

Why is sociology so important?

John Williams

Welcome to the new volume of *SOCIOLOGY REVIEW*. So, what makes sociology such an important subject to study today?

At certain times — usually because of some economic crisis or a lack of certainty about the future — some public figures begin to question examination results and what is being taught in our schools, colleges and universities. You may see this beginning to happen now.

During these times of high public anxiety and concern about our global competitiveness, education ministers and others often argue that there are too many so-called 'soft' subjects taught in colleges and universities — these usually include some social science subjects, such as sociology.

We have been here before, of course, even though social science subjects continue to produce strong results and are very popular with students at A-level. But, according to such critics, these subjects do too little to equip young people for work and for the changing world in which we live. I think this is making a serious mistake and below I will explain why.

How does sociology offer vocational skills?

The argument here is often that, faced with new economic challenges, we actually need to teach more *vocational* subjects — we need to offer young people in education more real, practical skills which they can then use in an increasingly competitive marketplace for work.

There is a debate to be had here of course about what education is actually for. Should it simply be about training young people for work, or should it be about expanding their knowledge and interests and getting them to ask key questions about how societies and communities operate? Maybe it should combine both? Sociologists are very interested in important questions like these.

Few people could argue against the idea that we need to teach young people practical skills. But, in an increasingly service-based economy like ours, what exactly are these practical or *vocational* skills?

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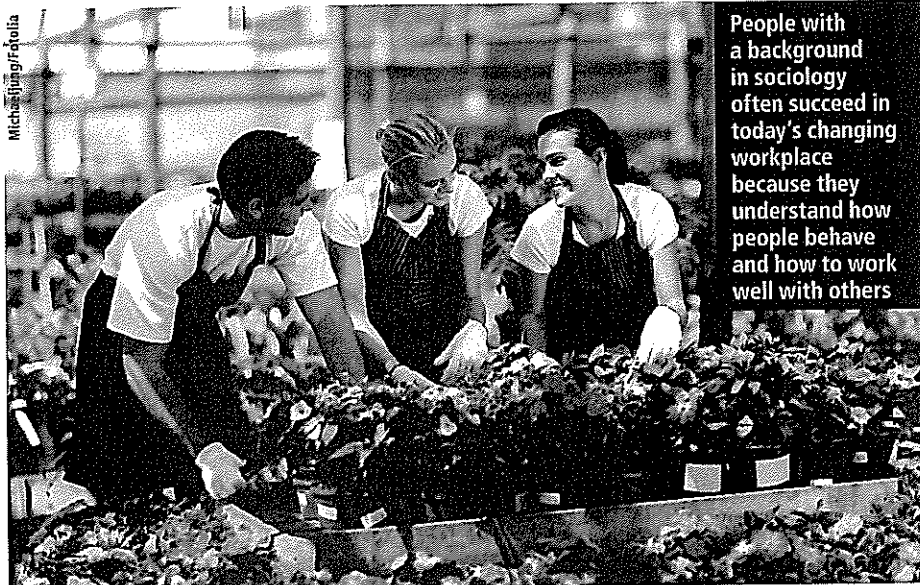
Individuals who can show they have analytical minds and good 'people skills' — those who can understand and deal with complex social problems and negotiations and also understand how people typically behave, interact and consume — are becoming increasingly highly valued in the UK economy.

Indeed, I would argue that young people who have studied sociology — the science of society — are in fact highly valued across a wide range of workplaces and professions today, from the police and public services, to the civil service and politics, to HR, marketing, management and other roles in private industry.

People with a background in sociology can prosper and succeed in the changing workplace of today precisely because they bring insights and understanding to their jobs — about how people behave and how to work well with others — which other recruits might lack. Sociology therefore is both important *and* vocational.

The public role of sociology

Some of us may feel overloaded today by the amount of information we receive about social life: about how our families and communities are changing; about changing crime levels; about media content; about poverty and inequality; about youth, ageing and leisure; and about the increasing roles of the internet and Facebook in our lives,



for example. We may not always appreciate it, but we are probably more informed than any previous generation in history.

Nor do we always realise that much of this information derives from the work of sociologists or from people who have had some sociological training. Many of the think tanks, charities and research agencies that operate in the public and private sectors today and which produce this kind of information depend on sociological assumptions or what we might broadly call a 'sociological imagination' for their study and output.

Major public inquiries which have been in the news — for example, into racism and the killing of Stephen Lawrence, into the policing of the Hillsborough football stadium disaster, or the recent Leveson inquiry into media regulation — use materials and evidence provided by sociologists to assess what has gone on and what to do next. So, social policy and new legislation is often underpinned, in a very practical way, by work done by sociologists or people with a sociological leaning.

How reliable is all this research?

But how are we to know exactly what and who to believe in this mass of research information we read about every day? So much 'research' is being done and being published these days that it is difficult to know who or what we can trust. This is where the *scientific* approach of sociologists is important and kicks in.

Sociologists — including you — must carefully scrutinise the research output of private companies, research organisations and governments in order to assess the value and status of the information they publish. We do this by looking critically at all research (including our own) and we ask a number of crucial questions such as:

- Who has paid for this research and why?
- In whose interest is this material being collected and published?
- Are the data concerned representative and have they been collected scientifically?
- Have they been scientifically analysed, without partiality or prejudice?
- What important questions or findings have been left out of this published research?

But why do we do all this worrying? Why not settle for an easy life? Because one of the underlying principles of sociology is that little in the social world is as it seems



Sociologists play a central role in providing evidence in public inquiries — for example, into the policing of the Hillsborough football stadium disaster

on the surface. Instead, sociology is a sort of 'trouble-shooter' discipline, one which investigates and reveals how powerful interests can often successfully mask their privilege and power — for example, by presenting research they have funded and directed as 'neutral' and 'scientific'.

So, in acting as a good sociologist you must also act as a kind of scientific sleuth. You must never accept the obvious and always be sceptical about what you are being told about the world until you have checked out the data — usually by asking some of the questions outlined above.

Thinking sociologically

This might all sound like it is simply unworldly and too detached from everyday life. Do I really have to tell all my friends that what they spout to me as 'fact' from newspapers or websites needs rather more critical, scientific assessment? You might get away initially by telling them not to believe all that they are told. Break them in gently.

And when you keep hearing from politicians and others about the 'choices' that we as individuals make — different homes, clothes and different styles — they might also ask why study a subject such as sociology which talks so much about communities or groups and about *patterns* of human behaviour.

The stock answer here is that we all make choices — of course we do — but not in the same circumstances. Some people, depending on class, race, gender and other variables, have many more options and possibilities in their lives than others. The balance in this relationship between the impact of agency (choice) and structure (constraint) remains one of the key questions for all sociologists.

Conclusion

Today, many terms or concepts which are now part of everyday speech and public debate are actually rooted in sociological assumptions and signal the importance of scientific social research done by sociologists: terms such as 'moral panic', 'institutional racism', 'gender balance' and the 'underclass', for example.

In this sense sociology has already made a huge impact on widening public understanding about how societies are organised, divided and work on a daily basis. We will always need good sociologists in order to provide reliable scientific research about the social.

Studying sociology is highly relevant for your future as an aware and active citizen and will provide you with relevant, critical skills that all modern societies need.

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