Trends and Future Directions in the Academic Job Market for Ph.D.'s in Sociology: A Research Note

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Introduction

There is a long history of research on the prospects (often dismal) of employment for new sociology Ph.D.'s (see Lyson and Squires 1993, 1980, 1978; Medalia and Mason 1963). However, much of this research is a response to the explanations for the market difficulties that faced new Ph.D.'s in the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s. In this article, we build on this tradition by focusing on the market conditions facing recent and future Ph.D.'s, and by drawing upon previously unpublished data sources to present a picture that accurately describes the conditions and trends currently shaping the future job market. Previous research on this subject has been limited in the data presented and by the failure to include any comparison groups to evaluate the situation in sociology. Currently, no single source exists that combines a detailed overview of the academic employment situation of sociologists with a discussion of the long-term trends that underlie the employment picture.[1] The data presented in this paper indicate that the conclusion that "sociology is on the skids" is partly true and partly false. The true picture of the job market for sociologists does not lend itself to simple descriptions and sweeping generalization.[2]

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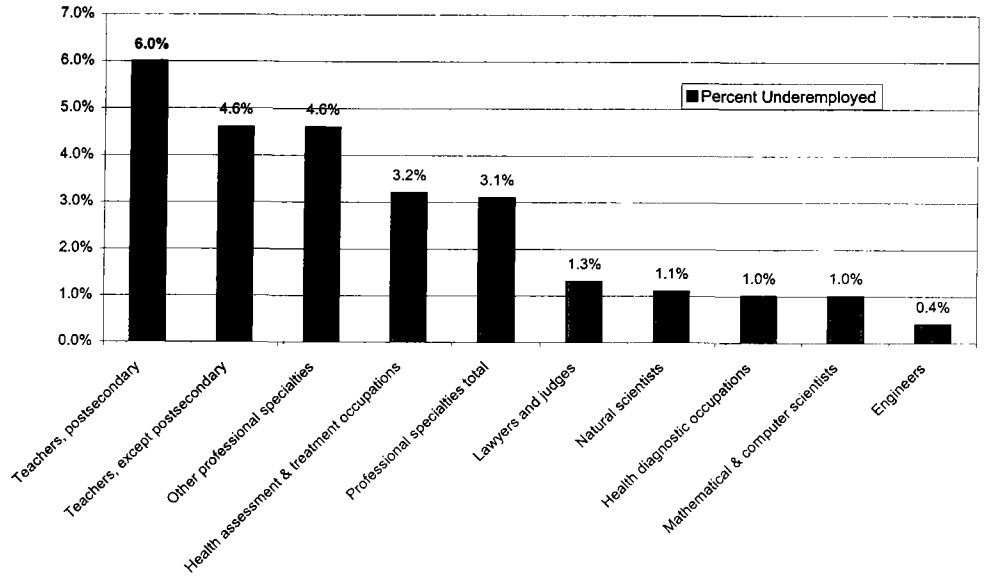
FIGURE 1
Percent of Professionals who Work 1–35 Hours a Week who are Seeking Full-Time Employment: 1996
Current Population Survey Data



Source: Constructed from unpublished data from the 1996 CPS Survey

The Job Market

For new Ph.D.'s the threat of underemployment looms larger than outright unemployment. Underemployment is strictly defined as less than full-time employment for non-economic reasons, meaning that the employee would prefer full-time work but is unable to secure a full-time job. An analysis of unpublished data from the 1996 Current Population Survey (CPS) indicates that postsecondary teachers (college teachers) have the highest rate of underemployment among professionals surveyed. Six percent of postsecondary teachers are employed one to 35 hours a week (see Figure 1). This rate is almost twice as high as health professionals (3.2%); five times as high as lawyers and judges (1.3%), and six times as high as natural scientists (1.1%) and mathematical and computer scientists (1.0%). The sample size of the CPS is too small to allow dissagregation by field with college teachers and it is therefore impossible to measure which field has the highest rate of underemployment. These CPS data are valuable, however, in that they set the context for the situation within sociology.

Unemployment, Underemployment, and Non-Tenure Track Employment

Table 1 provides statistical support to the often-cited concern about the difficulties in securing tenure track employment for recent sociology Ph.D.'s. The data come from a survey of respondents who received doctorates between 1988

TABLE 1
Labor Market Indicators for Ph.D. graduates from 1988 to 1993
Data from 1993

	Involuntary out-of-field rate	Unemployment rate	Non-tenure track/adjunct positions	Postdoc positions
Sociology/Anthropology	9.6	4.6	9.5	2.5
Engineering	3.4	1.5	4.3	6.1
Economics	2.7	3.2	5.8	2.1
Psychology	2.5	1.0	6.3	3.3
Social sciences	4.2	2.0	6.8	2.5
Humanities	14.2	3.3	10.7	0.5
Physical Sciences	5.0	2.6	5.0	24.6
Life Sciences	2.3	1.2	8.0	31.6
Political science	4.4	2.8	5.5	0.7

*Source: Science Resources Studies Divisio: National Science Foundation, 1993 Doctorate Recipients unpublished tabulations available at http://www.nsf.gov/sbe/srs/seind96/ttab3-02.gif.

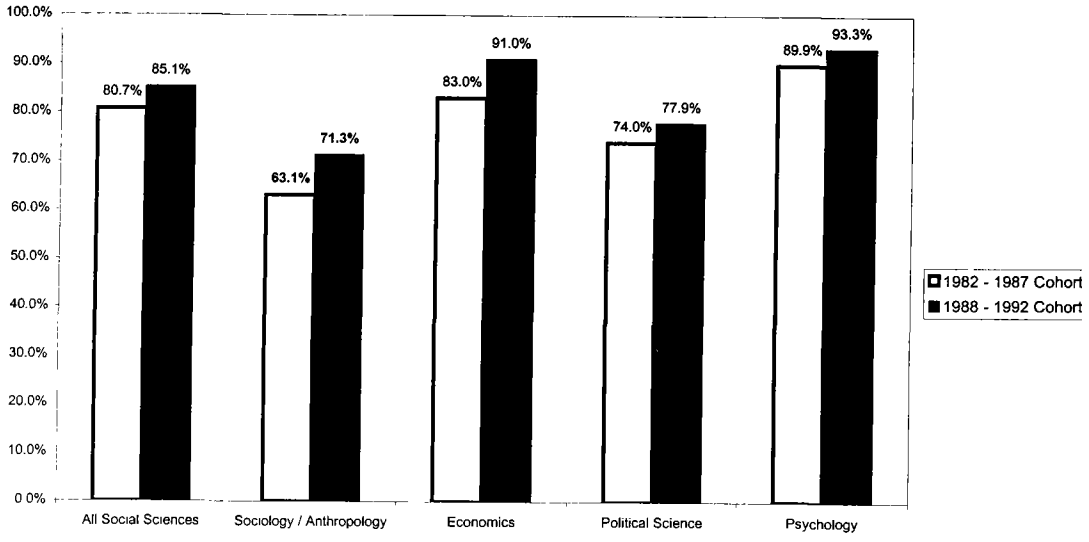
and 1993 with the employment data coming in 1993.[3] The actual rate of unemployment among academics is quite low, bottoming out at 1.2% for recent life science Ph.D.'s and peaking at 3.3% for the humanities. Depressingly, recent sociology/anthropology Ph.D.'s had the highest rate of unemployment at 4.6%. A corollary to unemployment is involuntary out-of-field employment. Of all the social sciences, sociology/anthropology had the highest rate of involuntary out-of-field employment during this period. Close to one-in-ten (9.6%) recent Ph.D.'s are working in a non-academic field because they are unable to secure academic appointments. Recent Ph.D.'s in sociology/anthropology are three and one-half times as likely to be involuntarily working outside the field as Ph.D.'s in economics or psychology.

The ability of sociologists to work outside academia is often cited as a positive attribute of the degree. The flip side to this is the inability of a large number of people trained for an academic career to find the employment for which they are qualified. The rate of involuntary out-of-field unemployment among sociologists looks good only when compared with that of the humanities, where an astonishing 14.2% of all recent Ph.D.'s involuntarily work outside the field.

A second and often voiced concern about the sociology job market is the proliferation of non-tenure track "visiting" or "adjunct" appointments (such as the one held by one of the authors). These jobs are generally viewed as exploitative because they carry with them lower than average salaries and heavy teaching loads. Little or no support is given to professional development and research, nor do these non-tenure track jobs come with any security or possibility of promotion. Are recent sociology/anthropology Ph.D.'s at greater risk of landing in non-tenure track jobs than other social scientists? Again the data are conclusive.

Recent sociology/anthropology Ph.D.'s have considerably higher rates of non-tenure adjunct appointments then either recent economic or psychology Ph.D.'s. Almost one-in-ten of academically employed sociologists/anthropologists are in

FIGURE 2
Ph.D. in the Social Science Workforce who Worked in a "Closely Related" Occupation: 1988 and 1993



Source: Science Resources Division, National Science Foundation, 1993 Survey of Doctorate Recipients unpublished tabulations http://www.nsf.gov/sbe/srs/seind96/ttab3-03.gif

the non-tenure track sector. This is higher than the social science field as a whole, with only recent Ph.D.'s in the humanities having (slightly) higher rates.

Employment Outside of Academia

The phenomena of working outside academia are more fully explored in Figure 2. This graph is constructed from previously unpublished data from the 1993 survey of doctoral recipients conducted by the National Science Foundation. Respondents were asked if their primary jobs in 1993 were "closely," "somewhat," or "not" related to their Ph.D. fields. This is a subjective measure and therefore may reflect both the attitude and objective circumstances of various academic disciplines.

Data are presented for a previous cohort of Ph.D. graduates who finished their doctorates in the years 1982 to 1987 and a more recent cohort that graduated between 1988 and 1992. Again sociologists and anthropologists are collapsed into one category.

For both cohorts, sociologists/anthropologists have the lowest rate of working in a closely related occupation. Only 63.1% of the earlier cohort reported working in a closely related occupation. This proportion improves to 71.3% for the latter cohort. These percentages are only comparable with political scientists who are in the 1970s for both cohorts. Economists and psychologists have 80 to 90 percent employment in a closely related occupation.

TABLE 2
Percent Distribution of Full and Part Time Faculty in the Social Sciences 1992

	Full-time Male	Full-time Female	Part-time Male	Part-time Female
Social sciences	73.1	26.9	57.1	42.9
Sociology	75.5	24.6	43.8	56.2
Economics	85.1	14.9	82.5	17.4
Political Science	82.9	17.0	81.4	18.6
Psychology	62.8	37.0	51.6	48.4
Other social sciences	69.1	30.9	56.1	44.1

Source: U.S. Departyment of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Study of Postsecondary Faculy (NSOPF), 1993. Unpublished Data http://www.fedstats.gov/.

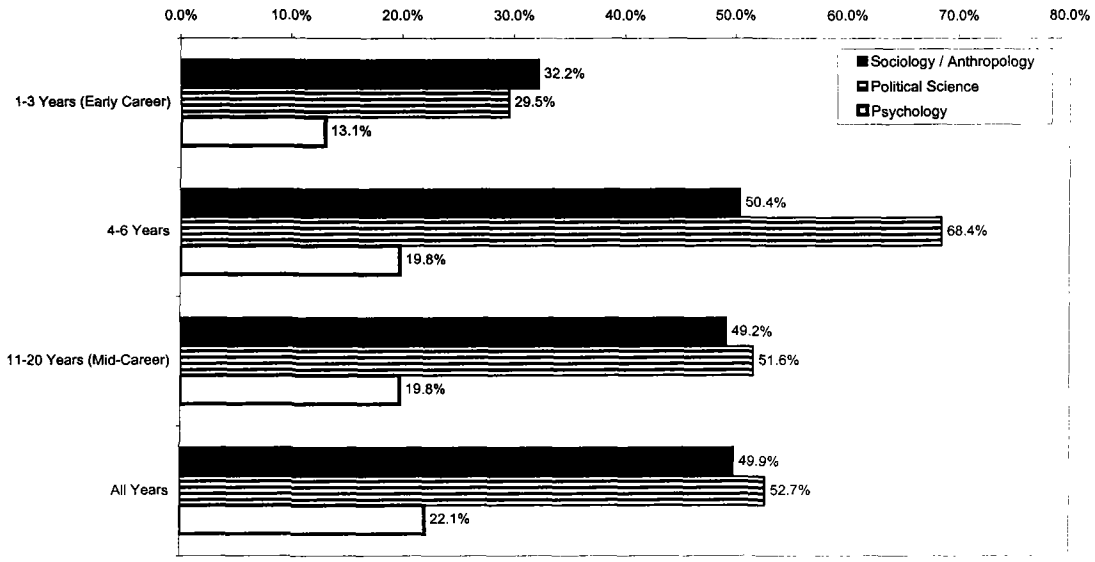
What accounts for the low percentage of sociologists/anthropologists working in occupations closely related to the discipline? The most obvious answer is that very large proportions of sociologists find employment outside academia in both government and private jobs. Given that graduate sociological training is overwhelmingly oriented to academic research and teaching, these non-academics may feel that they are no longer "closely" associated with their discipline. While non-academics may use methods and techniques in their daily work similar to those of academic sociologists, their work is not generally included in professional meetings or journals. The sharp rise in those reporting working in a closely related occupation between the cohorts (63.1% to 71.3%) may herald a trend towards a change in perspective. Recent Ph.D.'s may be able to retain their identity as sociologists while at the same recognizing that structural factors have made entry into the world of academic sociology increasingly difficult.

Full- and Part-Time Faculty

Table 2 shows the distribution of full and part-time faculty in sociology and the other social sciences by gender. The data are culled from the U.S. Department of Education's National Study of Postsecondary Faculty (NSOPF). These data show that full and part time employment has a strong gender component. While three-quarters of all full-time faculty members in sociology are males, less than half (43.8%) of part-time faculty are men. The fact that women constitute a minority of full-time faculty but a majority of part-time faculty may be cause for concern. While women are better represented in the full-time faculty than in economics or political science, they are under-represented when compared with psychology. Women in sociology also constitute a higher proportion of part-time employment than any other social science discipline.

It is impossible to tell from these data if women are occupying part-time positions because of preferences or because of constraints on full-time positions. It is safe to say, however, that the size of female cohorts of new sociology Ph.D.'s began to increase dramatically just as the number of full-time slots began to decrease. In other words the high proportion of women in part-time jobs in

FIGURE 3
Percent Holding Tenure and Tenure Track Appointments at Four-Year Institutions in 1995 by Years Since Ph.D.



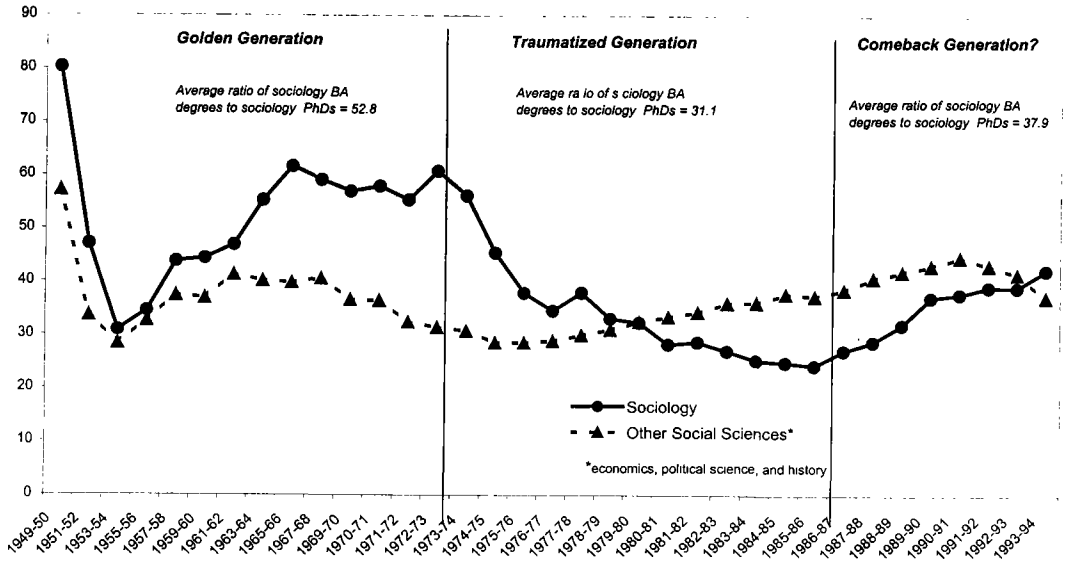
Source: Constructed from data from the NSF/SRS Survey of Doctorate Recipients reported in NSF97-321 September 23, 1997 http://www.nsf.gov/

sociology is most likely a cohort effect rather than due to institutional discrimination. Still, the fact that a part-time job is more likely to be filled by a woman and full-time job by a man has serious implications for the direction of the discipline. Part-time work by its very nature is devalued, with little opportunity to affect department or university-wide policy changes. Just when women have begun to achieve parity in training in sociology they find themselves pushed to the margin of the discipline.

Tenure

Figure 3 shows the proportion of doctorate holders in sociology/anthropology, political science and psychology who either are on a tenure track or hold tenure after a given set of years of completing their graduate work. Within one to three years following completion of the Ph.D., approximately one-third of sociology/anthropology graduates are in a tenure track (or tenured) position. They are slightly ahead of political scientists, and far ahead of psychologists. Within four to six years however, political scientists have strongly pulled ahead with over two-thirds of this group now filling tenure track jobs or already achieving tenure. In four to six years about one-half of sociology/anthropology Ph.D.'s will be on the tenure track or have achieved tenure. In mid career (eleven to twenty years post-Ph.D.) sociologists and political scientists pull essentially even, with both groups hovering around 50 percent. Psychology with its clinical non-aca-

FIGURE 4
Ratio of Earned Degrees for Undergraduate to Ph.D. Graduates 1949 to 1994: Sociology compared to the other Social Sciences



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, "Degrees and Other Formal Awards Conferred" surveys, and Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), "Completions" surveys. http://www.ed.gov/NCES/pubs/D96/d96t291.html

demic positions cannot be compared accurately with sociology/anthropology or political science.

These data suggest that recent sociology/anthropology Ph.D. graduates are having more difficulty achieving tenure track status and tenure than previous cohorts and graduates in other social sciences. Where two-thirds of political scientists who received their degrees in 1989 to 1991 were in a tenure track position by 1995, only one half of sociologists / anthropologists were in a similar position. Where earlier cohorts of sociologists/anthropologists and political scientists seemed to face a similar opportunity structure, this opportunity structure has diverged in recent years.[4]

Explaining the Trends

Underlying the figures on underemployment, non-tenure track employment and employment outside the discipline are three major trends. The first trend is a change in the demand for academic sociologists as operationalized by changes in the number of undergraduate majors and graduates. The second trend is a change in the supply of Ph.D.'s as measured by the number of recent doctoral graduates. And the third (and under-appreciated) underlying cause for the employment difficulties in sociology is decline in resources as measured by federal funds for research directed at the discipline.

Figure 4 combines the supply and demand trends into a measure of the ratio between sociology undergraduate degrees and sociology Ph.D. degrees. Combining these measures into one statistic and plotting them over time greatly simplifies the process of simultaneously analyzing changes in the supply and demand for academic sociologists. In order to facilitate a comparative perspective but preserve a straightforward visual presentation we have collapsed economics, history, and political science into a category entitled "other social sciences."

In constructing this figure we have borrowed from the language of Collins (1986) who has identified a "golden" and a "traumatized" generation of academic sociologists. The golden generation of academic sociology runs from 1949 to 1974. In these years the average ratio of bachelors graduates to Ph.D. graduates was a high 52.8. These years saw increasing enrollments in the sociology major and a relatively small number of graduating Ph.D.'s. Writing about this golden generation of sociologists Collins points out:

> The 1960s was a period of tremendous expansion of American higher education, which stimulated the production of graduate students for a growing market of college teachers. . . . If one came out onto the job market early enough . . . (generally before 1972, but possibly even later) job opportunities were plentiful. (Collins 1986: 1339)

During the golden generation for academic sociologists the ratio of Ph.D.s to bachelors (demand-to-supply) was considerably above the ratio for the rest of the social sciences. Where the demand for Ph.D.s and the supply were pretty much in equilibrium for the rest of the social sciences from 1949 to 1974, the demand was greater than the supply for the fortunate golden generation of sociologists.

Starting in 1975, however, these trends began to reverse. From 1975 to the mid-1980s the ratio of bachelor graduates to Ph.D.s declined in sociology. This is a function of a rapid decline in undergraduate majors (hence graduates) and an equally rapid increase in sociology graduate students and hence Ph.D. graduates. By 1978 the ratio between demand and supply had dipped below the average for the rest of the social sciences and would reach a low of less than 25 bachelor degree sociologists for each Ph.D. graduate by 1986. Writing at a time when the mismatch between demand and supply for Ph.D. sociologists had become most acute, Collins named the 1974 to 1987 cohort the "traumatized generation." During this period the average ratio of bachelors to graduates was 31.1, considerably lower than the average for the rest of the social sciences during the entire period covered (38.3). On this traumatized generation Collins comments:

> The expansion of the market in the 1960s and the early 1970s meant that the cohort who got Ph.D.'s in that period, a relatively young group, blocked most of the opportunities of the still-younger group right behind it. (Collins 1986: 1339)

The data from 1988 to 1994 seem to suggest that the supply of sociology Ph.D.'s is coming back into equilibrium with the demand. The trend toward declining ratios of undergraduates to Ph.D.'s has reversed. During the 1993-

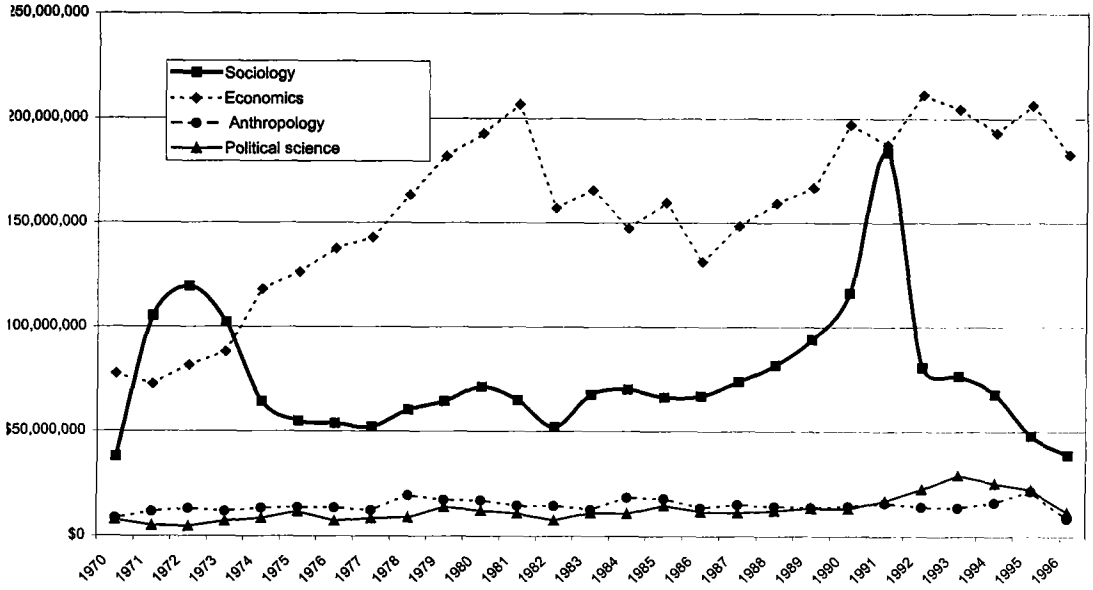
1994 academic year (the last year data are available) the demand and supply ratio for sociologists actually moved above the average ratio for the rest of the social sciences. During these years the ratio increased to 37.85, just below the average ratio for the other social sciences for the entire period covered. The reason for this reversal was a rapid increase in the number of undergraduate degrees in sociology during this time period. From 12,000 majors in 1985, the number of majors has increased to over 22,000 in 1994. During this time the number of new Ph.D.'s continued to grow (although at lower levels than in the mid-1970s to mid-1980s) but was compensated for by the more rapid increase in undergraduates.

We have named this latest cohort of sociologists the "comeback generation?". The question mark is present because seven years of data are not enough on which to base a trend. However, if undergraduate degrees keep increasing at current rates, and the production of new Ph.D.'s holds more or less steady, then we could be seeing a renaissance in the field of sociology. Projections for future enrollment in higher education are very positive. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, an increase in enrollments of 24% is expected between 1985 and 2005, and there is no reason to believe that sociology will not continue to take its fair share of these future students. The demand for human service professionals is expected to increase steadily in the late 1990s through 2005 (U.S. Department of Labor 1993). The move towards a more favorable demand and supply ratio for academic sociologists invites the question: why do the employment figures for sociologists/anthropologists look so bad as compared with other social scientists? Our reading of the data suggests that we are currently undergoing something akin to a "hangover" effect from the mid-1970s to the mid-to-late 1980s. Figure 2 shows that the percentage of sociologists who reported working in a closely related occupation increased dramatically for the cohort who received their degrees in 1988 to 1992 as compared with those whose degrees were from the 1982 to 1987 period. The later cohort faced a more favorable demand-to-supply ratio and this may be showing up in these results. If this interpretation is correct then sociologists should begin to achieve parity with other social scientists in terms of employment within the discipline as newer data become available. A second piece of evidence that supports the "comeback" generation hypothesis is the latest employment figures for sociologists, which show the rate of underemployment for Ph.D.'s one to three years following completion of their degrees has declined from 11.6% in 1993 to 9.1% in 1995. During these same years the rates of underemployment for economists rose from 4.6% to 5.5% and for psychologists from 2.2% to 3.8% (Regets 1997).

Federal Support for Research

Figure 5 shows federal support for research in the social sciences from 1985 to 1995. Trends in federally supported research are crucial for understanding employment trends among academic sociologists as federally supported research represents the most legitimate alternative to teaching as a source of funds (and

FIGURE 5
Federal Funding for Research in the Social Sciences: 1970 to 1996



Source: unpublished tables NSF Survey of Federal Funds for Development and Research http://www.nsf.gov/sbe/srs/nsf98326/htmstart.htm

hence the only factor that can obviate demand and supply trends). These data show a striking drop-off of federal funds for sociological research beginning in 1989. In 1989 sociology and economics each enjoyed over $30 million dollars annually in federal funding. From 1990 to 1995 economics continued to increase its funding levels while sociology went into a tailspin. By 1992 sociology funding had declined by almost 70 percent below its peak funding levels and had leveled out. Where once sociology had enjoyed parity with economics in terms of federal funding, by 1995 sociologists were collecting one dollar in funding for every five that went to economists.

Unlike the turnaround in the demand for sociologists, these funding trends show no signs of abating.[5] The trends in research funding are clear: academic sociologists will live and die by their demand in the classroom. This central fact calls into question the practice of most sociological graduate programs that continue to stress specialized research methodology over pedagogical skills. Recent Ph.D.'s that can demonstrate excellence in the classroom will probably be in a decent position to take advantage of the projected increase in demand for academic sociologists.

Conclusion and Summary

The quality of the current labor market for academic sociologists can be summarized as "not very good but looking up." It is impossible to deny the current reality that sociologists face elevated levels of unemployment, underemployment, involuntary out-of-field employment, employment in non-sociological disciplines and employment in non-tenure track jobs at greater levels than any

other social or physical science. Only Ph.D.'s in the humanities seem to have it worse. And as Lyson and Squires (1978; 1983) have pointed out, these situations are part of an ongoing historical trend. On the other hand the underlying trends that have gotten sociologists into this unenviable position seem to have reversed—a change that could start to improve the employment situation for academic sociologists. However, we also caution against overoptimistic interpretation of these data. While it appears that sociology majors are growing, this will not automatically translate into tenure-track positions. There is the possibility that current faculty or new temporary positions will handle the anticipated demand for sociology courses.

Both Ph.D. granting institutions and Ph.D.'s will probably need to adjust to the new realities of the sociology labor market. Graduate programs and graduate students would do well to include in their training systematic preparation in pedagogy and classroom management. Graduate students who do not envision a career built largely in the classroom should labor to acquire skills that fit the needs of nonacademic employers. For these future Ph.D.'s methods and analytical skills should be stressed over in-depth theoretical study. Both groups will need to become more effective at communicating their ideas to the future consumers (whether they be undergraduates or employers) of the twenty-first century sociology.

Notes

1. Data are available on the American Sociological Association home page (http://www.asanet.org/) and the chronicle of Higher Education home page (http://chronicle.com).
2. 2 This paper is written during a time when the conventional wisdom on the state of the discipline is one of crisis and malaise. A recent *Utne Reader* article entitled, "Sociology on the Skids," announces that sociology has fallen into a "dismal abyss." As evidence the article cites the decline in sociology undergraduates and the closing of three sociology departments in which "professors had come to outnumber students" (Glenn 1995: 28).
3. Employment data of this sort are only available for sociology / anthropology, a situation that limits what can be said specifically about sociologists. Sociology/anthropology are three and one-half times as likely to be involuntarily working outside the field as economics or psychology Ph.D.'s.
4. The fact that sociology Ph.D.'s are less likely to have tenure 4 to 6 years following completion of their doctorate does not mean that sociologists are more likely to be denied tenure. No data are available on the relationship between discipline and the denial of tenure for the social sciences.
5. Although some have suggested that "welfare reform" should be renamed "full-employment for social scientists" with sociologists well positioned to cash in on the need for consultants and program evaluators.

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