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Becoming Sociological: Disciplinarity and a sense of 'home'

Abstract

This short reflective piece uses the concept of 'home' to explore sociology as an intellectual and disciplinary pursuit. Drawing on autobiographical reflections and ethnographic study of sociology writing, I consider some of the trajectories of academics into sociology and what these tell us about the discipline itself. In light of increasing incursions by audit culture and marketization of academia, Holmwood (2010) has drawn attention to a lack of clear internal identity as being 'sociology's misfortune' – that sociology loses out, and is weakened by lacking theories and methodologies specific to the discipline. This essay takes a more optimistic view of sociology's position, and instead argues that it is this very ambiguity which keeps the discipline a lively and vital space for explorations of the social.

Key words: home, intellectual, discipline, sociology, sociological imagination, audit, belonging, stories

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Introduction

Sociology is in decline. As David Inglis puts it, 'In recent years, sociology in Britain has been diagnosed by various parties as suffering from a range of ailments' (2014: 100). From the moment I crossed from English Literature to sociology in 2012, its regular inhabitants have been keen to tell me just what a crisis the discipline is in - that I must be mad to willingly traverse the floor into territory so ill-defined and vulnerable to the whims of government policy. This reflective essay takes a more optimistic view of sociology's position, exploring the character of sociology as a discipline through ideas of 'home', and why so many scholars trained in other disciplines choose to make their home in sociology.

My focus is on the sociological imagination and the role it plays in how we think through and explore the social. It is this concept which sets sociology as paradoxically distinctive but yet ambiguous enough to be open to interlopers from other, sometimes quite radically different, disciplines. I argue that the sociological imagination ensures that this discipline in 'crisis' remains a dynamic and lively intellectual meeting place – a disciplinary home which, for many, is made rather than given. It is the operation of the sociological imagination - the vivaciousness of its practitioners - which produces a distinctive mode of enquiry and practice. Drawing on autobiographical reflections and my own ethnographic study of sociology writing, I consider some of the trajectories of academics into sociology and what these tell us about the discipline itself and how the sociological imagination is located and mobilised.

Becoming sociological

'But I don't want to go among mad people.' Alice remarked.

‘Oh you can’t help that,’ said the Cat: ‘we’re all mad here. I’m mad. You’re mad.’

‘How do you know I’m mad?’ said Alice.

‘You must be,’ said the Cat, ‘or you wouldn’t have come here.’

(Carroll 1865: 58)

As Alice makes her way through Wonderland she meets an increasingly odd assembly of strange and delightful characters from the hookah-smoking Caterpillar to the elusive White Rabbit and sadistic Queen of Hearts. Her conversations with them are punctuated by ever more arcane and absurd puzzles set out for Alice to explore and solve, and each character possesses their own particular form of logic – their own sets of theories and methodologies for understanding the (social) world. In the Cheshire Cat’s logic above, he points out that if everyone in Wonderland is mad, that as Alice is in Wonderland she too must be as mad as they are. Essentially, when you enter a world, you take on the characteristics of that world. Thinking about my own move into sociology, I’m reminded how close to Alice I felt when I first leapt from English Literature to sociology: extraordinary characters at every turn, positively lined up to inform me that defecting from a traditional, respected, historically-validated discipline to one which was (apparently) very much on the fringes of academia and intellectualism, was indeed ‘mad’. Setting aside the difficult and pejorative connotations of ‘mad’, I think what was in play here was sheer disbelief that anyone could think of sociology as more stable ground for an academic career than a traditional arts or humanities subject.

As with the narratives of so many of my research participants, I became a sociologist more by accident than design. Sociology became an unavoidable disciplinary move when the epistemological questions I asked ceased to be considered under the banner of ‘English Literature’. Whilst traditional humanities disciplines import the prestige of that tradition, they also – in my experience, anyway – require a much stricter following of disciplinary rules and academic mores. So it was for me in literary studies. The point at which my questions about texts turned to the ‘so what?’ of their social construction and away from their intrinsic literary properties was the moment at which English Literature departments met me with a, ‘Very interesting, but shouldn’t you be in sociology?’ response. Eventually I took the hint. It was by no means a relocation which felt instantly natural, especially in regard to aspects such as methods and research design. I recall sitting in a lecturer’s office during my sociology Master’s bemoaning the – to me - illogical and banally obvious way in which I was expected to write about my research design. ‘It’s not like this in English’, I whined - to which came the curt reply: ‘You’re not in English any more’. This was a real ‘Alice’ moment. I felt I had followed the White Rabbit only to discover that I still didn’t really fit, I still hadn’t found a home.

After this I set to wondering what had drawn me to sociology – how exactly have I ended up in this place which sometimes seems so very alien in its ways? But talking to more established sociologists I realised that my position was not so very different from theirs. What I found were people who had two things in common: i) we were simultaneously insiders and outsiders; ii) we wanted to understand how the personal relates to the political. No matter how my sociological colleagues went about practicing sociology, these basic tenets seemed to remain. With hindsight I now recognise these as reflexivity and the sociological imagination. Here, I want to focus on the latter aspect and think about the role of the sociological imagination in someone feeling they

belong to the discipline intellectually, methodologically, conceptually, or emotionally. Gane and Back write that the sociological imagination consists of ‘a critical sensibility which seeks to link the most intimate personal experiences to wider social forces, and seek out the public issue or problem contained in the private trouble’ (2012: 405). For me, the centrality of the sociological imagination to sociology as a discipline - its relative ambiguity and freedom - is what sets sociology apart. The sociological imagination shapes sociology as a disciplinary home where it is possible to inhabit the both fringe and mainstream at once. It is this which draws scholars from other, stricter, disciplines and maintains vitality in sociological research.

The constant question: what is sociology?

Lewis Carroll subtitled *Through the Looking Glass* (1872), ‘And What Alice Found There’. In this section I explore the terrain of sociology in these terms – what was it I found when moving into sociology? I also use this as a space to think from that incomer position about some of the central debates regarding what sociology is, what it’s for, and how it should proceed. As well as exciting new modes of inquiry, compelling concepts, and novel theoretical discussions, what I also found was a discipline incredibly ready to tell me how inadequate it is for the field of contemporary academia.

Firstly, I met people telling me how sociology fails at the audit culture game. In an academia increasingly incurred upon by marketization and audits sociology is apparently failing to – in Bourdieu’s term – ‘play the game’. Though sociologists have critiqued audit culture in great detail (Gill and Pratt 2008; Taylor 2014; Sparkes 2007), it would appear that despite sociology knowing the rules of the audit game it cannot quite, as a discipline, ‘get on the field’, to use Beverley Skeggs’s continuation of the Bourdieusian metaphor (2004: 87). John Holmwood draws attention to a lack of clear internal identity as being ‘sociology’s misfortune’ (2010). He describes how sociology is weakened by lacking theories and methodologies specific to the discipline. Away from concerns emanating from the threat of audit culture, I met with others who saw stinging faults in the discipline. John Law notes how current research methods in sociology are not well-placed to capture the ‘things that slip and slide, that appear and disappear, change shape or don’t have much form at all’ (Law 2004: 2). Law and Urry together claim that sociological methods ‘deal, for instance, poorly with the fleeting... the distributed... the multiple... the non-causal, the chaotic, the complex... the sensory... and the kinaesthetic’ (2004: 403). Likewise, John Holloway argues that sociological pedagogy sadly rids us of our ‘scream’ – our passion and necessity to change the world. We may still possess a sociological imagination but it is carefully trained to neat and conventional research. As Holloway says, ‘we learn that the correct way to understand is to pursue objectivity, to put our own feelings on one side. It is not so much what we learn as how we learn that seems to smother our scream’ (2002: 3). In a similar protest, David Beer notes how sociologists are ‘often trained to be neutral and passive... We are trained to make sociological wallpaper... We are trained to find a pigeonhole or hook for our work, and to stick with it’ (2014: 54). Even sociological expression was not safe from critique, Anthony Giddens joking: ‘What do you get when you cross a sociologist with a member of the Mafia? An offer you can’t understand’ (1995: 1). Taken together, all of this rather makes sociology seem the academic disciplinary equivalent of the stock pale and sickly child in a Dickens melodrama: done for.

Whilst I don’t disagree with the crux of what is identified here, I do find it at times confounding (if also mildly amusing) that a discipline I was drawn to whilst fleeing the far more conventional and ordered grounds of literary studies would be so constantly oriented to discussing itself as both lacking freedom *and* being too vague in its methods and theories. What drew me to sociology was not the lure of, say, using ethnographic methods or the theories of Pierre Bourdieu, but the intellectual freedom I saw at play. Instead of being required to write about a

particular thing in a particular way, I saw far more variation of approach and method – there was something almost *inherently* interdisciplinary about sociology. Not only did this mean that I could do new things (like actually talk to people as part of research), but I could also bring with me my formative literary theory, as well as being able to recognise some familiar faces (Hello to Foucault, Butler, and Marx). Of course, now that I'm distinctly more imbricated in the discipline I rail at the same problems as Law, Beer, Holloway, and especially Giddens – but it is worth holding onto the memory of how much stricter disciplinary rules are elsewhere.

Elsewhere I encountered a more optimistic perspective. Bourdieu's statement that, 'I often say sociology is a martial art, a means of self-defence. Basically, you use it to defend yourself, without having the right to use it for unfair attacks' (2001), felt inspirational. To me, it showed that sociology was also a verb, not simply a descriptive noun. Bourdieu's notion of sociology as a martial art resonates with the sociological style of C. Wright Mills. Gane and Back note that 'what Mills sought to resist at all costs was not simply the professionalization of the discipline but the invasion of a "bureaucratic ethos" into sociological work' (2012: 408, citing Mills 1959: 115). They note how 'For Mills, sociology is a navigation device' (2012: 405). For all the stated faults – the lack of distinctiveness, the blandness, the stubborn upholding of outdated ideas of rigour, and the inculcation of these through teaching – this notion of a discipline as a way of being and of knowing instead of a specific set of tools, texts, and skills was enticing. Gane and Back stress the active and embodied role of the sociological imagination, that it is a 'way of practising intellectual life as an attentive and sensuous craft but also as a moral and political project' (2012: 404). As a sociological neophyte, this felt more important than ownership of particular theories or methods, and moreover seemed to me the necessary counter to the ontological problems identified by Beer, Holloway, et al. The sensuous, inductive, political bent of both Bourdieu and Mills's conceptions of sociology provides means of challenging the pedagogical smothering of our scream, of finding means to understand those slippery and formless aspects of the social identified by Law and Urry, and of imbuing sociological wallpaper with vitality.

Disciplinary boundaries, the sociological imagination, and a sense of 'home'

A discipline is not only a description of a subject – its aims, interests, and practices. It is also a type of intellectual belonging. Immanuel Wallerstein describes how disciplines are 'modes of asserting that there exists a defined field of study with some kind of boundaries, however disputed or fuzzy, and some agreed-upon modes of legitimate research' (2003: 453). Within this 'the scholars who claim membership...share for the most part certain experiences and exposures' – same "classic" books, same "traditional" debates, same styles of scholarship, and are rewarded for adherence (Wallerstein 2003: 453). To adhere to a discipline is to be part of something. Sociology, though, has nebulous disciplinary foundations - indeed Wolf Lepenies refers to how sociology sits as 'a kind of "third culture" between the natural sciences on one hand and literature and humanities on the other' (1988: 7). Despite this intellectual history and protestations to the contrary, sociology does have its own traditions wrought through the particular construction of its canon of literature. We have some 'founding fathers' – Marx, Durkheim, Weber (Osborne, Rose and Savage 2008: 521), and a newer contemporary canon comprising Bauman, Beck, Bourdieu and Giddens (Outhwaite 2009). These voices orient our sociology through claims to authority and status – they discipline the discipline through demonstrations of 'what is most distinctively sociological' (Sugarman 1968: 84). Whilst sociology arguably lacks specific theories and methodologies which define and demarcate the discipline, there is a dominant set of literature - largely androcentric, Eurocentric, and white in character - which exerts hegemonic power.

The contradictory experience of sociology having permeable disciplinary walls but nevertheless still being structurally white and male is articulated within my ethnographic research. My own experience of feeling slowly pushed from a traditional arts and humanities discipline was echoed by one of my participants who began her education in history. Lara (all names have been changed for anonymity) explained how, 'I'd actually started a PhD in history...and one of the things over that first year of doing my history PhD that soon became clear to me was that I didn't want to do the sort of PhD that seemed to be expected within history'. Like me, she identified that the 'rules' of her former discipline seemed to prevent her from exploring the types of questions she saw as important. Lara described how her questions regarding the roles of social actors were considered outwith the scope of history:

So history is a discipline with very strong boundaries, with very strong ideas of what constitutes a history PhD, and what I was interested in...there wasn't scope to do it [within history]. What was required was to find an archive somewhere, study the archive, and write an account of what happened there.

Importantly, she ended up finding a disciplinary (and – crucially - institutional) home through completing an interdisciplinary PhD, during which she 'moved closer to sociology'. Again, the boundaries of the other disciplines within this PhD tended towards sociology being the freer, more open space in which to explore both empirical and theoretical questions about the social – even from a historical perspective. This trajectory is emphasised in the experience of another participant, Naomi, who also began in English Literature. Naomi self-deprecatingly commented that 'I got into sociology because no one else would have me'. She considered why sociology enabled this disciplinary shift, 'One of the interesting things about sociology is that it does tend to be a bit of a rag-bag...It's kind of woolly-round-the-edges, sociology'. Here, Naomi recognises that the very aspect of sociology that Holmwood asserts makes the discipline vulnerable was what allowed her entry. Perhaps what this indicates is that porous disciplinary edges may not be pragmatically helpful in terms of the paradigm of value set out by Higher Education audits, but they can certainly be intellectually and imaginatively positive through enabling a conceptually interdisciplinary environment to thrive. The innovative aspects of the sociological imagination are born out in contemporary sociological projects. Research such as 'Mapping Immigration Controversy' (2014), 'The role of celebrity in young people's classed and gendered aspirations' (2012), and 'Researching Multilingually at the Borders of Language, the Body, Law and the State' (2013), all draw on sociology's permeable disciplinary boundaries creating freer space for empirical exploration. These projects work from a sociological standpoint which recognises the centrality of artistic, linguistic, and cultural approaches *within* the discipline, but also sees sociology as a deeply political and public endeavour. The diversity and sensuality of these approaches implicitly challenge the mainstream 'sociological wallpaper' identified by Beer and push sociological research into a space in which its scream is no longer smothered.

Participants, however, noted the potential vulnerability of sociology in terms of disciplinary boundaries. Euan, who described himself as having always been on the sociological track, noted how 'it is now fashionable for sociologists to claim knowledge of another subject – to be discipline-hoppers' and pointed to a state where being a sociologist from the beginning is 'not enough'. He identified that, 'people make knowledge claims by resting their sociological knowledge on cognisance of other more traditional disciplines, particularly the hard sciences'. What Euan seemed concerned about was the lack of authority and legitimacy within sociology as a discipline – that even sociologists defer to the credibility of other disciplines and the rigour of their methodologies and theories in order to back up sociological knowledge claims. This would

seem to be a significant problem for us as sociologists if we are bent on engaging in academia through dominant modes of power and legitimation. Of course, sometimes this is structurally necessary. Johanna – who came into sociology through literary studies and philosophy - told me about the importance of claiming mainstream territory both when your work is seen to happen on the fringes, and when your political identity is understood similarly. During a discussion about her professorship Johanna told me that she had been allowed to choose the title of her Chair. She'd thought about inventing a title that spoke to feminist or gender concerns but decided instead on 'Professor of Sociology'. Expanding on this Johanna told me, 'it's about claiming space – a "fuck you"'. For Johanna it was a 'political decision to call my work sociology – any other title would be less powerful than the centre-ground'. Johanna's action again pulls attention to the strong role of the canon in demarcating sociological knowledge-making. This was an active concern for Johanna – she asserted that, 'disciplines are about canons, and canons are about borders; disciplines are disciplining'. For this reason she felt it vital to hold territory in the mainstream, and to classify her work as such through an institutional title.

The sociological imagination plays a role in allowing non-hegemonic scholars to claim space in a discipline disciplined by canonical literature. Both the sociological imagination and the canon are defining aspects of sociology. However, the sociological imagination as a concept is both fluid and acclaimed, allowing space for sociologists to be credentialised and legitimated. It is possible not to adhere to conventional notions of sociology enshrined in the canon, but to still be considered sociological through practicing a sociological imagination. The canon of sociology has been thoroughly critiqued as missing significant intellectual traditions (Bhambra 2014; Connell 2007) and as part of upholding hegemonic domination through sociological pedagogy (Burton 2015). Its domination is widely recognised as a form of structural power. Unlike the canon, the sociological imagination does not prescribe specific voices as authoritative (though it is noteworthy that most who have written on the concept are white men). Rather it recognises the particularity of seeing the social sociologically – of having 'a particular quality of mind...which makes the unfamiliar more familiar and treats the familiar as a source of astonishment' (Gane and Back 2012: 405). A certain freedom therefore exists where you can be non-hegemonic but still operate in the centre-ground. However, the ethnography demonstrates the tricky nature of disciplinary boundaries: the fuzziness makes it possible for people to find their way to sociology iteratively through intellectual exploration – but once here we find that the boundaries harden, the canon asserts itself, dominant intellectual traditions abide, and we are compelled to seek the authority and safety of the centre-ground. A disciplinary home remains, in this sense, tenuous and ambiguous.

Conclusion: disciplinary futures and sociological imaginations

The idea of a disciplinary home is important to sociology and sociologists – indeed this Special Issue pivots on the notion of 'Bringing Sociology Home'. The title invites questions of where we bring sociology home *to*? Where has it been? And does a stable disciplinary-located home even exist? There are certainly structural aspects to the discipline – it's particular journals, departments, and institutions such as the British Sociological Association. These may provide space in which we can gather and discuss, but they aren't 'sociology'. They are where sociology (sometimes but not always) happens. Sociology – as my own trajectory and those of my participants shows – isn't about a particular method or theory, but instead is brought into being by the people who do it. Sociology is a verb and it is done through practicing a sociological imagination.

In questioning the future of sociology we need to think about the paradigms of value at play. What do we care about and what sort of discipline do we want to be part of? The relative

ambiguity of sociology is why so many disparate scholars leaving more conventional disciplines gravitate here, bringing an eclecticism of methodologies, theories, experiences, intellectual touchstones, and so forth. Whether sociology has lost its way depends very much on what you think it's 'way' is. If you think in terms of dominant parameters of audit culture, then yes, it probably has. If we think intellectually, then perhaps, but not quite. The sociological imagination is both succinctly defined – marrying private troubles with public matters – but also remains tantalisingly equivocal. To act with a sociological imagination infers something paradoxically tangible and mercurial. The sociological imagination not only crosses, but *pushes*, boundaries of academia, practice, activism, and intellectualism. It questions and upbraids us. Perhaps sociology, as Holmwood suggests, does lack theories and methods specific only to the discipline. Perhaps we cannot claim such things as ethnography, post-structuralism, or statistical modelling as quintessentially sociological. But so what? The sociological imagination – with its ambiguity and flair – is a tool a great deal more potent, and capable of more perspicacious exploration than any combination of standard methods or theory. Inglis asks 'What is worth defending?' – I think the answer is our (sociological) imagination.

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