



William Julius Wilson

Reflections on a Sociological Career that Integrates Social Science with Social Policy

William Julius Wilson

Kennedy School and Department of Sociology, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138; email: bill_wilson@harvard.edu

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Abstract

This autobiographical essay reflects on my sociological career, highlighting the integration of sociology with social policy. I discuss the personal, social, and intellectual experiences, ranging from childhood to adult life, that influenced my pursuit of studies in race and ethnic relations and urban poverty. I then focus on how the academic and public reaction to these studies increased my concerns about the relationship between social science and public policy, as well as my attempts to make my work more accessible to a general audience. In the process, I discuss how the academic awards and honors I received based on these studies enhanced my involvement in the national policy arena. I conclude this essay with some thoughts about public agenda research and productive controversy based on my own unique experiences. In short, this autobiographical essay shows how a scholar can engage academics, policy makers, and the media concerned with how sociological knowledge can inform a policy agenda on some of the nation's most important social problems.

INTRODUCTION

As I was contemplating what to write about in this prefatory essay, I mentioned to Herbert Gans some ideas that I had for this piece. He responded with these words: “I did the *ARS* piece last year, and made it totally autobiographical for a variety of reasons. You should do the same; you are a very visible role model for a research and policy career that I think is becoming rarer among the young people and that you should advocate by the example of your career” (personal correspondence, July 23, 2010). I thought about this advice and decided to follow his thoughtful suggestion with an autobiographical essay that reflects on my sociological career, highlighting the integration of social science with social policy.

I am fully aware that my own subjective view of the world may have resulted in the selection of particular events for discussion in this essay. But this does not mean that the relations I draw are untrue. It only alerts the reader to possible selective attention to certain events that I deem significant in my own intellectual and personal life. Let me now turn to those events.

THE INFLUENCE OF MY CHILDHOOD BACKGROUND

I grew up in a small town in western Pennsylvania. My father had a tenth grade education and worked in the western Pennsylvania coal mines and the steel mills of Pittsburgh. He died at age 39 with lung disease, when I was 12 years old. My mother, who lived to the ripe old age of 94, also had a tenth grade education and was left to raise six children after my father died—I was her oldest child. Our family was on relief—we call it welfare today—for a brief period before my mother supported us with the money she earned from housekeeping jobs.

Some of the most lasting memories of my childhood have to do with enduring the physical conditions associated with deep poverty, including hunger, and the experiences of racial discrimination in a small town with relatively few African American families. And I do believe that the decisions I made to pursue

academic and research interests as a professional sociologist—first at the University of Massachusetts where I began to explore the field of race and ethnic relations, and later at the University of Chicago where I began to focus on urban poverty—were partly influenced by these childhood experiences. I say “partly” because, as I elaborate below, I perceive these childhood experiences as a mediating, rather than a direct, motivating factor in the selection of these two fields of study.

THE BLACK PROTEST MOVEMENT AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THEORETICAL INTEREST IN THE FIELD OF RACE RELATIONS

Unlike many who select areas of specialization on the basis of graduate training, I did not pursue race and ethnic relations and urban poverty as major academic fields of study in graduate school at Washington State University. On the contrary, my graduate study focused on theory and the philosophy of the social sciences, partly because I was influenced by and impressed with the teachings of the late Richard Ogles, who was my senior adviser and a professor of the philosophy of the social sciences in the Department of Sociology at Washington State University. My doctoral dissertation was an exercise in theory construction and concept formation. The title of the paper I presented as part of my first job interview at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, was “Formalization and Stages of Theoretical Development,” and my first four publications dealt with the logic of sociological inquiry. However, although I still maintain an interest in the philosophy of the social sciences (see, for example, Wilson & Chaddha 2009), several developments would ultimately result in a gradual shift to significantly different fields of study, beginning first with race and ethnic relations and followed by an intense study of urban poverty. Let me briefly elaborate.

In my last two years as a graduate student in the mid-1960s, I—like many African Americans—was caught up in the spirit of the Civil Rights Revolution and was encouraged

by the changes in social structure that led to increasing opportunities for African Americans. I also followed with intense interest the ghetto riots in Watts, Newark, and Detroit. And although at this point I had not developed a serious academic interest in the field of race and ethnic relations, I always had an intellectual curiosity for the subject partly because of my experiences with racism as a child, years before the passage of civil rights legislation. But the escalating civil rights protest heightened this curiosity. As a student of sociology I was cognizant of the social structural changes experienced by African Americans, and when I accepted my first full-time academic job as assistant professor of sociology at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, in the fall of 1965, I had firmly decided to develop race and ethnic relations as an additional field of specialization.

What struck me as I became acquainted with the literature on race and ethnic relations in the late 1960s was the incredibly uneven quality of the scholarship. I read some classic works such as Myrdal's (1944) *An American Dilemma*, Frazier's (1949) *The Negro in the United States*, Park's (1950) *Race and Culture*, and Weber's (1968 [1911]) theoretical writings on ethnic relations in *Economy and Society*. I also read the stimulating field research studies of Gans (1962), Clark (1965), Rainwater (1966), and Liebow (1967). But I soon discovered that a good deal of the scholarship on race relations published in the 1960s was ideologically driven and laden with polemics and rhetoric. I was also struck by the paucity of comprehensive theoretical formulations. With the exception of the influential work of scholars such as Lieberson (1961), Gordon (1964), Schermerhorn (1964), Blalock (1967), and Van den Berghe (1967), many of the writings on race and ethnic relations during this decade were written as if theory had no relevance to the field.

My concerns about the lack of theoretical studies in the field of race and ethnic relations led to the writing of *Power, Racism, and Privilege: Race Relations in Theoretical and Sociobistorical Perspectives*, published by Macmillan (Wilson 1973; Free Press paperback in 1976). This study

presents a comprehensive theoretical framework that is applied to race relations in the United States and the Republic of South Africa. I wrote most of *Power, Racism, and Privilege* while still a faculty member at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and I completed the book while serving as a visiting faculty member at the University of Chicago during the 1971–1972 academic year. However, by the time the book was in press, and far too late to retrieve, my thinking about race relations in America had already begun to change.

Basically, I regretted not only that I had paid little attention to the role of class in understanding issues of race, but also that I had tended to treat blacks as a monolithic socioeconomic group in most sections of *Power, Racism, and Privilege*. The one notable exception was a brief discussion, in one of the later chapters, of a paper written by Andrew Brimmer (1970), a consulting economist, on the deepening economic schism in the African American population. I further elaborated on this theme in a book I coedited with Peter Rose and Stanley Rothman (Rose et al. 1973) on black and white perceptions of race relations in America. In that publication I was careful to emphasize the need to disaggregate racial statistics and to recognize the importance of both racial and class positions in understanding the way that people respond to different situations involving interracial interaction. But my discussion of the race/class issue at that time had not progressed much beyond the ideas advanced by Brimmer (1970). It was not until I moved to Chicago and was appointed to a tenured position in the Department of Sociology in the spring of 1972, following an appointment as a visiting associate professor, that my views on the intersection of class with race in the United States sufficiently crystallized.

THE MOVE TO CHICAGO AND THE CRYSTALLIZATION OF MY RACE/CLASS THESIS

It is one thing to have research interests in a particular field, such as race and ethnic relations;

it is quite a different matter to have the opportunities and the academic environment and resources to pursue and develop them. With my tenured appointment to the sociology faculty at the University of Chicago in 1972, I definitely benefited from a type of affirmative action that I now like to call affirmative opportunity. As Malcolm Gladwell (2008), author of the best-selling book *Outliers: The Story of Success*, would put it, I was in the right place at the right time. Given the emphasis on affirmative action in the early 1970s, the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago was actively looking for a black sociologist to become a regular member of the faculty. In 1971, I was teaching at the University of Massachusetts and was invited to come to the Chicago campus to give a lecture, unaware that the sociology faculty were looking me over as a potential member of their department. Luckily, I gave one of the best lectures I had ever given at that point in my career. And I impressed the faculty and graduate students with my deft handling of questions during the question-and-answer period.

When I returned to the University of Massachusetts after the lecture, I was surprised to learn that the sociology faculty at the University of Chicago were actually considering me for a position. I was surprised because, unlike an overwhelming majority of faculty at outstanding research-oriented universities in this country, I was not educated at elite universities; therefore, the odds that I would end up teaching at outstanding universities like the University of Chicago (and eventually Harvard) were rather slim.

The senior members of the Department of Sociology at Chicago had read my articles and liked them. However, there was one problem. I had not written a book when they were initially considering me for a position. To be appointed associate professor with tenure in the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago, a scholar had to have at least one book published. The Chicago sociology faculty knew I had been working on a book—*Power, Racism, and Privilege*—at the University of Massachusetts for several years. In the fall of

1971, they invited me to come as a visiting associate professor for one year with a light teaching load, which gave me time to complete the book while I was there, and therefore provided them the opportunity to read a final draft of the manuscript to see if I was indeed qualified for tenure.

The University of Chicago was on a quarter system at the time, and I had no teaching responsibilities during the first quarter. I made good use of my free time and completed the book during the winter quarter of 1972. The tenured faculty in the Department of Sociology at Chicago—at that time the number one sociology department in the world—read the book in manuscript form, liked it, and voted to recommend to the central administration that I be appointed a tenured associate professor.

In relating my experiences here, I am providing an excellent example of affirmative action, or affirmative opportunity, based on the use of flexible criteria of evaluation. As Morris Janowitz, then chair of the department, told me, when they first read my articles prior to my lecture, they realized that I had potential, and rather than eliminating me early in the review process, they decided to give me a chance to complete my book to confirm that initial impression. And Janowitz informed me that they wanted to move quickly because, given the growing interest in hiring faculty of color at elite research-oriented universities, they were fearful that competing universities would rush to hire me.

When I talk about flexible criteria of evaluation as applied to faculty of color, I would include evaluative criteria that gauge a candidate's potential to succeed. In my case, their initial assessment of my potential turned out to be correct. The historian Thomas J. Sugrue (2010, pp. 73–74) probably put it best:

In 1972, the university [Chicago] had hired a young, relatively unknown black sociologist, William Julius Wilson. Wilson was a bit of a gamble for a hidebound institution like Chicago, with relatively few black faculty members and, despite its location, a small

number of black students. Wilson lacked the Ivy League credentials, the European pedigree, the Chicago degrees of most of the university's faculty. But the gamble paid off. Wilson's 1978 book, *The Declining Significance of Race*, was a rare scholarly study that won both academic acclaim and a wide nonacademic readership.

The Declining Significance of Race: Blacks and Changing American Institutions (1978, second edition, 1980) reflected my emerging thoughts on the intersection of class with race in the United States. And my thinking about intraracial divisions in America was in no small measure shaped by my perception of the changing social environments in Chicago's variegated neighborhoods. At one extreme were the upper-middle-class black professional neighborhoods in parts of the South Side; at the other extreme were the neighborhoods of poor blacks on the South Side and West Side plagued by long-term joblessness, welfare receipt, and crime. The widening gap that Andrew Brimmer first talked about in the late 1960s would be obvious to any student of urban life who took the time to drive around the Chicago neighborhoods as I did in the early to mid-1970s.

But intragroup differences were not, of course, confined to black neighborhoods in Chicago; they were even more noticeable in the different white neighborhoods. There were the racially liberal, predominantly white, and largely professional communities in Hyde Park and along the North Side lakefront; but there were also the racially hostile working-class white ethnic neighborhoods on the West Side and South Side. Unlike in the African American communities, these patterns were established long before I came to Chicago. What had recently changed, however, and what was evident to me during the first half of the 1970s, was the growing number of inner-city white ethnics who not only were trapped in their neighborhoods because of the high cost of suburban housing, but who also had become increasingly physically removed from the industries in which they were employed

because of the industrial shift to the suburbs and other locations [Kasarda (1978) has written effectively on this subject]. This situation increased the potential for racial tension as white European ethnics competed with blacks and the rapidly growing Hispanic population for access to and control of the remaining decent schools, housing, and neighborhoods.

But it is one thing to recognize and describe these intragroup differences and quite another to account for their evolution and relate them not only to the problems of intergroup relations, but, more important, to the broader problems of societal organization in America. And it was in this connection that the stimulating intellectual environment of the University of Chicago came into play because it encourages interdisciplinary contact and thereby afforded me the opportunity to explore questions about racial interaction with students of varied disciplinary backgrounds. The net result was a holistic approach to race relations in America that directed the writing, particularly the theoretical writing, of *The Declining Significance of Race*.

The theoretical framework outlined in *The Declining Significance of Race* relates racial issues to the economic and political arrangements of society. Basically, I argued that changes in the system of production and in the policies of the government have affected over time black/white access to rewards and privileges as well as racial antagonisms. I advanced this framework to accomplish two major objectives: (a) explain historical developments in U.S. race relations and (b) account for paradoxical changes in the black class structure whereby, beginning in the last few decades of the twentieth century, the social and economic conditions of the black poor have deteriorated while those of the black middle class have improved.

The original argument, as outlined in *The Declining Significance of Race*, was not that race is no longer significant or that racial barriers between blacks and whites have been eliminated. Rather, in comparing the contemporary situation of African Americans to their situation in the past, the diverging experiences of blacks along class lines indicate that race is no

longer the primary determinant of life chances for blacks (in the way it had been historically).

I had mentioned previously that I perceive my childhood experiences as a mediating, rather than a direct, factor that led to the research and writings that have dominated my academic career for decades. My childhood experiences dealing with race and poverty initially fueled an intellectual curiosity for these subjects, but the factors that ultimately shaped the direction of my writings and research were, first, my intellectual interest in the developing civil rights movement that resulted in the writing of *Power, Racism, and Privilege* and, second, my experiences living in the city of Chicago and teaching at the University of Chicago that influenced the writing of *The Declining Significance of Race*, a book that clearly integrated my interest in both race and poverty as I attempted to highlight and explain the emerging gap between the black poor and more privileged African Americans.

Given the controversy over *The Declining Significance of Race* immediately following publication, I never would have assumed that it would go on to become a classic. Indeed, its impact on the field of race and ethnic relations—the book’s arguments have been examined in roughly 800 empirical research articles, not to mention the nonempirical studies—lends credence to the idea of productive controversy and to the famous dictum: “It is better to be criticized and misunderstood than to be ignored.” When I wrote *The Declining Significance of Race*, I had hoped that the major academic contribution of the book would be to explain racial change in America with a macrohistorical-theoretical framework. But there was another major contribution I had hoped to make: I wanted to call attention to the worsening condition of poor blacks, in both absolute and relative terms, by relating it to the improving position of the black middle class.

However, the controversy surrounding *The Declining Significance of Race* was not limited to academic quarters; it was also the focus of a cover page story in the *New York Times Magazine* (1980) entitled “The Black Plight: Race or Class?” as well as of stories in the *Wall Street*

Journal, *Washington Post*, and *Chicago Tribune* and of several discussions in the national electronic media. At the time the book was published, heightened awareness of racial issues had been created because changing social structures altered many traditional patterns of race relations and because the state was inextricably involved in the emerging debate over affirmative action.

THE TRULY DISADVANTAGED AND URBAN POVERTY RESEARCH

I was motivated to do two things during the controversy over *The Declining Significance of Race*: (a) I would provide a comprehensive analysis of the problems of the ghetto poor and (b) I would spell out the policy implications of my work in considerable detail. The first commitment was the direct result of my personal and academic reaction to the almost total preoccupation of many early critics with my thesis about the improving conditions of the black middle class. The second commitment was brought about by my visceral reaction to those critics who either directly or indirectly tried to associate *The Declining Significance of Race* with the conservative movement or who labeled me a conservative. Although I identify with the Democratic Left, the title I chose for the book unfortunately lends itself to the erroneous assumption that I am a black conservative, especially if one has not actually read the book. Moreover, my failure to spell out the policy implications of my analysis enabled those who selectively read my arguments to draw policy implications significantly different from those I would personally endorse. Herbert Gans’s discussion of the absence of policy recommendations in the controversial Moynihan Report is relevant here. Gans states, “the vacuum that is created when no recommendations are attached to a policy proposal can easily be filled by undesirable solutions and the report’s conclusions can be conveniently misinterpreted” (Gans 1967, p. 449).

The second edition of *The Declining Significance of Race*, published in 1980, included an

epilogue that explicitly spelled out the policy implications of the book. However, by that time the opinions of many casual readers of the first edition had already become firm. Nonetheless, because of the reaction to the first edition, I shifted more of my attention to social policy. Indeed, all of my subsequent books reflect explicit attention to the integration of sociology and social policy.

The Declining Significance of Race resulted in national fame, including a MacArthur Prize Fellowship (1987–1992), but it was not until the publication of *The Truly Disadvantaged* (Wilson 1987) that I was considered a serious contributor in the national public policy arena. *The Truly Disadvantaged* could be seen as a sequel to *The Declining Significance of Race*, with an explicit effort to integrate social science with social policy. Despite the controversy over *The Declining Significance of Race*, in writing *The Truly Disadvantaged* I did not shy away from controversy. The book challenged liberal orthodoxy in analyzing problems in the inner city and discussed in candid terms the social conditions of the ghetto. In doing so, I advanced a case for moving beyond race-specific policies to address inner-city social dislocations to policies that confront the broader problems of society, including economic woes, and I proposed a social democratic public policy agenda designed to ameliorate the problems of the ghetto poor. Key to this strategy, I argued, is the creation of programs that would draw the support of all racial and ethnic groups in society, including the more advantaged individuals among them.

However, although the debate over *The Declining Significance of Race* led me to write *The Truly Disadvantaged*, many of the central arguments in the latter book were inspired by my perception of social changes, including changes in the class structure, in Chicago's inner-city neighborhoods. I noted that since the early 1970s, a significant out-migration of working- and middle-class families from inner-city neighborhoods combined with rising numbers of poor residents due to escalating rates of joblessness have resulted in heavy concentrations of ghetto poverty. The number

of census tracts with poverty rates of at least 40%—a threshold definition of high-poverty areas—has risen precipitously. Also, the diminishing presence of middle- and working-class families has weakened an important social buffer that served to deflect the full impact of the prolonged high levels of neighborhood joblessness stemming from uneven economic growth and periodic recessions.

Indeed, I argued, the inner-city ghetto today features a group of poor residents whose major predicament is rising joblessness, a trend that is strengthened by growing social isolation. The contact between groups of different class and racial backgrounds has decreased because of the out-migration of higher-income families, resulting in greater adverse effects from living in impoverished neighborhoods. These concentration effects, reflected, for example, in the self-limiting social dispositions of inner-city residents, are created by inadequate access to job networks and jobs, the lack of access to quality schools, the decreasing availability of suitable marriage partners, and lack of exposure to conventional role models and informal mainstream social networks.

Accordingly, the complex arguments presented in *The Truly Disadvantaged* to account for the recent increases in social dislocations in the inner-city ghetto cannot be reduced to the easy explanations of racism advanced by those on the left or of a “culture of poverty” posited by those on the right. Although historic racism created the ghetto and although contemporary discrimination has undoubtedly aggravated the economic and social woes of its residents, I argued that an adequate understanding of the sharp increase in these problems requires the specification of a complex web of additional factors, including the impact of shifts in the modern American economy.

Unlike the first edition of *The Declining Significance of Race*, *The Truly Disadvantaged* included three chapters with an explicit focus on public policy. These chapters presented a comprehensive policy agenda integrating targeted strategies—both means tested and race specific—with universal programs. However, I

argued that the universal programs should be seen as the more visible and dominant aspects of the policy agenda in the eyes of the general public so that the less visible target programs would be indirectly supported and protected. I argued that “the hidden agenda for liberal policymakers is to enhance the chances in life for the ghetto underclass by emphasizing programs to which the more advantaged groups of all class and racial backgrounds can positively relate” (Wilson 1987, p. 163). In a later section of this essay, I discuss how my views on this policy approach have changed. But the point to be emphasized here is the book’s explicit and deliberate attempt to relate public policy with substantive arguments.

The Truly Disadvantaged, one of the most widely cited books in the last half century, created a paradigm that has stimulated hundreds of studies across disciplines, even studies by economists. Steven Levitt, author of *Freakonomics* (2005), sent me a coauthored paper that he presented at the American Economic Association’s annual meeting in 2003, entitled “Theorists Most Often Cited as Motivating Empirical Microeconomic Research” (Chiappori & Levitt 2003). The paper presented the total number of citations of the work of authors identified as providing “a key motivating theory paper in empirical microeconomics” in articles published in the *American Economic Review*, the *Journal of Political Economy*, or the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* during the period 1999–2001. I, the only noneconomist on the list, was ranked among the top twelve, tied for ninth place overall.

The studies by the economists were among the hundreds of articles that focused on neighborhood effects. But as my colleague Robert Sampson pointed out in a brilliant paper—entitled “Moving to Inequality: Neighborhood Effects and Experiments Meet Social Structure,” in the July 2008 issue of the *American Journal of Sociology*, devoted to research on the Moving to Opportunity program—many of these studies that referenced my work failed to address the structural issue I was most concerned about. As

Sampson (2008, p. 190) put it, “Rereading *The Truly Disadvantaged*, one is struck by its structuralist bent, though this was rather quickly translated by policy-oriented researchers into a prediction about individual outcomes.”

WHEN WORK DISAPPEARS AND PUBLIC AGENDA RESEARCH

While writing *The Truly Disadvantaged*, I also developed a research project that provided the foundation for my later book, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (Wilson 1996). This project was in no small measure motivated by the publication of Charles Murray’s (1984) book, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950–1980*. Murray argued that social welfare programs, far from relieving poverty and welfare, increase them and should be eliminated. This book had enormous influence on conservative policy makers. As a *New York Times* editorial (February 3, 1985) put it, *Losing Ground* was the Reagan Administration’s “budget-cutter bible,” and for a few years following publication, the book dominated public policy discussions on poverty, welfare, and the ghetto poor.

To critically address a number of the issues that Murray raised, I felt that a study that integrated survey, ethnographic, and macrohistorical research would have the greatest effect. I wrote a long research proposal to conduct research in the inner-city neighborhoods of Chicago with a budget that climbed to more than \$2.5 million because of the intricate nature of the study. Thanks to the generous support of a consortium of foundations including Ford, Carnegie, Rockefeller, Spencer, Lloyd A. Fry, Joyce, William T. Grant, and the Woods Charitable Fund, as well as support from the Department of Health and Human Services, this project was fielded in 1987. This mammoth study, entitled “Poverty and Family Structure in the Inner City,” included twenty research assistants (ten of whom conducted research in the black, white, and Hispanic neighborhoods Chicago), two project administrators, and five coinvestigators. It also combined

different methodologies—the quantitative survey method and the more qualitative methods of ethnography and macrohistorical research. And, as suggested by the different methodologies, it combined individual micro-level data with societal macro-level data.

In writing the book based on this research—*When Work Disappears* (1996)—I made a firm decision at the outset. I would write an empirically based book that would be accessible to the general public and policy makers. I was fully aware that very little sociological research draws the attention of policy makers and the media. And as I discuss below, I was also fully cognizant of the attention *The Truly Disadvantaged* had received from policy makers. Moreover, I was aware that some sociologists are pleased that sociology tends to be ignored by policy makers because it both insulates the discipline from outside pressures to pursue certain research topics and protects the discipline from being sanctioned by the state if the research does not support a particular political agenda or ideology. I, on the other hand, viewed the situation as problematic. More specifically, I felt that the more the discipline of sociology is ignored by policy makers and the media, the less attention it receives as an academic discipline, and therefore the more sociologists are removed from the decision-making policy arena, the fewer students we attract, and the more difficult it is to receive funding from private foundations and government agencies.

A good number of sociologists would agree with these arguments. For example, when I was president of the American Sociological Association (ASA), I recall that in one of the ASA Council meetings in 1990 some council members expressed concern about the lack of attention that sociology receives in the media, and the discussion that followed focused on steps that could be taken to generate more media attention. During this discussion I realized that my own personal experience as a sociologist was unusual. Far from being ignored, I was inundated at that time with media requests for interviews. I wondered whether the lack of attention that sociologists generally receive from the media,

as well as from policy makers, had to do with the research focus of scholars in our discipline. In particular, I wondered about the extent to which research studies by sociologists explicitly address issues that are high on the public agenda.

As president of the ASA, I had already chosen a theme for the 1990 Annual Meeting that reflected my interest in public policy. The theme was “Sociology and the Public Agenda,” and my purpose was to stimulate and encourage sociological research that addresses issues of concern to the general public, research that would more likely attract the attention of the media and policy makers. The theme was particularly appropriate for the site of the ASA meeting—Washington, DC. Unlike many ASA meetings, the convention was widely covered by the media. And there was extensive media coverage of my presidential speech, “Studying Inner-City Social Dislocations: The Challenge of Public Agenda Research” (Wilson 1991), including articles in *Time* and in the *Weekend Review* section of the *Sunday New York Times*, which announced that I had abandoned the use of the term “underclass.” In the early part of my speech, I focused on the controversy raging over the use of the concept “urban underclass” whereby those on the right claim that “the underclass is a product of the unwillingness of the black poor to adhere to the American work ethic, among other cultural deficiencies, while those on the left contend that the underclass is a consequence of the developments in postindustrial society, which no longer needs the unskilled poor” (Gans 1990, p. 272).

This debate swirled around my book, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, where I assert, as Herbert Gans correctly observes, that “this underclass exists mainly because of the large-scale and harmful changes in the labor market, and its resulting spatial concentration as well as the isolation of such areas from the more affluent parts of the black community” (Gans 1990, p. 272). Gans argued that efforts by scholars to resolve this debate were largely unsuccessful. Meanwhile, the behavioral definition of the underclass had increased in the public discourse, especially among journalists [see, for example,

Magnet (1987), Hamill (1988)]. Reflecting on this situation in my speech, I attempted to move us away from the controversy over the underclass, including the simplistic either/or distinction between social structure and culture that had characterized so much of the debate, by substituting the words “ghetto poor” for “underclass” in the hope that I would not lose any of the subtle theoretical meaning that the latter term had in my writings.

My decision to avoid the concept of ghetto underclass in favor of the ghetto poor was reflected in *When Work Disappears*, which was completed shortly before I departed the University of Chicago for Harvard. And the reaction of policy makers and the general public following the publication of the book in 1996 reinforced my views that readers outside of academia will be drawn to sociological research that is accessible and addresses issues high on the public agenda. I shortly discuss the attention the book received from policy makers during the 1996 presidential campaign as well as attention from the media. However, let me briefly point out here that the objective of *When Work Disappears*, based on the research produced by the our project “Poverty and Family Structure in the Inner City,” was to analyze the structural forces that produced conditions of concentrated joblessness and to examine the implications of these factors for poor inner-city residents. Our research made me realize that the problems generated by concentrated poverty became even more severe under conditions of concentrated joblessness.

Indeed, one of the significant arguments in *When Work Disappears* is that a neighborhood in which people are poor and working is significantly different from a neighborhood in which people are poor and jobless. Jobless neighborhoods create special problems, exacerbating conditions that reinforce racial stereotypes and prejudices. High rates of joblessness trigger other problems in the neighborhood ranging from crime, gang violence, and drug trafficking to family breakups and other disruptions in the organization of family life. *When Work Disappears* also provided a theoretical explanation

for why conditions in inner-city neighborhoods had changed over time and how social processes in those contexts resulted in increasing, though not universal, joblessness. Just as in *The Truly Disadvantaged*, *When Work Disappears* included several chapters devoted to policy recommendations, with a strong emphasis on integrated programs, programs that provide both short-term and long-term solutions to joblessness. I argued repeatedly that the problems of jobless ghettos cannot be separated from employment problems that plague the rest of the nation.

ACADEMIC AWARDS AND HONORS AND INVOLVEMENT IN THE NATIONAL POLICY ARENA

The publication of *The Declining Significance of Race*, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, and *When Work Disappears* and the scholarly attention they received resulted in a number of prestigious academic honors. First of all, in 1989, while I was a faculty member at the University of Chicago, the period when *The Declining Significance of Race* and *The Truly Disadvantaged* were published, I was elected president of the ASA. I was also elected to the National Academy of Sciences, American Academy of Arts and Sciences, American Association for the Advancement of Science, American Philosophical Society, and National Academy of Education. Finally, I received numerous honorary doctorates.

I consider my election to the National Academy of Sciences in 1991 as a special honor. One thing I share with other black scholars is the uncertainty of whether honors or awards received are based solely on merit. I certainly think that the numerous honorary doctorates I have received (at the time of this writing the number of honorary doctorates had reached 44) were partly due to my visibility as a prominent black scholar. I also believe that my race was a positive factor in the MacArthur Prize Fellowship (“genius award”) that I received in 1987. But, given the enormous impact of *The Truly Disadvantaged* across disciplines, and to a lesser extend the impact of *The Declining Significance of Race* on the research community, I

did not feel that race was a factor in my election to the National Academy of Sciences in 1991. The year I was elected to the National Academy of Sciences, David Blackwell, the University of California, Berkeley, statistician, was the only African American member among the roughly 2000 members. And I will never forget the kind words he wrote congratulating me shortly after I was inducted. He stated, “Now when I am asked if I am the only black member of the Academy, I will be delighted to say ‘no’” (personal correspondence, April 1991).

I was eventually awarded the National Medal of Science in 1998 after I left Chicago for Harvard—the second sociologist, following Robert Merton, to receive the honor—which is the highest scientific award in the United States (Sweden awards the Nobel Prize). But the award was essentially based on work I had completed at the University of Chicago. Recipients of the National Medal of Science are selected by a 13-member committee from the National Academy of Sciences, who then send their recommendation to the White House. The Nobel laureate economist Kenneth Arrow wrote the citation for the award, which noted that I received the award because of my innovative approach to the study of urban inequality, most clearly reflected in my book *The Truly Disadvantaged*, which developed a paradigm on the interaction of race, class, and location, a paradigm that influenced research across social science disciplines, even research in microeconomics as previously noted.

Finally, while I was a member of the Harvard faculty, I was awarded the Talcott Parsons Prize by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2003. First awarded in 1974, this prize was established to honor Talcott Parsons, former president of the Academy, and is awarded every several years for contributions to the social sciences (broadly defined). Previous recipients of this award include Clifford Geertz (1974), Robert Dahl (1977), Robert K. Merton (1979), Albert Hirschman (1983), C. Vann Woodward (1988), Daniel Bell (1992), and Joseph H. Greenberg (1997).

Accompanying these honors were a number of appointments to the boards of private foundations, including the Spencer Foundation, the Russell Sage Foundation, and the Century Foundation that award research grants and fellowships; the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences and the National Humanities Center that award residential fellowships; the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation and Public/Private Ventures that conduct evaluation and policy-related research; and the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities that conducts state and national policy-related research. I was also appointed to President Clinton’s Commission on White House Fellowships (from 1992 to 2000), which is responsible for recommending to the president a group of exceptional men and women for selection as White House Fellows.

Membership on these boards not only increased my awareness of important social science research across disciplines, but also gave me intimate knowledge of the criteria used to evaluate research and scholarship, as well as the ranking of social scientists. Furthermore, it made me aware of the expanding domain of policy-relevant scholarship in the social sciences. I refer specifically to the impetus to address policy-relevant issues that emerge from the nation’s struggles to adapt to the impact of rapid technological and economic changes on individuals, families, communities, institutions, and the society at large.

Although *The Declining Significance of Race*, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, and *When Work Disappears* stimulated research across academic disciplines, they were also widely read outside academia. However, the latter two books did more than all of my other publications combined to propel me into the national public policy arena. A good deal of the public policy attention was generated by these books’ reception and coverage in the mainstream media. First of all, *The Truly Disadvantaged* received front-page reviews in the *New York Times Book Review*, *Washington Post’s Book World*, and the *New Republic*. The book also

resulted in a featured profile in the *New York Times Week in Review* section, was selected by the editors of the *New York Times Book Review* as one of the 15 best books of 1987, and was one of the winners of the *Washington Monthly's* Annual Book Award. This media attention was no doubt one of the main reasons why the book drew the attention of national political leaders. For example, Senator Bill Bradley arranged a meeting with me in his senatorial office shortly after *The Truly Disadvantaged* was published in the fall of 1987 to discuss the book. And he informed me that liberals on Capitol Hill were using the book as a way to counter the arguments in Charles Murray's (1984) controversial and popular book *Losing Ground*, a book widely touted by conservative policy makers.

Later, then President-Elect Bill Clinton praised and recommended the book in one of his panel discussions at his economic summit meeting in Little Rock, AR, in December 1991, and ended his comments with the memorable words: "And it is only 187 pages in text, so it won't take too long to read." I later became an informal adviser to President Clinton during his two terms in office. And aside from several meetings in the White House, I wrote a number of memos that were sent to the White House, and I was surprised that President Clinton took time to respond to each email with a brief handwritten response.

According to the historian Thomas J. Sugrue (2010), *The Truly Disadvantaged* even influenced the thinking of Barack Obama before he became a famous politician. "Obama was drawn to Wilson," states Sugrue. "Wilson appealed to his intellect. Wilson's most important book came out during Obama's stint as a community organizer on Chicago's South Side. *The Truly Disadvantaged*, published in 1987, was sweeping and synthetic, elegantly weaving together problems often considered separately from each other into an overarching theory of urban inequality. Using black Chicago as a case study, Wilson highlighted the devastating impact of deindustrialization, offering evidence that jibed with Obama's hands-on experience" (Sugrue 2010, pp. 75–76).

When Work Disappears also received a good deal of media coverage that drew the attention of policy makers. Indeed, given the reaction of media and policy makers to *The Truly Disadvantaged*, I was encouraged to make *When Work Disappears* even more accessible to the general educated reader. My effort was rewarded by front-page excerpts of the book in the *New York Times Magazine* in July 1996. Moreover, during the first week of a nationwide book tour, organized by my publishers at Knopf and shortly after the official publication date, I had 45 radio, television, and newspaper interviews. This media publicity appeared during the 1996 presidential campaign, and both Bill Clinton and Bob Dole cited the book in making a case for the need to address joblessness in the inner city.

THE MOVE TO HARVARD AND A MORE EXPLICIT FOCUS ON PUBLIC POLICY

My involvement in the national policy arena, especially as an informal adviser to President Clinton, increased my motivation to get more involved in public policy and was a major factor in my decision in 1996 to leave the University of Chicago and join the faculty at the Harvard Kennedy School, the premier school for the integration of social science and social policy. Although I would later join the Department of Sociology at Harvard, I initially decided on a joint appointment in the Kennedy School and the exciting Department of African and African American Studies. My appointment also carried the stipulation that I would be elevated to the position of University Professor after two years on the Harvard faculty, because the appointment of University Professor, the highest academic position at Harvard, can only occur after one has been a Harvard professor for at least two years. One of the major benefits of being a University Professor is the freedom to teach as much or as little as one chooses, which afforded me greater opportunity to pursue policy-related research and writing.

The year I joined the Harvard Kennedy School faculty, the sociologists Christopher

Jencks and Katherine Newman were also new appointees. The three of us, along with the Kennedy School economist David Ellwood, eventually developed a program named the Harvard Multidisciplinary Program in Inequality & Social Policy that was initially funded by the National Science Foundation Integrative Graduate Education and Research Training (IGERT) initiative. The purpose of IGERT was to promote innovative graduate training that transcends traditional academic boundaries. This program was officially launched in 1998. I was initially appointed director of the program, but the driving intellectual and creative force in the program's development was Katherine Newman.

This program brought together students and faculty—from the Kennedy School and the departments of Economics, Government, and Sociology—interested in using a multidisciplinary perspective to illuminate specific aspects of social policy problems. In addition to classes taught by faculty from different disciplines, students participated in multidisciplinary seminars on topics related to social inequality and social policy. What I found particularly interesting is that the program attracted some of the very best students applying for graduate training in sociology. To enter the program, students had to be first admitted to a traditional department at Harvard—for example, the Department of Sociology. The students from sociology who entered and completed the program received their PhDs in sociology and social policy, after satisfying all the basic requirements in the Department of Sociology. As an advocate of integrating sociology and social policy, not to mention a supporter of a multidisciplinary approach to social policy, I found it especially gratifying that many of the top undergraduate students in the country chose to enter this program. I was also gratified that I directed or served on dissertation committees of several of these students, especially after I joined the Department of Sociology at Harvard in 2004.

In general, I found the atmosphere at Harvard very supportive of attempts to integrate sociology and social policy as reflected

in seminars, workshops, and research projects. In this environment my publications clearly reflected my continued attempts at this integration. Although *When Work Disappears* was published during my first year at Harvard, as I indicated previously, the final draft of the book manuscript was completed during my last year at the University of Chicago. Accordingly, my first book as a Harvard professor was *The Bridge Over the Racial Divide: Rising Inequality and Coalition Politics* (Wilson 1999), which was explicitly oriented to public policy and focused on the rising economic inequality in American society and on the need for a progressive, multiracial political coalition to combat it.

In this book I argued that political power is disproportionately concentrated among the elite, most advantaged segments of society. Governmental economic and social policies of recent years have arisen from and, in turn, deepened this power imbalance. And, although the wealthy have benefited, ordinary families have fallen further behind. I maintained that as long as middle- and lower-class groups are fragmented along racial lines, they will fail to see how their combined efforts could change the political imbalance and thus promote policies that reflect their interests. Put another way, a vision of American society that highlights racial differences rather than commonalities makes it difficult for American citizens to see the need and appreciate the potential of mutual political support across racial lines.

In making the case for a progressive multiracial political coalition in a society preoccupied with matters that highlight racial differences, I examined in theoretical terms how a broad-based political constituency can be created, sustained, and energized. I also discussed a current network of community grassroots organizations—the Industrial Areas Foundation—that demonstrates how obstacles to sustained interracial cooperation can be overcome, as well. Just as with *When Work Disappears*, my publishers at the University of California Press sent me on a nationwide book tour, although to fewer cities, where I had the opportunity to share and debate my views

with media representatives, as well as with the general public in radio call-in shows.

A short time later, I coauthored a book with Richard Taub, a professor of sociology at the University of Chicago, entitled *There Goes the Neighborhood: Racial and Class Tensions in Four Chicago Neighborhoods and Their Meaning for America* (Wilson & Taub 2006). Although the book was written while I was at Harvard, the actual research was conducted while I was still at the University of Chicago. This book was based on almost three years of ethnographic field research in four working- and lower-middle-class neighborhoods in Chicago: an African American neighborhood, a white ethnic neighborhood, a neighborhood in transition from white ethnic to Latino, and a Latino neighborhood.

Our ethnographic team consisted of nine graduate student research assistants at the University of Chicago who immersed themselves in these neighborhoods for almost three years, from January 1993 to September 1995. *There Goes the Neighborhood* is an investigation into racial, ethnic, and class dynamics in these neighborhoods, and it discussed the implications of the research findings for the future of race and ethnic relations in urban America and for public policy designed to address intergroup conflict. And like my two previous books, *When Work Disappears* and *The Bridge Over the Racial Divide*, I went on a nationwide book tour, organized by my publishers at Knopf, where I once again had the opportunity to engage the media, especially the electronic media, with views that integrated sociological research with public policy recommendations.

Shortly after the publication of *There Goes the Neighborhood*, I returned to a focus on urban poverty that culminated in the writing of *More than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City* (Wilson 2009). I point out in this book that for many years social scientists and other observers and analysts have debated the role of social structure versus culture in determining the social outcomes of African Americans, including their educational attainment and success in the labor market. The position that one takes often reflects ideological bias.

Conservatives tend to emphasize cultural factors, whereas liberals pay more attention to structural conditions, with most of the attention devoted to racialist structural factors such as discrimination and segregation.

However, *More than Just Race* develops a framework for understanding the formation and maintenance of racial inequality and racial group outcomes that integrates cultural factors with two types of structural forces—those that directly reflect racial bias and those that do not, including impersonal macroeconomic forces and political forces that reinforce long-standing forms of racial stratification.

I apply this framework to topics pertaining to race and poverty in the inner city that have generated the most intense debates among the proponents of structural and cultural explanations—namely, the formation and persistence of the inner-city ghetto, the plight of black males, and the breakdown of the black family. I conclude the book with a detailed discussion of the implications of this framework for the political framing of public policy issues. In this discussion, I point out that in my previous writings I had called for the framing of issues designed to appeal to broad segments of the population. Key to this framing, I had argued, would be an emphasis on policies that would directly benefit all groups, not just people of color. My thinking had been that, given American views about poverty and race, a color-blind agenda would be the most realistic way to generate the broad political support that would be necessary to enact the required legislation. I point out in *More than Just Race* that I no longer hold to this view.

The question is not whether the policy should be race-neutral or universal; the question is whether the policy is framed to facilitate a frank discussion of the problems that ought to be addressed and to generate broad political support to alleviate them. In framing public policy, I argue, we should not shy away from an explicit discussion of the specific issues of race and poverty; on the contrary, we should highlight them in our attempt to convince the nation that these problems should be seriously

confronted and that there is an urgent need to address them. I point out that my change in the position of framing was partly influenced by then-Senator Barack Obama's 2008 speech on race whose oratory provided a model for the type of framing I had in mind. Obama's speech made me realize that the framing of the issues of race and poverty should not only generate a sense of fairness and justice to combat inequality, but should also make people aware that our country would be better off if these problems were seriously addressed and eradicated. I was able to make these points quite clearly on several radio interviews during the book tour that W.W. Norton arranged shortly after the book's publication in March 2009.

CONCLUSION: PUBLIC AGENDA RESEARCH AND PRODUCTIVE CONTROVERSY

To some extent, a scholar's impact in the national public policy arena depends on the attention his or her work receives outside of academia, especially in the media. And it goes without saying that a scholar's insights have to be compelling enough to interest the media and policy makers. Stilted, ponderous, jargon-laden language will all but ensure that one's writings will not penetrate beyond a narrow academic field of specialization. It amazes me to hear someone dismiss a book written by a sociologist as journalistic simply or solely because it is accessible to the general public. Also, it is commonly and falsely assumed in the academic world that if a book is accessible or appeals to a broad audience, including the media, it is likely to be ignored by academics. This is a concern voiced frequently by scholars, especially younger nontenured scholars, who would like to reach a wider audience with their writings but feel that their peers would censure them. I think this is a legitimate concern that ought to be a topic of any serious discussion on the social organization of the discipline of sociology.

We should begin that discussion by noting that some of the most important and influential books in our discipline are among those that are accessible to the general public. I have in mind

books such as David Riesman et al.'s (1951) *The Lonely Crowd*, Herbert Gans's (1962) *The Urban Villagers*, Gerald Suttles's (1968) *The Social Order of the Slum*, Robert Bellah et al.'s (1985) *Habits of the Heart*, Daniel Bell's (1973) *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, Seymour Martin Lipset's (1960) *Political Man*, Richard Sennett & Jonathan Cobb's (1972) *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, and Arlie Hochschild's (1989) *The Second Shift*. All these books were among the 53 titles that Herbert Gans (1997) identified as best sellers by sociologists—that is, books, excluding textbooks, that have sold at least 50,000 copies.

These books collectively represent what Michael Burawoy (2005) calls traditional public sociology. They qualify as books that “are read beyond the academy and they become the vehicle of a public discourse about the nature of U.S. society—the nature of its values, the gap between its promises and its reality, its malaise, its tendencies” (Burawoy 2005, p. 7). As Gans (1997) notes, the books on his best-seller list tend to be among the “most readable.” They have not only been discussed widely by academics, but they have also drawn the attention of educated lay readers in the general public as well.

I draw several conclusions from a careful reading of many of these outstanding books, namely that clear, intellectually rigorous, thought-provoking, and creative arguments will draw a wide readership both within and outside academia, especially if such arguments focus on issues that are high on the public agenda. I think that my own writings would support this conclusion. For example, I have written five books that have been reviewed in the *New York Times Book Review*—*The Declining Significance of Race*, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, *When Work Disappears, There Goes the Neighborhood*, and *More than Just Race*—and all the reviews have been positive. At the same time, each of these books has received a good deal of attention in the academic world. Indeed, as a general principle, scholars whose works are ignored by the academic world receive little attention in the media.

The real challenge, therefore, is to produce works that seriously engage both the academic and nonacademic communities. On the one hand, if the work is too technical and impenetrable to a lay audience, no matter how creative, it is unlikely to be discussed in the media. On the other hand, if it is accessible but not thoughtful or intellectually rigorous, it will be ignored in the academic community. In short, cogent arguments that resonate with both a lay audience and the academic community are more apt to draw media attention. And the more media attention a work receives, the more likely it is to engage policy makers.

But there is a downside to provocative works that are widely discussed in academia and the media and by policy makers. That is, they often draw the attention of ideologues, either on the left or the right. Ideological attacks on a scholar's work are often not carefully written or rigorously applied. For some careful scholars, such attacks often discourage the pursuit of provocative or controversial ideas. Drawing upon my own experience, my advice to such scholars is to ignore the ideological and polemical attacks and only focus on the serious criticisms that are based on empirical data and theoretical arguments. For example, in my own case, Massey & Denton (1993) wrote an important book that was partly devoted to a criticism of *The Truly Disadvantaged*. And I responded to their thoughtful arguments in several publications (see, for example, Wilson 1991). But, as Lincoln Quillian (1999) has shown, the debate has been productive, and our arguments are, in fact, complementary, not contradictory. As Quillian (1999, p. 31) put it:

I find that nonpoor African Americans are moving into white areas fairly rapidly, as Wilson suggests. But the numbers of nonpoor African Americans in white and nonpoor areas have not increased much over time, as Massey & Denton (1993) have shown, because of the decline in white population in these neighborhoods. When considered as part of a dynamic system, the movement of blacks into white nonpoor neighborhoods and high continuing

rates of racial segregation are not mutually exclusive.

I will have the opportunity to respond in considerable detail to other serious and scholarly reactions to my most important and controversial books, *The Declining Significance of Race* and *The Truly Disadvantaged*. The University of Chicago Press has invited me to write a postscript to new editions of both books, scheduled for simultaneous publication in the spring of 2012, which would reflect on their influence on policy and in shaping the fields of urban inequality and race relations. I have already begun writing the afterword for *The Declining Significance of Race*, in which I revisit my research and thinking on the "declining significance of race" thesis. In this essay, I consider the universe of studies that claim to be responding to the ideas advanced in *The Declining Significance of Race*, including over 800 empirical studies. I also highlight the important ones that correctly address my thesis, including studies that fundamentally uphold or provide partial support for my arguments, as well as those that challenge my basic claims. In the process, I show how some of these studies have led me to revise or extend parts of my basic thesis, especially as it pertains to race and interracial relations today. Overall, however, my basic arguments have generally withstood the test of time.

With respect to *The Truly Disadvantaged*, I plan to use the same strategy, including a systematic reaction to the controversy the book generated over the notion of concentration effects, as well as the increasing sophistication and importance of studies on neighborhood effects. As I pointed out above, earlier studies by economists and demographers focused mainly on individual outcomes; however, more recent studies like those of Robert Sampson (2008, 2009) and Patrick Sharkey (2008, 2009) provide more sophisticated measures of the cumulative effects of long-term residence in high-poverty neighborhoods and do a great job of capturing the structural factors I discuss in *The Truly Disadvantaged* and how they interact with cultural factors. However, in both postscripts, the

focus will clearly be on the integration of sociology with social policy. Hopefully, the new editions of *The Declining Significance of Race* and *The Truly Disadvantaged* will once again engage

academics, policy makers, and the media concerned with how sociological knowledge can inform a public policy agenda on some of the nation's most important social problems.

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