

Three Things a Year of Sociology Has Taught Me

Frances Brill, who completed her MSc in Sociology in 2014, reflects on what she learned during that year.

Let me beginning by introducing my background and myself. I graduated from an undergraduate course trained in classical economics, law and normative urban planning processes. I spent the final year of my undergrad writing a dissertation on the intersection of class and gender and I was desperate to study Sociology. All of my friends are brilliant people who have worked very hard to get their degrees and their corporate jobs but as I was awarded my degree, I was unaware of how little I questioned the texts we read or the privilege I was surrounded by. A year in the Sociology department has changed me, it's an ongoing process and I am not going to pretend I can fully comprehend my own privilege (or classical Sociology's writing styles) but I am making progress.

1. The value of ethnography

I am currently teaching second year physical Geographers their methods course. This means spending week after week debating whether 'science' in all its glorified 'objectivity' is superior to their human geography social science counterparts. I am making progress. The only reason I can debate with such determination and belief is my experience with social research methods in Sociology. My thoughts on qualitative and quantitative work are continually changing. With each new piece of work I try to strike a balance.

I learnt to love qualitative work this year though. A group ethnography project studying the Barbican opened my eyes to a whole host of challenges, including writing based primarily on qualitative observations. It was fun. I learnt a lot. Ethnographies, situating yourself in the middle-being totally immersed- is an incomparable experience that adds real value to research. Being subjective is not a bad thing and it does not undermine your work, refusing to acknowledge your subjectivity is and can.

I recognize the perceived failures of qualitative work, the idea numbers and 'facts' are indisputable. But more recently I have challenged this, not only can facts be easily manipulated but every element of the research that created them has some level of subjectivity. Rather, facts and stats can be used to shock and society has been taught facts and stats hold weight. Getting things changed, convincing people of a problem is helped by a few statistics. It's all about striking a balance.

2. Neoliberalism is evil

I knew from the onset Sociology would change me. I warned those closest to me and I asked them to make sure I did not change too much. I think we would agree they have failed on their mission, or rather their mission has evolved. In developing my new views and moving on from my leanings there have been a number of challenges. By far the hardest topic to fully understand has been neoliberalism.

I tried my hardest to write in defense of neoliberalism, I questioned the alternatives and then, to paraphrase Milton Friedman, as the only person who could convince myself- I did. I convinced myself neoliberalism is not a good thing. I read Harvey, I read Wacquant. At the end of the day it was reading the original (neo)liberal texts that sold it to me: reading Friedman and Hayek and the other Chicago economists. I needed to separate the ideology and the practice. Too many times I stumbled around trying to work out how state supported financial institutions reconciled with Friedman's dream of completely free markets. Embarking on a PhD with undercurrents of 'neoliberalism is bad' I think I have learnt not only the problems with neoliberalism but with the

problems of lumping together different issues under the umbrella neoliberal discourse. Rather than treating the individual issues and seeing the slow changes on the ground there is a tendency to portray the global shift as a sudden unified wave of reforms. Realizing the intricacies involved and the politically grounded societal shifts are part of a pattern but one situated at a local as well as global level was key in my understanding.

3. Intersectionality should always be centre-stage

In the summer of 2012 someone I admire greatly asked me about feminism, whether I define myself as a feminist and my general thoughts on gender equality. Always keen to avoid speaking in an uninformed way I tried to deflect the conversation. Unfortunately we were away together for a month without the Internet, so there was no escape. A few days later, emerging with mixed opinions from Moran's *How to be a Woman* I was (marginally more) ready for the conversation. Fast forward eighteen months and I have moved on: my shelves now support Skeggs, I've queued for hours to see Butler speak and I've written a ten thousand words on gender and class. In my academic work, having discussed intersectionality at length, I had failed to name it.

I took the Gender and Societies course with thirty-five other women and two men. Week after week we read readings lists an arms' length long (even though only two or three were compulsory) and at the core of each topic was intersectionality. My understanding of gender inequality and its relationship with class, sexuality and race grew beyond comparison. Banded together by admiration for our professor, as students, we created an informal space on Facebook for sharing our ideas and extra-curricular readings. Outside of term time, activity levels shot up with everyone clearly having more time to pursue gender analysis of every news item. The solid combination of classic texts in seminars and the reactionary group of Facebook has kept my interest and reading on intersectionality alive as I move to study urban speculative processes. Part of this discussion has been on privilege and learning to acknowledge the privileges society has afforded me. I am more self-reflexive.

It was a rollercoaster of a year. I have learnt vast amounts and a lot of it came from my fellow students. I am still grappling with how to consolidate everything I want to achieve personally with my newly developed ideals. I will always respect the people who want to put their head down, work hard for the money they earn and want to earn money. I now understand and can justify my inherent dislike of Reagan, I can sit for hours discussing privilege and I am using qualitative methods for my PhD. A lot can change in a year.

Frances is now a doctoral researcher in Geography at UCL.

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