

Global social justice research, teaching, and activism: a global turn in sociology?

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The opportunity

Today's most compelling social problems require global solutions. While this claim is not entirely new, we suggest that a series of recent developments may make a global perspective increasingly salient. The COVID-19 pandemic, the ever-more-pressing threats posed by climate change, and the need to address issues of racial justice have propelled global issues to a new level of common-sense understanding. As Karl Mannheim (1970) suggested, historical events can shape the experience and perspective of generations. We feel that the combination of the pandemic, climate change, and Black Lives Matter may coalesce to shape the future of sociology. This may well be a moment in which there is a turn toward issues of global social justice, not just for one segment of sociologists, but for the discipline as whole. In this chapter, we argue for more attention to global issues in terms of research, teaching, and activism.

The global COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020 showed that some social issues are irreducibly global in scope. New waves of COVID-19 break out in localities and countries around the world as our global economic and social system makes it exceedingly difficult to cordon off nations, even geographically isolated places, such as New Zealand.

The pandemic also demonstrated the power of international scientific cooperation in compelling new ways: biomedical scientists have collaborated with remarkable speed across national borders; detailed genetic analyses revealed the direction of international flows of the infection; scientists shared data on genome sequences; international consortia collaborated on vaccine research; and clinical vaccine trials enrolled patients from multiple countries. The rapid advances in vaccines and treatments have, in turn, highlighted the need for a global system of producing and disseminating these vital tools.

The pandemic has shown that science and international cooperation are indispensable in this kind of crisis; yet, paradoxically, the COVID-19 crisis

has also led to a backlash against both global cooperation and science. The effort to blame China for the virus, the intensified barriers to immigration, and the extensive resistance to scientific advice are just three indicators that international science is being challenged just as it is most needed.

Surveys report that many Americans are ill-informed regarding international issues (Council on Foreign Relations, 2019). There is thus much work to be done to bring our students and the broader public to understand the social world outside the borders of the US and to appreciate the global dimensions of issues of social justice.

Unfortunately, as a global scholarly discipline, sociology lags far behind the biomedical sciences in its capacity for large-scale, rapid-fire international collaborative research. While the pandemic raises countless issues about the state of our society and the challenges we need to address going forward, as a discipline, sociology is not well positioned to respond in a timely way to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, as a distinct field of inquiry, sociology is relatively well developed in certain countries but is quite weak and not entirely independent of state control in others.

Globalizing sociological research

Global sociology has deep roots in the discipline, as the founding figures in the field took the entirety of human experience as their purview. Moreover, many scholars have conducted important research and developed powerful theories about global inequalities. Notable lines of inquiry include world systems theory, studies of anticolonial social movements, and analyses of racism and sexism as global systems of inequality, among many others. Yet, despite the existence of these lines of inquiry, the majority of research by sociologists at US institutions of higher education focuses on the US. The principal journals are almost all in one language (English), disproportionately concentrated in the US, and typically focus on US topics using US data.

Over the years, the charge of "ethnocentrism" in US sociology has been raised by a variety of authors. The dominant position of the US, in turn, affects sociological research worldwide. We find it particularly troubling that most research that focuses on social problems and issues of social justice fit the pattern of US-focused scholarship. Our study of research published in the journal *Social Problems*—the main scholarly publication of the progressive Society for the Study of Social Problems—reveals that even in this journal, the overwhelming preponderance of research published draws on data from the US (Jacobs and Avni, 2021). The great majority of authors of articles published in *Social Problems* obtained their bachelor's or doctoral degrees in the US. It is clear that both substance and authorship skews toward the US. Articles published in *Social Problems* were more US-focused than were the other two leading sociological journals: the *American Sociological Review*

and the *American Journal of Sociology* (Jacobs and Mizrachi, 2020; for similar conclusions, see also Kurien, 2016; Lie, 1995; Kurzman, 2017; Smith, 2017). In short, we see a need to greatly expand globally oriented sociological research and scholarship in US journals and by American authors.

Globalizing teaching

In addition to making globally oriented research more central to the discipline, we also believe that there is much to be done to make undergraduate teaching more global in scope. Most of the topics covered in social problems textbooks used in US colleges and universities are examined in the US context. In general, social issues are approached from a US vantage point, though the authors, sometimes note that these issues are not unique to the US. Globalization and global inequality are not routinely featured as separate chapters.

Notable exceptions to these generalizations include Anna Leon-Guerrero's (2019) *Social Problems: Community, Policy and Social Action* and A. Javier Treviño's (2021) *Investigating Social Problems*, as each offers an international section in each chapter. Robin Cohen and Paul Kennedy's (2013) *Global Sociology* is still more inclusive in its orientation. Students who read these books will recognize that there is much to be learned from considering how social problems are defined and addressed in countries other than the US.

Along with the pandemic, we see climate change as a potent opportunity for introducing global themes in undergraduate classes. Climate change remains a fundamental and growing threat, and international cooperation in the development and collection of routine climate indicators is an essential input into the decision-making processes surrounding this set of issues (Fankhauser, 2020). However, climate change has not yet become a standard chapter in US social problems textbooks.

Activism

The remarkable international diffusion of Black Lives Matter protests represents a third potentially game-changing development. In response to the video of the death of George Floyd at the hands of police in Minneapolis, marches quickly spread across major cities not only in the US, but also around the world. This was, of course, not the first case in which brutal inhumanity had been exposed. Organizations such as Amnesty International work diligently to monitor human rights issues throughout the world. And it was not the first case in which demands for the protection of human rights became a truly global concern. At the present moment, the expulsion of the Rohingya from Myanmar, the concentration camps for Uyghurs in China, the plight of displaced Syrians, and the Venezuelan diaspora have

all garnered international attention, though none on the scale of the Black Lives Matter movement. It is rare for even the most outrageous cases of injustice to garner international interest to the extent that occurred in May and June of 2020 (Daragahi, 2020).

Recommendations and solutions

We believe that a call for a "global turn" in sociology is needed. The multiple global crises facing the world today make it possible that researchers, scholars, and a new generation entering academia may be responsive to this call. To expand the focus on global social justice research, teaching, and activism, we need to recognize the obstacles that inhere in the current structure of rewards in academia. We believe that there is no single, silver-bullet solution to the issues raised here; thus, a multifaceted strategy should be pursued. We divide solutions into three main components: (1) making the case; (2) increasing visibility and recognition; and (3) increasing capacity.

Making the case

The strategy for increasing the focus on global social justice issues begins with making the case on intellectual terms. There are many researchers who have flexibility in the topics they investigate; thus, expanding the number of research studies conducted in this area naturally begins by making an intellectually compelling case that social justice issues are best understood in a global context and that a global perspective can help to contribute to effective long-term solutions.

The examples of the pandemic, climate change, and Black Lives Matter can easily be defined in global terms, though many individuals still view these topics in local or national terms. We suggest that using these inherently global cases as starting points may be a good way to make a broader case for studying social justice in a global context:

- The first way to broaden these cases is by using them to highlight the structural inequalities in our national and international systems. For example, COVID-19 has highlighted health disparities in both the US and other countries. Marginalized communities bore the brunt of the pandemic. As the vaccines became available, the pandemic exposed the inequalities in our global health and pharmaceutical systems. Dramatic disparities between rich and poor countries in the accessibility of vaccines and in the capacity to distribute these to large populations also became evident. Thus, the structural and systemic inequalities revealed by the pandemic can serve as a point of entry into an understanding of global health inequalities, as well as global inequalities more generally. Similar

points can be made with respect to climate change and the mobilizations against racial injustice.

- A second strategy might build on these examples as emblematic cases. In other words, global issues like inequality, violence against women, racism, refugees, and so on all share some of the same defining features as the pandemic. While each of these issues is often refracted through a local or national prism, the fact is that we live in an interconnected world, and it is not just viruses and greenhouse gasses that traverse national boundaries. Ideas, cultural tropes, economic models, and political forces are global in scope; thus, issues of social justice have an international, as well as a national and regional, dimension.
- A third strategy emphasizes the value of comparative policy analyses. A comparative approach, while recognizing global influences and constraints, could point to particular policy choices that are not fully determined by the world system. Again, the pandemic and climate change provide many examples of some countries acting more boldly and effectively than others. A comparative approach can thus complement a global perspective by highlighting the role of local agency. This comparative policy focus often characterizes cross-national studies of education, healthcare, and other social policies.
- Finally, even for researchers who are not focused on issues of social justice, there is a strong case to be made for the value of comparative international research. In other words, social science knowledge is more likely to be generalizable when conclusions are based on studies of multiple countries. An exclusive focus on the US case (or on cases within the US, such as the city of Chicago) risks generalizing from a single and perhaps idiosyncratic case.

Increasing recognition and visibility

In addition to making the case for global social justice research, we can try to increase the visibility of, and recognition for, the important research that has already been conducted. In other words, it is important to remember that the call for more global social justice research does not start from scratch. There is a long history of globally oriented research, and there are a number of important organizations and conferences that can help to sound the call for more attention to this important area of research and scholarship.

We feel that it is important to emphasize the significant organizational efforts to promote international research and scholarship of the Society for the Study of Social Problems (SSSP), the American Sociological Association (ASA), and the International Sociological Association (ISA) (Patel, 2009). The Global Division of the SSSP has been active since 2005 in examining “global and transnational processes [that] both intensify and mitigate

existing social problems as well as contribute to the generation of new ones” (Society for the Study of Social Problems, 2022). Likewise, the Global and Transnational Sociology Section of the ASA serves as an organization hub for research and activism on these issues. Moreover, the ASA Section on the Political Economy of the World System must surely be mentioned in this context.

While there is no research committee (RC) of the ISA that is devoted to “social problems” *per se*, many of the ISA RCs focus on issues of interest to social problems scholars. For example, ISA RC 19 focuses on “poverty, social welfare, and social policy,” while ISA RC 48 focuses on “social movements, collective action, and social change.” The goal of strengthening an international focus on social problems is thus not a matter of starting from square one, but rather one of building on intellectual capacity and organizational structures that are already in place.

Yet, there is much that can and should be done to strengthen the efforts of these leaders in the field. Strengthening the coverage of issues of global social justice in review essays in the *Annual Review of Sociology* and in textbooks for courses on social problems would help to raise the visibility of research in this area.

Expanding resources

Global social justice research can be difficult, expensive, and time-consuming. Launching a major initiative in this area will require considerable resources. We divide resources into the five categories of funding, infrastructure, coordination and cooperation, faculty and students, and publication outlets:

- Additional funding for global social justice research will be needed. While it can be expensive to conduct high-quality research in one venue, doing so on a global scale will be even more challenging. Foundations as well as national sources of funding are likely to be the principal sources of support for research and scholarship.
- Research on a number of topics is facilitated by the establishment of national data-collection systems. These data-collection systems can be viewed as part of a global research infrastructure. Researchers can draw on these data sources and can build on them. For example, much of the research on the pandemic has been based on data-collection systems that were in place in advance of the crisis. While state institutions routinely gather data on economic, criminal justice, education, and vital statistics, the institutional capacity to field original sociological research is not as extensive as one might hope for. A broader and more comprehensive system of data collection on global social justice issues—including

quantitative, qualitative, and social-media data—would go a long way to advancing our understanding of these issues.

- Developing a system to facilitate international collaborations will no doubt be an indispensable part of a truly global research effort. High-quality research requires extensive local knowledge. Just to take a simple example, a survey must be translated into many languages in order to make it truly international in scope, and many subtleties and nuances are easily lost without expert native-language collaboration. An international system, perhaps based in the ISA, should be developed to promote cross-national collaborative research. Such networks can build on each other so that, over time, it may become easier to find international research partners.
- Among the scarce resources for global social justice research is a critical mass of researchers and scholars working on these issues. Recent research has reported that internationally oriented appointments in US sociology departments are the exception (Stevens et al., 2018). Expanding the number of faculty hires is likely to be needed. In the long run, expanding capacity in this area will involve recruiting a new generation of students who recognize the importance of approaching social justice issues from a comparative and global framework.
- In terms of publication outlets, we should seek to increase the representation of international research in top journals, as well as to expand the outlets and visibility of journals oriented to international social justice issues. While a number of journals focus on comparative research on particular topics, such as education and healthcare, journals that focus on global social justice remain scarce. While there should be efforts to increase the representation of global issues in the top journals, a new journal called *International Social Problems* might encourage researchers to target this area for their scholarship.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have made the case for bolstering a global focus on social justice in terms of research, teaching, and activism. We suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, the increasing centrality of climate change, and the renewed focus on issues of racial justice have elevated the importance of approaching social problems from an international perspective. In the US, research, teaching, and activism have all emphasized US social issues.

We propose a multipronged effort to expand global social justice research. The strands of this effort include making the case for expanded research and scholarship in this area, enhancing the recognition and visibility of extant research and scholarship, and considerably expanding the resources needed to conduct high-quality international scholarship on issues of global social justice. We similarly argue for more global emphasis in teaching and activism.

Since its inception in the 19th century, sociology has endeavored to understand the modern experience and to improve the condition of contemporary societies. We maintain here that these twin goals can be promoted by expanding the scope of social problems research beyond the US experience and drawing more fully on the struggles and models offered by other societies around the world. The increasingly global nature of social issues and social movements speaks to the importance of greatly expanding our capacity to conduct global-oriented social problems research and scholarship. We hope that the readers of this volume on global social justice will help to lead this undertaking.

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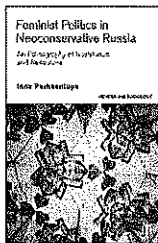
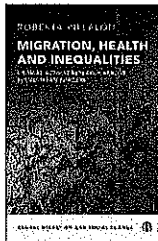
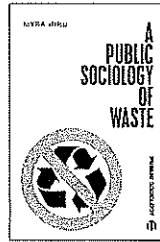
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Edited by
Glenn W. Muschert, Kristen M. Budd,
Heather Dillaway, David C. Lane,
Manjusha Nair, and Jason A. Smith



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