

Being sociological



What do we mean when we talk about investigating things sociologically? And how do we know whether we can really trust research about the social world? This article offers some insights about becoming a sociologist

Welcome to another volume of **SOCIOLOGY REVIEW**. This first issue is positively stacked with up-to-date and useful material for the discerning A-level sociology student. This is where to find out how sociological theories and critical analysis can be applied to current developments in the fields of education, the family, crime and deviance, the mass media, religion, health and many other areas of social life.

The job of a good sociologist is to understand the patterning of human relationships and to explore, with a critical eye, the taken-for-granted aspects of the social world. The social world is seldom how it appears — it requires in-depth study and careful investigation to reveal its hidden secrets.

Signposts



This interesting article provides you with a really good introduction to sociology. It can help you answer questions from your family and friends about what sociology actually is, what sociologists do, what you can do with a qualification in sociology, and how sociology can help sift through the enormous amount of information we get in our everyday life to get at the bits that matter and are based on evidence — and identify the bits that don't and aren't! As you start on your sociological journey, this will prove a very useful guide.

SOCIOLOGY REVIEW will help to guide you on this incredible journey. With us, you will be able to dig beneath the surface of the social world and hopefully explain a little more clearly what is *really* going on. Once you have developed that sociological 'superpower' for seeing beneath the surface there is no going back. Things will never seem quite the same again.

What is the sociological journey?

Sociology is an excellent route into university and a future career. The discipline is widely taught as a single subject at degree level. But, equally importantly, sociology is also routinely offered as an integral part of many other degrees. The subject is very attractive and is engaging students from many other academic disciplines.

Although fashions and theories change, many of the key questions for sociologists remain reasonably constant. Perhaps the central one is this: 'How, in changing times, do individual structures and social structures work together to reproduce the social order over time?' What this really means is: 'To what extent, as individuals, are we all able to make free choices in our lives, rather than being constrained by the choices available to us through pre-existing social structures, such as social class, or by gender and ethnicity?' An additional question today might be: 'How is the process of globalisation changing our experiences and opportunities in this respect?'

Simple answers to these questions are almost impossible, of course, because the nature of the social order has some very complex features. Moreover, sociologists continue to be divided into a number of camps in terms of approach. Broadly speaking, there are two main groups:

- those who favour an *action* approach, arguing that in the choices we make as individuals we actively create social worlds
- those who favour a *structural* approach, arguing that existing structures continue to play a rather bigger role in making us who we are and in limiting or extending our access to choice

Look out for these approaches and for subtle combinations of these positions in **SOCIOLOGY REVIEW**. We are sure that our investigations and analyses of social institutions and existing power structures will fire up your imagination.

What is sociology for?

Let's consider this question by looking at the issue of education. How would sociology address a key educational debate: 'What should education focus on in order to prepare children for adulthood?' The political and economic argument here is often that, faced with new technological and economic challenges in a highly competitive global marketplace, we need to teach more skills and more directly *vocational* subjects to young people. This view is based on the idea that, above all, education should offer all young people more practical skills in an increasingly competitive marketplace for work.

A sociological approach to this issue might start a little differently. It might begin by asking some questions about social background and the experience of education:

- Are some young people more advantaged in their educational potential than others,

ONCE YOU HAVE DEVELOPED THAT SOCIOLOGICAL 'SUPERPOWER' FOR SEEING BENEATH THE SURFACE THERE IS NO GOING BACK

perhaps because of their social class background, or their ethnicity or gender?

- Do poorer areas get the worst schools and less capable teachers?
- Do teachers quickly identify 'talented' pupils and pay more attention to them in classrooms?
- Does paying for private education provide an advantage for a select few — and does this distort the marketplace for skills?
- How do all these features work together to shape educational outcomes?

Sociologists also address the core question of what education is actually *for*. Should it simply be about narrowly training young people for the skills and disciplines of the world of work? After all, for many young people, much of the employment available is unlikely to be especially creative or rewarding. It is also open to question exactly which practical and vocational skills are useful in this age of globalisation and in an increasingly service-based economy. Or, should education be about expanding our knowledge and interests and getting young people to ask critically informed, key questions about exactly what we are learning and how societies and communities operate? Maybe an education system for these global times should try to combine all of these functions.

This is how sociology looks at the issue of education. But, of course, if a sociological approach is useful, then we must advocate sociology as a subject *within* education. Studying sociology certainly offers useful skills for life, but it is also a subject that offers huge scope for self-development and improving one's knowledge — it is critically inquisitive *and* vocational at the same time. It really can open your eyes and expand your horizons.

What is sociological knowledge?

There is more information available to us today than any other generation in history has experienced. Much 'official' material on social issues actually derives from the work of sociologists, or at least from people who have had some kind of sociological training.

Plenty of the main think tanks, charities and agencies that produce social research, for example, depend on sociological assumptions, or what we might broadly call a critical 'sociological imagination', for their study and output. Major public inquiries often use materials and evidence provided by people who have had a sociological training. Social policy and new legislation is often shaped by the 'hidden' work done by sociologists, or by people with a sociological bent.

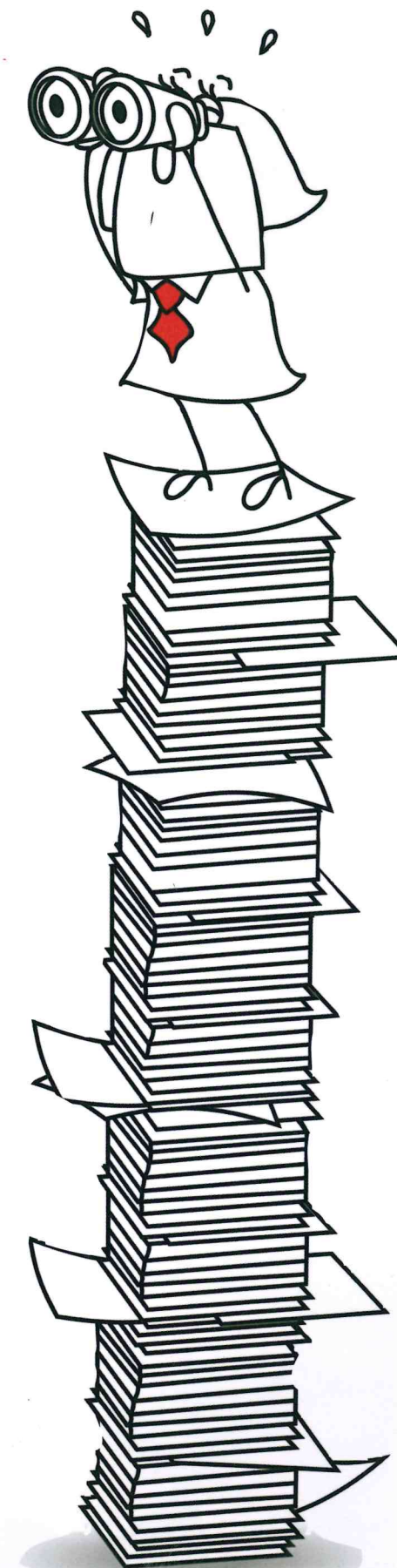
But here comes a real problem. How are we to know exactly what and who to believe, given this mass of research information we read about every day? So much research is published these days, often contradicting the last set of 'new' findings. How do we know who or what we can trust?

So, how, as sociologists, should we deal with this information glut? Well, we need to test it against the *scientific* approach of sociologists. Sociologists carefully scrutinise the research output of private companies, research organisations, academics and governments in order to assess the value and status of published research. This is a very important part of what we do.

Sociologists typically work by looking critically at *all* research findings (including our own). To evaluate the evidence presented we must always ask a number of key questions:

- What are the prior assumptions made about this area of work?
- 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 the data been scientifically analysed, without partiality or prejudice?
- What important questions or findings have been left out of this published research?

Only when we know the answers to these sorts of questions can we know if the claims made in research can stand the sociological test.



SOCIOLOGY IS CRITICALLY INQUISITIVE AND VOCATIONAL AT THE SAME TIME

Checking on method

This focus on how data have been collected and analysed is especially important. Sociologists spend a lot of time studying and criticising methods of *doing* social research precisely because it is very easy to get things wrong, either accidentally or because a particular agenda is being pursued. Powerful interests can successfully mask their privilege and power by presenting favourable research. It may have been funded, directed and placed in the public eye by such interest groups as 'neutral' and 'scientific': as truth.

So, in acting as a good sociologist we are required to operate as a kind of scientific sleuth; as someone who gets behind the headlines to ask, 'Does this or that research really stand up?' We must always be sceptical about what we are being told about the social world until we have checked the validity of the data — usually by asking some of the questions outlined above.

You will notice that many of the articles in *SOCIOLOGY REVIEW* contain an information box telling you exactly how the research you are reading about has been undertaken, just for these reasons. We will also present you with articles that discuss different approaches to doing sociological research. If we don't get the basics of doing research right then the findings of research projects are really not much use to us.

Being sociological — and perhaps a little contrary

All this talk about 'knowledge', 'imagination' and 'method' in sociology might sound a little detached from everyday life. It also sounds a little difficult. After all, challenging convention and what seems obvious is always a difficult stance to take.

You may want to ask: 'Do I really have to tell my friends that what they spout to me as "fact" from newspapers or websites needs rather more cool-headed and critical,

scientific assessment? Do I really have to question where every piece of information comes from?' Well, you may opt to keep quiet sometimes — but good sociologists often *do* have to challenge what many other people seem to be claiming to be true.

So prepare for a wonderful adventure — and for being regarded sometimes as perhaps a little contrary. Studying sociology has huge rewards, but it can also make you look, perhaps frustratingly, as if you want to question just about everything.



John Williams is senior lecturer in the department of sociology at the University of Leicester and one of the managing editors of *SOCIOLOGY REVIEW*.

Race and crime in the USA

One of the most highly acclaimed sociological studies of recent years is Alice Goffman's *On the Run* (2014). Knowledge of Goffman's study would be useful when writing about crime, policing, ethnicity and racism, and as an example of the use of participant observation.

The study was a participant observation study of a poor, predominantly black neighbourhood of Philadelphia. It was carried out in the context of unprecedented rates of imprisonment for young black men in the USA, with about 11% imprisoned at any one time compared to about 2% of young white men.

Goffman spent 6 years studying the way in which the criminalisation of so many young black men affected their lives

and the life of the community. She lived in the area and observed how the risk of being arrested and being sent to prison completely undermined the lives of many people.

Although most offences were of a relatively minor nature, they still had serious consequences. Many people were on parole and had strict conditions they had to meet to avoid being sent to prison. It was all too easy to violate these conditions, for example by drinking alcohol, missing an appointment or breaking a curfew. A warrant for arrest was then issued with the result that many of the young black men went on the run and became fugitives in their own neighbourhood.

The fugitives tried to avoid any situations where the police might find them and arrest them. This resulted in them not visiting family, going to funerals or even going to hospital if they were injured. Some men cut their fingertips to prevent fingerprint identification. The men were unable to find legitimate work, get a permanent home, seek medical help if they were ill or get help from the police if they were victims of crime.

In these circumstances, it was not just their lives which were disrupted, but the life of the community as a whole. The process further disadvantaged a community which already had very restricted opportunities.

References

Goffman, A. (2014) *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City*, University of Chicago Press.

Martin Holborn

Sociology Review September 2015



Child sexual abuse within families

Child sexual abuse is in the news but how common is such abuse in families? What impact does it have? And how effective are the child protection and criminal justice systems in dealing with this problem?

Anna Gekoski, Miranda Horvath and Julia Davidson

Key concepts

primary and secondary victimisation, child protection system

Signposts

This article is of use for the 'Crime and deviance' topic. It outlines some of the reasons why the exact number of cases of child abuse is so difficult to determine, then explores what happens when the crime is reported and those cases where it comes to court. You should note the agencies that are designed to protect and help children, and why the children's experiences of these are so often negative.

The important concept of 'secondary victimisation' is introduced. The new AQA specification for A-level specifically mentions victims and the role of the criminal justice system and other agencies. The OCR specification includes the social distribution of victims, including by age.

Note carefully the new research method used — the REA, an example of the use of secondary data.

Media coverage may suggest that the sexual abuse of children is most likely to involve people outside the home. Our research focused specifically on the much more common child sexual abuse cases that occur *within* the family environment. Such abuse is known in the academic literature as 'intra-familial' child sexual abuse, as opposed to 'extra-familial', which is committed by an outsider.

Research by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) in 2011 suggests that around nine out of ten cases of child sexual abuse are committed

by someone known to the child. Findings such as these led the Office of the Children's Commissioner to commission a report which looked at the prevalence, nature and effects of child sexual abuse in a family environment, as well as the impact and effectiveness of the 'system' in such cases. See Box 1 for information on the methods used in this research.

How common is abuse in families?

Unfortunately, it is very hard to determine how common child sexual abuse really is. This is partly because many victims

Box 1 Methods used in the research

In order to investigate these issues, we employed a question-led rapid evidence assessment (REA), which is a relatively new research method. An REA enables researchers to search the electronic and print literature as comprehensively as possible within the limits of a specific timeframe — which in this case was 3 months — and provide a summary of what the evidence says (see Davies 2003 for more information on this method).

In this case, our initial searches uncovered over 57,000 potential documents of interest. We then set about excluding ones which were not relevant to our research, firstly by scanning the titles, followed by the abstracts/executive summaries, and ultimately the full papers. This left us with 296 papers to analyse and incorporate into the final report.