



Science in Society, Society in Science:

Toward a 21st Century Model for Social Scientific Research

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Growing public skepticism about the value of science and expert knowledge has been a defining characteristic of the early 21st century. Political discourse and populist movements have increasingly questioned the objectivity of scientists and criticized the perceived liberal bias of academic elites. Privately funded research think tanks, internet websites, and other alternative sources of information have contributed to an increasingly diverse ecosystem of authority and knowledge. As the distinction between 'facts' and 'values' has become increasingly blurred, the evidence-base that informs current policy becomes increasingly contested territory.

Many in academia deplore these trends as 'anti-intellectual' and 'anti-science' as exemplified by the organization of a national "March for Science" in the spring of 2017. As a subgroup of scientists, many social scientists frequently marshal the use of evidence, facts, and research to challenge popular misunderstandings of social problems (like poverty, crime, racism, and sexism). At the same time, social scientists have been at the forefront of a critique of the mainstream scientific enterprise for more than 50 years, raising important questions about naïve conventional understandings of the scientific method and scientific objectivity, and innovating new and diverse approaches to knowledge production.

Current public distrust of science and our own internal critiques bring important challenges and opportunities for rural social scientists to articulate new models for the role of science in society. Professional social science societies (like RSS) have an obligation to support those who are studying and developing effective responses to the challenges faced by rural people and places in a globalized world. New models for scientific research will be increasingly important if our efforts are to inform public discourse and shape the development of effective public policies. To do this, we need to reconcile tensions between the desire to retain the power and insights of rigorous scientific methods, and our awareness of the societal biases associated with conventional scientific institutions. **At the 2018 Annual Meetings of the Rural Sociological Society, we encourage attendees to present work that explores this vexing and enduring issue, and to provide examples of innovative approaches to applied scientific research on rural topics.**

RSS 2018 Program Committee Contacts:

Kate MacTavish, RSS 2018 Program Chair

kate.mactavish@oregonstate.edu

Douglas Jackson-Smith, RSS President

jackson-smith.1@osu.edu

Lisa Pruitt, RSS Vice President

lrpruitt@ucdavis.edu