Recent developments in sociological practice are reviewed in terms of methodological, theoretical, and paradigmatic responses to the ill-structured or unstructured policy problems confronting private or public organizations. Methodologically, sociological practice is responding with the use of mixed methods or triangulation, in diagnosing policy problems as well as evaluating policy programs. Theoretically, the cognitive mapping of unstructured problems occurs increasingly in terms of multivariate conceptual models, usually in a graphic presentation. At a paradigmatic level, these two trends open the way to a clinical approach in sociological practice. In the clinical paradigm, improving the program is an inherent part of the method.

Unstructured Policy Problems

The term "sociological practice" refers to the relationship between a policy problem and a policy program aimed at reducing the problem. What is confusing in this relationship is that, compared with problems in physical science, policy problems are "ill-structured" or "unstructured" (Mitroff, 1983). In conventional knowledge, for instance, attitudes will predict behavior. In problem-oriented policy action, however, the relationship between attitudes and behavior is reciprocal (Schuman & Johnson, 1976, p. 198). Thus, when designing a policy program, attitude research is not a valid instrument for predicting the program's impact upon the
targeted problem behavior. In sociological practice, such discrepancies between research and policy are not uncommon. This is confirmed when we analyze the following ill-structured features of policy problems: ambiguity, complexity, duality, and multiplicity (Dunn, 1981).

**Ambiguity.** A policy problem is often little more than a vague but persistent feeling among policy makers that "something is wrong," i.e., that a current program should be looked at "both from the point of view whether it is the thing to do and in terms of how to do it" (Checkland & Scholes, 1990, p. 17). In those cases, exploring the problem rather than verification of theory is the central task of social policy research.

**Complexity.** From a perspective of policy design, problems consist of conditions, interests, values, symbols, and perceptions, some of which are manipulable while others are not (Ravetz, 1987). From a research perspective, however, problems consist of antecedent, independent, intervening, constraining, and dependent variables, the latter unintended or latent. Operationalizing the complexity of policy problems in terms of the complexity of policy research often takes several months.

**Duality.** Research often shows problem behavior to be a symptom of underlying structures or needs: Strike behavior may express work dissatisfaction; criminal behavior may be caused by drug addiction; and urban riots as a response to racial discrimination. Yet, policy makers often prefer the cosmetic route of suppressing the symptoms rather than the structural route of removing the conditions causing the problem.

**Multiplicity.** Usually, several stakeholders are involved in a policy problem. In crime control, for instance, the police force, lawyers, DAs, judges, journalists, criminals, probation officers, social workers, prison guards, and, not to forget, the victims are also involved. While stakeholder analysis clarifies the stakeholders' perceptions of the problem, selecting one of those perceptions as a basis for program evaluation is usually a matter of politics rather than research.

The relationship between policy research and policy-making is one of mutual interaction. Besides cases where research influences policy programs, there are instances where the strategy of policy-making has an impact upon the design and/or utilization of research. In most projects of social policy research, the influence goes in either direction. Thus, sociological practice encompasses the values of both epistemology and implementation, preferably in that order.

### Developments in Sociological Practice

**Models and Methods**

Confronted with the real world of ill-structured policy problems, data-based sociological practice has responded with theoretical and methodological developments in diagnosing policy problems, as well as in evaluating policy programs. A promising theoretical trend, for instance,