Selected Problems of the Family in Urban and Rural Austria

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The topic of the Fourth World Congress of Sociology, "Sociology and Society", presented ample opportunity for the discussion of the relationship between so-called "pure" or "basic" sociological research and "applied" studies. This paper is intended to continue such a discussion. At the present time the status of our science heavily depends on the applicability of its findings and the practicality of its results. This pressure, though it may be hard on sociology as an academic institution, has had a rather rejuvenating effect during the last fifteen years, it has forced sociologists to deal with concrete research and has created a much higher standard of precision and complexity of all their statements, theories and judgements.

Some of the topics of our Social Science Research Center in Austria may be similar to the foci of interest in India, others may be of quite a different nature. It should be recalled at any stage of this paper that the results are not presented for their immediate content only but, as stated before, in order to gain a better grasp of what the range of aims in sociology can be. Sociological work of this character will, in all probability, spread over many Asiatic countries in the near future and it therefore seems to be of general interest to raise the question where it leads to. In doing so, we do not want to limit ourselves to a statement on the philosophy of social science; we want to illustrate it by examples from our own research and by a discussion on the use of their results.

1. Concern with Social Problems as a Motivation for Sociological Research

Having experienced such a demand for the applicability of results and having acquired some control over the means of obtaining them, sociologists are today in a better position to discuss the relationship between "pure" and "applied" research. It is the thesis of this paper that there is less of a difference between "pure" and "applied" sociology than is generally assumed, and we hope to show some evidence toward proving it through the examples we will furnish from our own research. We feel that this distinction itself has certain shortcomings and that it tends to result in stereotypes. We have reasons to
believe that research starting with interest in a social problem will lead to practically applicable results and will also have theoretical significance.

By "social problem" we do not mean solely the openly visible deplorable state of a certain group in society which may be changed through material support from the rest of society, or social work and charities. Although the classical social problems, such as substandard housing (slums), unemployment, poverty and maladjustment of immigrants, still exist in many parts of the world, there has been both an extension and a refinement of social sensibility, which results from the partial solution or improvement of the first level social problems (as just mentioned) in some societies. It also results from an increased understanding of human problems in matters of interhuman (e.g., social) interdependency and relationships and in types of problems common to certain groups (age groups, occupational groups, ethnic groups) in society.

In this paper we therefore call a "social problem" such things as the treatment that old people receive in their families, or in old age homes, or the special difficulties in matters of authority such as the rejection of social and cultural values and deviant and destructive behavior of a pre-delinquent nature which are shown by adolescent youth. The list of examples of this second kind of social problem, objects of refined social perceptiveness, could be turned into a catalogue of socio-cultural tensions in modern industrial society. Instead of drawing up such an inventory we want to note that the discovery of social problems has even gone beyond this second level and has become more general. We realize that every human problem connected with the well-being of the personality and its self-knowledge and self-control is a problem also of interhuman contact and relationship. A "concern with a social problem" may therefore originate not only from the desire to find a remedy for an underprivileged social group but may also arise from an intellectual concern, the wish to know more about the influence of certain social conditions and backgrounds of human motivation and reactions (e.g., the impact of social class and mobility on fertility or the influence of the position in the sibling group on certain types of tensions in personality or on social constellations under which certain reactions of anxiety occur etc.).

We therefore hypothesize that any concern, intellectual or ethical, concentrating on the social aspect of a human problem, provided it has some major significance especially for the society where it is discovered and on the condition that it can be established as such a concern for scientific investigation, will result in findings meaningful for sociological theory as well as for practical decisions in social life (e.g., legislative and administrative measures, direct and indirect social action, regional planning, educational and therapeutic practices). The categories of "pure" and "applied" research in the traditional philosophy of science are convenient and justifiable only if they are regarded as defining an emphasis in the elaboration and presentation of results, but not as a distinction of principle in the selection and classification of research topics or methods.