A Walk on the Applied Side: Sociology and Training Research

THEODORE A. LAMB

This article presents a topic that sociologists rarely research but which holds great promise for the future—training. Sociologists spend a good deal of time investigating education but generally neglect the field of training. Little effort is spent on investigating training, why it’s done, how it’s done, what effect it has, who gets it, when it’s appropriate, or where it takes place. Sociologists tend to leave these issues to psychologists of various specialties or to professional trainers and training developers. The article identifies some major training-related issues, sociological specialty areas that apply to training-related research, areas of research that are of likely interest to sociologists and what sociologists might do to get involved in training research.

Levels of Analysis

In their professional socialization, sociologists quickly develop a sense of different levels of analysis because these levels are keys to defining their discipline. This sensitivity is not found in all behavioral science disciplines. Although there are closely related theories, methods, and results in disciplines such as psychology, social psychology, sociology, political science, economics, and anthropology, their analytical starting point and end point may be quite different. No single disciplinary perspective offers all the possible ways of defining problems and solutions in the applied world. It is particularly disconcerting when only one discipline is represented in an attempt to understand the dynamics of any situation involving humans—training or anything else. Lamb and Chin (1992) have offered a model for examining training from eight different levels of analysis: biological, individual, group, organizational, community, societal, world systems, and space systems. The biological and individualistic perspectives of psychology now dominate training research. They explain much and contribute to better

Theodore A. Lamb is a visiting professor at the United States Air Force Academy, Department of Behavioral Science and Leadership, USAF Academy, CO 80840. He is on loan from the Armstrong Laboratory, Technical Training Research Division at Brooks AFB, TX, 78235.
training but the other levels of analysis also have great potential. Indeed, other levels reveal that what appears to be a training problem, for example when workers cannot do their job, may result from personnel, resource, or management practices or shortfalls rather than to an individually based definition of the problem such as workers not having the mental aptitudes to absorb the training and perform the job. These alternative solutions to “training problems” can be brought to light by scientists such as sociologists who willingly examine these issues at different levels of analysis.

A caveat should be mentioned here, however, because these non-training solutions to problems may involve recommendations that make management uncomfortable. It is often expedient and face-saving to management to blame performance deficiencies on the workers themselves rather than upon organizational factors for which managers are responsible. Enlightened managers with a real desire to fix the basic problem should be receptive to non-training solutions. Other managers eventually should fall into line as they see improvements.

**Education Versus Training**

A traditional distinction has been made between education and training. Education is usually considered instruction that takes place during normal schooling which is aimed at acquiring the norms, values, philosophy, and general background knowledge needed by the average citizen. Training is instruction aimed at transferring specific knowledge, skills, or abilities required to do a specific job. Education is typically defined as taking place in public/private schools through high school and into college and graduate education. Training is typically defined as taking place at a vocational school, work site or business. In the United States it is the responsibility of the society (that is, the individual states) to provide education through high school. Training for specific jobs is generally provided by the employer or at individual expense, as in community college preparation to be a paralegal, emergency medical technician, or real estate salesperson.

This apparent distinction between education and training, however, becomes less obvious as we move to the applied setting. Many employers today are finding that a large number of young people coming to them to fill entry-level jobs lack some of the basic skills they should have acquired in their formal education. As a result, many employers are having to resort to employing these people and giving them remedial education so they can do their jobs. However, the employers are not interested in providing a complete high school education. The result is that they provide only enough literacy, math, or science “education” to do the job. In essence, this is “Basic Skills Training” not education. Many employers feel put upon by an educational system which they perceive as not doing its job. So, in the applied setting we have found that the distinction between education and training is becoming blurred . . . we have to do both and call it training (Carnevale, Gainer, and Meltzer, 1989; Sticht and McDonald, 1989; Resnick, 1987).