

Social Problems, Social Solutions

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Social change as an abstract aspiration of many researchers remains a sought after, yet somewhat contentious, goal within academia. Many researchers pursue knowledge construction through research in the name of developing a better understanding of the social world and social problems—an effort in theory development, refinement, and understanding. While academia is full of important research and pursuits, these efforts do not always move beyond the walls and conversations of the academic world and are not always focused on producing social change. Given the enormous amount of social problems facing the world today, what is the role of academia in social change? Do graduate students and researchers have a responsibility to research and develop theory for social change? Can academic pursuits be a vehicle for social change?

Among sociologists there has been debate about how sociology should be done and for what purpose. For instance, there have long been debates between “pure” positivist sociologists and “applied” sociologists, especially during the 1960s and 1970s (Michalski, 2016). “Pure” sociologists viewed research as a theoretical endeavour of social scientific explanation and understanding (see Black, 1979, 1995, 2000). Research in this view is believed to only be used to explain and expand our understanding of the social world (Michalski, 2016). “Applied” sociology was critiqued by “pure” sociologists as not real sociology because it undermined the scientific credibility of the field. With a focus on social change, for example, “applied” sociology has been criticized for undermining sociological scientificity, politicizing the role of the researcher, and blurring discipline boundaries (Parsons, 1959; Puddephatt & McLaughlin, 2015; Sprague & Zimmerman, 2004).

Much has changed within the field of sociology, and social research more generally, since the 1970s. For instance, development in feminist, Indigenous, and other

critical research practices have criticized pure positivist sociology as simplistic, not accounting for human interest and variability, and for utilizing methods that in many ways reproduce social inequalities and harm participants (D. Smith, 1987; L.T. Smith, 2013; Sprague & Zimmerman, 2004). Furthermore, Indigenous peoples and scholars have documented the long history of harm done to their peoples under the guise of research for “the greater good” (Kovach, 2010; Smith, 2013). Many feminist theorists and other researchers reject that researchers can objectively measure and explain social issues, and thus critique the desirability or necessity for doing so (Marshall, 2008; D. Smith, 1972). Overall, without the goal of social change, research can be argued as an intellectual pursuit for elites.

The development and application of social theory for identifying and addressing social problems to produce change is complex, and many questions arise. For instance, what theories are relevant or appropriate for looking at particular social issues and how do we determine this? Do classical social theories still hold relevance today? Which areas of current theoretical development are appropriate? Whose voices and experiences take precedence? Even though these kinds of questions may not have clear answers, asking such questions of social theory points to the dynamic narrative of social change. It also points to our roles as consumers of social knowledge, and the importance of critically engaging with social theory for social change.

In this special issue, we look at two applications of social theory in effort to identify social problems and produce solutions. These articles both demonstrate how theory can be used to understand social problems and work towards social change.

Timothy Kang's article *Suicide in South Korea: Revisiting Durkheim's Suicide* draws on Émile Durkheim's concepts of social integration and egotistic suicide to understand and explore the ever increasing suicide rate in contemporary South Korea. Kang argues that while

the increasing suicide rates have drawn attention from a wide array of researchers, a theoretically informed approach to the issue is needed. Using Durkheim's concepts, Kang found that the increasing levels of individualism and decreasing levels of collectivism contribute to greater collective cultural ambivalence and egoism in South Korea, which leads to both anomic and egoistic suicides. Thus, by explicitly engaging with several of Durkheim's concepts, Kang attests that we can further our understanding of suicide in South Korea today with the hopes of reducing it.

In *The Contentious Field of Whiteness Studies*, Jun Mian Chen details the literature on whiteness and showcases the many critiques against whiteness studies. For example, some have argued that whiteness studies only capture a single axis of oppression. Despite this critique and several others, Chen argues that whiteness studies do make an important contribution to the study of racialization, racism, and white privilege. While there are still debates regarding how whiteness studies can fit in to race studies, Chen argues that whiteness studies have a unique epistemological standpoint that adds to the conversation on racial inequality—this includes identifying implications of whiteness and understanding how whiteness is perpetuated, how it affects people, and how we can deconstruct it.

We hope that you enjoy the issue and that it inspires you to be critical and work towards social change, whether inside or outside of the academy. We would like to thank the authors for all their hard work and their contributions to the *Journal for Social Thought*. A special thank you to our peer reviewers for their time, engagement, and dedication to the journal. We would also like to recognize Visiting Editor Andrew D. Nevin for his wisdom and continued support of the *JST*.

— Jennifer Elgie, *JST* Editor-In-Chief

— Rachelle Miele, *JST* Deputy Editor

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