

EDITED BY

Katherine Twamley Mark Doidge Andrea Scott

SOCIOLOGISTS' TALES

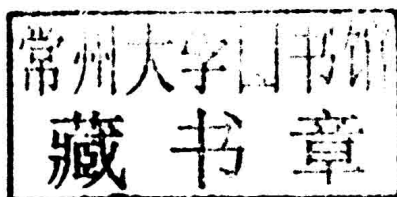
Contemporary narratives on
sociological thought and practice



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Foreword

Judith Mudd, Chief Executive, British Sociological Association

At the British Sociological Association, we often ask ourselves ‘How do we explain the fascination of sociology?’, ‘How do sociologists learn their trade?’ and ‘How do we support and nurture our successors?’ *Sociologists’ Tales* provides answers to all of these questions. Full of compelling descriptions of sociology, inspirational examples of sociological research and candid insights into the lives of sociologists, it is an invaluable resource. In it, the contributors tell us how they came to sociology, revealing often riveting twists and turns in their journeys, highlighting what made a difference to their career trajectories and offering sound advice for newcomers including sign-posting to other helpful resources.

I have worked with many talented, enthusiastic, generous people across the sociological journey but I am struck by the willingness, openness and generosity of all of the authors who contributed to this book. The foresight and tenacity of the editors in suggesting and bringing this work to fruition is remarkable. In producing the book they have made a significant and positive contribution to the knowledge, development and understanding of sociology, and a chapter has been written in their own sociological tales.

This book is a fascinating read for sociologists old and new, and is ‘mentoring in your pocket’ for anyone setting out on their sociological apprenticeship.

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Introduction

Mark Doidge, Katherine Twamley and Andrea Scott

‘Making the familiar strange and the strange familiar.’
(C Wright Mills)

‘But he isn’t wearing anything at all!’, shrieked the young child. Among the throngs of well-wishers and dignitaries, the Emperor strolled triumphantly through the streets for all to admire his resplendent attire. He had just been made the finest clothes by two tailors who had procured the most beautiful threads; so wonderful was this finery that it was invisible to the naked eye. The Emperor’s ministers and admirers all noted the exceptional workmanship and sumptuous detail of the new clothes so that they would not highlight their stupidity in front of their superior. It was not until a child declared that actually the Emperor was naked that the myth surrounding the vain leader began to unravel.

Hans Christian Andersen’s fable of the Emperor’s New Clothes provides a useful metaphor for the discipline of sociology. As sociologists we untangle the invisible threads through our analyses, showing them for what they are – pure air spun by the structures of power and inequality – revealing to the world what they knew, but didn’t know they knew. Such unravelling is not just about uncovering truths, but about challenging the very structures that uphold such truths. As Marx (1970) famously said, ‘The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.’ How much change (or ‘impact’) our research really makes is debatable, but that sociologists’ strive for this change cannot be refuted.

It is this sense of discovery, insight and transformation that flows through the narratives that are contained within *Sociologists’ Tales*. In this book, 33 sociologists tell us their tales of a life in sociology.

They share with us their ideas and passions, their daily practices and challenges, and their tips for those aspiring a similar career. The result is a book both about sociology *and* sociological practice. Together the narratives provide an overview of the questions and concerns that are driving contemporary British sociologists, while also giving advice to the 'next generation' of sociologists. Through these accounts, the reader can discern a story of sociology as a discipline, and how biography and the political economic context shape scholars' research and careers. This book will be of interest to anyone with an attraction to sociology: for established sociologists there are insights from some renowned exponents of the discipline. For mid- and early-career sociologists there are overviews and opinions about charting a career in higher education. And last but not least, for students and those inquisitive about the discipline there are ideas about what it means to be a sociologist.

The origins of sociology: the story so far (abridged)

Sociology originated as the science of modern society. As Western Europe moved from traditional rural communities to modern urban societies, the discipline of sociology emerged to understand how human beings operated in this brave new world. The early proponents of sociology, like Comte, Spencer and Durkheim, as well as later members of the Chicago school, focused on establishing sociology as a legitimate discipline in the academy alongside the natural sciences, history, anthropology and philosophy. A second wave of sociology occurred in the 1960s thanks to an interest in the New Left, and fuelled by the student protests of 1968, marked by a surging interest in class politics. The importance of this date re-occurs in several of the biographies within *Sociologists' Tales*, drawing authors into a sociological career, funnelling their desire for change into their work and opening up new opportunities for a university education and career. For example, John Brewer was drawn to sociology at this time through his growing awareness of inequalities, racism and anti-Vietnam sentiments.

In the 1970s feminism drew attention to the gendered nature of the discipline and its theories. More importantly, feminism gave (female) sociologists the theoretical support to challenge the status quo and enabled women to argue for the relevance of 'women's lives and work' to sociology. The legacy and influence of feminism is difficult to underestimate. Around this time too, poststructuralist theorists challenged notions of knowledge, theory and method. Theorists such as Michel Foucault proffered new ways of critically analysing the world

and this helped reinforce the work of those engaged with gender and sexuality research.

Subsequent scholars lamented a perceived shift away from a methodological or theoretical consensus, especially when compared to the natural sciences (Turner and Turner, 1990; Horowitz, 1993; Goldthorpe, 2000; Cole, 2001; Berger, 2002). Without a set of established methods they felt that it was harder to ascertain a core knowledge with which to communicate with students and the public. Much of this comes from an anxiety that has existed since Comte and Spencer that sociology should be a 'science'. This positivist approach permeated the discipline until the multiple challenges that arose in the 1970s from feminists and poststructuralists.

Sociology is now a broad church that covers a range of methods and theories. Ritzer (1975) argues that sociology is 'a multiple paradigm science', with scholars drawing on different epistemologies and ontologies in their research, resulting in a rich variety of methodologies and theories. Meanwhile, Urry (1981) goes so far as to say that sociology is 'parasitic', feeding off other disciplines. Despite this rather unappealing term, it highlights that the discipline is inherently interdisciplinary and open to new ideas, spawning 'hybridic sociologies' as Stanley (2005) calls them. Several of our authors exemplify the ideal of a hybridic sociologist, such as Sasha Roseneil who uses a psychosocial approach in her work, even going so far as to retrain in group psychotherapy to hone her skills. In other cases, sociology provided a 'home' to academics from other disciplines, allowing them to carve out a hybridic sociology of their own – such as Yvonne Robinson who calls herself a 'sociographer' having originally studied geography.

What is constant, at least in this book, is the attachment to C Wright Mills's vision of *The sociological imagination* (1959). The central principle of the sociological imagination is to be able to see micro interactions and macro society in unison – rather than the actions of individuals or groups as independent of other social processes. C Wright Mills argued, 'the sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society' (1959, 12). The contributors to this book hold true to this vision in their narratives, unpacking their own biographies and career trajectories within the wider structures of the academe and the socio-political context around them.

Another legacy of C Wright Mills can be seen in the authors' commitment to public engagement. This was a central theme of the book (picked up again in more detail below) and a key motivation for many to study and work in sociology. Some sociologists have criticised

the political approach of the discipline. Parsons (1959) argued that for the discipline to be a true science, it must retain value-free objectivity. Similarly, Berger (2002) laments the political agenda that has entered the discipline and argues that sociologists should be impartial observers, rationally and scientifically analysing society without proscription. As many of the authors in this book discuss, however, politics (in its broadest sense of the word) is often a motivation for joining the discipline. Becker argues that it is impossible for social scientists to undertake research 'uncontaminated by personal and political sympathies' (1967, 240). Similarly, Burawoy (2005) argues against this 'pure science' position by suggesting that 'antipolitics' is still political. In effect, the purpose of sociology is to make society better.

Reflection is vital in order to alleviate accusations of personal bias. As this book is about reflective sociologists, the chapters illustrate how these practitioners situate themselves within this wider political economic context. Gouldner (1968) suggests that being reflexive of one's own political position is precisely how we as sociologists can remain 'objective'. By acknowledging our own position, and keeping this at the forefront of our mind, we can ensure that our research is not adversely affected by our own preconceptions. 'Objectivity', as Gouldner (1968, 114) argues, 'consists in the capacity to know and to use – to seek out, or at least accept it when it is otherwise provided – information inimical to our own desires and values, and to overcome our own fear of such information'. Because we are aware of our own position, we seek out contrary information so that we can present the whole picture in an objective fashion. Such reflexivity then is common in sociological studies, whereby the researcher attempts to unpack his/her political, theoretical and biographical baggage that they carry with them. The contributions in this book are an example of reflexivity in action, as researchers attempt to unravel how their personal lives and convictions have shaped their careers and research trajectories.

The idea for the book

This book was originally conceived as an attempt to bring together scholars from a range of backgrounds to give advice and inspiration to early career sociologists, such as us. The three editors are convenors of the British Sociological Association (BSA) Early Career Forum. Through interactions with our members, we felt that a book from more established scholars could encourage, advise and enthuse our members. Each of us is committed to a sociological career and we seek to hear others' stories about how they have managed to carve

one out. Already among the three editors there is evidence of diverse career trajectories and discipline interests. Mark started his career in a warehouse before moving into logistics management. Following redundancy he studied for a master's degree in ancient history before discovering sociology. Andrea's experiences as an athlete led her to study a sports science undergraduate degree. Her journey into sociology began after becoming frustrated by the 'black and white' nature of the 'natural' sciences and renewed by a discipline such as sociology that questioned the 'grey areas'. While Katherine has perhaps taken the most conventional route from sociology undergraduate to PhD to 'postdoc', with some travelling in between. We knew how our biographies had shaped these paths, and we thought it would be interesting to consider whether the same was true of other people. In particular, we were eager to get the 'tales' of those from different generations. We hoped that by inviting sociologists from across the decades, we could discern patterns across the years. In the end, there were both similarities and differences within and between 'generations', though there is no doubt that personal biography and the historical (both socio-political and theoretical) had a profound effect on our contributors' interests, theoretical inclinations and career pathways.

At the same time, we were aware that in the current economic climate young people are more and more concerned with 'employability'. We envisioned a book that celebrated the merits of sociology as a discipline, while also giving realistic career advice to encourage a new generation of would-be sociologists. What comes across in the pages contained within this book is the passion that our authors have for sociology, and the rewards of a sociological career. These were the aims of this book, and our contributors answered with gusto.

How we went about making this book

The solicitation for contributions to this book did not follow any specific logic or plan. We aimed to include authors from a range of backgrounds, ages and disciplinary interests. Our only criterion was that the contributor should be minimally 'established' in her/his career; no students or postdocs have been included. It is not that we feel such people have nothing to contribute; rather, we sought to include the advice of those who have already 'made it' into a 'permanent' post. As this project has been completed in association with the BSA, many contributors are members, or actively recruited by the association. It is for this reason that the focus has been on British sociology and sociologists. Beyond this, we were keen to ensure that contributors

of 'minoritised' groups were included, including minority ethnic, female and LGBT sociologists. In retrospect, the narratives are not as diverse as we had hoped, particularly in regards to tales from minority ethnic sociologists. It is to be hoped that this is something that can be rectified in a future volume.

All of the contributors were asked to address the same questions in writing their chapters:

- What is sociology to you?
- Why study sociology? (Why did you?)
- Why 'be' a sociologist – what does that mean?
- Looking back on your career, what would you have done differently?
- What advice would you give to someone starting out in a career in sociology?

Additionally, authors were asked to be mindful to write chapters that would be accessible and useful for students and early career sociologists, who are potentially facing similar opportunities and challenges to those they faced themselves.

The enthusiasm of scholars to contribute to this book both surprised and delighted us, especially given the busy time upon which we called on them (around REF deadlines);¹ several commented on the therapeutic and rewarding experience of writing their piece. Nonetheless, there was also a certain level of anxiety from scholars more used to writing about others than themselves. Several wrote to us asking for further information on 'style' and queried how 'academic' or not their chapter should be. Three asked to see other's contributions before embarking on their own. While some may have been simply courteous and attempting to 'please' the editors, others were clearly nervous about writing something different from their usual research 'outputs'.

Due to the relatively open guidelines given to the authors, we have amassed a group of chapters that approach the topic in varying ways, both thematically and stylistically, but primarily the questions provoked biographical narratives, with authors situating their own views and experiences of sociology alongside key experiences in their lives. Many, for example, talked about their first 'exposure' to sociological ideas, or how early experiences or their social positionings sparked the questions that drove their sociological enquiry.

What emerges in the personal biographies that follow are, however, not individual accounts of individual lives. The influence of others, and

their impact on the author, clearly come across. No auto/biography is independent of others. As Cotterill and Letherby (1993, 74) state,

Life histories... 'tell it like is' from the lived experience of the narrator. They are invaluable because they do not fracture life experiences, but provide a means of evaluating the present, re-evaluating the past, and anticipating the future.

C Wright Mills argued that, 'no social study that does not come back to the problems of biography, of history, and of their intersections within a society, has completed its intellectual journey' (Mills, 1959, 12). This book seeks, in some small way, to do that with sociologists themselves. We are presenting the personal reflections and biographies of various sociologists. In keeping with their sociological training, they reflect on the wider social and historical aspects within their stories.

The danger of our approach is that by eliciting stories without guaranteeing anonymity, we limit the possibility of 'negative' stories, and encourage stories of success and positivity. We acknowledge these are limitations, though we feel that anonymous tales would have resulted in rather sanitised accounts – as discussed above, research foci and personal biography were often intertwined so anonymisation would have necessitated quite significant deletions and omissions. At any rate, not all of the accounts are biographical, and some of the biographical accounts describe significant failures and setbacks, though within the context of ultimately holding a 'permanent position' in one way or another. The diversity of tales reflects the diverse group we managed to recruit, in the hope that their stories will help and/or encourage others.

Description of the book

The chapters that follow tell a story about sociology in the UK today. They tell us where sociologists are coming from, and where they are going. While nearly all the stories reflect on the autobiographical journey of the author, as any sociologist knows, society is not comprised of isolated individuals. This is neatly reflected in how the writers have interwoven their wider understanding of society into their personal biography. But the study of sociology or exposure to sociological ideas can also shape one's own life, and was used by many to understand their own life trajectories and social situations. Such overlaps show that, perhaps more than in any other discipline, sociologists' lives and works have a symbiotic relationship as we study everyday life and the world around us.

We have divided the chapters into three sections: What can sociology do?; What does it mean to be a sociologist?; and How does one become a sociologist? This division of chapters is not to suggest that each chapter in that section only addresses that particular theme, rather, they have primarily focused on that aspect in answering our questions outlined above.

Part 1: What can sociology do?

What emerges from the narratives in this section is the centrality of social activism to the sociologists' work; they have a desire to do more than 'just' analyse. Although the discipline provides a range of tools and skills with which to investigate the world around us, the outcome of this research for these contributors is intended to affect it. This is perfectly illustrated by Liza Schuster's powerful discussion of conducting research with vulnerable populations who have very difficult tales of injustice to tell her. Schuster tells us that she is 'committed to the search for understanding, to the resolution of social problems and to the formulation of public policies that will do more good than harm', but confronted with her participants she feels at times like a 'voyeur'. This conundrum pushes her to develop a way of being a sociologist that allows her to combine academic work with activism.

Schuster's chapter is followed by Mark Featherstone's exposition on the importance of sociology to explain social change. He argues that this makes sociology vital in today's world and he never loses sight of sociology as a utopian discipline that can make the world better.

The importance of public sociology is reiterated in a chapter from one of the most pre-eminent public sociologists in Britain: Zygmunt Bauman. Bauman refers to Burawoy's call for 'public sociology' (2004; 2005) and argues that 'sociological wisdom is needed more than at any other time of modern history'. Understanding the tumultuous world we live in will help us understand our own place within it and make us happier.

The following two chapters highlight the revelatory nature of sociology. Anthony Giddens describes how sociology looks at the mundane everyday interactions while simultaneously unpacking wider social structures and institutions. It is this sociological perspective that gives us wonder. For Bev Skeggs, sociology provides a range of perspectives, which allow us to understand the wider world. We need curiosity and imagination to push the boundaries of knowledge. More particularly, Skeggs argues that you have to 'stick to your instincts' and

say things that may be unpopular in the wider public, or the academy; in her case it was to continue to talk about the concept of class.

Wider social movements can have a dramatic impact on sociology and sociological careers. John Holmwood discusses how feminism's emergence in the 1970s showed that class was not the only form of inequality in society. Understanding this inequality was important in order to challenge wider assumptions. He has put this into practice through the 'Campaign for the Public University' to challenge the current changes to higher education. Political activism has been also central to Sasha Roseneil's career. In her interview, Roseneil discusses how her feminism and anti-nuclear politics engaged her to research Greenham Common. She felt at home in the discipline, while also working on its 'edges'.

Communicating these social changes is a vital aspect of sociology. John Brewer's tale describes how 'communicating sociology's capacity to be both life-changing and life-empowering is what I see as the essential purpose of sociology teaching and research'. This is not just a rational response to provide impact for the managerial culture that impresses upon higher education. It is a moral imperative to improve the lives of those whose voices are muted. Similarly, Judith Burnett suggests that studying sociology allowed her to pass 'through the looking glass' into a new world. This personal journey and awareness should not just be used to influence our students, she argues, but policy makers as well.

The section ends with an interview with Les Back entitled 'Living sociology'. Like others in this book, Back did not start out in sociology, but in this interview he describes how he found a 'home' in sociology, helping him to make sense of his upbringing in a large public housing estate on the outskirts of London. His sociological interest continues to be driven by social questions, telling us that 'sociology is nothing if it is not concerned urgently with the key problems of what it means to live in the twenty-first century', and describing how he strives for new modes of sociological writing and representation to answer these questions.

Part 2: What does it mean to be a sociologist?

Authors in this section focused more on their identity as a sociologist, some relating a troubled claim to that identity, whether because of feeling 'outside' mainstream sociology, or because of other disciplinary backgrounds. Yvette Taylor's thought-provoking chapter poses the question of professional identity and how it is represented and