Featured Essays

*Best-Sellers by Sociologists: An Exploratory Study**

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Sociology's support from the general public, in its taxpayer and other roles, depends in significant part on how informative that public finds sociology, and what uses it can make of the discipline's work. Since one of the many things we do for various sectors of the general public is to inform its reading members through our books and nonjournal articles, this study aims to determine what sociology that general public has read and is reading, and it takes a first cut at answering that question by estimating sociology's best-selling books. The study is about sales, not readership, and this article reports 53 titles that have sold over 50,000 copies.[1]

The identification of these titles turned out to be a difficult empirical problem, and discussion of the study must thus begin with a report on methods. What books by sociologists have been read most often by the general public can really only be answered by a readership study among a sample of that public. What I have done instead, and as a very exploratory effort, is to ask a large number of editors at commercial and university presses, and authors, about the sales of sociological books other than texts and classics.

The sales figures I obtained in this fashion were probably dominated in most cases by books sold to undergraduates as supplementary readings, but there is no way to find out from editors or authors how many of their books were bought by members of the general public. Furthermore, most undergraduates, future sociologists excepted, *are* members of the general public. Nevertheless, this is also a study of sociological titles adopted by college instructors. While these instructors chose the titles, I assume that some picked their supplementary readings to some extent because they thought these stood a better chance of being read than research monographs on the same topic.

For the purpose of this study, I defined sociologists as authors with graduate degrees or teaching affiliations in sociology, or social scientists from related disciplines, particularly anthropology, whose books have been adopted as sociological because their concepts and methods are so similar to sociology's and are therefore often cited or widely read by sociologists and their students. However, I excluded books by journalists because, while some of their works meet some of our conceptual and methodological criteria and increasingly appear on sociological reading lists, they are not trained social scientists. More important, there is no way to determine what proportion of their often immense sales come from sociologists, students, or other buyers interested in sociology.[2]

* This study exists only because the hard work of staff members of commercial and university presses, and of course authors, who reported their book sales, especially those who went through their royalty files to compile exact figures. I am grateful to all of them, and also to the authors whose book sales did not reach 50,000 copies. They represent the vast majority of all sociologist-authors, but I could not include their names and book titles in this article.

[1] People may buy books that they do not read, and they may also read books that they do not buy, by borrowing from friends and libraries. Used book sales are another kind of highly relevant but unavailable datum.

[2] Of course, the same criticism can be applied to books written by anthropologists, but their sales and readership audience is sufficiently small that they can be included here. Historians, political scientists, economists, and psychologists, all of them members of

The study was conducted via a brief mail questionnaire sent to editors at all the major commercial and university presses that publish sociologists, and a similar mail questionnaire sent to sociologist-authors I considered likely to have written well-selling books.[3] Both authors and editors were asked to exclude textbooks. I further asked editors not to report on the classic authors, so that sales for the discipline's pantheon of Marx, Durkheim, Weber et al. are also excluded.

I chose authors and presses carefully from a number of lists, bibliographies, ASA annual meeting program advertisers, and from my nearly 50 years of experience in the discipline and my knowledge of commercial and university presses.[4] My choices of authors were limited to living American (and Canadian) sociologists, which is unfair to, among other people, some foreign authors also read in the United States, as well as to North American colleagues whose work is read mainly overseas.[5] *However, I surely omitted some eligible authors who should have been asked, and I hope they will get in touch with me so that I can publish an amended list of "best-sellers" in a subsequent issue of CS.*

Altogether, I wrote to 52 presses, of whom 41 responded and 55 authors, of whom 43 responded.[6] Twenty-seven, or 52 percent, of the publishers or editors—or their representatives—who responded supplied sales figures. So did 39, or 71 percent, of the authors. Most of the authors and many of the editors estimated or rounded off sales figures, and the number who could supply exact figures was in the minority.

As the numbers above suggest, authors were on the whole more helpful than editors.[7] In a surprising number of cases, press records were incomplete, particularly for books issued before computerization arrived in the book industry. However, 4 of the 14 who responded without numerical data indicated that company policy required holding sales figures proprietary.[8]

In any case, the findings of the study also reflect the problems of self-reporting—and these problems are numerous and obvious.[9] Whenever possible, I made an extra effort to get figures from both authors and their editors, and I practiced some caution by privileging editor figures when these were complete.[10] When respondents offered a range, as many did, I automatically accepted the lower number. Still, I had no easy way of determining, among editors or authors, who had accurate sales figures or not, and who was supplying hopeful rather than realistic estimates.[11]

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much larger disciplines than sociology, do not meet this criterion.

[3] The questionnaire asked publishers to report up to 8 of their top-selling books by sociologists—other than texts or classics. Authors were asked to report the sales of their 3 to 5 best-selling works.

[4] I also received and used nominations of authors by the editor of this journal.

[5] I also tried to obtain sales figures for no longer living but popular sociological authors of the last half-century, such as Erving Goffman and C. Wright Mills, but was able to do so only for the recently deceased Elliot Liebow, thanks entirely to the persistent efforts of his wife Harriet in obtaining the numbers from the publisher. Liebow, although trained in anthropology, was widely read by, and worked mainly with, sociologists.

[6] Everyone who did not respond received one reminder. I should note that I received no responses from the big mass-market paperback presses such as Bantam that publish sociologists, or from their authors.

[7] Sociology editors whom I knew personally or to whom I could write by name were more helpful than other people, whom I wrote to as sociology or social science editors.

[8] Some of the editors who failed to answer probably also did so for proprietary reason, but I find the policy mystifying, since even the best-selling sociologists are not a major source of income, especially for large presses. Just about all the authors who provided no data indicated that they had not saved their royalty statements or were not sent data on number of books sold, and a surprising number of authors did not look at that number in their statements, although I am sure that some did not respond to my questionnaire because they wanted to keep their book sales to themselves.

[9] In addition, although all authors and editors were asked to report foreign as well as domestic sales, not all did so, although foreign sales are usually small. However, the books of some sociologists who sell well in the United States, e.g., Daniel Bell, Richard Sennett and Immanuel Wallerstein, are very popular overseas.

[10] In the handful of cases for which I had conflicting sales figures from author and editor, I wrote to both, either to try to reconcile the numbers or to determine why they differed.

[11] I can only add that I know personally many of the authors I contacted, but I doubt whether that discouraged anyone from hopeful estimating. Likewise, I assume that some editors who lacked complete data also supplied me with hopeful estimates. The immense logistical and other tasks of checking sales figures requires a funded study,

The Findings

The basic findings of the study are shown in Table 1. Because so many of the numbers I obtained were rounded figures, estimates, and even guesstimates, I decided not to report the sales figures I received. Instead, I ranked by numerical intervals—and in order of reported sales—the top sellers for which I obtained data.

I except only two books from my practice of not publishing sales figures. One is the only title known to have sold over one million copies: David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, and Reuel Denney's *The Lonely Crowd.* That book had already sold one million copies by 1971; by the end of 1995 Nathan Glazer reported (personal communication) that it had sold 1,434,000 copies. The runner-up to *The Lonely Crowd* was Elliot Liebow's *Tally's Corner,* which had sold 701,000 copies through 1995.

Without a readership study of the general public, I can only offer some hypotheses about what kinds of books by sociologists are bought most often—and these are fairly obvious. They are also risky, because not only do many books have several themes worthy of note, but also, as every author knows, what authors write is not always what readers read, or even buy to read. Thus, the explicit subject matter of the book is only one factor in understanding the public's interest in sociology.

First, the age distribution of the books on the list reflects the growth in college and sociology enrollments, as well as in the number of sociologists in the last three decades—not to mention the changes in American society. The list includes only one book first published prior to the 1950s: William F. Whyte's *Street Corner Society,* and three from the 1950s. Fifteen were originally published in the 1960s, 32 in the 1970s and 1980s, and 2 in the 1990s.

Second, all or just about all of the books are jargon-free; whatever their other virtues, they are written in a language that at least educated general readers can understand. As a result, a few authors have several books on the list and may even have constituencies of their own.

Third, at or near the top of the list are several titles that attract readers from other disciplines. For example, *The Lonely Crowd,* books by Richard Sennett, and some others, are found on reading lists in the humanities. S. M. Lipset's *Political Man,* like the works of William Domhoff, is among the several books of political sociology that also show up in political science course syllabi.

Fourth, books that try to understand and explain American society as a whole are also among the leaders. The *Lonely Crowd* has often been described as portraying the America of the 1950s and 1960s. If decades are actually relevant empirical indicators of anything, their sales figures would suggest that Philip Slater's *Pursuit of Loneliness* and Richard Sennett's *The Fall of Public Man* may have served the same function for the 1960s and 1970s, and Robert Bellah et al.'s *Habits of the Heart* for the 1980s and 1990s.

That two of sociology's top sellers mention American loneliness in their titles may also be significant. Analogously, that some of the top sellers and a number of other books lower down on the list were at least partly nostalgic for a better American past is probably not accidental either.

Fifth, sociology was among the first to respond to the country's increased interest in problems of poverty and racial inequality in the 1960s, which surely helps to explain why *Tally's Corner* is second highest on my list, and why William Ryan's *Blaming the Victim* and Lillian Rubin's *World of Pain* are not far behind.

Sixth, books about the family, children, and friends, and other works that deal with primary groups, are as popular as are courses sociologists teach on these subjects—surely one reason why Lillian Rubin has several books on the list. True, most of the best-sellers are about larger groups and institutions, as well as macrosociological concepts, but by and large they respond to the audience's interest in specific subjects and political or social issues that had become

perhaps by a graduate student interested in making the general subject her or his dissertation topic. In that case, however, I hope he or she undertakes a readership study, even if the sample of readers is small.

Table 1 Reported Book Sales, Through 1995, Rank Ordered Within Numerical Intervals*

Over 1 Million
D. Riesman, N. Glazer, R. Denney, *The Lonely Crowd,* Yale, 1951

1 Million to 750,000
None

749,000 to 500,000
E. Liebow, *Tally's Corner*, Little Brown, 1967
P. Slater, *Pursuit of Loneliness,* Beacon, 1970

499,000 to 400,000
R. Sennett, *Fall of Public Man,* Knopf, 1967
W. Ryan, *Blaming the Victim,* Pantheon, 1971
R. Bellah, et al. *Habits of the Heart,* California, 1985
S. Lipset, *Political Man,* Doubleday, 1960
L. Rubin, *Worlds of Pain,* Basic, 1976

399,00 to 300,000
L. Rubin, *Intimate Strangers,* Harper & Row, 1983
N. Glazer and D. Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot*, M.I.T., 1963
R. Sennett and J. Cobb, *Hidden Injuries of Class*, Knopf, 1972

299,000 to 200,000
G. W. Domhoff, *Who Rules America?* Prentice Hall, 1967
W. Whyte, *Street Corner Society*, Chicago, 1943
F. Piven and R. Cloward, *Regulating the Poor,* Pantheon, 1971
R. Sennett, *Uses of Disorder,* Knopf, 1970
C. Stack, *All Our Kin,* Basic 1974

199,000 to 150,000
H. Gans, *Urban Villagers,* Free Press, 1962
R. Kanter, *Men and Women of the Corporation*, Basic, 1977**
I. Horowitz, *War Games*, Ballantine, 1963

149,999 to 100,000
P. Starr, *Social Transformation of American Medicine,* Basic, 1982
H. Becker, *Outsiders*, Free Press, 1963
K. Erikson, *Everything In Its Path*, Simon & Schuster, 1976
D. Bell, *Coming of Post-Industrial Society,* Basic 1973
A. Hochschild, *Second Shift,* Viking 1989
K. Erikson, *Wayward Puritans*, Macmillan, 1966

99,000 to 75,000
T. Gitlin, *The Sixties.* Bantam 1987
I. Wallerstein, *Africa: Politics of Independence,* Random House 1961
D. Bell, *Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism,* Basic 1976
W. Wilson, *Truly Disadvantaged*, Chicago, 1987
D. Bell, *End of Ideology.* Free Press, 1963
P. Blumstein and P. Schwartz, *American Couples*, Morrow 1983
I. Horowitz, *Anarchists,* Dell, 1964
L. Rubin, *Just Friends*, Harper & Row, 1985
L. Coser, *Functions of Social Conflict,* Free Press, 1956
G. Sykes, *Society of Captives,* Princeton, 1958
J. McLeod, *Ain't No Making It,* Westview, 1985

74,000 to 60,000
M. Komarovsky, *Blue-Collar Marriage*, Random House, 1962
F. Piven and R. Cloward, *Poor People's Movements*, Pantheon, 1977
G. W. Domhoff, *Higher Circles,* Random House, 1970
I. Wallerstein, *Modern World-System,* Vol. 1, Academic, 1974
N. Chodorow, *Reproduction of Mothering*, California, 1978
R. Sidel, *Women and Children Last*, Viking, 1986
G. W. Domhoff, *Who Rules America Now?* Prentice Hall, 1983
G. Suttles, *Social Order of the Slum*, Chicago, 1968
R. Bellah, et. al., *Good Society*, Knopf, 1991
R. Sennett, *Conscience of the Eye,* Knopf, 1990

59,000 to 50,000
G. W. Domhoff, *Powers That Be,* Random House, 1978
W. Wilson, *Declining Significance of Race*, Chicago, 1979
K. Luker, *Abortion and the Politics of Mothering*, California, 1984
R. Sidel, *Women and Child Care in China,* Viking, 1986
S. Lipset, *First New Nation,* Basic, 1963
T. Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions*, Cambridge, 1979
S. Steinberg, *Ethnic Myth*, Atheneum, 1981

* Citations are limited to original publisher and year of publication.

** Sales for paperback edition only.

topical in previous years, for example race, ethnicity, and gender.[12]

Seventh, most of the books on the list are not empirical research reports, but of those that fall into this category, ethnographies outnumber depth-interview studies and surveys by a considerable margin. This is not surprising, since they are apt to be most readable, to emphasize narrative over abstractions, and to minimize quantitative analyses. Probably the book on the list with the most numbers is William J. Wilson's *Truly Disadvantaged*, but more completely quantitative studies have no chance in this competition; also, most are published as articles, not books.

Eighth, the authors of the two top best-sellers do not hold Ph.D.s in sociology, but a large number of the other authors do—a pleasant contrast, at least from a disciplinary booster's perspective, from the majority of the authors published in *CS*'s earlier lists of the most influential books.

Ninth, only seven of the authors are women, and only one is black, but these and other inequalities—for example, that most authors are associated with elite or other research universities—should not be surprising, even if they are still dismaying.

Tenth, as might be expected, 42 of the 53 books (79 percent) on the list were first published commercially, and 11 were issued by university presses—mostly by Chicago and California. Ten years from now the commercial/university ratio is likely to be lower. Commercial publishers, particularly those belonging to conglomerates, are already being pressed to produce higher profit rates and may therefore not be allowed to publish as much sociology in the future. Some of the financially healthier university presses will as a result most likely add to their sociology lists.

Finally, that I could find only 53 books that have sold over 50,000 since the 1940s suggests that the discipline still has a long way to go before it makes a significant impression on the general public. How it can best do so is a subject for another article, but it should not do so by attempting to publish best-sellers. Sociologists ought to publish intellectually and otherwise useful work, empirical and theoretical, that adds to our own and to the public understanding of society, and if possible to its improvement as well. If sociologists achieve these goals more adequately and write more clearly too, some books will sell more copies, including books like the high-quality and serious ones that crowd Table 1. Equally important, others will be more seminal or influential than they now are even if they are not best-sellers.[13]

Should sociologists be able to produce more relevant findings and influential ideas about society, particularly about American society, we may even be able to attract popular writers, including sociologists, who can report our work to the general public better than we can. The natural sciences have recruited a still increasing number of scientists who are serving their fields as popularizers. Meanwhile, part of our informational role is being taken over by talented journalists, too many of whom still write on sociological topics with only a limited understanding of society. Journalists' increasing takeover of what should be our role is a far more serious problem than the scarcity of sociological best-sellers, at least for those of us who believe that the discipline must increase its usefulness to the general public.

[12] I also expected a correlation with the most frequently taught courses in sociology, but the number of books about family and marriage and even "deviance" is limited, although many of the best-sellers could fit nicely into courses on social problems and social stratification.

[13] Still, the books listed in Table 1 include a number of seminal and influential titles, including what has arguably been the most influential one of the last decade or more in sociology and among the sociology-reading public: William J. Wilson's *Truly Disadvantaged.*