

Executive Officer Report - 2021-2022 Annual Meeting - August 2022 - Los Angeles, CA

Submitted by Héctor L. Delgado, PhD

This is my final report as the Executive Officer (EO) of the Society for the Study of Social Problems (SSSP), after serving in that capacity for the past 13 years. I retired from my full-time faculty position at the University of La Verne in 2019 and with my retirement as EO, I will be fully retired, with much more time at my disposal to spend with my family, and especially with my grandchildren. Normally, I begin my annual report thanking the many people who do so much for this organization and its members; and I will do the same here, with one exception. The exception will be the folks with whom I work in the Administrative Office. This time, I will save that for the end.

I would like to begin with an expression of gratitude to the Board of Directors (BOD) for giving me the opportunity to serve as the SSSP's EO. It has been an honor. When I reflect on my career as a sociologist, I take great pride in the cutting-edge research I conducted on immigrant labor and unionization, and my commitment to the students I taught at Occidental College, the University of Arizona, the University of California, Irvine, and the University of La Verne. But high on that list as well is my tenure as the EO of an organization whose stated purpose is "to promote and protect sociological research and teaching on significant problems of social life and, particularly, to encourage the work of young sociologists; to stimulate the application of scientific method and theory to the study of vital social problems; to encourage problem-centered social research; to foster cooperative relations among persons and organizations engaged in the application of scientific sociological findings to the formulation of social policies; to foster higher quality of life, social welfare, and positive social relations in society and the global community and to undertake any activity related thereto or necessary or desirable for the accomplishment of the foregoing purposes." What better purpose is there?

The Sociological Reimagination: From Moments to Momentum

My thanks and congratulations to President Noreen M. Sugrue, the Program Committee, chaired by Jackie Krasas, the Division Chairs, and the administrative office staff, for their excellent work on this year's annual meeting program, with the timely theme, *The Sociological Reimagination: From Moments to Momentum*. President Sugrue writes, "Our entry into a post-pandemic world provides us with an opportunity to recalibrate our priorities as scholars, policy analysts, teachers, and activists. We are being given an opportunity to embrace this period, with a clear sense of needed pathways toward change. Addressing and redressing today's problems requires the full and central participation of SSSP members. SSSP scholars, be they in the academy, government, or the private sector, are uniquely qualified to play a formative role in defining, designing, and implementing the policies required for a new beginning, a new hope, and a new and fairer social order." I could not agree more.

Divisions, Committees, and Internationalization

My thanks as well to the many members who are active in our divisions and committees. The Society could not survive without the work of these volunteers. I want to give special recognition this time to the members of the Transnational Initiatives Committee (TIC) for their work this past year and especially for organizing an excellent virtual conference in May, with participation by scholars from around the world. My thanks to Corey Dolgon, past president, for his contribution to this venture, which I hope becomes a permanent fixture of the Society's outreach to foreign scholars. But I would be remiss, if I did not mention John Dale's efforts to make the SSSP more international in its scope and reach. The TIC was created and is now an important part of the Society largely because of John's labor and commitment to the internationalization of the SSSP.

As I leave the organization, I am confident that the TIC will continue this important *and necessary* work. Meanwhile, as part of these efforts to internationalize the Society (and as an expression of support for human rights), the BOD approved the Society's membership and participation in the Science and Human Rights Coalition of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS); a network of scientific and engineering membership organizations that recognize a role for scientists and engineers in human rights. John Dale was elected twice to serve on the coalition's steering committee and has quickly given the SSSP an important voice in the coalition. More recently, the BOD approved the Society's membership in the Scholars-at-Risk (SAR) Network, which supports and protects the academic freedom of scholars from all around the world, who are persecuted, forced to flee their homeland, or are incarcerated for their ideas.

Finances, Membership, and a Pandemic

This will be the first in-person annual meeting since 2019. The Society has been hit hard financially, as many other organizations have been (and continue to be), by the pandemic. We saw a decline in membership, but we are coming back and for that, the BOD and the Budget, Finance, and Audit (BFA) Committee deserve a significant portion of the credit, for being such excellent stewards of the Society's resources.

Here I want to give special recognition to Susan M. Carlson, who will be stepping down as Treasurer after many years of devoted service to the Society. For many years as well, Susan has done an excellent job as the Society's principal investment advisor; providing the Society with a safety net that has been indispensable during this very difficult period. And if that were not enough, she has agreed to serve as the interim EO during the search for my replacement. While Susan will be missed greatly, we are indeed fortunate to have Heather E. Dillaway step in as the next Treasurer. I have had the pleasure of working with Heather during her stint on the BFA, and based on that experience, I can assure you that the Society will be in extremely capable hands. Let me take this opportunity, as well, to urge members to consider applying for the Executive Officer position. If you are interested, and wish to talk with me about my experience as EO, I will be more than happy to speak with you. I, of course, will not be involved in the selection process.

Social Problems

I now want to turn to our flagship journal, *Social Problems*. It continues to be one of the top journals in the social sciences; and for that I wish to thank the editors we have had at the helm of the journal, our publisher Oxford University Press (OUP), and, of course, the authors for the excellent content of this prestigious journal. According to OUP, content engagement with the journal in 2021 increased 18% over 2020, and the journal's Impact Factor is now 5.397, ranking it 10th among 148 titles indexed in Sociology. Meanwhile, the journal's five-year impact factor of 4.994 is evidence of its consistently high quality and importance to the field. These are impressive numbers.

Since I have been EO, I have had the pleasure of working with six superb editors: Ted Chiricos, Becky Pettit, Pamela Anne Quiroz, Annulla (Anna) Linders, Earl Wright II, and Derrick R. Brooms. Anna, Earl, and Derrick are our current editors. I want to thank them all, and to extend a special thanks to Anna and Earl for agreeing to a second three-year term. Each of these editors brought something different, but shared with one another a strong commitment to the production of a high-quality journal. If you are not a reader of the journal, you owe yourself the favor of becoming one. Soon we will begin the search for a new editor or editors. Please consider becoming the next editor of *Social Problems*. If you do, you will enjoy unrivaled editorial freedom. When the announcement comes out, please consider applying or recommending someone who is committed to social justice and excellent, cutting-edge scholarship, and who has the managerial skills and experience to edit an academic journal.

Social Justice Work

In the past, the Society has taken positions on a wide range of issues, usually in the form of a resolution or letter. In my estimation, now more than ever, it is critically important for the Society and its members to continue taking positions and exploring ways to address these problems. I say "now more than ever" because of the events of the past two years in the United States, which include an attempted coup, the undermining of democratic processes, attempts to disenfranchise black and other categories of voters, the denial of a woman's right to control her body (including attempts to prevent her from crossing state lines to exercise that right), book bans designed to white-wash (literally) history, the refusal to effect common-sense gun laws, to name but a few. We should have learned by now that ignoring or downplaying threats to freedom, rights, and basic human decency can be deadly.

A resolution and letter may not seem like much, and perhaps neither is by itself, but as part of a social justice movement, both matter. And it is as part of a social justice movement that I believe the Society should think of itself; with each group and individual in that movement bringing something different to the table. The SSSP's task is to determine what it can do that is unique and that it can do well, to determine what it can contribute to the movement. For example, the Society cannot organize a political rally quickly and effectively, as Black Lives Matter (BLM) can (and has), but its members have research skills that can be offered to the BLM and other organizations that may not have that capacity; and in the classroom, members can teach students how to think critically and expose them to important social problems and issues otherwise ignored, downplayed, or misrepresented. Members can teach students that they are

part of something bigger, and encourage them to become members of other social justice organizations and to engage in concrete actions for a more just and humane world.

Resolutions

Related to the aforementioned is the issue of resolutions. The BOD approved requiring a 2/3 vote for the passage of a resolution. Most resolutions pass overwhelmingly. But in the event of a resolution on which the membership is divided, I believe it is important, since it represents the position of the Society, that more than a simple majority of individuals support the resolution. A number of individuals have recommended reconsidering this policy and returning to a simple majority to pass a resolution. I strongly urge the Society to keep the 2/3 requirement, and for the reasons I gave when I first proposed it. Principally, if we are going to take a position as an organization, I think it is in the Society's best interest to have strong support for the position and thereby, hopefully, avoid a fracture that may be difficult to repair if the vote in favor or in opposition is 50% plus one. I would add that the 2/3 requirement is much more likely to encourage both sides on an issue to craft a resolution that both can support.

Related as well, are concerns expressed from time to time that the organization has drifted away from what it was when it was first conceived. My response to that is that I hope so, and that consistently examining what the organization is and should be, is both healthy and necessary. But it does matter how that is done. The discussion must be a constructive and realistic one, respectful of other social justice organizations and never at their expense. Whatever differences we may have, they are not the enemy. As I indicated earlier, and I believe that this is true of any organization, the Society must decide how it can best contribute to a global social justice movement. Such a movement has its work cut out for it, in the face of a rising fascist and authoritarian tide, increasingly evident in different parts of the world, including the United States.

Anti-Harassment Policy and Conflicts of Interest

As I reflect on what we have achieved, collectively, during the past thirteen years, the anti-harassment policy, is, in my estimation, one of the Society's most important achievements. The policy is designed to make the SSSP an even safer, more empowering, and more inviting place for members, our staff, and the staff at the hotels where we meet. While numerous individuals have made important contributions to this project and policy, I especially want to acknowledge Sarah Jane Brubaker's leadership on this front. I have enjoyed immensely working with her, and others, on this policy. In addition to this policy, I want to highlight the creation of a conflict-of-interest policy and ask my colleagues to always consider whether their participation in a process or project creates a conflict of interest or the *appearance* of a conflict of interest, and to *always* err on the side of recusal if they are not certain.

Roles and Responsibilities

As I come to the end of my tenure as EO, and this report, I want to comment on an issue that the Permanent Organization and Strategic Planning Committee (POSPC) has asked the BOD to address; namely, the respective roles and responsibilities of the EO and the BOD. This is an especially important issue as the Society prepares to launch the search for a new EO. In the past I have advised the BOD on many issues, and I would like to do precisely that now.

The *Operations Manual* of the SSSP is an obvious and appropriate place to begin. The *Operations Manual* reads, "The Executive Officer is responsible for ensuring that the work of the organization is carried out and policies established by the Board of Directors are implemented. The Executive Officer is also responsible for representing the organization to the public and for coordinating with other organizations. The Executive Officer is responsible for supervising the work of the Administrative Officer." Individual Directors, as a rule, do not have the power to direct staff, including the EO. Their power is a collective one, i.e., as a BOD, not as individual Directors. If the BOD is not happy with the performance of the EO, it can communicate that *collectively* to the EO; and if deemed appropriate, even terminate the EO's employment. An individual Director cannot make and execute that decision. Furthermore, if the BOD is not happy with the performance of staff reporting to the EO, the BOD holds the EO, not the staff member, accountable. Directors should not be giving directives to staff without the EO's approval. To drive home the importance of this point, please note that I have rarely, if ever, made requests of staff who are supervised directly by Michele, without talking with her first – and even then, it is usually Michele who makes the request on my behalf.

Once these roles and responsibilities are clarified, they need to be incorporated in the *Operations Manual* and, I would recommend, new board members, EOs, and staff, should be directed to them, to ensure that everyone understands and abides by the same rules and regulations. It could be part of an orientation for new Directors and staff. I include staff, because staff, I believe, should indicate to Directors that they are obligated to make the EO aware of requests by Directors, since it is to the EO that they report. When Directors get involved in the day-to-day operation of the organization, it can create confusion and a heavier workload for staff, and can even put a strain on the relationship between the EO and staff. Staff should not have to report to more than one supervisor. Staff need to be protected and that is principally the EO's job.

The principal role of most BODs is a fiduciary one, which means making sure that the organization is achieving its mission, not breaking any laws, and managing funds responsibly and effectively. While the BOD is responsible for the overall performance of the organization, it cannot and should not do the day-to-day work of the organization, but rather delegate that authority to others, including, and most importantly, to the EO. They then review the work of the EO as part of their overall assessment of the organization's performance. An organization's inability to define and communicate clearly these roles and responsibilities, can result in low morale and high turnover of staff, and discourage Society members from serving on the BOD and committees or applying for positions in the Society.

Final Thoughts and Expressions of Gratitude

In the beginning (no, not that beginning) and throughout this report, I have thanked many people, mostly unnamed in this report unfortunately, for their extraordinary service to the Society. But here I'd like to thank the folks with whom I have worked most closely over the past thirteen years. First, there are the GRAs. I was sorry to hear that Zaina Shams was stepping down as our GRA, but very happy about the fact that she was leaving to get teaching experience. I wish her well. I want to express my thanks to Kelsey Whitaker, Assistant to the Administrative Officer, not only for her efficiency in getting things done (often the "little" things that are essential but not always sufficiently appreciated), but also for the respectful and helpful manner in which she engages members and her co-workers. In a country that has been bleeding basic human decency over the past 6-7 years, you learn to appreciate people like

Kelsey even more. I will also miss working with Rachel Cogburn, our Information Technology Specialist. For those who have had the pleasure of working with her and especially watching her take on the lion's share of the logistics work for a very successful virtual meeting in 2021, I do not have to convince them of just how competent and smart she is. Her direct, no-nonsense approach to problems is invaluable. Invaluable as well is her wise counsel, which Michele and I have benefitted from on numerous occasions. She always seems to ask the right questions and to see the potential pitfalls of different paths. The Society is very lucky to have someone with her intelligence and skills as its IT Specialist, and I am indeed fortunate to have her as a friend.

Finally, there is Michele Koontz, Administrative Officer and Meeting Manager. As I have said many times in the past, I have never seen anyone as competent as Michele in what they do. Perhaps a handful as competent, but more so? None. Anyone who has served on the BOD, been a division chair, or organized a session or workshop does not have to be told how indispensable Michele is to the SSSP. No one knows the workings of this organization better. And they know that it is not just that she gets things done. It is also that she does it with a graciousness, affability, kindness, generosity, and politeness that requires one, as I just did, to consult a Thesaurus to try to find the right words to describe how she does what she does. I hope I came close. I will miss working with her, but we will stay in touch. We have become good friends over the past 13 years. Michele loves to see photos of my grandkids and I love to send them. That alone will sustain our friendship. Thank you for everything Michele. Working with you has been an absolute joy.