

The Personal Pull of Sociology

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What is Sociology? What does a Sociologist do and why do you want to be one? These are just some of the questions I am met with when seeking to explain to family and peers what exactly is it that I do on a day-to-day basis. My response? A complex one...

My discovery of sociology was both accidental and somewhat the result of calculated decision-making. Prior to sixth form I hadn't heard of the subject and was totally oblivious as to what its subject matter might be; however, it was in 2008 when choosing my AS levels that my 11-month younger sister recommended that I study sociology. This recommendation was based on two things; the first was the fact that she thought I would 'really enjoy it' because it was a subject that was 'real', and the second was based upon the quality of teaching offered. The course's teacher, Mrs Plowman, had a reputation for bringing alive the subject, teaching it in a way that was understandable and for leading successive cohorts of students whom would always excel. Given my status at the Grammar school as a visiting student from the local failing 'special measures' comprehensive 'down the road', I did not want to take a gamble on my education by choosing subjects that sounded like they ran the risk of boring me, or where the content and teaching would not be what I was used to.

Looking back, my decision to initially study sociology was a strategic one. I knew that it was important to enjoy a subject if I had any chance of getting a good grade; and I needed good grades in order to get into a 'good' university, so I went for it. Some eight years on from that initial encounter, I remain in education and I remain studying sociology; and most are intrigued as to why...

Like most working-class, first generation students, the purpose of attending university was, for me, a prerequisite for success within the paid economy. I regarded a degree as providing me with the platform from which I would then be able to secure myself a comparatively well-paid job and thus secure financial independence. This is why I initially choose to embark on a university education in BSc Economics under the fallacy that it would bring financial gains where Sociology would not, despite my love of the subject. However, just one week into my degree, I was bored by the numbers and feeling the pull of Sociology upon my intellectual strings, leading to my transferal to read BSc Sociology (though admittedly, it was not the plan to still be in the university library some 5 years after initial enrolment on my undergraduate degree). So what then happened along the way to drastically alter my perspective of education and career ideal? Why is it that I find myself unable to leave Sociology? I think because, in short, like so many others, my relationship to sociology is a deeply personal one.

Throughout my sociological readings I have so often found the experiences of myself and those around me within the text. I was introduced to the concept of institutional racism a few months after watching my ethnic-minority peers stand in the dock and get handed custodial sentences for affray when their white, equally guilty counter parts walked away. Reading the McPherson report of the Stephen Lawrence enquiry as part of the A Level Sociology syllabus was a chilling experience as it dawned on me that I had often walked down the same streets and waited at the same bus stop where the attack had occurred and sparked, now seminal, race relations legislation. I discovered Paul Willis learning to labour when my male peers, despite their potential, had rejected education as a route for upward mobility and instead were moving into manual trades, operating within the low-level drugs market or dropping out of the paid economy altogether. I discovered Marxist perspectives on the role of education when my comprehensive school peers were persuaded to study for GNVQ's in childcare, home economics and sent to college two days a week to learn a trade when our grammar school counterparts at the school adjacent were

encouraged to study for exams in Economics, Engineering and Classics and were taken to University exhibitions. Upon reading Bourdieu's *Distinction* I finally understood why, at primary school, as a child on free school meals living in a council flat in the local 'sink estate', my friends parents were reluctant to allow them to attend afterschool tea or weekend sleepovers at my house (or rather, flat). Today, I read of the gentrification of working-class neighbourhoods in London and further afield and cannot help but relate it back to my parents and grandparents experiences of growing up and moving out of South East London. London is losing its heritage and communities, and a sociological perspective helps us understand why. I not only debated the motivations behind the London 2011 'riots' as a university student but witnessed friends partake. It was my close proximity spatially and personally to various sociological issues of the day that pulled me to sociology. Now, I do not wish to romanticize or play upon my past because I am already so removed from it, I cannot feel that my steps towards perusing sociology has moved me further away from the reasons and situations as to why I wished to pursue it.

As I sit comfortably at my desk I cannot help feel a grave sense of fortune, luck and guilt as I constantly question how I came to be in the position that I am in when so many of those I grew up with are left living out the social ills of our times. Food poverty, the lack of affordable housing, shrinking jobs market, the rise in zero hour contracts, the proliferation of low paid work, the privatization of the National Health Service and our education system are just some of the issues that overwhelmingly affect the lives of the working classes and the lives of my peers. Sociology affords me with the platform from which to fight social injustices, challenge pervasive stereotypes and turn on their head the social myths of our times. As Diane Reay has written, working-class female academics "have the potential of subverting dominant discourses" and "highlight the intricate psycho-social process of class experienced by the still working-class" (Reay1997 p26). I feel compelled to pursue sociology because it was the very subject that enabled me to academically excel where I had previously stagnated, whilst at the same time highlighted the historical disadvantage of the social group to which I belong. At a time when working-class consciousness is near non-existent, their voices drowned out and distorted by a government and media vilifying them through austerity, ideologically driven, purposefully divisive policies and 'poverty porn' television, I remain compelled to pursue sociology out of a sense of service to others and my desire to challenge class inequality. At a time of heightening working-class hardship, the growing gulf between the rich and the poor and a future of increasing class oppression and injustice there is perhaps no better reason for pursuing sociology.

References

Reay, D. (1997) The Double-Bind of The 'Working-Class' Feminist Academic: The Failure of Success or The Success of Failure?. In P. Mahony and C. Zmroczek (Ed.), *Class Matters: Working Class Women's perspectives on Social Class* (pp. 18-29). London: Taylor & Francis.

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