Sociological Perspectives: What we need to know.

Sociology and social causation. Every time someone raises the issue of the environmental (as opposed to individual) determinants of health, you are hearing the influence of sociology. We are the chief perpetrators of the social causation approach. Ever since Emile Durkheim, truly one of the “fathers” of Sociology” demonstrated in the 1890s that suicide rates vary among groups based on the degree of social integration, we have urged students of the human condition to investigate social as well as individual explanations for behavior. In that sense, I can borrow from Milton Friedman: you are all sociologists now.

There are three basic theoretical perspectives in sociology—the Functionalist, the Conflict and the Interactionist. Each has a set of core questions. Most sociologists are associated with one or another of these perspectives but nearly all of us would assert that it takes all three to get a complete picture of most social phenomena.

I’m going to take the central question from each of these perspectives and use the three together to try to answer the larger “What do we need to know?” question. So,

**Functionalis**ts are concerned with order and stability in society, with social structure and the ways in which society’s parts fit together. Looking at any social arrangement they ask, what functions (or dysfunctions) does it perform for society? Essentially, functionalists focus on impact, on consequences, regardless of intent. The most fun is finding “latent functions”—impacts that are not obvious. Almost everyone who engages in program evaluation research becomes a kind of functionalist, like it or not.

**Conflict theorists** are especially concerned with the ways in which the benefits of human social arrangements are distributed. Who benefits—who wins and who loses—from any particular social arrangement? Conflict theorists see society as constantly changing, and they see conflict as the primary engine of change.
Social Interactionists focus more on the micro-sociological level—on interactions between individuals and among small groups, and they ask what meanings are conveyed and how.

1. Search for latent functions. Starting with “vulgar functionalism,” I’d say that we need to add the hunt for latent functions to our program evaluation efforts. That is, we normally assess programs to determine the extent to which they are achieving their goals, but a good dose of functionalism would put us on the path to identifying those “dreaded unintended consequences” that Jim Weil mentioned yesterday. This surfaced in our small group exercise on Tuesday afternoon, when several of us argued that the reason to explore the connection between food insecurity and obesity was that interventions designed to prevent food insecurity were being accused of causing, or at least contributing to, obesity. In fact, if I am not mistaken, some of the impetus for research on the interactions of food insecurity and obesity was stimulated by claims by the Heritage Foundation that food assistance programs were contributing to obesity.

2. One of the best ways to begin to identify such latent functions would be to make sure that the interactionist perspective is included in evaluation studies. That is, we need close observation—ethnography—of what happens in these programs “on the ground.”(looking at the actual points in the pointillist painting as Mariana said, rather than just at the big picture). Policy intent is one thing, but program outcome may sometimes be something very different. If students in a particular school characterize school lunch as “welfare food,” no amount of dedicated menu planning may induce them to eat it. If the rumor spreads that a new entrée is “health food,” students may avoid it without giving it a chance. I found this slip between intent and effect rampant in school food, particularly in regard to the nutrition regulations. Perhaps the most egregious example is the replacement of whole milk with nonfat or lowfat milk to reduce the % of calories from fat, (to comply with the dietary guideline) and then the addition of sweetened flavored milk to restore the calories needed to comply with the old calorie minimums. There have been a number of calls for “mixed methods” in this colloquium.
We need to make sure that close observation in real world settings is among them. And we need, as Elizabeth Dowler said, “better ways of capturing people’s real stories”.

3. One of the **best sources of information about what is actually taking place on the ground is the staff—the workforce**. Too many program evaluations focus solely on the clients/consumers/customers, treating the people who actually fix and serve the meals (or lead the exercise classes) as mere conduits. I believe that this is a mistake; in my experience, workers are often keen observers and have the benefits of a sort of built-in longitudinal perspective. We should listen harder and more frequently; these are among the real stories that we need to capture. I think some research attention to the quality of the work lives that are typical of food security and obesity interventions is also needed.

4. Another aspect of the micro-sociological lens is a **more nuanced exploration of place, or of particular places**. GIS (Geographic Information Systems) software has made possible all sorts of mapping studies, allowing us to identify food deserts without ever going there. But I think we need to go there, and to explore the dynamics, “up close and personal,” that frustrate the intent of our interventions—the real world patterns and dynamics that several people at this conference have called “pathways.”

5. I also think that a focus on place can permit wider use of “**action research**” or “**Community-engaged research**” techniques, like the Pine Ridge Study that Kathleen Sherman described, or Mariana Chilton’s Witnesses to Hunger and Joe Sharkey’s Promotoras. Perhaps some of you saw a recent report in the *New York Times* entitled “After a Study Healthy Changes Block by Block”—about research on diabetes and other health matters conducted in Humboldt Park in Chicago with the assistance of local community leaders (who were not only consulted in the survey design, but hired to conduct the interviews). One result was that when the data were compiled, the community was receptive to learning the results and acting on them. This intersection of obesity and food insecurity seems to me to be particularly well suited to community-based action/research interventions.
5. Turning to the conflict perspective, but maintaining our focus on place, suggests to me another whole line of research that I believe is urgently in need of attention. This has to do with the differential impact of programs in areas with widely differing costs of living. Conflict theorists ask “who benefits, who loses” and when I look at the National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs through this lens, one of the things that jumps out at me is that school systems in relatively low cost-of-living areas benefit far more than those in high cost of living areas. On the one hand, in a low cost of living area, more of the children in need are likely to be covered by the 185% of poverty income threshold (for Reduced Price meals). This raises participation rates and, by embracing a larger spectrum of the community, changes the atmosphere and “reputation” of the program (and incidentally makes it far easier for a school to use Provision Two). And increased participation lowers the unit cost of producing each meal. At the same time, lower labor costs in a low-cost-of-living area mean that the federal reimbursement goes further; more of the $2.72 is available for food, and the meals are often better (which in turn raises participation again). I’d like to see careful research on the impacts (functions) of cost of living differentials on food assistance programs, especially those where food quality is important to the capacity of programs to address obesity and related health concerns.

6. The who benefits question also turns my attention to the larger social context. To what extent does the overall rise in weight reflect national policies about what to subsidize. By subsidizing corn, soy and wheat, the federal government has made them artificially cheap, thus inducing the food industry to develop the enormous infrastructure of R&D and production that churns out the ever rolling stream of new sweet and salty snack products. Short of taxing unhealthy products, or banning their purchase with SNAP, we might just stop subsidizing them. The research gaps here, it seems to me, are in the realm of history and political science. Sonya’s comments about the Iron Triangle are a case in point.

7. Moving on to the interactionist perspective with its focus on meanings, I want to assert that framing matters, and matters in
ways that we don’t intend and probably cannot fully anticipate. I sometimes think of myself as a “childhood obesity opportunist.” That is, I wrote Free for All because I perceived that concern about childhood obesity had created an opportunity to rethink school food, but the more I worked with the concept of obesity, the more I came to feel that it may be a mistake to focus on “obesity.” Our choice of topic, of label, of conceptualization, has consequences in the real world. As Marlene pointed out yesterday, and several other presenters have mentioned as well, anti-weight bias has increased with the rise in obesity. I would rather see a broader, more inclusive concept of diet-related health—healthy weight, healthy lifestyles, healthy eating. We know that our children’s diets are often deficient in fruits and vegetables and whole grains, even if the children do not (yet) show signs of overweight. I think we need to avoid contributing to the creation of a gulf, a divide, between the fit and the fat, or the obese and the rest of society. I would like to see the issue constructed as creating a food system that provides healthy, nutritious, palatable, pleasurable and just food—fair food—for all.