



# embedded sociologists

by hollie nyseth, sarah shannon, kia heise, and suzy maves mcelrath

## “Hi, my name is Rachel, and I’m a non-academic sociologist.”

The audience at the American Sociological Association’s annual meeting laughed as Rachel Ivie began her talk with a tongue-in-cheek revelation. Like most of the other speakers at the conference, Rachel holds a Ph.D. in sociology. But unlike the majority of her fellow graduates, Rachel hasn’t followed the academic path.

She’s now the Assistant Director of the American Institute of Physics Statistics Research Center, where she uses her sociological training to study education and employment in physics, drawing upon her graduate work in the areas of science, gender, and methods. Although being a sociologist among physicists seems like a strange place to be, Rachel said in a later interview, “We’re here, get used to it.”

Since Rachel uses her advanced degree outside of the academy, some might call her an “applied” or “policy sociologist.” But, as part of a wider group of similarly-trained practitioners in a diverse array of fields, Rachel is what we have

capacities, but are embedded in settings where sociologists are far and few between. We asked them to reflect on the factors that led them down this non-traditional career path, how they use sociological knowledge in their positions, and how they think of their work in relation to the public. These conversations help put a human face on this often overlooked group of sociologists and illustrate how they bring sociology to diverse locations and audiences.

### the road less travelled

Of the many factors that embedded sociologists (each of whom expressed profound respect for academic sociologists) highlight in explaining their career paths and current occupations, perhaps the most decisive was the desire for their work to reach broader audiences. Some told us they entered graduate school with this vision; others came to it during the course of their academic training or after they’d held an academic position.



“We always say that theory informs practice and practice informs theory in this ever-evolving way.”  
Julie Barrows

come to think of as an “embedded sociologist.” Despite recent attention to “public sociology” and the realities of a shaky academic job market, the paths of sociologists like these who have staked out careers outside the professorate are largely overlooked in graduate programs, academic literature, and even conversations about the discipline and its future. Yet, according to a recent ASA report by Roberta Spalter-Roth, a full quarter of those who earn Ph.D.s in sociology now go to work in non-academic positions. This figure includes sociologists working in the non-profit sector (43.1 percent), government (31.5 percent), and business (25.3 percent) on diverse topics like the environment, criminal justice, defense, economic development, and health care.

As current graduate students learning about the field and considering our own futures, we decided to get a look at these sociologists and the work they are doing. The 15 men and women we talked to hold a variety of positions, including executives, program managers, research directors, and analysts. They work with many other people, often in management

Jim Kirby, a researcher with the Agency of Healthcare Research and Quality, was in the latter group. “My intention was to go into academia, but when I finished, I did some rethinking... I felt like I could concentrate on research that I was most interested in here.” Georgette Bennett, a former academic sociologist who founded the Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding, felt similarly: “I was never content just living behind the ivory tower. I always needed to do things on the side. I had a very great need to get behind the headlines and stay in the ‘real world.’”

Embedded sociologists who took this alternative route said one reason for the move was finding their academic careers were not compatible with their personal goals and family life. For example, Christine Morton, a researcher with the California Maternal Quality Care Collaborative, noted a contrast between the focus of sociological study and the career orientation of academic life. “Sociology is the study of group dynamics and behavior. But the career path in sociology always seemed to be predicated on this individual, sole contributor model with

no caregiver responsibilities.” She explained it was parenting, in part, that influenced her own career trajectory into a non-academic position.

Across cohorts and sectors, the embedded sociologists we interviewed also cited the uncertain future of traditional academic careers as a reason for working in alternative settings. Preston Beckman, who earned his Ph.D. in the 1980s, said that when he was on the market, “people who were getting their Ph.D.s were being ‘retrained’ to find jobs in the corporate world.” Those who’d graduated more recently also expressed doubts about the viability of academic careers. Mikel Walters explained, “I think [pushing academic careers] kind of limits students... I don’t think that the academic system can maintain a) its prestige, and b) its tenure status. There are only so many professorships.” In the face of dramatic and well-documented transformations in higher education (including the growth of contingent labor and the decline in tenure track slots), these sociologists have simply looked elsewhere for security.



“I wanted to do applied work to be out in the public... The job I have has a big community engagement part to it, and that’s very appealing to me.”

Amy Godecker

### bumps in the road

Finding one’s way from the academy into embedded settings isn’t always easy. For example, Rachel Ivie remembers: “I thought I wanted to be a professor because that’s what all of the professors seem to want us to do. That’s what you’re supposed to do... But when it came time to go on the job market, I was dreading that kind of work... until I talked at ASA this summer, it was so hard to admit to myself that I never wanted to do it.”

Nearly everyone we talked with echoed Rachel’s comment, saying that pressure to pursue an academic career came from advisers, other students, or the graduate school culture in general. According to Rochelle Woods, who runs a college retention program, “There’s a lot of pressure to go into academia. You sort of feel like if you don’t go into academia, it says something about you and people are going to think you couldn’t make it or couldn’t hack it or you couldn’t get a position.” Amy Godecker agreed: “I felt and still feel to some degree that everybody is supposed to want an academic career. That’s what the professors expect. That’s

what most of them are trying to train you for.”

Due to those expectations, some embedded sociologists experienced stigma once they made their career choices. After accepting his first job at NBC, Preston remembered, “I could really feel that people [were thinking], ‘What are you doing?... I can’t believe you did this! I can’t believe you sold out!’” Georgette agreed, asking, “Why should sociologists feel uncomfortable, as if somehow they’re not fully professional, when they’re not in the academy? And why should society not benefit from this extraordinary array of skills that they can apply outside of the academy?”

Many embedded sociologists also felt that their graduate programs were not equipped to help them find careers outside of the academy. Karen Lutfey, who left an academic career to direct research at the New England Research Institutes, said that, as a student, going after a position as a professor essentially seemed like the only path: “The infrastructure is in place to support that, and the overall effect is that it is much easier to go in the direction in which the system is trying to push

you...” Karen also told us that sociology students now stop her in hallways or even in the bathrooms at academic conferences to ask how they might go about finding a nonacademic job. “There is such a desperate need for something that is such a ready fix. [So] what’s the problem? The professors who are in contact with the students, their depth of knowledge is being in that academic track.” Jim Kirby agreed that “most professors’ experience was in academia” and “their mentoring was more effective and pointed” for those on an educational track.

### making an impact

Now, degrees in hand, our interviewees use their sociological knowledge in unique and meaningful ways. Their careers put them in the mix on a daily basis with high-powered executives, federal agents, doctors, police officers, and even physicists. These positions allow them to apply a sociological imagination as well as their advanced research skills to a broader and sometimes more influential public than academic sociologists.

Embedded sociologists offer a range of distinctive contri-

## The Embedded Informants

### Government

**Julie Barrows**, Special Agent, Federal Government

**Amy Godecker**, Epidemiologist, City of Minneapolis

**Jim Kirby**, Service Fellow, Agency of Healthcare Research and Quality

**Shelly Schaefer**, Research Analyst, Fourth Judicial District Court, Hennepin County, Minnesota

**Mikel Walters**, Behavioral Scientist, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention

### Nonprofit

**Georgette Bennett**, President, Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding

**Mayra Gomez**, Senior Expert on Women and Housing Rights, Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions

**Rachel Ivie**, Assistant Director, American Institute of Physics Statistical Research Center

**Ellen Kennedy**, Executive Director, World Without Genocide

**Karen Lutfey**, Director, Center for Patient-Provider Relationships, New England Research Institutes

**Nicole MartinRogers**, Survey Research Manager, Wilder Research

**Christine Morton**, Program Manager/Research Sociologist, California Maternal Quality Care Collaborative, Stanford University

**Rochelle Woods**, Assistant Director for Undergraduate Development, University of Michigan

### Corporate

**Preston Beckman**, Executive Vice President, Strategic Programming and Planning, Fox Broadcasting

**Paul Schmid**, Human Resources Reporting Consultant, U.S. Bank

contributions to the organizations they work for and the topics they work on. In some settings, it is the skill of gathering basic data and organizing that information in useful ways. In others, it is the ability to put data and issues in broader perspective, with a critical edge. People like Jim Kirby are often the only sociologists in their organizations. Jim emphasized how the sociological perspective is even more valuable outside a research university: "I felt like I could contribute more, in effect, because I had a different perspective than most of the economists [around me]." Mayra Gomez gave an illustrative example. "In my work on women and housing rights, being a sociologist really gives me a different understanding of gender in society, gender roles, and gender inequality. Sociology allows you to think about the social implications of how women are viewed in general. Or how children are viewed in general. And this

larger social context of how we objectify women or sexualize children in the media and so forth. I don't think a lot of disciplines are able to make that jump from what we're trying to do and cultural aspects of what [actually] goes on in society."

Similarly, Christine Morton discussed how being a feminist scholar helped her craft language for public consumption. "Folks in the department of health are coming from their own particular perspectives, whatever they might be, and aren't particularly aware of issues around how we talk about women, how we talk about race and ethnicity, how to do that in ways that are inclusive and not further othering the other. So, I've been able to help craft language and phrases in reports that get away from the public health kind of formulation and say, 'African American women who...' as opposed to 'African Americans' or 'racial and ethnic groups' instead of 'non-whites.' My feminist sociological lens can help me shape things like that in what can be very consequential documents."

Some embedded sociologists have even had the opportunity to bring this perspective to high-profile tasks. Preston



**"To create social change, education is not enough. You must have education plus action."**

**Ellen Kennedy**

Beckman is in charge of scheduling for Fox Broadcasting, where he feels he has been able to "shape culture" by launching widely popular TV shows like *American Idol*. And Georgette Bennett described the impact her work with the NYPD has had on policing in the United States: "I ended up training some of the first policewomen to go on patrol... The first federally-funded crime victim service center came out of an idea that I presented... And I did a lot of pioneering work for what today is known as 'community policing' and is practiced all over the world... In all of my [different careers], I ended up tapping very deeply into my skills as a sociologist."

The meaningful nature of this work and these contributions seemed to be associated with fairly high levels of happiness and fulfillment in our exchanges. This pattern accords well with the ASA's recent research. The sociology association's 2008 study reported high levels of professional satisfaction among sociologists working in "research, applied, and policy settings." More than half of their respondents reported being "highly satisfied" with their positions, though this varied by sector,

occupational setting, and professional characteristics. Those in non-profit work and those who were able to devote more time to research reported higher levels of satisfaction.

Furthermore, even though about half of those surveyed work in a specialized field, almost 90 percent of those in the ASA study reported their jobs are somewhat or strongly related to sociology. The embedded sociologists echoed this viewpoint and explained that graduate training in sociology affects how you understand the world and how you do your job, even when you work outside of the academy. Preston Beckman explained that, even as a television executive, "I am a sociologist... I see everything through that lens. It's a way to see the world." Mikel Walters agreed, "Sociology prepares you to think critically and unpack things and unbuckle them from normal elements." Karen Lutfey, too, believes her sociological training allows her to view problems in unique ways: "...I can look at problems of concern to the National Institutes of Health and say 'here is a different way to solve this problem.'"

Beyond a basic understanding of data and a sociological

reality. How do people in different cultures and in different religions perceive the other based on the way they construct their reality? How does that act as a screen for their perceptions?"

### sociology and the public

Many of our embedded sociologists work in and for organizations that would, using Michael Burawoy's well-known typology, be described as policy settings. But our definition of embedded sociology is more inclusive, including aspects of both policy and public sociology. When asked, many of those we spoke with embraced the term "public sociology" and talked about their work as a form of public engagement. Nicole MartinRogers, who conducts community and social research, considered herself a public sociologist "in terms of the products or benefits" of her research: "I've been doing more and more projects engaging communities with the research. It's really cool... to work with a community to find out what questions they want answered and actually incorporate that... rather than just swooping in and doing a survey on a community without ever asking



"Sociology prepares you to unpack things... to take a critical eye toward different issues, and that works well in prevention models."

Mikel Walters

lens, advanced sociological training gave our interviewees highly valuable methodological skills, particularly, they thought, in quantitative areas. This, too, reflects the national pattern the ASA found just a couple of years ago: 63 percent reported using statistical training developed in their sociology training, 55 percent survey methods, and 46 percent software programming skills. (The use of quantitative and qualitative skills were also both associated with higher levels of professional satisfaction, with the effect for quantitative being somewhat more significant).

As a sociologist working for U.S. Bank, Paul Schmid explained that he has the methodological insight to help his coworkers across departments design more rigorous surveys. He says that his surveys tend to be "more disciplined" because he can consider the data each group needs and "look forward in the sense to how useful a question may be." Specific theoretical training also enters into the embedded sociologist's day-to-day work. Georgette Bennett's center runs programs to facilitate interreligious understanding, and she explained, "What I need to deal with is straight George Mead: the social construction of

them what they might want or need out of it." As founder of World Without Genocide, Ellen Kennedy focuses on the impact she can have on the community. "As a public sociologist, my commitment and responsibilities are to help advocate for social justice and encourage others to advocate for social justice in whatever arenas are of interest to them."

Federal agent Julie Barrows offered a more personal take: "Every step I make in my own career, with this agency, has an impact on programs, on policies, on people. And I want to make sure that what I'm doing and what other people like me are doing are in the best interests of those programs, policies, and people. The only way to do that, in my mind, is to engage in sociology and study it." Shelly Schaefer, a research analyst for a district court, considered herself "someone who really wants to have a greater understanding of community needs and how research [can] assist the community."

What became clear in our exchanges was that embedded sociologists define their work not by where they are working or who they are working for, but by the intended audiences and

public impact of their work, which is heavily influenced by their locations outside of the academy. “I think one of the challenges for sociology is to engage these audiences outside of a narrow spectrum... sociology has a lot to bring to a lot of different kinds of problems... and that is what I am trying to do,” Karen Lutfey reflected. And it’s because her audience is broader than those of academic sociologists that Christine Morton sees herself as a public sociologist: “If I was going to talk to sociologists about what I was studying, I was still going to have to frame it and form it in a way that made sense to them. And it was really challenging to me. On the other hand, when I envisioned talking to a bunch of doulas and childbirth educators, I knew exactly how I wanted to write. I wanted to reach out to those people who could use my insights about the work that they did in a way that helped them make sense of the challenges and contradictions they were facing.”

Furthermore, being embedded in non-academic positions puts these sociologists in closer communication with those most in need of sociological information and insight. Amy Godecker

Jim Kirby explained they are often limited to writing about their empirical findings but expressed the importance of sociological theory in directing their research. Jim joked that, for some applied journals, “If I can spend a paragraph on theory, that’s usually too much.” But, without his degree in sociology, he “wouldn’t be able to bring the theoretical perspectives... to bear on health services in the United States.”

Others alluded to some of the political assumptions and debates that have swirled around public sociology. At the root of all these concerns, we believe, is a recognition of the surprising and unfortunate separation of academic sociology from embedded sociological practice in all its forms. Julie Barrows said, “It has felt like I’m straddling two different worlds, very often. There is that huge disconnect.”

### bridging worlds

This division of academic sociology from more embedded, applied forms of sociological practice goes back to the early history of the discipline and debates between those who



“Being a sociologist puts me at an advantage... Everybody has a different point of view, a different agenda, and I have to figure out how to get everyone to buy in to a schedule and feel like it’s theirs. That’s where the sociology, social psychology of it all comes in.”

Preston Beckman

noted: “Part of the reason why I wanted to do applied work was to be out in the public and to be more connected to the community. I didn’t want to publish solely in academic journals. If I were going to be doing statistics, I wanted it to be statistics that would directly inform practice and policy. So I have worked in each of my jobs to try to make sure what we’re doing gets out into the community and to policy makers.” Like Amy, Jim Kirby conducts research that is “either aimed at policy makers or providers of care, getting information that could help them provide better care.” His goal in writing public reports and publishing in applied journals is quite simply and concretely “to contribute to making health services better.”

Several of the sociologists we interviewed pointed out the drawbacks of defining their work as public sociology. Mikel Walters, for instance, worried that such a focus could stifle creativity. “[O]ne of the good things about sociology is that, as sociologists, we are encouraged to think out of the main frame box and approach things in what may not always be a practical way through our use of theories.” Both Shelly Schaefer and

emphasized a more objective, scientific vision of sociology from those who championed its more activist, reformist roots. Working on this project, we have come to believe that both faces of the discipline have a great deal to be gained from working together and doing a better job of supporting each other.

Obviously, sociologists working in applied, clinical, and policy contexts have so much to offer the various organizations they are embedded in—whether it is an understanding of basic data and analytic techniques or big picture critical thinking and contextual framing. But by creating supportive structures and recognition for embedded work as a legitimate and valuable form of sociological practice, the discipline could address the decreasing availability of tenure track jobs by supporting (or making more visible) job opportunities outside of academia for its graduates and trainees. As Preston Beckman pointed out, “I actually think it’s in the best interests of the profession to have people like myself out there. I think it helps recruit people to the discipline because they see that there’s not just one path you can take.”

Nurturing diverse, alternative paths within sociology programs could also result in a greater standing of the mission and value of sociology in the public sphere. The Fall 2010 issue of *Contexts* featured an exchange with three sociologists working in the Obama administration, but such appointments have historically been few and far between. Sociology pales in comparison to economics, for example, which has a prominent presence in government and public policy (over 40 percent of economists with Ph.D.s work outside of education). Our discipline could earn a seat at the table in more influential settings by fostering embedded sociologists who are able to bring the sociological imagination to national and international policy arenas.

What might be most basic and yet easiest to overlook is what embedded sociology and sociologists have to contribute to those of us working in the ivory tower itself. Embedded sociologists are working in agencies and communities on some of the most troubling problems of our time. Their research and writing is infusing society with a sociological worldview as, day by day, they conduct socially relevant research, engage policy mak-



## recommended resources

Craig Calhoun (ed). *Sociology in America: A History* (University of Chicago Press, 2007). An overview of the ways American sociology has developed institutionally and intellectually.

Dan Clawson, Robert Zussman, Joya Misra, Naomi Gerstel, Randall Stokes, Douglas L. Anderton, and Michael Burawoy (eds). *Public Sociology: Fifteen Eminent Sociologists Debate Politics and the Profession in the Twenty-first Century* (University of California Press, 2007). Prominent sociologists debate the meaning and practice of public sociology as defined in Michael Burawoy's 2004 ASA presidential address.

National Science Foundation, Science Resources Statistics. "Characteristics of Doctoral Scientists and Engineers in the United States: 2006." [nsf.gov/statistics/pubseri.cfm?seri\\_id=13#1993](http://nsf.gov/statistics/pubseri.cfm?seri_id=13#1993). Identifies work sectors for Ph.D.s across disciplines.

Roberta Spalter-Roth. "Sociologists in Research, Applied, and Policy Settings: Bringing Them in From the Cold." *Journal of Applied Social Science* (2007), 1(2):4-18. A quantitative look at non-academic sociologists' graduate and post-graduate satisfaction.

Stephen Park Turner and Jonathan H. Turner. *The Impossible Science: An Institutional Analysis of American Sociology* (SAGE Publications, 1990). A useful sociological description of the field we know and love.

"The specific skills you get as a sociologist, the way you understand how the world works and how social change happens and the research skills that you gain are important... My background in sociology helps me think about research questions in a concrete way."

Mayra Gomez

ers, and translate sociological knowledge across disciplinary boundaries. More than this, these researchers are closer to the ground, able to see the new, cutting-edge trends and emerging developments that are shaping our social worlds for better and for worse.

Recognizing, supporting, and incorporating these sociologists within the broader framework of sociology as a discipline stands to enhance the academic study of social life and problems through connections among diverse settings and perspectives. Embedded sociologists are certainly inspired to play their role as well. As Julie Barrows put it: "Part of my goal is to try to make a bridge, because we always say that theory informs practice and practice informs theory in this ever-evolving way. I just think by maintaining a foot in both worlds, that hopefully I'll be able to try and bridge that, at least by keeping an eye on what's happening in sociology and trying to contribute to it where I can."

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