practices.40

The perception of others aside, from my point of view, throughout the project I was walking a tightrope, balancing my outsider status (as a professor) with my insider status (as a researcher for the CDCR). The invisible gate in the wall between academic and correctional institutions had been opened, and I walked through it. As I did so, considerable opportunity for sustained didactic exchange presented itself. Thus, I could not help but think about Burawoy’s call for public sociology anchored in systematic back-translation as well as Angelou’s advice about wearing two catchers’ mitts. Systematic back-translation is defined as a didactic process; without it, there is no productive engagement, and it’s why, as an embedded researcher, you don’t wear a catcher’s mitt on both hands.

It’s easy to be seduced as a researcher when you get invited to create knowledge and offered a place at the table to talk about that knowledge as it relates to policy, practice, and people—in high ranking administrative meetings, in a courtroom, to the press, and with plaintiffs looking for injunctive relief—that’s legal lingo for system reform. Doing so can make you feel more important than you are. And we should never underestimate the power of being made to feel good.41

However, systematic back-translation, especially when focused on issues related to justice, is also a messy, tough, and hazardous business made difficult for a host of reasons already identified in the literature (see for example, Brownstein 2007, Clawson et al. 2007, Schwartz 2006, and Stacey 2004,). My experience has taught me that being embedded as a researcher is a fantastic way to get unique perspective, insight, and data, but only if one can be more like a cat than a dog. With threats of “going native” abound and the seduction of feeling important omnipresent, it is useful to remember that cats, unlike dogs, have never been fully domesticated. A group of French archeologists who spent six years collecting species of wildcats and their DNA in places as far apart as Scotland, Israel, and Mongolia have distinguished the cat from other domestic animals. Now, I don’t presume to understand the details of this research, but a recent article in the New York Times described it this way:

[U]nlike other domestic animals, which were tamed by people, cats probably domesticated themselves, which could account for the haughty independence of their descendants. “The cats were adapting themselves to a new environment, so the push for domestication came from the cat side, not the human side,” Dr. Driscoll [the lead researcher] said (Wade 2007:A8).

In other words, cats choose their location, but are not defined or owned by it. In simple terms, they work for themselves.

Extending this imagery, I was recently told by a nonacademic colleague who has been embedded in state government for over thirty years,42 that there are two types of loyalty: cat loyalty and dog loyalty. Dogs are loyal to people, thus they do what they can to please

40. The mission of the research office in the CDCR is to “provide quality research, data analysis, and evaluation to implement evidence-based programs and corrections, strengthen policy, inform management decisions, and ensure accountability.”

41. As Maya Angelou once said, “I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel” (see http://thinkexist.com/quotes/maya_angelou/).

42. Kathy Jett, chair, Governor’s Rehabilitation Strike Team, July 25, 2007, and, more recently, undersecretary, California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.
them, entertain them, and otherwise evoke their commitment. In contrast, cats are loyal to home, mission, and place. Anyone who has had both cats and dogs knows the difference. I’m a cat person, and while I like and respect dog people (I even know a few I call “friends”), I think researchers should proceed like cat people—domesticate their environment, but not be beholden to those who comprise it. This is a perilous task given the relations of dependence that thread the fabric of the field of play for an embedded researcher. The irony here is that the animal that never goes far from home—the cat—is smart and has the qualities and characteristics needed by the researcher who is embedded in relations outside the Ivory Tower.

Both outside and inside the field of play, my experiences also remind me that not everyone wants to talk about, understand, or otherwise attend to justice and injustice—a crucial lesson for those interested in creating justice through research (see figure 4). Moreover, when people do want to talk about social problems, it is not always academics, researchers, teachers, and intellectuals with whom they want to talk. Michael Welch, Melissa Fenwich, and Meredith Roberts’ (1997) content analysis of featured articles on crime in major newspapers, for example, reveals that state managers are more often quoted than intellectuals; the most often quoted expert on crime is the director of the FBI; the least represented segment of experts is female professors. Duh. And, of course, who gets to talk relates to what gets said.43

43. In the case of crime control, politicians and practitioners more frequently attribute crime to individualistic causes while, predictably, professors and researchers more frequently attribute crime to social forces (Welch, Fenwich, and Roberts 1998).
Beyond the question of “look who’s talking” and “what’s getting said,” we might ask “how do they get heard”? When social science researchers talk (or write), they often get dismissed as “unhearable” for a variety of reasons that have been well documented by others: too much technical jargon, an inability or unwillingness to speak in sound bytes, the deployment of words that are first and foremost heard as a political stance and only secondarily as a social science finding or theory, and the failure to acknowledge a few “inconvenient facts” of their own.

This, then, brings me to what I’m calling “the translation problem”: how do we take the research we produce, translate it into meaningful terms for audiences outside of academic life, and move it one step closer to being knowledge that matters in some larger sense? My response brings me to my conclusion.

**Conclusion**

I think it is important to keep in mind that the approach to knowledge production, the data we produce, and the theoretical understandings we advance are the best friends we have in the field at play. More to the point, they are the only unique contributions we have to make in the field of play; they can provide a vocabulary for discussion that, itself, provides understanding and a new view of the problem. Along with this contribution, which I never underestimate, is the necessity of both caution and humility with regard to what we know and don’t know; some skepticism about the relation of theory to empirical result; an acknowledgment that what we know is provisional and contingent (see figure 5). These practices are often lacking in politics, in government agencies, and certainly in the courtroom.

It was certainly lacking for Art Buchwald, the Pulitzer Prize winning political satirist, columnist, and author of more than thirty books, who said the following to the *New York Times* in 1972: “I never talk to anybody. Facts just get in the way” (quoted in Sahagun 2007:19). Our job is to produce facts and contextualized understandings that can get in the way, but we can’t control whether they actually do get in the way.

We can never fully anticipate how our contributions will be perceived, deployed, and utilized by others (see figure 6). Often we cannot even anticipate who the “others” are. We

44. For a more general and more engaging discussion along these lines, see *Words that Work: It’s Not What You Say, It’s What People Hear* by Luntz (2007).

45. For example, as I was working on this address, the media was reporting on high profile empirical studies that found that the death penalty reduces urban homicides (see, for example, Mocan 2003). This was not a finding I could get my progressive colleagues to take seriously beyond saying some version of “well, it’s only one study” or “I’m sure the data and methods are flawed.” Of course, many of the studies they cite are “only one study” and they, like me, have produced, published, and cited studies with flaws. My guess is that the discussion I was hoping for was never forthcoming because any discussion of a “functional” outcome associated with the death penalty is simply too taboo among progressive criminologists.

46. Of course, some would disagree with this claim. Landry, Moktar, and Amara’s (2003) empirical work on the extent to which university research is used in government agencies reveals that the characteristics of research and the focus on the advancement of scholarly knowledge or on users’ needs do not explain the uptake of research; rather, users’ adaptation of research, users’ acquisition efforts, and links between researchers and users are good predictors of “uptake.” See also, Amara, Ouimet, and Landry (2004).

47. Philip Goodman, an advanced graduate student and research assistant on the project described in this address, articulated this responsibility in an e-mail written in response to reading the theme for this year’s annual meeting of the SSSP. As he wrote: “sometimes researchers can make an ‘impact’ not by what they say, but by what they don’t say. In other words, your recognition of where the data are limited, your careful efforts to acknowledge where future research might shed light, your equal privileging of social scientific research and transgender women’s (anecdotal) stories (which, themselves are, as you write, often contradictory) all indicate a very important role of academics—to counsel the need for caution and honesty with regard to what we know and don’t know. This, in my humble opinion, is something lacking in politics, government agencies, and a host of other arenas. I think interesting area of research for your theme would be to probe whether researchers have encouraged policy makers to be more reflective and thoughtful before making sweeping conclusions and/or programmatic changes.”
certainly cannot control the consumption of our work as it traverses across diverse audiences who put their own imprint on it. We can—and I think should—play a role in escorting our findings and understandings outside the environment in which they were produced and into arenas in which they can inform dialogue, influence claims-makers, and shape policy and practice. Because, as Gary Marx (2007:18) quipped, “the future has a wonderfully open-ended quality about it,” we should accept that we don’t have full control over how our work makes its way into and through fields of play even as we try to escort it in the journey at times. Nor should we ultimately have control; to do so would reveal a hubris that points to the seductions of social engineering. As Shakespeare taught us again and again and again, such hubris always ends badly.

Even taking sides in the field of play is hazardous business. For example, in prisons it is easy to proclaim that “guards are just plain cruel” or “mere neanderthals”; likewise, it is easy to maintain that “prisoners are only products of oppression.” Both qualify as sophomoric sloganeering, in the best-case scenario simply pointing to the existence of institutional power. It’s much more difficult to draw on systematic data to paint a picture of correctional officers and inmates—and the relationship between the two in the context of a paramilitary organizational structure and culture—in a way that provides a different, more complex, and nuanced view. It’s about widening and deepening perspective, in this case to articulate the social organization of inequality and workings of institutional power.

In the 20 years I have been attending these meetings—at which a considerable amount of ink has been spilt and dialogue has been generated—who constitutes a “good guy” and who constitutes a “bad guy” has often been made perfectly clear through our individual and collective scholarship; indeed, such clarity is often a precursor to being a scholar-activist. The activist side of this equation is about taking sides. In his 1966 presidential address to the SSSP, Howard Becker asked “Whose Side are We On?” and urged sociologists to “avoid sentimentality”

48. For more along these lines, see Landry et al. (2003) and Brownstein (2007).
and be clear and straightforward about their political loyalties and visions." In 2004, Burawoy (2005) proclaimed that those of us doing public sociology should be on the side of humanity.50

It’s too easy to demonize and ennoble players proximate to and distant from an array of well-known social problems: medical care delivery, national security, war, education, crime, poverty, energy dependence, and the like. It’s so easy; we’ve been doing it for years. Today, I’m reminding us of doing something more, of getting beyond Howard Becker’s long ago categorical divisions. And I say that as an absolute fan of Becker and his contributions to SSSP and social inquiry writ large.

In my recent experience as an embedded researcher, I’ve been forced to problematize the very side-taking I’ve been trained into. For me, the realities of the prison system disquieted my time honored moralizing and ontological gerrymandering, to borrow Steve Woolgar and Dorothy Pawluch’s (1985) term. They used “ontological gerrymandering” to refer to the way scholars use empirical case studies and theoretical statements to manipulate a boundary, making some phenomena problematic while leaving others unproblematic. Perhaps doing so is unavoidable.

49. To quote Becker (1967): “the question is not whether we should take sides, since we inevitably will, but rather whose side are we on” (p. 239).

50. To be precise, Burawoy (2005) argues: “sociology’s affiliation with civil society, that is public sociology, represents the interests of humanity—interests in keeping at bay both state depostism and market economy” (p. 24).
But, I’m convinced of the value of something Sarah Fenstermaker (1989), one of my former teachers and tennis chums and now a colleague and friend, said at a commencement address at the University of California, Santa Barbara in 1989:

to see a way apparently different from your own, and in it to experience both commonality and difference—a sense of both us and them, and us again—is to enlarge vision outward and inward. To learn that difference is not necessarily reason for domination, that difference does not mean more or less, or good or bad—is to rise above a simple, simpleminded, categorical, and ultimately deadening approach to one’s place in the world (p. 7).

As an embedded researcher, this observation means more to me now than it did almost twenty years ago when I first heard it. It can serve us well as scholars, as activists, and as members of humanity. If we’re lucky, it can point the way to justice, a journey and destination I know we share.

Thank you.

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