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A Global Turn in Sociology: Approaching Social Problems from an International Vantage Point

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Abstract

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Keywords

social problems, global sociology, comparative research

Disciplines

Scholarly Publishing | Social and Behavioral Sciences | Social Justice | Sociology

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Abstract

In this paper we make the case that a "global turn" in sociology is in order, building on the arguments advanced in David A. Smith's SSSP Presidential Address. The emergence of global social problems, and the internationalization of social protests, underscore the importance of examining the experiences of countries outside the borders of the United States. Some issues will be fruitfully examined from a global perspective, while others may benefit from a more comparative approach. Empirically, the paper documents the extent to which *Social Problems* topics, authors and readers were international in scope during the period 2010-2019. Articles appearing in the *American Sociological Review* and the *American Journal of Sociology* are also examined for purposes of comparison. In addition, the content of fifteen leading social problems textbooks is analyzed. The data suggest that, while there is has been a significant emphasis on US authors and US topics in *Social Problems*, there is nonetheless a significant international and interdisciplinary audience for research published in this area. Textbooks on social problems, with several notable exceptions, typically relegate international issues to a restricted set of topic areas, such as the environment, climate change and health care. Our findings suggest that too great a focus on the US experience may constrain the sociological imagination and result in a limited sociological toolkit that is ill-suited for understanding the challenges facing contemporary societies. The article concludes with a discussion of the obstacles that need to be surmounted in order to advance a more international approach to social problems.

A Global Turn in Sociology:

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There are times in the history of scholarly fields when inflection points occur. In sociology, the dominance of Parsonian functionalism gave way in the late 1960s and early 1970s to a more diverse set of approaches. Quantitative data analysis emerged as a powerful current, as did Marxist, feminist and other critical perspectives. In the 1980s and 1990s, the discipline experience a "cultural turn," along with a deepening of knowledge and theory in the area of race, class and gender.

We would like to suggest that the current moment may represent another such inflection point. It is time to make sociology more fully global in scope. In contrast with earlier transitions, this time it will be much more a matter of building on and extending current approaches rather than discarding discredited frameworks. Many challenges lay ahead, including the difficulties of building effective international collaborations and securing appropriate funding. But the future holds the great promise of enriching the sociological tool kit, extending the generalizability of sociological knowledge, and contributing more effectively to public conversations and public policy.

In his Presidential Address to the Society for the Study of Social Problems, David A. Smith built a powerful case for going beyond a focus on American social problems to incorporate broader, global perspectives. In this paper, we seek to build on Smith's arguments in four ways. First, we note three recent, compelling examples that speak to the value of taking an international approach. Second, in reviewing Smith's essay, we distinguish between comparative and global research. We suggest that both approaches may contribute in their own ways. Third, we examine the content of the journal *Social Problems* in order to examine the extent to which it draws on international data, publishes international authors and engages international and interdisciplinary audiences. We also conduct an analysis of the topics covered in fifteen prominent social problems textbooks. Finally, we set forth some of the obstacles that we believe need to be addressed in order to advance empirical cross-national research on social issues.

1. Social Issues as Global Issues: Pandemics, Climate Change, and Racial Justice

The current coronavirus epidemic has shown that some social issues are irreducibly global in scope. Once the virus made its way from animals to humans, no nation could be assured that its population would be immune. The high rate of human-to-human transmission quickly led to an international public health crisis, an economic crisis, and social and political crises that continue to unfold.

The pandemic also demonstrated the power of international scientific cooperation. While many uncertainties remain, what is beyond dispute is that pathogens operate in the same manner all over the world. Passengers on the cruise ship in Yokahama harbor in the earliest days of the pandemic were vulnerable no matter what their nationality might have been or what passport they held.

Bio-medical scientists have collaborated quickly across national borders. Detailed genetic analyses revealed the direction of international flows of the infection. Scientists shared data on genome sequences, international consortia collaborated on vaccine research, and clinical trials enrolled patients from multiple countries (Apuzzo and Kirkpatrick, 2020).[1]

The covid-19 pandemic has also sharpened attention to cross-national variations in policy and behavioral responses. Some countries – notably South Korea, Germany and New Zealand, took aggressive steps to the spread of the virus, while early efforts to contain the impact were less effective in other countries, such as Italy, the US, the UK and Brazil. Our understanding of the coronavirus as a disease continues to evolve as new variants and new waves of infection emerge, and there is likely to be much to be learned about the reasons that some countries were more effective in responding to the pandemic than others.[2]

The pandemic has shown that science, and international cooperation, are indispensable in this kind of crisis, yet, paradoxically, the coronavirus crisis has also led to a backlash against both global cooperation and against science.

The effort to blame China for the virus, the intensified barriers to immigration, and the extensive resistance to scientific advice are just three indicators that international science is being challenged just as it is most needed. Understanding these paradoxical trends represents an important challenge for sociologists and other social sciences.

Unfortunately, sociology lags far behind the biomedical sciences in its capacity for rapid-fire international collaborative research. While the pandemic raises countless issues about the state of our society and the challenges we need to address going forward, as a discipline sociologists are not well positioned to respond in a timely way to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moreover, sociology as a distinct field of inquiry is relatively well developed in certain countries and is quite weak and not entirely independent of state control in others (Patel, 2009). The principal journals are almost all in one language (English), disproportionately concentrated in the US, and typically focus on US topics using US data (Jacobs, 2016; Jacobs and Mizrachi, 2020).

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[1] International cooperation in the natural sciences varies among fields and even by specialty within discipiines (Habinek, 2021).

[2] We hasten to add that even the most successful countries remain at risk of a resurgence of cases.

Much research is based on data collection systems that were in place in advance of the pandemic. While state institutions routinely gather data on economic, criminal justice, education and vital statistics, the institutional capacity to field original sociological research is not as extensive as we might desire.

While the pandemic absorbed the attention of the world during the pandemic years of 2020 and 2021, climate change remains a fundamental and growing threat. International cooperation in the development and collection of routine climate indicators is an essential input into the decision-making processes surrounding this set of issues. International social-science research on climate issues is advancing, but here again the natural-science research has advanced much more rapidly than the social-science scholarship (Fankhauser, 2020).

A final example of the importance of cross-national research is the remarkable international diffusion of Black Lives Matter protests. In response to the video of the death of George Floyd at the hands of police in Minneapolis, marches quickly spread across major cities not only in the US but also around the world. We need to understand the role that the existence of organizations in the US such as Black Lives Matter and human-rights organizations internationally contributed to the organization of what might seem to be spontaneous protests.

Of course this was not the first case in which brutal inhumanity had been exposed, Organizations such as Amnesty International work hard to monitor human rights issues throughout the world. And it was not the first case in which demands for the protection of human rights became a truly global concern. At the present moment, the expulsion of the Rohingya from Myanmar, the concentration camps for Uigurs in China, the plight of displaced Syrians, and the Venezuelan diaspora have all garnered international attention, but none on the scale of the Black Lives Matter movement. It is rare for even the most outrageous cases of injustice to garner international interest to the extent that occurred in May and June of 2020 (Daragahi, 2020). The more common pattern is for any such protests to be local and intermittent.

While the importance of scientific knowledge and international collaboration are more evident than ever, powerful social currents have trended against internationalism and even against science. These trends must be acknowledged, but in our view they represent additional rationale for the importance of internationalizing sociology. The rise of nationalism and xenophobia are themselves international currents that need to be studied in a cross-national manner (Bergmann, 2020; Bonikowski, 2017).

David A. Smith: Globalizing Social Problems

We recognize that we are not the first observers to raise concerns about an excessive focus on the US case. Over the years, the charge of "ethnocentrism" in American sociology has been raised by a variety of authors (Hughes, 1961; Lie, 1995; Kurzman, 2017; see Kurien, 2016 for a review), yet they have not received

sustained empirical analysis (see Kurzman, 2017, and Jacobs and Mizrachi, 2020 for notable exceptions).[3]

Critics have raised similar concerns regarding the field of social psychology. Henrich and his colleagues (2010) charged that experimental research in this field is "WEIRD," an acronym coined to designate study participants as residents of "Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic" countries. They report that samples from this population comprise 95 percent of lab-based social psychology research (see also Arnett, 2008).

David A. Smith connects these concerns most explicitly to the social problems approach. Smith points out that the study of social problems as organized in SSSP began with a focus on social issues in the US. Consistent with this starting point is Smith's observation that social problems textbooks in the 1970s "totally focused on American social problems (2017, p. 3)."

Smith proceeds to raise the issue of the generalizability of sociological knowledge. He suggests that an exclusive focus on the US case (or on cases within the US such as the city of Chicago) risks generalizing from a limited and perhaps idiosyncratic set of examples.

The core of Smith's argument is that Issues we study from a local or national vantage point often have an important global dimension that should not be neglected. Smith views capitalism as the root source of global inequality, and points out that issues such as race and gender that we may take to be local and personal also have a global dimension. Smith concludes by noting that environmental and climate issues are global and reflect the destructiveness of global capitalism

While we agree with the thrust of Smith's perspective, we feel that it is important to distinguish between global and comparative approaches. A global approach would emphasize the importance of the global economy and other dimensions of the global system as contributing to social issues in a particular country. A comparative approach, while recognizing global influences and constraints, might point to particular policy choices that are not fully determined by the world system.

To take the case of the pandemic as an example, South Korea was pro-active in combatting the COVID-19 pandemic, having had significant exposure to earlier epidemics including SAARS and H1N1 (You, 2020). While its trade proximity to China, Japan and the US were no doubt relevant, the fact is that local institutional preparedness and policy choices enabled the government to limit the spread of COVID-19 in South Korea during the earliest phases of the pandemic. There are many other cases in which countries similarly situated in terms of geography and international trade links (Germany and Italy) had markedly different outcomes. In

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[3] Vanderstraeten and his colleagues provide similar evidence for science studies and educational research (Vanderstraeten, Vandermoere and Hermans, 2016; Vanderstraeten and Eykens, 2018).

other words, one can focus on the importance of national policy choices without ignoring global economic and political constraints. A comparative approach thus can complement a global perspective.

Research Questions

In empirically addressing some of the issues raised in Smith's address, we seek to ask the following research questions:

1. How US-focused is the journal *Social Problems*? In other words, to what extent are *international topics* represented in this journal in absolute terms, and compared to other prominent sociology journals (the *American Sociological Review* and the *American Journal of Sociology*).

2. To what extent are *Social Problems* articles authored by US researchers and scholars?

3. How much of the audience for Social Problems articles is located outside the US, and outside the field of sociology?

4. How have these trends changed in recent years?

5. To what extend to textbooks on social problems include international material?

Data and Methods

All of the articles 271 published in *Social Problems* spanning the years 2010 through 2019 were coded as explained below. Articles from the same time period appearing in the *American Journal of Sociology* and the *American Sociological Review* were also examined for the purposes of comparison. Comments, replies as well as book reviews were excluded from our sample.

Each article was coded according to the following variables:

<u>Publication Year</u>.

<u>National Focus</u>. We take the location of the data used in a study to indicate the national focus of the research. For example, a research article drawing on data collected in the US was classified as "US focused." While in principle this may seem like a simple, distinction, in practice a number of different types of research required. After considering a number of possibilities, we settled on a national focus measure with six categories: (1) US data only; (2) data on the US and another country; (3) data on a large number of countries including the US; (4)

data on a single country other than the US, (5) data on a large number of countries excluding the US; (6) presentation of a theory or model, or no national context indicated.

Author(s) Nationality. Since an author's nationality is often not ascertainable, we used the country of the first author's bachelor's degree as an indicator of their nationality. We recognize that this is not a perfect indication of national origin, but it is usually accurate and was frequently available on author's cv's. We also classified the country of the first author's doctoral degree as an indicator of the location of their professional training.

Audience Nationality. The nationality of the audience was measured from Web of Science citation data, which includes an indicator of the location of the citing author. While there is much to be said for using broader citation measures, such as Google Scholar, other data sources do not include data on the location of the citing author. Because the Web of Science does not index all journals and may be skewed toward US publications, the results may understate the extent of international readership.

Audience Disciplines. The Web of Science also provides information on the discipline of the citing journal. This data allow us to explore the extent to which *Social Problems* articles reach an interdisciplinary audience outside the confines of sociology journals.

Results

Representation of International Topics
Table 1 characterizes the 271 research articles publish in *Social Problems* from 2010 through 2019 by method. Just over half of the papers were quantitative in approach; one quarter were qualitative, and just over one-in-ten were based on ethnographic methods. A variety of other approaches made up the balance of papers.

Figure 1 presents the national focus of articles published in Social Problems, along with articles in ASR and AJS over the same time period. Three quarters of the articles (75.3 percent) published in *Social Problems* used data solely from the US. Five percent of papers were based on data from multiple countries including the US, and three percent compared with US with one other country. In all, over five out of six papers (83.8 percent) used data on the US, with the vast majority of these cases focusing solely on the US.

Figure 1 also shows that the majority of articles published in *ASR* and *AJS* during the same time period were based on US data. While the US-focus is somewhat higher in *Social Problems* than in these two other prominent journals, the gap narrows when articles including data on the US and other countries are grouped together. In other words, during this period *ASR* and *AJS* included more articles

that included data on the US and multiple other countries, as well as papers that included the US and one other country. Consequently, as shown in Figure 2, the proportion of articles that include at least some data on the US is similar in *Social Problems*, *ASR* and *AJS*. Our analysis (not shown) indicates that there is no clear trend over time toward more or less international representation in *ASR*, *AJS* and *Social Problems* articles during the last ten years.

Table 2 lists the countries outside the US that were the focus of at least two *Social Problems* articles. The list includes Canada, Mexico, Russia, Israel, UK, Brazil and Peru. These nine countries were responsible for half (51 percent) of the 59 papers that focused on countries outside the US. In addition, there were 29 other countries that were the subject of one *Social Problems* article. These data suggest that there is no set countries that represent a systematic point of reference for comparison with the US.[4]

Figure 3 focuses on authorship rather than on the subject matter of the paper. The great majority (over 90 percent) of authors of *Social Problems* papers obtained their bachelor's degree in the US. And an even slightly larger fraction obtained their PhD in a US university. In short, it is clear that authorship skews toward the United States.

In Figure 4, we consider where the audience for Social Problems papers is located. In this analysis, we rely on Web of Science data which conveniently is classified by country and discipline. The findings suggest that a sizable minority of the authors who cite *Social Problems* articles are located outside the US. Roughly one third of citing papers are international. In other words, the audience for *Social Problems* papers is considerably more international in scope than is the content of the papers.

Even more noteworthy is a second trend in Figure 3, namely, the majority of papers citing *Social Problems* articles appear in journals outside of the field of sociology. It is certainly heartening to know that the impact of the research of scholars who publish their studies in *Social Problems* are being read and cited by a broad, interdisciplinary audience.

We would be remiss if we fostered the impression that the journals represent the sole or even the principle obstacle to international research on social issues. The authors do not have access to data on the number of submissions, the acceptance rate and other relevant indicators in this area. As we note below, the goal is to build on existing organizational efforts and scholarship in this area rather than to pinpoint the sources of the current scarcity of representation of these topics.

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[4] Interest in Mexico reflects the continuing interest in Mexican migration; articles that used Canadian data varied widely by topic.

Social Problems Textbooks

Table 3 lists the topics that are most commonly included in the fourteen textbooks included in our sample. A core set of topics is included in at least 11 textbooks.[5]

Textbooks most often begin with a set of issues related to forms of inequality. These include: inequality, sometimes combined with poverty and or class; race and ethnicity, and gender. Sexualities as a set of issues has become a standard part of this set as well. The routine coverage and prominent placement of these topics reflects the continued emphasis of the field on issues of social justice.

A second set of topics examines an array of social institutions and processes. The family is the social institutions that receives the most regular treatment in social problems textbooks. Crime and criminal justice are also routinely covered; this topic is frequently paired with a stand-alone discussion of drugs. The medical system is also part of the standard set of social-problems topics, as are education and the environment.

A third set of topics is common but not quite standard. These include aging, population, war & terrorism, work and the economy and urbanization. The media is treated as a social issue in five textbooks; others, including Joel Best, treat the media as part of a system that influences the visibility of social issues rather than a social problem in its own right (Best, 2013).

A final set of issues appears in two or three of the textbooks examined. We were surprised to see that immigration and migration were not routinely included as a separate chapter. These issues were sometimes touched on in the section on race and ethnicity. Globalization and global inequality are also not routinely featured as a separate chapter. Sometimes these topic is included as part of global population issues and sometimes as part of a discussion of inequality.

New issues include our food system and animal welfare. It will be interesting to see if, over time, these topics join the standard list of chapter headings in social problems textbooks. We also wonder whether pandemics will appear as a social problem warranting its own chapter before too long.

Most of the topics covered in social problems textbooks are examined in the US context. Sometimes the unique position of the US in the world is mentioned. For

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[5] While most textbooks feature at least nine chapters with one social issue per chapter, there are a few exceptions. Joel Best's book emphasizes the social problems process; Kurt Finsterbusch's reader has six sections, and Robert Heiner's is organized around four main themes. Consequently the entries in Table 3 have maximum values of less than 15.

example, the lack of universal health care in the US is often mentioned. But even in the case of health care, social problems textbooks typically do not attempt a systematic coverage of different approaches to health care around the globe. In general, social issues are approached from an American vantage point, even if the authors note that these issues are not unique to the US.

There are notable exceptions to these generalizations. Anna Leon-Guerrero (2019), in her book *Social Problems: Community, Policy and Social Action*, systematically includes international material on each of the social issues she examines. Each chapter of her book includes a section entitled "Taking a World View" which incorporates data and examples from countries beyond the borders of the US. For example, her chapter on race and ethnicity includes a discussion of the Indian caste system. Her chapter on families includes a discussion of the Swedish family system. And her chapter on sexualities includes a review of the policies regarding gay service personnel in military systems around the world. Javier Treviño *Investigating Social Problems* similarly offers a "Beyond Our Borders" feature for each chapter.

To be sure, some of these discussions are more systematic than others. Nonetheless, Guerrero-Leon and Treviño help to demonstrate the "proof of concept," namely that social problems can be fruitfully treated in an international or global perspective within the confines of an introductory-level social problems text.[6] Students who read her book will recognize that there is much to be learned from considering how social problems are defined and addressed in countries other than the US.

Building on International Social-Problems Scholarship

We feel that it is important to emphasize the important organizational efforts to promote international research and scholarship at SSSP, at the ASA and the ISA. The Global Division of SSSP has been active since 2005 in examining "global and transnational processes both intensify and mitigate existing social problems, as well as contribute to the generation of new ones" (Global Division, 2020). Likewise, the Global and Transnational Sociology Section of the American Sociological Association serves as an organization hub for research and activism on these issues. And the ASA Section on the Political Economy of the World System surely must be mentioned in this context.

While there is no research committee of the International Sociological Association that is devoted to "social problems" *per se*, many of the ISA research committees focus on issues of interest to social-problems scholars. For example, ISA RC 19 focuses on Poverty, Social Welfare and Social Policy, while RC 48 focuses on Social Movements, Collective Action and Social Change. The goal of strengthening an international focus on social problems thus is not a matter of

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[6] Robert Heiner's book also features more international material than do most others.

starting from square one but rather building on intellectual capacity and organizational structures that are already in place.

Yet there is much that can and should be done to strengthen the efforts of these leaders in the field. There are many obstacles that would need to be overcome in order to make social problems research more fully international. While a full account of these issues is beyond the scope of this paper, perhaps a brief list might be of some use.

International research is greatly facilitated by the availability of standardized cross-national data. For example, economists can generate estimates of economic growth under various scenarios because an elaborate system of national economic accounts has been established. The limited availability of comparable social indicators (outside of health, education and vital statistics) serves as a constraint on conducting sociological research in multiple countries.

Cross-national and global research can be expensive to conduct. More extensive research support for internationally-oriented research would help to make such research financially viable.

The expansion of positions for faculty with an international portfolio would further aid in this area. Stevens et al. (2018) report that internationally-oriented appointments in sociology departments are the exception. In the long run, expanding capacity in this area will involve recruiting a new generation of students who recognize the importance of approaching social justice issues from a comparative and global framework.

Developing a system to facilitate international collaborations will no doubt be an indispensable part of a truly global research effort. International research is challenging in part because there is so much to know. In order to go beyond a superficial acquaintance, or a reliance on a very small set of national comparisons, teams of researchers and scholars from a variety of countries with complimentary skill sets working together will be most likely to make major contributions to our understanding of social problems from an international vantage point.

Summary and Conclusion

In this paper we make the case for a bolstering the international dimension of social problems research and teaching. We draw on three compelling examples: the pandemic of 2020, climate change, and the international response to Black Lives Matter protests in the US to underscore the importance of approaching social problems from an international perspective. Empirically, we document the predominance of US-based studies of social issues in the journal *Social Problems*. These studies are largely written by US authors and especially those who obtained their doctoral degrees in the US. There is nevertheless a

considerable international audience for articles published in *Social Problems*. It is also noteworthy that a broad, interdisciplinary array of researchers cite *Social Problems* in their own publications. Introductory textbooks on social problems, with notable exceptions, mention international dimensions of these issues to a limited degree.

Since its inception in the 19th century, sociology has endeavored to understand the modern experience and to improve the condition of contemporary societies to the extent possible. We maintain here that these twin goals can be promoted by expanding the scope of social problems research to encompass not only the American experience but to draw more fully on the struggles and models offered by other societies around the world. The increasingly global nature of social issues and social movements speak to the important of greatly expanding our capacity to conduct internationally-oriented social problems research and scholarship. Here's hoping that the journal *Social Problems* helps to lead this undertaking.

Table 1: *Social Problems* Methodology of Papers (in %)

Qualitative	24.0
Quantitative	52.8
Historical	1.8
Ethnography	12.5
Network Analysis	0.4
Mixed methods	6.6
Experimental	1.8

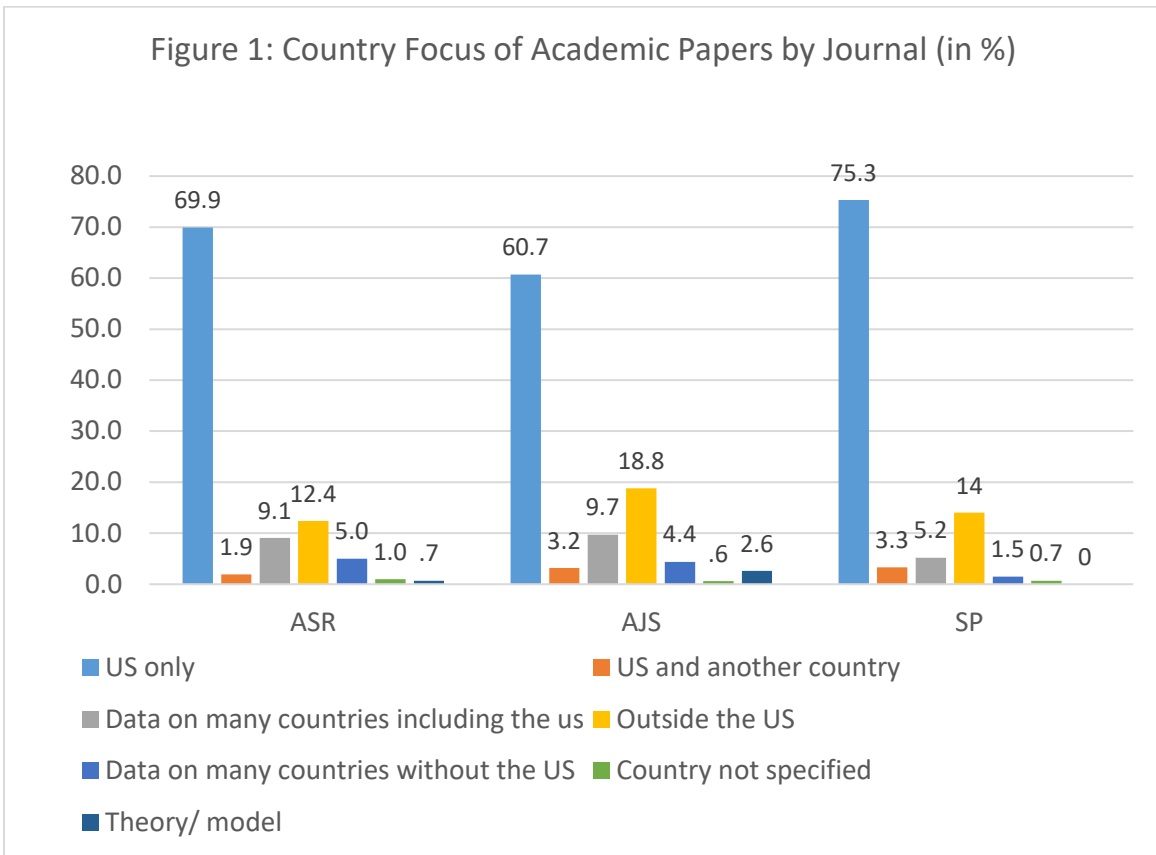Figure 1: Country Focus of Academic Papers by Journal (in %)

<u>Table 2: *Social Problems* Main Countries of Focus</u>
<u>(other than the U.S.)</u>

<u>Country</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>%</u>
Canada	6	10
Mexico	6	10
Russia	3	5
Israel	3	5
United kingdom	3	5
Peru	2	3
Brazil	2	3
Colombia	2	3
France	2	3
Other countries	30	51
Total	59	100

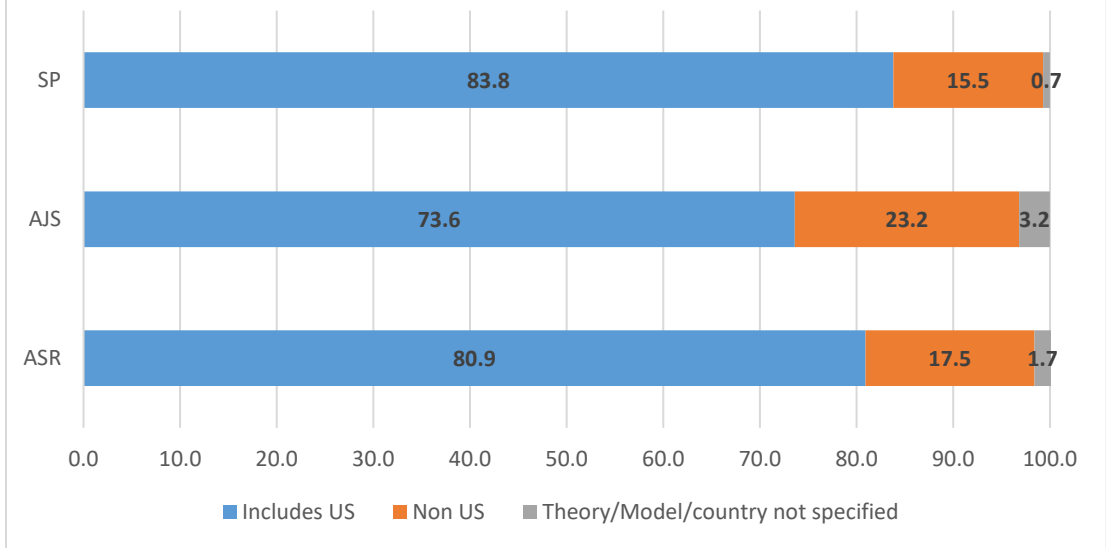Figure 2: Country Focus of Academic Papers by Journal (in %)

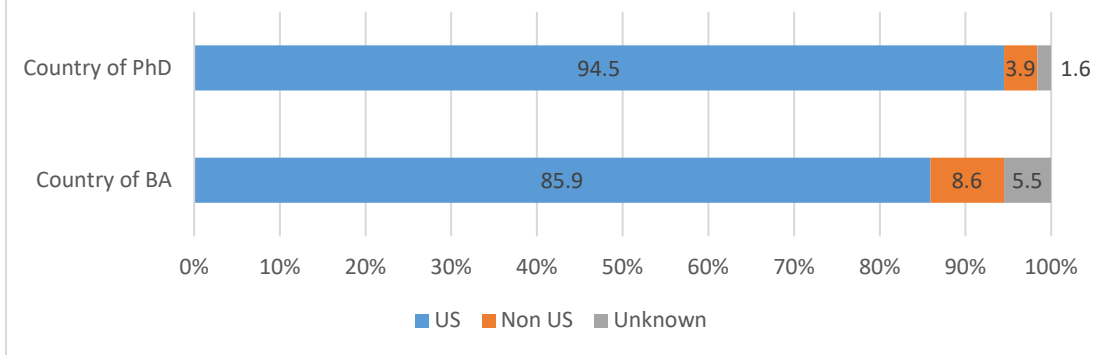Figure 3: Sole Author's Characteristics in *Social Problem* Papers

Figure 4. International and Interdisciplinary Audience for *Social Problems* Articles
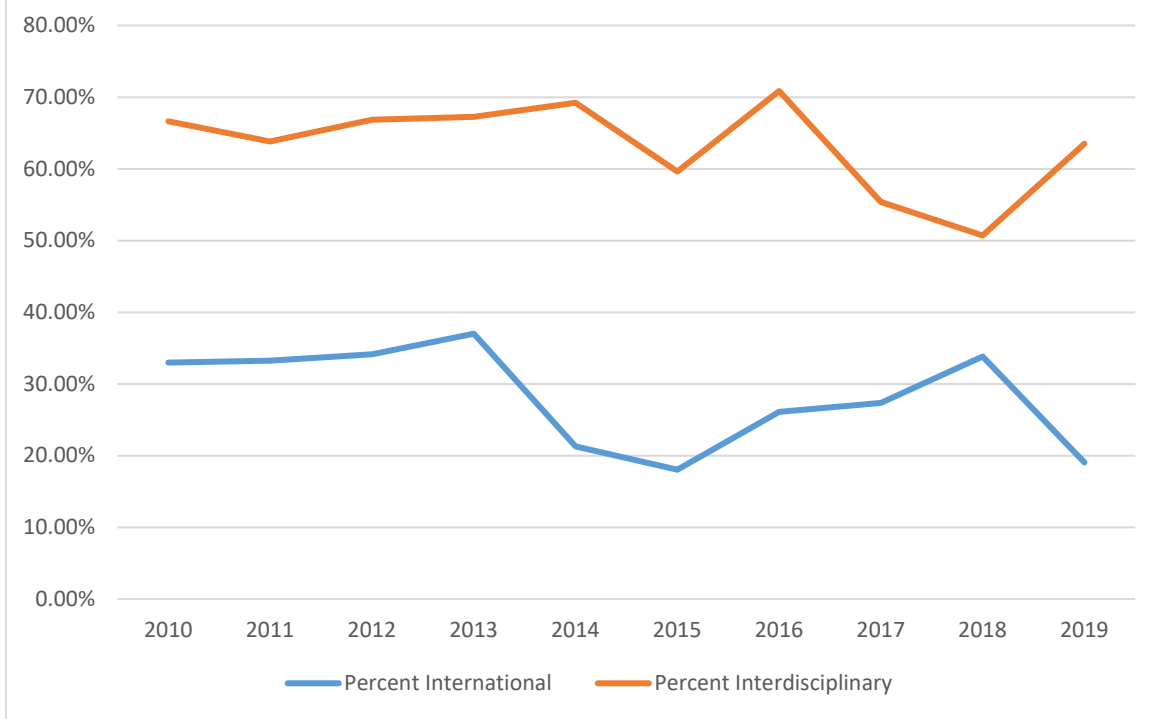
Table 3. Topics Included in Social Problems Textbooks

Topic	Frequency
Dimensions of Inequality	
Race & ethnicity	13
Inequality, class and poverty	12
Gender	12
Sexualities	11
Institutions and Processes	
Family	13
Crime and criminal justice	13
Medicine, health and healthcare	12
Education and Schooling	11
Environment	12
Drugs	11
Common but Not Universal Topics	
Aging	9
Population	9
War & Terrorism	9
Work & the economy	8
Urbanization	7
Media	5
Less Common Topics	
Immigration/ migration	3
Science & technology	2
Globalization/ global inequality	2
Animal welfare	2
Food	2

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