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The Collaborative Dialogue Panel: Changing The Model of The Professional Sociology Conference

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Abstract
The emergence of Sociologists Without Borders opened up new opportunities for social justice oriented intellectual engagement and collaboration. Given the opportunity to re-imagine the structure and function of professional conferences, a number of us who were focused on issues of environmental justice as a human right came together in 2006 to challenge the traditional model of serial paper presentations at panel sessions. The collaborative dialogue panel brings together sociologists focused on a specific social problem or issue, and asks them to work together to generate questions and answers in a public forum in dialogue with each other and with others attending a session. The goals of a collaborative dialogue panel are to replace serial monologues with sustained dialogue, address critical social issues, and to invite meaningful interaction between panelists and other participants. The idea is to maximize the unique benefits of bringing a group of engaged intellectuals physically together (at great ecological cost) to address social problems, and to leave the reading of papers to other times and places.

I had thought for quite some time that our traditional academic model of conference panel paper presentations was antiquated, inefficient, and quite frankly, colossally boring. Don't get me wrong, I think that it is important that we share our work, exchange ideas, discuss our data, methods, and theories, and get to know each other. I had just become decreasingly convinced that the standard American Sociological Association (ASA) model developed a century ago or earlier, was getting the job done as effectively as possible. In the digital age, there really is no reason that we should all have to travel hundreds or thousands of miles to gather in windowless rooms to listen to each other read summaries of our most recent research papers (and given the long lead time in submission deadlines,

"recent" is often an exaggeration). Why couldn't we submit and organize our papers as we had been doing, and have them posted, by section, panel, etc. on the ASA conference website as PDFs? We could look over titles and abstracts, and decide which panels looked interesting just as we have always done, but rather than trudging off, bleary eyed, $5 coffee in hand to an 8AM session in some corporate hotel, we simply downloaded the papers and read them at a time, place, and caffeination level of our own choosing? Rather than abbreviated summaries (accompanied by often deadly PowerPoints), we could read the work at a depth of our choosing. We could email the author(s) with our questions and comments, and even establish dates and times for authors and readers to exchange thoughts in real time via the web. The benefits of this would include massively reduced carbon footprints, greater inclusivity, reduced cost, reduced time conflicts (from trying to be at two sessions at the same time), and arguably deeper and longer exchanges freed from time constraints. After all, ASA meetings are, at some level, an object lesson in space and time constraints within a very environmentally costly corporate conference center/hotel/airline structure.

However, if the model above was implemented, what would become of the face-to-face human social interaction that many of us actually value more than the panel sessions at ASA meetings? For me, the upside of the meetings has always been "lunch", that is, the opportunity to sit and have meals with old friends, good colleagues and new recruits while discussing heady topics. After twenty years of conference attendance, I had also noticed that the most valuable intellectual exchanges occurred outside of the conference rooms, in the halls, lobbies, bars, and coffee stands, and were often interrupted by the need to rush off to a session to present, listen, or support a student or colleague.

By the time the early days of Sociologists Without Borders (SSF) came around, I was eager to find a way to dispense with the serial paper reading at conferences, while capturing the essential elements of intellectual exchange on crucial social issues, face-to-face social interaction with colleagues and others, and lunch. When Judith Blau approached me with the idea of organizing a session on environmental rights for an SSF co-sponsored mini-conference prior to the 2005 ASA meetings in Philadelphia, I agreed on the condition

that the format was wholly up for grabs. Always an innovator, Judith, of course, duly authorized me to put the two hour session together however I'd like. The result was the collaborative dialogue panel session on Environmental Rights at the "Where Sociology Meets Solidarities" mini-conference co-sponsored by SSF and the Association of Black Sociologists held on August 12, 2005 in Philadelphia at the Philadelphia Sheraton Society Hill Hotel (you can't win all your battles at once).

The first challenge was to gather an enthusiastic and diverse group of engaged environmental justice scholars whose work spoke to issues of human rights. The idea was to put folks from diverse locations together in a room to generate a challenging dialogue that would move the issues of environmental rights forward, and have them take elements of that discussion back to their various corners of the country. The panelists who agreed to participate in a somewhat pioneering conference event were (with their institutional affiliations at that time):

- David Naguib Pellow (Department of Ethnic Studies, University of California-San Diego)

- Jennifer M. Santos (Disaster Research Center, University of Delaware)

- Keri Iyall Smith (Department of Sociology, Stonehill College)

- Dave Overfelt (Department of Sociology, University of Missouri-Columbia)

- Cecilio Ortiz-Garcia (Center for Environmental Resource Management, University of Texas-El Paso)

- Elizabeth S. Canigilia (Department of Sociology, Oklahoma State University)

- Kenneth A. Gould (Department of Sociology, St. Lawrence University)

The next challenge was to put my money where my mouth was and to come up with a panel session format that was familiar enough so that participants would feel comfortable, but that would effectively achieve 3 basic goals:

1. Sustain dialogue rather than just serial monologues.
2. Address issues central to the establishment of environmental rights as human rights in a focused manner.
3. Invite sustained interaction between panelists and other participants, rather than a stilted Q&A at the end of the session.

Rather than ask panelists to submit formal academic papers, I asked them to come prepared to provide brief, pithy, and incisive answers to a list of seven questions. Panelists were instructed to "try to limit your initial comments to 5 minutes per question. Please be respectfully provocative in your comments, as our goal is to animate discussion at the end of a long day" (our session was slated to run from 4:30PM to 6:30PM). Each panelist was asked to suggest a question for our session. In this way, we initiated a dialogue between the panelists long before the conference. The panel session would be a collaborative effort, rather than a collection of individual efforts (with a discussant charged with the daunting task of weaving connections between disparate papers together at the end of a session). We worked together to create something that we thought would be stimulating for everybody who would attend. Once we had bounced a series of questions back and forth, refining, and editing them, we settled on the following seven:

1. EVALUATION: How far has the Environmental Justice movement come since its start more than two decades ago? To what degree has it achieved any of its stated goals?

2. FRAMES: What are the costs and benefits of extending the Environmental Justice frame beyond its original basis in racial and ethnic discrimination to include issues of class, gender, and nation? In a way we are still dealing with the identity politics vs. disinterested politics dichotomy in terms of political action in this policy arena. What are the implications for stakeholders of utilizing these different

frames in Environmental Justice conflicts? Is Environmental Justice a human right? What are the implications of this framing?

3. COALITIONS: What are the primary obstacles to forming Environmental Justice coalitions, both domestically and internationally? What are some instructive examples of confronting obstacles?

4. ECONOMIC STRUCTURE: To what extent, and through what mechanisms, can Environmental Justice be achieved within the constraints of a market economy?

5. STATES: To what extent, and through what mechanisms, can Environmental Justice be achieved in a state-based society? What specific actions typify state action/reaction to the Environmental Justice movement? What policy instruments have dominated state action re this issue? How have those policy actions evolved since E.O. 12898? What connections can be made (if any) between the current demographic changes within lets say Hispanics in the U.S. (or vulnerable populations internationally) and state capacity in the area of Environmental Justice/Environmental Policy.

6. CULTURE: What is the role of Environmental Justice in cultural preservation and protection (locally and globally)?

7) METHODOLOGY: What are some of the benefits/limitations of the risk-based methodological framework utilized on a large number of Environmental Justice related studies? What benefits/limitations would be associated with a shift to a vulnerability assessment format?

We believed that the set of questions was specific enough to focus our conversations where we wanted them, yet broad enough to allow multiple points of entry for panelist and other participants. Now, the quantitatively oriented among you might have calculated that seven questions times seven panelists times five minutes a piece would give us over four hours of prepared remarks, which would not inspire much dialogue nor fit into a two hour session. I asked each panelist to choose two questions to respond to. After some sorting,

trading, and a little tripling up, we had two panelists assigned to each question. That gave us a little over an hour for panelists to address questions, with a little under an hour left "open" so that other participants could have nearly equal time to address the questions and/or the remarks of the panelists as we went.

At the start of the session I handed out the list of questions and panelists who would address them to the others in attendance. I explained the format as follows. "I will read a question, then ask the assigned panelist to offer five minutes of response to the question, after which you (the non-panelist participants) will be invited to offer comments on the question and the remarks of the panelists." What ensued was a rapid, pithy, highly participatory exchange of ideas related to each question. To our great enjoyment (and some relief), we successfully transformed the old serial paper presentation model into a sometimes fiery, even exciting exchange of ideas and perspectives on environmental justice and environmental human rights. (Please look at the published work of the panelists for the specifics on environmental rights and justice). The bottom line is that people engaged the ideas, the issues, and each other. Panelists interacted with each other, other participants interacted with each other, and panelists and other participants interacted as well. And this was the main event, not the side conversation in the hall on the way to get more coffee or find the bathroom or book exhibit. I think we all had fun, and felt like something more had been accomplished than ticking a box or adding a line to a CV. A number of those who had participated in the session came up to me afterward to say "that was great". I've rarely heard (or said) that after a traditional panel session, even those with a terrific collection of papers and substantive Q&A.

Following the mini-conference, I made some effort to move this new panel session model into the ASA meetings. Unfortunately, the ASA meeting structure is not terribly amenable to this. Formal papers must be submitted. This is true for roundtables as well as panel sessions. The price of entry to an ASA session is a formal paper, so that participants in collaborative dialogue sessions would have to produce the papers, have them accepted, then agree not to actually present them, but instead, collaborate to generate short pithy answers to a series of related questions in a coherently themed session. That is not the ASA way. One of the great benefits of SSF, and why its

emergence came as a great relief to many of us, was that it generated fora for intellectual creativity and engagement. Following Michael Burawoy's call for public sociology in his Presidential address to the 2004 ASA meetings in San Francisco, many of us felt that new structures, organizations, and models were necessary to move the project of meaningful and purposeful sociological engagement forward. SSF was (and is) a terrific vehicle for that project.

The model of collaborative dialogue panel that we tested in Philadelphia is certainly replicable, but only when organizational constraints are fluid, creative, and amenable to experimentation. Sadly, the ASA has proven to be deficient on that score. But the model of the mega meeting may be an historical relic that we can dispense with as communication and information technology intersect with committed groups of publicly engaged social scientists. A proliferation of smaller, social issue focused, collaborative dialogue-style meetings might be just the thing to reenergize our enterprise. Our goal is to sustain dialogue, address crucial issues with a sociological imagination, and engage publics with an eye toward social justice. SSF has provided, and continues to provide, terrific opportunities for us to do just that.

Kenneth A. Gould is Professor and Chair of Sociology at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, and Professor of Sociology, and Earth and Environmental Sciences at the CUNY Graduate Center. His work focuses on the political economy of environment, technology and development, and is best known for its contribution to the development of the Treadmill of Production model of socio-environmental dynamics. Gould's research examines the responses of communities to environmental problems, environmental movement coalitions, the role of inequality in environmental conflicts, and the impacts of economic globalization on efforts to achieve ecologically and socially sustainable development trajectories. He is co-author of *Environment and Society* (1994), *Local Environmental Struggles* (1996), *The Treadmill of Production* (2008), *Twenty Lessons in Environmental Sociology* (2009), *Thirty Readings in Introductory Sociology* (2013), and *Ten Lessons in Introductory Sociology* (2013). His recent work examines ecotourism, labor environmentalism, and green gentrification.