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Toward an organic policy sociology

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Abstract

According to many, sociology is facing a crisis of relevance. Of particular concern is sociology's inability to impact policy. Sociologists, who should be the go-to on major policy issues have been sidelined as other social scientists take up roles as policy advisors. Recent efforts aimed at encouraging public engagement have focused on disseminating research and producing more policy-relevant knowledge. These are welcome resources, but they reflect a deep ambivalence toward policy sociology and a tendency to conflate participation in public discussions with policy impact. In contrast, this essay draws on recent findings about the power of policy experts to develop an organic policy sociology. Organic policy sociology depends on co-designing and carrying out research with policymakers with whom we share critical and professional commitments. By working collaboratively with policymakers, sociologists can foster equity-promoting policy, change how policymakers understand social problems, and improve how citizens experience policy on the ground. To that end, I offer six orienting strategies for developing and maintaining organic policy sociology projects, from finding the right partner to assessing the impact of our work.

1 | INTRODUCTION

According to many sociologists and close observers, our discipline is facing a crisis of relevance. Of particular concern is sociology's inability to impact policy. Sociologists, who should be the go-to on major policy issues including race, gender, and economic inequality, seem to have been sidelined as other experts—from economists to designers—take up the role of policy advisors (Hirschman & Berman, 2014; Lupton, 2018). Recent writing on the topic points to a series of challenges, including our inaccessible, jargon-filled writing (Fox, 2018; Smith, 2016; Stein & Daniels, 2017), our reluctance to step outside of the ivory tower (Fox, 2018; Smith, 2016),

sociology's disciplinary diversity (Popp Berman quoted in Fox, 2018), and the public's potentially negative perception of our field (Gauchat & Andrews, 2018; Scheitle, 2018). Others suggest that the political moment—whether neoliberal, post-political, or post-truth—is working against the social sciences, and perhaps especially sociology (Gauchat, 2015; Lockie, 2017; Sismondo, 2017).

The concern over the impact of sociology has inspired a wave of articles, books, blog posts, tweets, and workshops offering guidance to sociologists wishing to reach a broader public and produce more policy-relevant research. Some argue for improving our dissemination strategies by taking advantage of social media (Cohen, 2019; Healy, 2017; Stein & Daniels, 2017) and presenting our research in ways that engage nonacademic audiences (Ray, 2019; Stein & Daniels, 2017; Sternheimer, 2018). Others encourage sociologists to ask more policy-relevant research questions (Cohen, 2019; Prasad, 2016, 2018) and employ research methods that can produce “problem-solving” knowledge (Prasad, 2016, 2018).

These are welcome and important resources, but they reflect a deep ambivalence toward policy sociology and a tendency to conflate participation in public discussions with policy impact. In this essay, I argue that if the goal is to impact policy, sociologists should embrace *organic policy sociology*. Like organic public sociology (Burawoy, 2005), this form of engaged scholarship requires collaborating with an organized public dedicated to social change. But unlike the former, organic policy sociology depends on working with policymakers and state actors on the front line of policy. With these partners sociologists can and should let research emerge and co-design projects that are immediately relevant. The goal of organic policy sociology is not to produce “useful” findings in the instrumental sense but rather to shift how policymakers understand social problems, introduce equity and justice into existing and new policy process, and improve how citizens experience policy on the ground.

To make the case for an organic policy sociology, I draw on recent scholarship on policy expertise that suggests that social scientists can maximize their political power and impact by plugging into policymaking spaces and intervening directly in policymaking processes. I also draw on the political sociology of states and policymaking and on my experience carrying out various policy sociology projects.¹ Insights from political sociology suggest that we can find partners who share our normative and critical commitments. My own experience shows that through careful and deliberate dialogue sociologists can engage in collaborative policy research that meets professional and ethical standards while remaining relevant and resonant for policymakers.

In the following sections, I first address sociology's ambivalent relationship to policy sociology and the contemporary focus on research dissemination and problem-solving at a distance. Second, I present key findings from political sociology that suggest we can and should be more proactive in connecting with policymakers. I then introduce strategies for developing and maintaining organic policy sociology partnerships, from finding the right partner, to conducting research, to assessing the impact of our work. These strategies should help sociologists retain control over their research process while keeping policy research partnerships collaborative. To illuminate these strategies, I draw on a recent project conducted with the Mayor's Office of the City of Providence, Rhode Island.² The final section addresses the challenges of conducting organic policy research in the context of academic institutions and incentive structures that can be hostile to direct forms of public engagement.

2 | POLICY SOCIOLOGY WITHOUT POLICYMAKERS

In his recent presidential address to the Midwest Sociological Society, Hartmann (2017) reminded readers of the famously “awkward” relationship sociology has with public engagement (see also Calhoun, 2007). As Hartmann notes, “no matter the justification or reason, the acknowledgment and embrace of public engagement has an uneven history, marked by ebbs and flows of embrace and disavowal” (p. 2). Despite our reformist origins, the relationship with policy engagement is especially awkward and ambivalent (Calhoun, 2007; Lengerma & Niebrugge, 2007; Lewis & Embrick, 2016). On the one hand, many professional academic sociologists want their research to reach policymakers. We praise the public efforts and media savvy of Eve Ewing, Matthew Desmond, Sara Goldrick-Rab, and Tressie

McMillan Cottom (to name just a few very public sociologists) as well as Aida Winfield Harvey (winner of the American Sociological Association's 2018 Public Understanding of Sociology Award) or Christopher Uggen, Ryan Larson, and Sarah Shannon (winners of the 2018 Sociological Practice and Public Sociology's Publication Award for Significant Contributions to Applied and Public Sociology). We get excited, and rightfully so, when on rare occasions sociology attracts the attention of policymakers at the highest level. Consider for example Elizabeth Warren's recent reference to the work of Goldrick-Rab, McMillan Cottom, and Louise Seamster in her position on student debt, or Barack Obama's (2017) reference to Shannon et al. (2017) in his writing on criminal justice reform. At the same time, sociologists are often dismissive of policy-oriented projects and distrust policymakers as partners and interlocutors (in contrast to social movements and other civil society actors).

This ambivalence is most forcefully articulated in Michael Burawoy's (2005) presidential address. In an otherwise positive endorsement of public engagement, Burawoy describes sociologists working outside of the ivory tower as doing "mere policy" work. This is despite how, "influential or indeed socially essential their work might be" (Hartmann, 2017, p. 4). Perhaps more to the point, Burawoy (2005) portrays the relationship between academic sociologists and policymakers as necessarily instrumental, suggesting policy sociology is always conducted, "in the service of a goal defined by a client" who specifies the task for the sociologist through a "narrow contract" or act, "like patrons defining broad policy agendas" (p. 9). From this perspective, policy sociology's, "*raison d'être* is to provide solutions to problems that are presented to us, or to legitimate solutions that have already been reached" (Burawoy, 2005).³ In contrast, public sociology is described as having two modes ("traditional" wherein sociologists shape public debate through dissemination without working directly with affected publics and "organic" wherein sociologists engage directly in a dialogic, collaborative relationship with an organized civil society public). While civil society publics are imagined as agents of social change with whom sociologists share professional or normative commitments, policymakers are imagined as a threat. With no possibility of organic policy sociology, our best hope, it seems, is to take on policy indirectly by intervening in public debate.⁴

The renewed interest in sociology's public impact reflects this desire to intervene in policy via public debate while keeping policymakers at bay. Consider the attention sociologists have recently given public writing and dissemination. Both Stein and Daniels (2017) and Sternheimer (2018), for example, offer practical advice about writing for and keeping the attention of nonacademic audiences, such as writing effective op-eds and publishing with crossover presses (for additional advice, see Ray, 2019). A second theme of this work turns on how to effectively use social media for publicizing research across various digital domains. For example, Stein and Daniels (2017) focus on how to cultivate more expansive, diverse, and democratic online networks. Healy (2017) argues that since social media makes all our work "latently public" and "ambiently visible," we should engage audiences early in the research process and intervene in online debates openly and often.

Institutional efforts have also been devised to help sociologists promote their work to knowledge-consuming publics. For example, SocArXiv provides an open access platform for social scientists to upload working papers, preprints, published work, and even data and code. As the website states, SocArXiv is "dedicated to opening up social science, to reach more people more effectively, to improve research, and build the future of scholarly communication" (SocArXiv). The American Sociological Association (ASA), for its part, has crafted a strategic public engagement plan that relies primarily on the use of digital media tools to increase the public profile of sociological research, hosted several social media workshops, and published an instructive tool kit on promoting sociological research (Wray, Daniels, & Fetner, 2016). The ASA has also recently unveiled the Sociology Action Network which promotes forging contacts outside of our professional field. Though many of these resources emphasize the need to tailor our public writing and networking efforts to specific audiences, policymakers are assumed rather than addressed specifically as a target.

A parallel lively discussion around "problem-solving" research ignores the work it takes to reach lay audiences or policymakers all together. Rather than "communicating things that social scientists already know to audiences outside of social science," problem-solving research aims to discover "things that social scientists do not yet know" (Prasad, 2018, p. 394). To that end, advocates of "problem-solving" sociology offer lessons sociologists can apply when

coming up with research questions and designing research projects. For example, Prasad (2018) suggests that scholars can address important policy questions by making use of creative case comparisons, turning their attention to uncovering the roots of social problems and toward the “villains” rather than the “victims” of various social ills. Though much more focused than the dissemination model (the “problem-solving” conversation has mostly occurred among comparative historical and political sociologists), Prasad argues that by asking and answering “the most basic and biggest questions,” the discipline can renew its “policy orientation” (p. 394).⁵ Efforts that encourage “problem-solving” scholarship include idea incubators and dissertation proposal development workshops that support scholars whose research tackles social problems with a focus on solutions.

These welcome resources should help more sociologists join the ranks of those already asking big questions and intervening in public policy debates. But if getting policymakers to read, cite, or retweet our work is rare, getting our work to impact actually existing policy is even rarer. In what follows, I argue that if our hope is to impact policy, we should focus on direct forms of engagement. Research in political sociology shows that proximity to policymakers matters and that policymakers can indeed make good partners.

3 | PLUGGING INTO POLICY

The power of economists and other experts to shape policy has not only caused sociologists to fret about the discipline's relevance, this has also inspired a wave of research on policy expertise that sociologists interested in public impact have heretofore ignored.

In a diverse set of cases and contexts, researchers have repeatedly found that the power of policy-oriented experts to intervene in politics and influence policy depends, in large part, on the relationships they forge with policymakers and the positions they occupy vis-à-vis policymaking institutions or fields (Christensen, 2017; Fourcade, 2006; Hirschman & Berman, 2014; Medvetz, 2012; Mudge, 2019; Mudge & Vauchez, 2012). For example, the embeddedness of economists *within* the state apparatus has guaranteed the lasting and widespread influence of neo-liberal economic theory and policy (Babb, 2001; Christensen, 2017; Fourcade, 2009; Fourcade-Gourinchas & Babb, 2002). Likewise, think tank experts have been able to exert political influence by occupying positions *between* and *proximate* to the policy domains they ultimately influence (Medvetz, 2012). As Mudge and Vauchez (2012, p. 452) argue, these proximate positions directly facilitate “exchange and translation across scholarly, political, and bureaucratic boundaries.” In her deeply researched book on political parties, Mudge (2019) finds that the reinvention of left-ist parties was in part a result of shifting relationships. When economists occupied positions of “in-betweenness” with “one foot in left parties and one foot in academic economics professions” (as they did in the 1960s), they forged “strong and interdependent” relationships through which they could transmit a “way of seeing the world” to political party elites (p. 6).

To be sure, proximity does not guarantee influence. This depends on a negotiated synergy between disciplinary and policymaking trends (Fourcade, 2009) and on the degree to which homologies and parallel struggles facilitate alliances across fields (de Sousa Leão & Eyal, 2019). Notwithstanding, what this recent scholarship shows is that asking the right questions and circulating findings are insufficient conditions for policy impact. Influence is exerted by entering policy spaces, creating channels of communication and exchange, and building alliances with like-minded policymakers. From these positions, experts have lasting effects on policy not only by sharing findings produced at a distance from policymakers, but also by introducing new styles of reasoning, ways of understanding issues, and methods for thinking about and doing policy (Hirschman & Berman, 2014).

By suggesting we consider these findings as we develop public impact strategies I do not mean sociologists must forgo their academic positions to work for government (though some might!) nor that the entire field must pivot toward a policy-advisory role. Instead, I am urging sociologists to be proactive in building relationships and creating opportunities for dialogue and exchange with policymakers. Before introducing some strategies for doing that, a brief

detour to address the concerns that policymakers necessarily threaten our autonomy and that our research will be beholden to the interests of policymakers.

The wholesale distrust of policymakers as potential partners belies the sociological research on states and policymaking which has shown that neither the state nor its constitutive organizations and agencies are unified or homogeneous (see Morgan & Orloff, 2016 for a recent discussion of this long-established notion). Within any given policy domain, it is likely that we will find state officials working at *contra* purposes. And, within state organizations that on the surface present a certain logic, we are likely to find pockets of innovation and autonomy (Evans, 1995; McDonnell, 2017).

Weberian bureaucrats are often credited with carving out spaces of efficiency, but even Weber argued that these actors may be motivated by normative commitments. Bureaucrats and policymakers committed to justice and equity may be especially likely in fields where former activists have entered state spaces and where policymakers think of their work as oriented toward democratic or just goals (e.g., Abers, 1998; Abers & Keck, 2009; Coslovsky, 2014; Friedmann, 1987). We may also encounter policymaking actors who identify with professional or political commitments that challenge their official charge (e.g., Christensen, 2017; Friedmann, 1987) or who have developed their own sociological and structural approach to understanding their work (e.g., Silbey, Huising, & Coslovsky, 2009). In other words, across policy domains sociologists may find partners that share their professional and normative commitments.

Traditional public sociology efforts are often aimed at capturing the attention of high-level policymakers. We tend to think of policy design and implementation as happening at different ends of the policy cycle (with scientific evidence impacting policy at the ideation and design phases). Ethnographic accounts of policy suggest that we might focus instead on finding partners deep within the state apparatus or policy process. Street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980) constantly invent and reinvent policy, policy designs are rarely carried out, and implementation even in the most rigid bureaucratic settings can be innovative (e.g., Coslovsky, 2014; Gupta, 2012; Mosse, 2005; Watkins-Hayes, 2009). Moreover, power in policymaking domains is distributed in unexpected ways depending on the sector or context of work. In some domains, power to make decisions, change policy, or engage with social scientists may be concentrated at the top. In others, decision-making power and discretion may be distributed downwards, and autonomy and experimentation may be encouraged (e.g., Sabel & Zeitlin, 2012). Finally, though state agencies are key nodes of policymaking, policymaking processes are not contained within the state. A wave of scholarship has illuminated the role of think tanks, consultants, and policy professionals in designing and implementing policy (e.g., Lee, 2015; Medvetz, 2012; Walker, 2014). Our policymaking partners, then, may include traditional national or local policymakers (including bureaucrats and program officers) as well as non-state actors in influential policymaking positions.

The fact that the state is heterogeneous, its boundaries blurry, and policy partly incoherent is a boon to sociologists. It means we can work to find good partners with whom we share commitments to the importance of research and social scientific evidence in policy, or to justice and social change. The task is finding these partners and creating mutually beneficial collaborations that will help realize these commitments.

4 | TOWARD AN ORGANIC POLICY SOCIOLOGY

Organic policy sociology builds on deliberative co-design and co-production and working *with* (as opposed to *for*) a given partner. Successful projects and meaningful policy impact depend on mutual learning and keeping collaborations "as *open ended* as possible" (Powell & Colin, 2008, emphasis in the original). Both parties must remain willing to learn from one another, and researchers must be receptive to input including concerning the scope of research problems.

Maintaining a collaborative spirit while working with policymakers comes with a unique set of challenges related to the dynamics of the political and bureaucratic fields in which policymakers work and the pressures that threaten

to instrumentalize our research. Though we may never be able to fully predict how our policy interventions will be used (Steinmetz, 2016), by working directly and deliberately with policymakers sociologists can fulfill normative, critical, and professional commitments without compromising research integrity. The strategies I offer should help sociologists retain control over the research process while keeping partnerships open-ended. To illuminate each of the strategies, I include an example from an organic policy sociology project conducted with the Department of Innovation of the Mayor's Office of the City of Providence, Rhode Island. This admittedly idiosyncratic project is not intended as a blueprint, but rather as an example sociologists might think with as they craft their own projects.

4.1 | Finding the “right” partner

Organic policy sociology depends on researchers proactively seeking partners. Some sociologists might find that a partner emerges from their primary, scholarly research. For those who have been diligent about research dissemination and are already well networked or politically engaged, finding a partner might be an easy task. Others might benefit from becoming more engaged with local government or within a policy issue area of interest (housing, climate change, criminal justice reform, etc.). The “right” partner will vary, but as the discussion above suggests, organic policy sociology requires partners have some degree of autonomy as well as the institutional incentives and capacity, or personal motivation and willingness to engage in collaborative research.

Prior to beginning our work in Providence, my collaborator, Jamie McPike, and I had experience working with policymakers and conducting policy sociology projects, but our scholarly research sites were outside of the United States. Though we were relatively engaged in our communities, neither of us had ties to local policymakers. Committed to collaborative policy research, we began by scouring state websites to identify agencies connected to our interests (housing, urban inequality, democratic participation, transparency and accountability, etc.). Our search led us to various potential partners including the newly established Department of Innovation (DOI) housed within the Mayor's Office. The stated objectives of the DOI (“working with internal and external stakeholders to streamline the delivery of city services, promote public entrepreneurship, and enhance citizen engagement” and creating “a ‘City that Works’ for its residents and customers”) piqued our interest. Rather than rejecting the language as too vague or as neoliberal governance-speak, we took the DOI's stated mission as a potential entry point. The fact that the agency seemed to reach across various policy sectors and have a mandate to improve services suggested the DOI might have some flexibility and autonomy. Its various mandates signaled potential overlap with our research interests.

4.2 | Discovering commitments and constraints

Once a potential partner has been identified, the second and perhaps most critical stage begins: establishing dialogue. Rather than approaching a potential partner with the goal of presenting a project proposal or having the partner assign a project, the aim of initial meetings should be for each partner to gain an understanding of what the other does in practice and to discover factors that could facilitate or hinder the relationship. Dialogues should be built around discovering our partners commitments and constraints. From policymakers, we will want to know the nature of their involvement in specific programs, policies, or initiatives. We will also want to know how they understand and enact their stated goals and what conflicts or challenges they face in realizing these. Shared commitments to research, evidence-based policymaking, or equity and justice can facilitate a partnership. Political or organizational constraints including electoral pressures, budgetary issues, or rigid bureaucratic cultures can sometimes jeopardize collaboration. At other times, these constraints afford opportunities for sociologists to intervene.

After communicating an interest in the work of the Department of Innovation and introducing the idea of a potential collaboration, we invited the Chief Innovation Officer (CIO) to join us for a series of informal chats. As we met again and again over several months, we began thinking of conversations with the CIO and her staff as an extended ethnographic interview. Like an ethnographic interview, these conversations helped us gain an understanding of the DOI, but also depended on building trust with the CIO.

For us, building a relationship with the DOI meant learning how staff understood their various charges (“streamlining delivery,” “enhanc[ing] citizen engagement,” and ensuring a “City that Works”) and what being housed within the Mayor’s Office meant for their autonomy and potential impact. We also wanted to get a sense of who their “stakeholders” were; what cross-sector, intra-departmental ties the DOI had; and which programs or policies the agency had a hand in shaping. Of course, we also wanted to introduce ourselves and share our own commitments and constraints.

During these conversations we confirmed our suspicion that the DOI had a lot of autonomy and saw their proximity to the Mayor and City Council as an opportunity to effect change. We learned that as part of their mandate to “streamline” service delivery and introduce open-governance measures, the DOI had authority over reordering the relationship between various city agencies and their constituents. Through this ongoing dialogue, we also learned that the CIO had long wanted to work on a few “pet projects,” including developing a methodology to increase citizen participation and supporting minority and refugee-owned businesses which she suspected were discriminated against through the business licensing process. The fact that the DOI had no budget or staffing capacity to address these issues was a constraint we saw as an opportunity to provide research support.

4.3 | Establishing a research “problem space” and agreeing on the terms of engagement

One way to protect our work and ensure the integrity of our research process is to agree to a *problem space* rather than a specific research question. By problem space, I mean an area of mutual concern arrived at through dialogue. The problem space must be important for the policymaker and fall squarely within the researchers’ area of expertise. The problem space should be immediately relevant to policymakers and policy processes but not so specific as to risk our work being marshaled to justify a particular decision. Counterintuitively agreeing to a relatively broad problem space allows the researcher to retain more control over the research process.

The open-endedness of the research problem space can be counterbalanced by a set of terms nimble enough to adapt to new ideas as they will inevitably arise during the course of research, but clear and specific enough so that expectations are met and both partners remain satisfied. At this stage, partners should establish clear expectations about, for example, communication and deadlines as well as research possibilities and limitations. Partners should also address research ethics, anonymity, data sharing, co-authorship, and involvement in non-research activities. Here, we can be especially careful about establishing guidelines related to how our research will be used.

When the CIO talked about her “pet projects,” she was quite specific. For example, she wanted to develop a specific methodology to promote civic engagement among new immigrants and refugee communities in Providence. She also wanted to introduce reforms that might increase transparency around the decision making of a smallbusiness licensing board she thought of as discriminatory. Her concerns were too specific, and ours (democratic participation, accountability, and equity) too broad to seem immediately relevant. Instead, we negotiated a researchable problem space. We agreed we would conduct research to “understand democratic (dis)engagement” among Providence residents, and on how minority business owners “negotiate and experience bureaucracy”. In short, we found a middle ground between an assignment driven by a specific policy question and a broad scholarly research area. We agreed our problem space was worthwhile, interesting, and relevant for both parties.

In establishing the terms of the partnership, we emphasized our role as researchers (not policy evaluators or policymakers), and the kinds of data we might be able to collect. Here, we were clear about our expertise as qualitative sociologists and what we saw as the strengths and limitations of ethnographic data (for a discussion of the use of ethnographic data for policy in this project, see Graizbord, McPike, & Pollock, 2016a). We emphasized our commitment to protecting our research participants and the stories they shared. We also discussed what data the DOI would share with us, and when, how, and to whom we might make our data available in return. We shared our scheduling constraints (the semester timeline) and discussed what we thought we could accomplish together. We made sure that each partner understood what could and could not be expected from a research partnership and set expectations

accordingly. We also decided that we would maintain frequent and open communication and collaborate throughout the research process.

4.4 | Opening the black box of research

In traditional models of public and policy sociology, the research process is black boxed. Organic policy sociology, in contrast, calls for researchers to open up the research process to policy partners, enlisting them as collaborators in developing and carrying out fieldwork and interpreting findings. Inviting policy partners into the research processes can leverage their expertise. Just as working with affected citizens can result in more immediately useful and ethical science (Cordner, Ciptel, Brown, & Morello-Frosch, 2012), so can working with trusted and committed policymakers. Openness also increases credibility, trust, and the uptake of knowledge (Wynne, 1992). Communicating throughout the research process has the advantage of demonstrating how we define research questions and approach policy problems. By multiplying our points of contact, we can also share early or interim research findings which we might otherwise have ignored. This incremental and iterative approach is key to inserting sociological methods and styles of reasoning into policymaking.

Over the course of our research which spanned roughly a semester we maintained frequent communication and had several face-to-face meetings with the DOI staff. During these meetings we shared our research design, data, and early findings. We even invited DOI staff to follow along as members of our research team conduct ethnographic observation (at public forums). Conducting ethnographic observation with our partner gave us a sense of how they understood their own work and relationship with city residents. In turn, this led to productive discussions about how, as sociologists, we approached the research problem and interpreted what we observed. More practically, these conversations helped improve our research. For example, during one meeting after sharing feeling frustrated by our fieldwork and some seemingly contradictory findings, the DOI shared (extremely helpful) administrative data we had not known existed and which facilitated further research and interpretation.

Moreover, frequent communication during the research process expanded our impact in ways we had not anticipated. On one occasion, we shared what we thought were irrelevant data related to the ecology of nonprofit organizations in Providence. As it turned out, the DOI was working on another project (a small business incubator), and these findings prompted them to include members of the nonprofit community in the planning process. In sum, sharing research was generative. It improved our research and expanded the opportunities for impact while ensuring that the partnership remained relevant and satisfying for both parties.

4.5 | Delivering data-rich stories (not policy briefs!)

Once the research is complete, there are a number of ways we might communicate our findings. Though here I defer to the work on dissemination reviewed above, I will suggest that to captivate public interest, introduce sociological perspectives into policy debates, and invite policy action or innovation, sociologists should consider crafting and circulating data-rich sociological stories. Like data visualizations and other creative ways of presenting our work (Healy, 2017; Healy & Moody, 2014), stories engage multiple sensory, emotive, and cognitive registers, and storytelling can make ideas memorable and convincing (Gelman & Basbøll, 2014; Maris, 1990). Stories, broadly imagined, have a number of specific advantages. Because stories can retain some of the complexity of social life and uniqueness of actual events, they can contribute to emphasizing sociological ways of understanding policy problems and introduce critical perspectives on social issues (Tilly, 2002). Unlike some of our more conventional ways of writing, sociological stories based on data systematically collected and thoughtfully presented can capture “productive contradictions” (Maris, 1990) and the unruliness of the social world (Law, 2004; Tilly, 2002) in ways that challenge traditional narratives and shift how problems are understood and acted upon (Yanow, 1996). By unsettling taken-for-granted ideas stories can serve as catalysts for debate and mobilize actors to adopt seemingly unlikely policy solutions.

When we began discussing the possibility of working together, the CIO was adamant in that she was not interested in receiving yet another policy brief. In her experience, briefs and recommendations written by academics tended to be full of unimplementable solutions and easily dismissed by important stakeholders. We agreed that we would try to communicate our research in ways that would get the attention of her staff and relevant stakeholders across city government. Together, we decided to experiment with presenting our findings using digital storytelling formats.⁶

We found that the digital stories our team produced, including a story map, had a number of advantages. First, they could be easily circulated to community members, the City Council, Mayor, and other policymakers. Second, because of the interactive nature of digital storytelling, rather than holding a public forum where we might have presented our findings using a PowerPoint deck, we hosted an “engagement event” (Horst & Michael, 2011). There, policymakers, research participants, and other interested community members gathered around each story and interacted with it and each other in real time. This invited immediate dialogue about our research findings which continued later as the stories were shared more widely.

Finally, and most importantly, by presenting our data in a multimedia format, we were able to emphasize critical key findings. Namely, gentrification in various neighborhoods across Providence, including some in which the DOI and other city agencies were pushing redevelopment initiatives, was not only limiting the viability of minority-owned businesses but also decreasing the willingness and capacity of business owners to engage in participatory processes. The story map rendered the concept of gentrification visible. By embedding photos and interview clips, policymakers could see and hear the voices and experiences of city residents firsthand. In short, the story map helped us deliver critical findings through a powerful data-rich narrative that was hard for policymakers to ignore.

4.6 | Assessing our impact

The strategies presented above may help sociologists develop and carry out collaborative research. But how do we assess the impact of organic policy sociology? This form of engagement is not designed to justify policy or deliver solutions but to introduce sociological styles of thought and inspire more equitable policy processes and interventions. To that end, we might assess how our research helps unsettle taken-for-granted approaches to policy problems, the degree to which our work inspires equity enhancing changes in actual policy processes, and improves the way citizens experience policy. In addition to these criteria, sociologists might be interested in assessing whether organic policy sociology partnerships help expand and democratize the social policy problem-solving space. In other words, we should track not only how problems are defined by policymakers but also the degree to which our research helps inspire dialogue and deliberation between policymakers and those most directly impacted by policy. Through careful positioning, sociologists can act as hinges between policymakers and community organizations, stage meaningful dialogues, and plan and conduct research alongside policymakers and affected publics. Here, an organic public and organic policy sociology can be combined to foster and promote more democratic policymaking processes and equity-enhancing policy solutions.

A major win for us came when, as a result of our research, the DOI pushed the issue of gentrification on to the City Council agenda and began linking the city's “entrepreneurship” initiatives (including their pledge of support for small and medium businesses) to a broader conversation about urban equity. We took this as evidence of having helped change the terms of the debate. Another effect of our work was a result of interim findings. In our interviews with business owners, they expressed (counterintuitively) that though they found the licensing process onerous, one thing they did enjoy was visiting City Hall to process their paperwork. During face-to-face encounters with city agency staff, business owners got all sorts questions answered and accessed important information only some of which was directly about the licensing process. This surprised the DOI, which was moving ahead with a plan to digitize the business licensing process having assumed, without consulting small business owners, that the process needed reform. Our findings helped the DOI pause the digitization process and informed a new “business in a day” initiative where small business owners could move through the licensing process more efficiently, but in an expo-

style setting where they would meet city staff and each other. We saw this as an initiative that improved delivery and the encounter between the city bureaucracies and residents. Finally, as the described above, we saw our research create new opportunities for participation. Nonprofit leaders were invited into the planning of a new program, and research participants came together with the DOI to discuss our research and what might be done as a result.

5 | POLICY SOCIOLOGY WITHOUT INCENTIVES?

There is nothing fundamentally at odds between rigorous, empirical, and theory building scholarship and policy-oriented, public-facing work. Indeed, for many of the founders of American sociology, including W.E.B. Du Bois, politically engaged scholarship was at the center of the discipline, indistinct from professional social science. To produce “top-notch social science” was also to illuminate injustice and “shift popular understandings and stimulate change” (Lewis & Embrick, 2016, p. 255). As Prasad (2018) argues, “attempting to solve real-world problems can be a catalyst for breakthroughs in the basic understanding of society: posing new questions, suggesting new research paths, and demanding new methods” (p. 94). Nonetheless, pursuing organic policy sociology projects can seem risky for professional academic sociologists.

A recent report issued by the ASA urges sociology departments to rethink tenure and promotion standards and consider how to evaluate traditional public engagement efforts (McCall et al., 2016). Though this is a step in the right direction, protecting and promoting collaborative relationship-building models of engagement may be more challenging. Organic policy sociology is often time and labor intensive and can result in findings that are not easily written up and published in sociology's standard formats or venues. The projects can be unpredictable and may not fit neatly within a tenure clock timeline or the rhythm of an academic semester. For these reasons, organic forms of public engagement push against the “high productivity compressed time frame” (Mountz et al., 2015) as well as the “efficiency” and “flexibility” logics of the neoliberal university (Giroux, 2002). Moreover, because organic policy sociology requires direct engagement with change-making, justice-oriented state actors, it can be easily perceived as political. Our discipline is split on the value of public engagement, and many academic institutions are openly antagonistic toward work that might be deemed “too political” (Baiocchi, 2005; Lewis & Embrick, 2016). This is especially the case for women and graduate students of color for whom “socialization” into the discipline emphasizes disavowing “activist” and “applied research” foci (Margolis & Romero, 1998; Romero, 2017).

And yet, the same academic institutions that can be hostile to faculty engaging in real-world politics increasingly embrace “experiential,” “engaged,” and “service” learning opportunities for students while promoting “applied” and “problem-oriented” forms of knowledge production. At the same time, the reality of the job market for graduate students in the context of increasingly precarious academic labor arrangements has made some graduate students want to gain skills that prepare them for academic-adjacent careers. In planning the research described above, my collaborators and I took advantage of these realities and built our project into an “applied” research methods course for which we received support from our institution's center for experiential learning (for more on the role of students, see Graizbord, McPike, & Pollock, 2016b). I realize this might not always be an available strategy and that certain research projects might preclude involving students. However, while we work to rethink what our discipline considers professional and intellectually serious activity and devise strategies to resist neoliberal standards of academic productivity, I encourage sociologists to find creative ways to pursue organic policy sociology.

6 | CONCLUSION

In light of the discipline's perceived lack of policy impact, sociologists have amassed an impressive set of resources and institutional innovations that should help researchers make their work more publicly accessible and policy-relevant. In this essay, I have argued that these efforts, though important, reflect an ambivalence about policy sociology

based on a fear that working with policymakers necessarily compromises our integrity and threatens our autonomy. As a result, sociologists have tended to embrace traditional public sociology (as endorsed by Gans, 2002; Burawoy, 2005) and confuse intervening in public debate with intervening in policy. In contrast, I argue that if the goal is to impact policy, sociologists should embrace organic policy sociology. That is, we should work directly with like-minded policymakers to improve actually existing policy processes.

Sociologists have found that the political power and impact of policy-oriented experts does not result only from disseminating ideas or from producing more relevant knowledge. Rather, impact depends on building relationships, creating and maintaining channels of communication, and working with and in policymaking domains. By working with policymakers, we can introduce our ideas, analytic perspectives, and practices into policymaking directly. In doing so, we may shape how social problems are understood, inspire debate, and foster the development of more democratic processes and equitable solutions.

There are challenges to organic policy sociology including doing away with long-standing ideas about policymaking and policymakers' agendas. Engaged policy research also requires that we shift some of our standard research and communication practices and remain humble about our expertise and expectations. Perhaps the biggest challenge is keeping our partnerships truly collaborative and open-ended while retaining control over the research process and keeping the goals of equity and justice front and center. As an orienting guide, this essay introduced six strategies specifically designed to help sociologists craft collaborative and deliberative policy sociology partnerships. I hope the discussion above helps sociologists see the possibility and promise of direct forms of policy research and inspires sociologists to experiment with organic policy sociology.

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ENDNOTES

¹ In addition to the example I provide, my collaborators and I have worked with a senior planner to conduct research for and help draft a redevelopment plan for a major South-Western city and surrounding counties; planned and executed a training for 16 city government teams on research methods for policy innovation; and provided the Chief Diversity Officer of a flagship public university with qualitative data for understanding and visualizing diversity on campus, among other projects.

² This project was designed and carried out with Jamie McPike. For more on the origin and effects of this project, see Adeleke (2016).

³ The sentiment is echoed by Steinmetz (2016) who argues that conducting "applied" research threatens to "instrumentalize" sociology and is at odds with the "intellectual trends," "scientific quality," and ethical positions that should guide our work.

⁴ In an earlier similar call for public sociology, Gans (2002) argued for institutionalizing and legitimizing the "specialist public sociologists" who could intervene in public debate and reshape public understanding of social issues. For Gans, the interlocutor was never a policymaker, but the "general public" reached via journalists or other gatekeepers.

⁵ This proposal has been debated in the pages of *Trajectories* (the ASA's comparative historical section newsletter): <http://chs.asa-comparative-historical.org/category/trajectories/>

⁶ Digital story tools have become increasingly easy for social scientists to use and access. One good starting point is Knightlab, an open-source storytelling tool project at Northwestern University: <http://www.knightlab.northwestern.edu>.

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