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## What sociology means to me: exploring, imagining and challenging

*Kate Woodthorpe*



Dr Kate Woodthorpe is a lecturer in Sociology in the Department of Social and Policy Sciences at the University of Bath (2010 to date). Prior to this she was a lecturer in Health Studies in the Faculty of Health and Social Care at the Open University (2008–10), and completed her PhD in the Sociological Studies Department at the University of Sheffield (2003–07). Her Bachelor's degree in sociology is from Lancaster University (1998–2001), and her Master's degree in sociological research is from the University of Warwick (2002–03). Kate's research to date has examined contemporary death practices and beliefs, including funeral costs, education in funeral directing and mortuaries and cemetery usage. She is currently the Director of

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What a fantastic opportunity this is, to be able to write about how I feel about sociology and what it has added to my life. Sociology has enormous value as an academic discipline that is based on informed opinion, intelligible theoretical ideas, rigorous research and robust arguments, but we do not often get the chance to shout about it.

For me, being a sociologist is more than spouting hot air. It is about trying to understand *why* things happen, how they could differ, what could change and where. It is about exploration and imagination, challenging systems, people and procedures, and (it is to be hoped) providing solutions or suggestions for the future. It is about not accepting the status quo. It is about finding your own feet, thinking independently and challenging others. It is about contributing to a civilised and inclusive society. Sociology is a discipline bursting with ideas and potential, but sociologists also have too quiet a voice within the public sphere at present, and there is much more to be done to continue to cement the discipline's credibility.

My own path into sociology has been one of good fortune, fortuitous timing, hard work and persistence. Certainly, I have always thought of myself as very lucky that I was introduced to sociology. In the 1990s sociology was not an option of study at school, so when it was suggested by my parents that I consider it as a degree subject I had very little prior knowledge of what it was. Having done A-levels in history, politics and economics, first and foremost I knew that I enjoyed learning about *people*. But I also knew that I was not moved by understanding people in terms of them as individuals. No, what I liked was understanding what made people get on (or not) together, what made communities cohere or revolt, and what made societies 'work' more broadly. I wanted to learn more about how these intersected with wider belief systems, institutions, cultural expectations and the political economy.

For me then, sociology was a natural 'fit'. Almost from day one of my undergraduate degree at Lancaster University, I felt fortunate to have found an academic discipline that I cared about. During those years, I observed my peers bemoaning a degree that they considered boring and studying topics that they detested, all in the name of getting a 'well paid' job at the end of it. "How odd", I recall thinking, "if they hate [the subject] now, won't they dislike the job they want to get at the end too?" Quite possibly so – from what I have heard a lot

of those peers are now working in completely different areas, some well-paid and some not!

Good fortune has also been with me with regard to where I chose to continue my study and then work. Following my undergraduate degree I did a Masters at the University of Warwick, which had a different ‘feel’ in terms of the department and the sociologists working there. It was, I think, really fruitful to see the breadth of sociology by moving between different departments as a student, and to learn how varying parts of the sociological community conceptualised the world around them differently. Most often, this was apparent in the research pursuits of the academics; at the time, while at Lancaster, a lot of the work being done was in relation to gender and technology. The focus and content of undergraduate teaching naturally complemented this. At Warwick, in contrast, the sociological interests of the staff with whom I was engaged were in research methods, health and emotion, making for a varied and intellectually stimulating learning experience.

After that I moved to the University of Sheffield for my doctoral studies and experienced a terrific four years learning how to **do** research **proper** and developing my ability to teach. What was most important for me was that the sociologists with and for whom I worked at that point set appropriately high expectations about written work, research conduct and teaching – not so beyond reach that you felt that you could not achieve them, nor too low that you felt as if you were coasting. The department at Sheffield was a nurturing and supportive environment, and for that I am grateful as it was a solid foundation from which to develop my sociological identity.

## **Becoming a sociologist**

Certainly, to anyone considering a sociological career in academia I would encourage you to expose yourself to as many people, ideas and institutional cultures as possible. I would also extend this to include working with non-academics; over the last two years I have worked with commercial organisations and it has been an informative experience of learning how different organisations operate. Priorities, speed and ethos can be so varied, and when working in a single institution it is tempting to focus on the day-to-day requirements of the job.

In that way, to sustain a sociological career – especially in the early days – it is a case of being on your own case and reminding yourself to ‘think big’. For me, this was about actively using the probation experience at the University of Bath to create a research and teaching strategy that had coherence and continuity. By reminding myself of

the bigger picture through the required probationary review process, I was able to generate a sense of where I was going. This is easier said than done, but as a discipline sociology is expansive enough to enable you to find your place within it and keep evolving.

Having said that, it is important that when thinking big you do not neglect the 'small stuff'. Personally, when it comes to the everyday work of 'being' an academic sociologist, I find research that is both intellectually stimulating in terms of providing insight into how society and all its components work, while at the same time being well written and engaging, a real joy and inspiration. Certainly, there have been a few key books and articles that have intellectually nourished me at key points in my sociological career so far. On occasions when I have been up against deadlines with marking, or frustrated trying to get a paper published or finding time to work on a bid, discovering and engaging in such pieces of work has kept my sociological spirit going. These do not necessarily have to be recently published either, a recent case for me would be a colleague's recommendation of Finch and Mason's (2000) work on inheritance in the book *Passing on*, which is to my mind research that is both academically rigorous while also being a genuinely interesting account of how families manage assets and the value ascribed to the decisions made about who gets what when someone dies.

In bringing together the big thinking and small stuff, I also find inspiration in meeting people whose work I have read and realising that they are human and are nice people! Going to the BSA conference has been a great way to meet others, but it takes time and resources to be able to go year after year, and to get to know people. In that way, I would advise those considering a sociological career to be mindful of short-term gains and the long-term task of building up a profile and network. This longer-term strategy takes persistence and energy, and while it is fulfilling it can also be accompanied by moments of doubt and uncertainty. There is an element of being willing to put yourself 'out there' with this job; with your peers at conferences, with your submissions to journals (always being aware that you could face a disappointing rejection), and with what can feel like speculative bids for research funding. I was once told that to cultivate an academic career developing a 'rhino hide' could be quite helpful. For those lucky enough to have a rhino hide already then this may be more straightforward than for others who need to craft a suitably thick(er) one. Ultimately, the depth of that hide depends on the individual and, as I have been advised, the type of academic one wants to be.

Back to good fortune, though, and I can say that my current departmental colleagues are **also** a helpful everyday inspiration, particularly in meetings where they remind me that behind the administrative requirements of the job there is a real desire for making a difference through research and teaching. The snippets of passion that can shine through when debating how units are taught and assessed, which journals we submit papers to, and how we structure our research themes, can be genuinely uplifting and provide timely reminders about why sociology matters. It's a discipline aiming to document and challenge people, to further society, and for that I am grateful that it exists.

### **Starting out: what the future may hold**

If I could be remembered for one thing in my academic career it would be for passing on this gratitude for the potential of sociological thought to students. As a discipline sociology has an enormous capacity to make a difference and the people who are working in this area right now can, should, and do make a tremendous contribution to society. But those of us lucky enough to be working in this field, and those hoping to enter it, need to be conscious of the future. The currency of knowledge and speed in which it is produced is changing and sociologists need to be clear about what they can contribute to this.

My concerns for the future of sociology are twofold. First, the education system from which I benefited is changing beyond recognition. Although it has only been 15 years since I started my undergraduate degree, the freedom with which I was encouraged to learn is being slowly eroded as a result of the complex interplay of political, social and economic forces. While I was encouraged to explore, be creative, to think for myself and take risks in my assessments, I see students now who are increasingly instrumental in their activities and work, focused on their degree marks and employability. This is not to their detriment necessarily, as it is a product of determination and ambition; and of course it may be isolated to a particular type of student who attends a certain type of university. Without doubt, I see students studying exceptionally hard and wanting to 'do' something with their life. And they are rightly concerned about the graduate market, debts, the financial commitment they are making by doing a degree, and how attractive they will be to employers. But it is with sadness that I observe how for some these concerns now outweigh the valuable skills that can be developed and nurtured while at university, and in particular when studying a subject such as sociology. The ability

to think, challenge and take risks is giving way to instrumentalism and self-interest.

My second concern is the role that sociologists perform in the public sphere more broadly. Currently, there remains considerable scope to have a bigger presence as a body of informed people who provide insight, explanations and recommendations about future change. To my mind, getting sociology out there is about hard work and persistence, and the challenge for individuals is, I think, to navigate the path of meeting all the other requirements of the academic job and maintaining a sense of integrity as a credible source of knowledge, ensuring that one does not morph into an impulsive social commentator or mouthpiece for someone else. This is no mean feat, but there is much work to do to promote sociological viewpoints – even if these are contested by others within the discipline. Debate and progress are at the heart of sociology, and this needs to be reflected in the public sphere, as much as publications and research funding bids. I have been lucky in feeling the goodwill towards sociologists, and I hope that others have experienced, and will continue to experience, this.

So, at the time of writing this piece, I feel hopeful about the future for sociology, chiefly as a product of the hard work of the colleagues I see around me. Through their research, their teaching, their engagement with others, networking and so on, I anticipate and trust that the sociological community will thrive, fostering the next generation of sociologists both through teaching sociology students, and developing career young scholars.

### Reference

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