

From Theory to Practice: Leveraging ‘Applied Sociology’ and ‘Inspiration Labs’ for Effective Social Change

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Abstract This paper explores the intersection of sociology, applied sociology, and the Inspiration Economy, highlighting their collective potential to address pressing social challenges within communities. It begins with a comprehensive definition of sociology as the scientific study of society, relationships, and behaviour, emphasising its relevance in understanding social dynamics, cultural norms, and systemic inequalities. Following this, the applications of sociology are examined compared to a decade of experience with Inspiration Economy Labs. The study emphasises how the practices of Inspiration Labs are bringing in collaborative efforts across disciplines to tackle socioeconomic issues. By employing a comparative methodology, this paper analyses multiple case studies of applied sociology initiatives and Inspiration Labs, assessing their effectiveness, community engagement, and measurable outcomes. The findings reveal the significant roles that applied sociology and Inspiration Labs play in fostering social change and community empowerment. Ultimately, the paper offers recommendations for integrating sociological principles into practice, stressing the importance of interdisciplinary approaches and community involvement in creating sustainable solutions for contemporary socio-economic challenges.

Keywords Sociology, Applied Sociology, Inspiration economy, Inspiration Lab, Comparative Study

1. Introduction

Sociology, as a scientific discipline, offers profound insights into the fabric of human society. By studying the intricate relationships, behaviours, and structures that define our social world, sociology enhances our understanding of how individuals interact and how societies function, evolve, and sustain stability. This paper will delve into the definition of sociology, its applications in addressing contemporary challenges, and the need for the emergence of ‘applied sociology’, learning from the ‘inspiration economy experience as a vital tools for real-world problem-solving. Buheji (2022).

In an increasingly complex and interconnected world, the relevance of sociological insights cannot be overstated. However, the "Inspiration Economy" concept emerges as a compelling approach, focusing on the potential to reassess socioeconomic conditions and create innovative models that harness hidden opportunities, Oleynick et al. (2014). The concept can thrive in the slow-developing ‘applied sociology’ in comparison to the realised world demands. Freeman and Rossi (1984).

Through the exploration of Inspiration Labs, we find a distinct methodology that complements traditional sociological practices by fostering collaboration across disciplines and

community involvement in tackling pressing social issues. By examining the synergies between applied sociology and the innovative frameworks provided by Inspiration Labs, this paper seeks to illustrate how these approaches can effectively address various community challenges, enhance social cohesion, and foster resilience in the face of adversity, Thompson (2017). The subsequent sections will elucidate these themes further, emphasising the critical importance of ‘applied sociology’ in understanding and improving societal conditions. Buheji (2018).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Definition of Sociology

Sociology is the scientific study of society, relationships, and behaviour. It is a social science that seeks to understand how cultural, institutional, and social structures shape human actions and consciousness. Sociologists examine how individuals interact with each other and how societies function, change, and maintain stability. Ward (1906).

The discipline of sociology encompasses various subfields, including but not limited to ‘Cultural Sociology’, which explores cultural norms, values, and practices ‘Social Dynamics’ which focuses on studying social changes and movements; and ‘Social Inequality’, which investigates disparities in wealth, power, and opportunity, Oleynick et al. (2014). Besides,

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the discipline of sociology is the leading social science that tackles 'Family Sociology', which examines family structures and relationships, and 'Criminology', which analyses crime, deviance, and social control.

2.2. Applications of Sociology

Sociology has a wide range of applications across various fields and sectors. However, its applications tend to be more relevant to research, policies, and analysis than direct field changes, Perlstadt (2007). One of the key applications of sociology can be seen in 'Policy Development', where sociologists inform public policy by providing insights into social issues, such as poverty, education, health care, and criminal justice, helping policymakers design effective interventions. For example, sociology research contributes to understanding the role of education in society and addressing issues like educational inequality, curriculum development, and the sociology of learning. Bulmer (1990).

Sociological research examines social determinants of health, healthcare access, and the impact of social behaviour on health outcomes, leading to better health interventions. In another application, specific organisations utilise sociological principles to understand consumer behaviour, market trends, and workplace dynamics, aiding in effective marketing strategies and employee relations. Buheji (2019b).

Sociologists should also work with communities to analyse social problems, promote community engagement, and facilitate social change through grassroots initiatives. In specific contexts, sociology helps understand the social context of crime, societal responses to deviance, and the effectiveness of legal systems and rehabilitative measures. Even insights from sociology inform urban development policies, addressing issues like housing, transportation, and community needs, contributing to sustainable city planning. Buheji (2022).

Sociological methods are still used in various research projects across different disciplines, employing surveys, interviews, and observations to gather data on social phenomena.

2.3. Realising Applied Sociology

This sociology subfield focuses on applying sociological theories, concepts, and research methods to address real-world problems and challenges. It involves using sociological knowledge to develop solutions and interventions in various contexts, such as communities, organisations, and public policies. Gelfand (1975).

Applied sociology prioritises real-world interdisciplinary collaboration aiming to understand social issues and develop strategies to address them effectively, Perlstadt (2007). Applied sociologists often work alongside professionals from other disciplines, such as public health, criminology, education, and urban planning, to create comprehensive approaches to social problems. Buheji (2022), Thompson (2017).

Applied sociology involves conducting research to assess social issues and implementing interventions, Freeman and Rossi (1984). Sociologists evaluate the effectiveness of the programs and policies to ensure they meet their intended

goals. Practitioners often engage with communities to understand their needs, challenges, and resources. This participatory approach empowers communities and fosters collaboration. Street and Weinstein (1975).

Sociological principles can assist in navigating social services and addressing issues like poverty, addiction, and mental health. The sociological research aims to improve educational practices, address educational inequalities, and enhance student outcomes. Besides, sociological methods can help understand consumer behaviour, societal trends, and the impact of social factors on purchasing decisions. Buheji (2019b).

2.4. Definition of Economics and Its Role in the Social Sciences

Economics is a social science that is concerned with social requirements related to production, distribution, exchange and consumption. It is a science that involves the accumulation, classification and organisation of knowledge, and the achievement of efficiency in the application of social laws related to production, distribution, exchange and consumption. Buheji (2019a).

The English economist Adam Smith, the founder of modern economics, defined it in his book *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776 as "the science of wealth because it studies wealth in terms of its production and exchange."

The human behaviour of individuals and society represented in the pursuit of satisfying multiple needs using limited productive resources can be studied to reach the maximum possible satisfaction of the target community. Buheji (2019b).

The English economist (Alfred Marshall) defined the *Principles of Economics* as: "The science that studies man in his ordinary daily life activity investigates thus the part of individual and social activity related to the acquisition and use of material requirements."

While the economist Rubens defined economics as: "The science that studies human behaviour as a relationship between targets and rare elements that have alternative uses."

The socialist economist Oscar Lanka defined *Principles of Economics* as: He means the social laws of production and distribution, it addresses the social laws of the production of goods and their distribution to consumers, those who consume goods to satisfy their individual or collective needs. Thus, this science is about an economic system that brings a set of coherent ideas that run the parts of economic activity and coordinate together through interrelated variables that prepare for achieving the objectives of the financial activity. Buheji (2019a).

2.5. Introduction to 'Inspiration Economy' and Its Relevance to Thriving 'Applied Sociology'

Inspiration Economy focuses on the re-assessment of the socioeconomic status of any community and bringing solutions that lead to creating models and establishing a novel development formula. These original, innovative formulas enhance and raise the capacity to exploit the hidden

socioeconomic opportunities within the problems experienced or foresighted. Buheji (2017).

Besides, (socioeconomic re-assessment), and (formula enhancement), Inspiration Economy theories focus on productivity, capacity enhancement, impact factor and outcome. When inspiration economy theories are embraced, the student, the expert, or the mentor would have the capacity to weigh down choices that lead to community development or exploration for inspiration currency.

Inspiration Economy theories can be the defining lines for how to be available, efficient, and effective in responding to contemporary challenges and problems that lead to discovering opportunities, Oleynick et al. (2014). The concept focuses on realising the reality of the field, as the more we manage to make decisions in the field, the more we can inspire lives. This inspiration is double-folded by using the inspiration labs that bring in the inspiration models, mainly when we are focused on the socioeconomic environment. Street and Weinstein (1975).

2.6. The Differentiation of Inspiration Lab in Relevance to Applied Sociology

Inspiration labs are considered to be a technique where people are brought together to explore and collect field observations about a specific chronic, complex or challenging problem and then explore further how to turn them into opportunities. During Inspiration Lab, after visualising the problem, the researchers usually start dividing it into constructs and work their way backwards. The purpose of the whole lab process is not only to solve a problem but rather to use it to build an insight or find the blind spots that it could not see clearly. Inspiration labs developed as part of IE's total solution not only try to solve the problem permanently but also look for opportunities from inside each problem and what type of socioeconomic characteristics it carries. The fieldwork and consistent piloting in the inspiration lab help evaluate the alternative opportunities one at a time and eliminate those that do not meet the desired criteria. Buheji (2018).

2.7. How Traditional 'Inspiration Labs' are Constructed to Address the Gap Needed in Applied Sociology?

Inspiration Labs are focused on a specific community or socioeconomic issue. The first step of the lab focuses on the introduction to Socioeconomic Problems, and then the Data Collection step follows. The Lab scientist or mentor would work next on narrowing the problem through site visits and observations. This would ease their start tackling the problem and piloting the solutions for better inspiration opportunities. Buheji (2017).

The fourth stage would be piloting the new area of inspiration identified. At this stage, the inspiration expert would start working on creating the inspiration model.

Thus, "Inspiration Lab" typically refers to a physical or virtual space designed to foster creative, innovative, and/or inspiring social solutions. It is a hub where individuals or

teams can explore ideas, collaborate, experiment, and generate new concepts across various disciplines. An Inspiration Lab often provides tools, resources, and an environment encouraging out-of-the-box thinking and problem-solving. Buheji (2018).

3. Methodology

To examine the effectiveness and outcomes of 'Applied Sociology' and 'Inspiration Economy Labs in addressing community challenges, a comparative strategy will be implemented. This approach will enable a systematic evaluation of different case studies, drawing insights and lessons from varying contexts.

The study identifies and selects a range of case studies involving both applied sociology initiatives and Inspiration Labs. The author ensures the difference in the outcomes of each concept. The comparison focuses on the techniques and practices that were employed in the execution of sociological interventions, the community members involved in the processes, and the measurable impacts that were achieved.

The paper identifies the similarities and differences in how applied sociology and Inspiration Labs approached problem-solving, Buheji (2017). Then, the effectiveness of different strategies is evaluated based on outcomes related to community improvement, engagement levels, and sustainability. The methodology facilitates highlighting the best practices, transferable lessons, and unique approaches that could inform future efforts in community development.

4. Application & Analysis

4.1. Key Aspects of 'Inspiration Lab' that Revive 'Applied Sociology'

An Inspiration Lab offers a flexible and interactive sociological workspace that supports both individual and group activities. It may include areas for brainstorming, ideation, prototyping, and discussions. The lab is equipped with various tools, materials, and technologies that facilitate creativity and experimentation. This could range from art supplies and design software to high-tech equipment like 3D printers and virtual reality systems.

Inspiration Labs often encourage cross-disciplinary collaboration by bringing together individuals from diverse fields, such as sociology, science, technology, and business, to spark new perspectives and innovative ideas. These activities provide opportunities for hands-on learning and idea exchange, Oleynick et al. (2014). The lab allows individuals to experiment with new concepts, develop prototypes, and test ideas in a safe and supportive environment. The physical layout and design of an Inspiration Lab often emphasise openness, flexibility, and a sense of freedom. This encourages participants to explore and interact freely.

Some Inspiration Labs focus on user-centred design principles, involving end-users or stakeholders in the creative process to ensure solutions meet real-world needs. The Lab provides a

platform for individuals to connect, share their work, and exchange ideas with like-minded creatives and innovators.

4.2. Inspiration Labs vs Applied Sociology in Tackling Communities Problems

While applied sociology would focus on understanding social issues and developing strategies to address them effectively, inspiration labs focus on the set of activities and challenges of the social issues through the type of thinking that brings unique insights to socioeconomic problems. Thompson (2017).

Let us take an example of the differentiation of the inspiration lab vs applied sociology in tackling the urban decay in a specific community. The applied sociologist would do a study on the urban challenges and then design a strategy to tackle the problem through the concerned authority. On the other hand, the inspiration lab expert would mainly collect field observations on how the community is grappling with urban decay, deteriorating infrastructure, and community disengagement.

The local authorities would call the inspiration lab's expert to see what possibilities the lab could bring to the community. The lab's primary objective is to harness the power of collaborative multidisciplinary efforts to handle complex and interconnected challenges and revitalise the community.

The Inspiration Lab would consist of a more diverse group of beneficiaries and stakeholders, including city officials, urban planners, architects, community leaders, artists, and residents. At the same time, the applied sociologist would most probably work as a solo specialist. This cross-disciplinary team embarked on a collaborative journey to identify innovative solutions that could transform the community's situation.

One of the most pressing community problems was a lack of safe and vibrant public spaces. Urban decay and neglect had resulted in underutilised public areas that were uninviting and even unsafe. Residents felt disconnected from each other, and the absence of communal spaces hindered social cohesion.

The Inspiration Lab successfully transformed several neglected public spaces into vibrant, community-driven hubs.

For example, the abandoned parking lot was converted into an open-air amphitheatre, hosting cultural performances, movie nights, and public talks. At the same time, the underutilised alleyway was transformed into a pedestrian walkway that encourages foot traffic and social interactions. The vacant lot was turned into a community garden and gathering space, promoting urban agriculture and strengthening neighbourhood bonds.

4.3. The Outcome of the Inspiration Lab vs Applied Sociology

Thus, the urban development inspiration lab would accelerate the significant positive outcomes compared to applied sociology. While both the inspiration lab and applied sociologists would tackle crime rates, the lab would bring less resource-dependent solutions. For example, the lab would increase foot traffic and community engagement in specific areas of focus to enhance safety. The lab would foster a sense of belonging and community pride.

One could say that both the inspiration lab and applied sociology would create social interactions among residents; the lab would work to spread the model to show how the revitalised spaces would inspire other neighbourhoods to replicate the model, leading to a city-wide urban renewal movement. The Inspiration Lab would address the community's problem of neglected public spaces and revitalise the social fabric and sense of identity within the city, showcasing the power of inspiration to bring about positive community transformation.

4.4. How does 'Inspiration Lab' Build Resilient Solutions vs 'Applied Sociology'?

To bring sociological impact, the inspiration economist would first specify the focus problem so that the field is identified. The inspirational economist would then start capturing observations to capture opportunities that make the challenges and constraints more realised. Then, the work on developing the model to bring an inspiring outcome would start. Figure (1) illustrates the process of thinking that the inspiration expert goes through until the inspiring model is discovered.

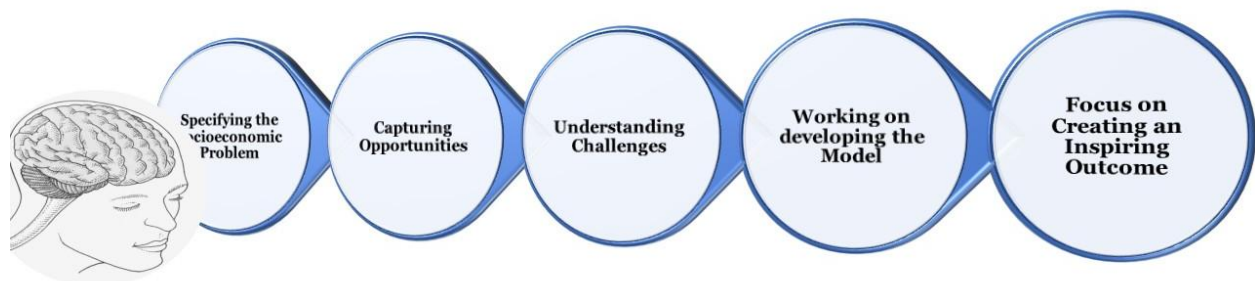


Figure (1). Illustrates how the Inspiration Economist might tackle a Sociological or Socioeconomic Problem

4.5. How is 'Inspiration Lab' Related to or Differentiated from 'Applied Sociology'?

The Inspiration Lab, often associated with educational or community development initiatives, may utilise applied socio-ecological approaches to address complex social and socioeconomic challenges. The lab encourages collaboration among various fields, such as sociology, engineering, economics, psychology, and education, to create comprehensive solutions for community issues.

By understanding the context, the lab can tailor interventions to communities' specific needs and characteristics. In addition to applied sociology, the inspiration economist would be focused on engaging more with the local populations to ensure that solutions are grounded in the realities and experiences of those affected, promoting ownership and sustainability.

The inspirational economist would employ systems thinking to recognise and analyse the interconnectedness of social systems, allowing the lab to develop holistic solutions. The applied sociologist would be keener on collecting and analysing data on social behaviour, economic impacts, and community dynamics to provide input for decision-making and strategy development.

The inspiration economist would focus on implementing experimental projects that provide insights that can be scaled or adapted for broader application. The field implementation would incorporate feedback loops that help refine initiatives based on community input and changing circumstances, ensuring relevance and effectiveness.

4.6. How 'Inspiration Labs' Environment Thrive 'Socioeconomic Projects'?

The Inspiration Lab environment promotes community learning and engagement. By asking 'what' and 'why' and then pausing to capitalise on the benefits, we can create the necessary learning community to bring about the social or socioeconomic change targeted. Once the Lab is open to multi-disciplines and focuses on overcoming challenges, we start the 'how' questioning.

We can overcome barriers and transform our communities through focused Inspiration Lab initiatives. Once created, this environment helps us carry out experiments that can build trends to support the currencies of inspiration. Therefore, the driving force behind Inspiration Labs is the curiosity to test and apply new approaches that will bring the targeted change. The process of the lab thrives the engaged community on how to deal with existing or foreseen challenges or problems within the community.

Through Inspiration Labs, we can create an environment that thrives on focused change and enables the targeted community to lead its change. In the environment of the Lab, the targeted community is allowed to employ a range of activities and tools to discover what triggers our capacity to explore new opportunities. The more the targeted community members are involved in the Lab environment, the more new mindsets could be created that will enable us to support them

directly in making the necessary organisational change. This is a significant differentiation from all the applied socioecology that is written in literature.

The degree to which the Lab has the flexibility to try things out practically and then measure the results creates better autonomy about operating responsively. Labs work to create a model that will not be generalised until all the structural and financial constraints are approved; this is meant to help overcome the fear of change.

With Labs, we can minimise the targeted communities, the beneficiaries, or the partners' fears and increase their willingness to take risks. The Labs help create the necessary focus, making us more sensitive to essential observations that align us with community needs. Thus, the outcome of the Labs is that they make immediate connections with necessary knowledge clusters in the field so that we can then define better renewable inspiration sources, approaches and methodologies.

4.7. Creating Outcomes from 'Inspiration Labs' - Taking 'Poverty Elimination Labs' as an Example

Poverty Elimination Labs do not only come from Inspiration Economy Labs projects but there are also what is called 'Poverty Innovation Labs' or 'Poverty Action Labs' which are run by leading international NGOs or Leading academic institutes as in the case of Poverty Action Lab from MIT and Abdul-Latif Jameel foundation. Inspiration economy 'poverty elimination' labs are more of collaborative spaces or initiatives that focus on generating innovative solutions to address and ultimately alleviate poverty and its associated challenges.

The outcomes expected from Poverty Elimination Labs can vary based on their specific goals, context, and approach. These labs try to bring in a model solution that shows how the root causes of poverty occur. The outcome is supposed to bring better solutions through interventions that enable individuals and communities to break the cycle of poverty through income-generating activities, microenterprises, and entrepreneurship opportunities.

Poverty Elimination Labs focus on fostering social inclusion and reducing inequalities. The outcomes might include initiatives that empower marginalised groups, enhance social cohesion, and promote the participation of vulnerable populations in decision-making processes. Labs may work on educational programs, vocational training, and skill development initiatives to equip individuals with the tools they need to secure better job opportunities and improve their quality of life.

Lab outcomes could involve improving access to vital services such as healthcare, clean water, sanitation, and housing, which can significantly impact the well-being of impoverished communities. The lab creates behavioural change that focuses on changing behaviours and mindsets that contribute to poverty, such as encouraging financial literacy, savings, and responsible borrowing. The Lab often generate data and insights through their initiatives. The outcome can include evidence-based policy recommendations

that empower communities to take an active role in shaping their development, fostering a sense of ownership, and building local capacities.

Successful interventions and approaches developed within Poverty Elimination Labs can serve as replicable models that can be scaled and adapted to other contexts to address poverty effectively. Labs often create networks of stakeholders, including governments, NGOs, academia, and local communities, which can lead to sustained collaboration and partnerships for poverty eradication efforts.

4.8. Mechanisms of Learning in Inspiration Labs

The inspiration lab works on three types of learning that are cognitive, latent and observation-based. Cognitive map learning in the lab brings in the mental representation of the layout of the environment targeted. Latent occurs that become apparent when there is an incentive to demonstrate it. The third learning is observational learning. Here, learning is based on observing or seeing best practices. While modelling is more of a process of observing and imitating behaviour that moves the prosocial behaviour.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Applied sociology plays a crucial role in translating sociological knowledge into actionable solutions for societal issues, Ward (1906). However, applied sociology was not exploited enough to bridge the theory and practice to create positive social change and enhance the quality of life for individuals and communities. Compared to Inspiration Economy Labs, applied sociology still needs development to be engaged more and in a more accelerated, economical way with the realised community problems.

Based on the comparative findings, the future applications of sociology in different contexts are highlighted. This requires adopting further strategies for enhancing community engagement, integrating interdisciplinary approaches, or adapting models to meet specific local needs.

Most of the complex socioeconomic challenges today require involvement and engagement with the community from a multidisciplinary perspective. The deployment and testing of new concepts or solutions in actual environments require allowing for feedback and refinement in the field. Thus, engaging users, communities, and other stakeholders as active participants in the innovation process in society, but more importantly, accelerating the iterative cycles of testing, learning, and adaptation to improve and optimise solutions to social issues in relevance to time. This is where inspiration economy is doing more than applied sociology.

With Inspiration Lab, sociologists can focus on understanding the context and specific challenges of the target environment to develop relevant solutions. Such setup promotes collaboration

between researchers, innovators, users, and local communities to create meaningful outcomes that are tangible and practical and address real-world problems and needs.

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