

To study sociology is to study oneself...

This is a fundamental understanding I have developed since I started studying Sociology at degree level just under a year ago. Motivational speaker, Jim Rohn, has suggested that a person is the average of the five most prominent people in their lives; even if not entirely accurate I believe the sentiment, that our behaviours, mannerisms and life choices are largely the result of socialisation is valid. Sociology can look at influences that range from structurally maintained privilege to micro aggressions, so it is difficult to quantify just how much of what we are is passed on directly to us through socialisation. However, the joy of sociology to me is that it attempts to go beyond the individual and, some might say, the arbitrary.

Having grown up in a reasonably liberal environment, I was always troubled by the existence of social ills such as racism, poverty, gender inequality, heteronormativity (not that I knew it was called that at the time) etc. Why did such injustices and inequalities exist? Why could we not just fix them and make the world a better place? Sweet naivety.

Studying sociology was like a slow sunrise as the light gradually began to hit me, almost



blinding me with both painful and exciting realities. It is a beautiful discipline as it makes the student aware of the tangled web of power structures in which they exist, and exist so obviously at that! I look back now and think how the simple ignorance of my various privileges, for example being white and educated, meant I could never experience certain things no matter how objective I wished to be.

Equally, sociology in a more morality based sense, allowed me to be angry. I could now see that certain struggles I and others had faced were not simply coincidences or bad luck but the consequence of systematic oppression. Sociology is knowledge, is awareness, is justification for that anger. Some of the more classically thinking sociologists wish to maintain the notion that any sociological research conducted should only aim to study society “sui generis” and not apply it in the hope of implementing positive change. I see sociology as a tool that gives the most oppressed in society back some degree of power to change their social environment.

In short, to study sociology is to study oneself. That does not mean it is limited to the self, after all it is not social psychology, but I defy any conscientious student to study this wonderful discipline without experiencing some degree of introspection. We may study large groups, societies, national populations, but in doing so a sociologist is always unconsciously asking how they relate to those around them. I make no exaggeration when I say sociologists are the single most socially aware group of people I have ever met, and I am more the better for it. When you not only think about “social facts” that you may have previously taken for granted, but also discuss your knowledge gains with incredibly open-minded peers who are on the same journey as you there can be few limits to what can be achieved with regards to the liberation of social understanding.

I'm sure all children of the discipline have had that uncomfortable moment when asked “So what actually IS Sociology?” Many students I know have simply replied with “I don't know” or “the study of society” to avoid the long explanation, which unfortunately can often reinforce the academically elitist attitude that Sociology is “not a real subject”. I cannot deny either that this hasn't been my response on occasions. What I would like to say is something more along the lines of this: Sociology is more than me, you or even everyone in the world. Some people say it is nothing but I say it is everything, from the systems of exchange that exist, to power structures that oppress. It is liberation, restriction, obligation, even life and death. It is what we call history and what we will do tomorrow. It is contested, inescapable and incomplete.

I then check if they're still there or if they've mysteriously disappeared during my rather poetic rant. But that's the thing with sociology. So many of those who follow it can be no less that passionate about it, because that is the strength of feeling it evokes in so many. I can never regret choosing Sociology for my degree and I think even 10 years from now I still will not fully understand the magnitude of what I have gained from it. I think everyone could do with a little Sociology in their lives, but I accept not everyone will be as fanatic about it as me. All I can hope is that when future students come to study this discipline, they will realise that Sociology is not just in the words of books; it is in the real world, real people, every second of the day.

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