For interdisciplinarity and a disciplined, professional sociology

This item was submitted to Loughborough University’s Institutional Repository by the/an author.

Citation: O’REILLY, K., 2009. For interdisciplinarity and a disciplined, professional sociology. Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research, 22 (2), pp. 219-232

Additional Information:

- This article was published in the serial, Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research. The definitive version is available at: http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13511610903075761

Metadata Record: https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/9141

Version: Accepted for publication

Publisher: Routledge © Interdisciplinary Centre for Comparative Research in the Social Sciences and ICCR Foundation

Please cite the published version.
This item was submitted to Loughborough’s Institutional Repository (https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/) by the author and is made available under the following Creative Commons Licence conditions.

For the full text of this licence, please go to: http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/
For interdisciplinarity and a disciplined, professional sociology

Karen O’Reilly


Abstract
Sociology has been said to be in crisis: it is fragmented; its institutional life is threatened; it is obsessed with its history; it keeps forgetting its history. Meanwhile, a widespread movement is pushing it in the direction of increasing interdisciplinarity, or even post-disciplinarity, accusing disciplines of being parochial or imperialist, or of stifling innovation. But accusations of parochialism and fragmentation are continually met by calls to remember or redefine sociology’s core and to defend a professional sociology that can engage in public debates in an informed way. This article explores interdisciplinarity through my own interdisciplinary story and concludes that interdisciplinarity can and should be embraced, but needs to be matched with a disciplined sociology. That disciplined sociology needs a professional and institutional space in which to reaffirm and develop the foundations and later developments attributable to a general conception of sociology. What is central to this general conception of sociology is a scientific emphasis on the complex interrelationship between actions and structures. Interdisciplinary work rarely leaves space for the continued examination of this fundamental realm.

Introduction
Sociology has been said to be in crisis (Fuller 2006; Touraine 2003; Urry 2000). It is uncertain of the extent to which it is a science. It is fragmented. Several new subjects (such as cultural studies, media studies and criminology) are threatening its status in academic life. It has been accused of being obsessed with its history, and of forgetting its history (Brewer 2007a). On the other hand, one senses a general and widespread movement, perhaps a paradigm shift, in the direction of increasing interdisciplinarity or even post-disciplinarity (Letherby 2005). Disciplines are described as parochial, imperialist or stifling innovation (Sayer 2003). In response come more calls to remember or to redefine sociology’s core (Scott 2005a and b); to respect its scientific distance from politics (Martinelli 2008); to defend a professional sociology that can engage in public debates in an informed way (Burawoy 2008); or to celebrate sociology as the “flagship discipline of the social sciences” (Fuller 2006, p. 1). This article explores interdisciplinarity through my own interdisciplinary story and concludes that interdisciplinarity can and should be embraced, but needs to be matched with a disciplined sociology. I begin by reviewing sociology’s interdisciplinary history and some of the arguments for and against more interdisciplinarity. I review, in depth,

John Scott’s arguments in favor of what I call a more disciplined sociology. For Scott, sociology can and indeed must embrace interdisciplinarity, but should do so from a position on firm ground. The contents of his disciplined sociology and his “general conception of sociology” are explored. Many of these debates are conducted in the abstract, or with a specific stance on which disciplines can work together. Drawing on my own interdisciplinary biography, I examine a range of issues relevant to the actual experience and performance of interdisciplinary work in practice and discover a distinct (but not pure and bounded) sociological perspective pervades my engagement with other disciplines. What a distinct sociological perspective consists of, on the other hand, is something I have failed adequately to
consider until recently, and this has involved a return to disciplinary work. A closer analysis of what we might call, following Scott (2005a), a general conception of sociology leads me to conclude that what is central to what sociologists do is to think through, explore and theorize the interrelationship between the social and the individual; to consider what constitutes the category of the social and how it relates to the units that comprise it. This ongoing work, based on firm foundations, is what a disciplinary space must be safeguarded to protect.

**Sociology and interdisciplinarity**

Of course, sociology has always worked alongside other disciplines; indeed, the discipline’s history is multi-disciplinary (Brewer 2007a). It emerged as a set of ideas within other disciplines and before disciplinary boundaries became as institutionally entrenched as they are now. The continuing generation of classical social theory has thus infused and emerged from within other disciplines. Durkheim, it must be remembered, taught philosophy and worked as professor of education for much of his career. Weber was a legal theorist and economic historian. C. Wright Mills acknowledged the wider application of the term “sociological imagination” and noted the interdisciplinary links to history, politics and biography (Brewer 2007a). Simmel’s doctoral thesis and early publications were philosophical in character (Steinmetz 2007). Talcott Parsons made serious efforts to bring discussions about the boundaries between sociology and psychology and cultural anthropology to American sociology at Harvard (see Scott 2005b). And no one can dispute the interdisciplinary ancestry of the Chicago School. Indeed sociology is unique in the historical ability of its professionals to overcome disciplinary boundaries.

Nevertheless, alongside demands in academia more broadly to explore beyond (especially national) boundaries, localities, field sites and exclusivities (e.g. Beck 2006; Urry 2000; Wimmer and Schiller 2002) there are calls for sociology to embrace interdisciplinarity (Brewer 2007a and b), transdisciplinarity (e.g. Steinmetz 20071), or even post-disciplinarity (Sayer 20032). In the UK, for example, a great deal of interdisciplinary work is currently being undertaken. Common disciplinary “others” have included anthropology, politics, history, social policy and psychology, but research is now embracing, for example, the sociology of health and illness, sociology and urban planning, sociology and the environment (especially sustainability), the sociology of the body and emotions (which has embraced links to biology and psychology) and animal and human relations.

The contributors to a special edition of the History of the human sciences (see Brewer 2007a) explore sociology’s relationship to more “exotic” or intellectually remote others, including cultural studies, theology, evolution, criminal justice, rhetoric, economics and art history. Many of the authors are not sociologists, but embrace sociology. In a way, this special edition is a celebration of the potential of interdisciplinarity rather than of its achievements to date. Brewer (2007b) notes how, despite the many issues they share in common, the relationship between sociology and theology has been marked by disciplinary closure. Dunbar’s (2007) paper is about how the contribution evolutionary biology can make to sociology has consistently been ignored. Here there is a very important point in favor of interdisciplinarity, which is that classical sociology (with its subsequent break from biology and evolution) was premised on evolutionary ideas that are now very outdated. In other words, due to its rigid disciplinary boundaries, sociology has failed to recognize important developments in evolutionary science (see Fuller 2006). Karstedt (2007, p. 52) calls sociology and law close strangers: “in the way that strangers share seats in trains, that is, with considerable uneasiness”, and Inglis (2007) notes the fundamental similarities between cultural studies and sociology, belying their endless posturing as distinct (and often antagonistic) disciplines.

However, calls for more inter-(trans-or post-) disciplinarity often seem to take the form of attacks on the discipline of sociology. Sayer (2003), for example, considers disciplines parochial, imperialist and reductionist. Urry (1981 and 2005) contends that sociology has no real “center” or essence and is
merely parasitic on other bodies of knowledge. Steinmetz (2007, p. 48) fails to see the ontological or epistemological justifications for distinctions between disciplines in the human and social sciences and considers the policing of boundaries conservative. Sociology, he contends, shares the same subject matter. The social, as, for instance, politics, psychology and economics. These appeals for more interdisciplinarity are, in turn, met by defensiveness and apparent calls for more closure. Fears of the porosity, fragmentation and dissipation of sociology (Letherby 2005) are responded to by calls to maintain its core ideas, central to a general conception of sociology (Scott 2005a,b), to keep sociology distinct from external pressures that might threaten its scientific objectivity (Martinelli 2008) and to protect sociology’s status as the guardian of humanity (Burawoy 2008).

A core sociology

The word discipline has several connotations: a branch of knowledge, or a subject (noun: a discipline); the trait of being well-behaved, or to adhere to moral codes (adjective: to be disciplined); and even the act of punishing (verb: to discipline). I believe John Scott’s (2005a, b) arguments in Sociological Research Online, and his response to Urry (2005) and Davetian (2005), amount to an argument that sociology should be more disciplined (adjective). This is not to say it should be well-behaved or adhere to moral codes, but it should observe its core conception of society. Being “disciplined” implies being trained according to certain rules, codes or acceptable standards, and it is this understanding of the term I wish to employ here. I will begin by outlining Scott’s position. He begins by addressing an argument made by John Urry (1981) that sociology either perceives itself as some sort of “queen of the sciences” (which he says is similar to Comte’s belief in a positive science of sociology; a final stage in the development of the human sciences) or as a scavenger science, parasitic on other disciplines. The latter implies that sociology, because it constantly scavenges for new topics, merely spawns new disciplines, which then leave the nest; it leads to the generation of ever more sociologies rather than one core, or overarching, sociology. Here interdisciplinarity leaves little room for sociology as a discipline.

Alternatively, Scott contends that sociology can contribute to and learn from other disciplines and other fields, but must do so from a firm view of what sociology has to offer. Interdisciplinary work must begin with a “secure discipline of principled proponents”, a professional sociology with a general conception of the social. It can (and must) be open to new ideas, new areas and new developments in the real world, which will inevitably become disciplines of their own, but it must retain a distinctive sense of what it is at the core. Scott cannot outline in depth what the core of sociology is, as this would entail an entire undergraduate degree, or at least a good part of it. But he does say a few things from which we can gather his central point. To paraphrase Scott (2005a, 2005b):

A professional (or disciplined) sociology shares: a general conception of sociology; a rounded and holistic view of the subject; and a framework of ideas about social relations. Ideas that have defined the core of sociological work. All human activity is socially embedded in this general conception of sociology. This category we call “the social” constitutes intersubjective phenomena which are irreducible to individual biology or psychology, to individual actions or the meanings attributed to these. It acknowledges that these intersubjective phenomena form social structures (social facts, forms of social life, norms and institutions) which, in turn, are reproduced by and form the conditions for individual and collective actions (Scott 2005a, 2.2).

These social structures are relational, institutional and embodied. Above all, then, Scott defends the “viability of the social as a unit of analysis” (Brewer 2007a). More concretely, this consists, for example, of continuing to share and impart the perspective that all human activity is in some way social. It involves inspiring sociology students to acquire C. Wright Mills’s “sociological imagination”; teaching specialisms as well as the “general foundational theory of the social” (Scott 2005a, 3.10).
Sociology courses must therefore include comparative and historical sociology, courses in social theory, and a determined focus on the study of social structures. It means remembering that Durkheim identified social facts that are irreducible to biological or psychological facts; that Simmel said the intersubjective exists through subjects, but cannot be reduced to individual subjects; and reiterating that, as a central concern, sociologists share “the general idea of society as the specific form of intersubjective association through which human beings are able to live their lives” (Scott 2005a, 7.2).

Through my own academic biography I hope to demonstrate some of the difficulties and advantages of interdisciplinary work, but above all to show that, unlike Steinmetz (2007), there are many implicit ontological and epistemological differences between sociology and other (even cognate) disciplines. I do not pretend to be unique. I am sure many readers will recognize elements of their own experience in these lines. However, I find such an intimately familiar example is a useful way to examine abstract ideas.

An interdisciplinary story

Though I majored in sociology, my first degree included courses in social psychology and social anthropology, and in Spanish language, literature and linguistics. Maybe this was multidisciplinary rather than interdisciplinary, but it marked the beginning of an intellectual journey on which I have acquired a few skills for understanding and communicating across disciplines. I then completed a PhD (published as O’Reilly 2000) on international retirement migration and tourism-related migration to Spain.

This took the form of a fairly classical anthropological community study of the British community living on the Costa del Sol. I moved to Spain with my family for 15 months and we settled there as migrants ourselves, learning what life was like for others through our own experiences as well as through in-depth participant observation, long narrative interviews and some survey work. The dissertation was supervised by anthropologists working in a sociology department, and examined by a sociologist and an anthropologist. Perhaps there is not considered to be much intellectual distance between sociology and anthropology (Steinmetz 2007), but I have constantly found it necessary to reflect carefully when explaining theoretical ideas and methodological perspectives across the borders of these two disciplines. Anthropologists, for example, share an often implicit methodological foundation that sociologists do not always understand.

Directly after completing my PhD, I worked as a social researcher on two major projects, both funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). One was the ESRC/ONS (Office for National Statistics) Review of UK Government Social Classifications. This involved negotiating the shape, form and content of a newly-proposed social class scheme with end-users including epidemiologists, statisticians, civil servants, economists and social policy researchers. A large interdisciplinary team of experts together constructed the new scheme informed by a sociological perspective (Rose and O’Reilly 1997). The other project, celebrated as a twenty-first-century version of Charles Booth’s study of London, involved a team of sociologists, geographers and social policy analysts, and brought together social, economic and governance concerns (Buck et al. 2002). My role in both projects involved the quantitative analysis of large datasets. I have since joined academia as a fully-fledged sociology lecturer (now Reader), and from 2003 to 2004 returned to Spain for two 6-month periods to update my research on lifestyle migration, this time exploring rural as well as coastal areas, and combining participant observation, and individual and group interviews with a 53-item survey of 340 respondents (O’Reilly 2004, 2007).

My work has therefore consistently overlapped or met with anthropology, gerontology, geography and social policy, and drawn on quantitative and qualitative approaches. I have published in journals in the fields of gerontology, sociology, political science, geography, anthropology, law, health and tourism,
and even contributed to an edited volume with writers on language and linguistics. I have presented at sociology, anthropology and interdisciplinary migration studies conferences, and at one exploring the future of interdisciplinary area studies. I teach quantitative and qualitative research methods to students from a whole range of disciplines, including the natural sciences. I therefore clearly embrace and engage in interdisciplinarity and this has brought its challenges together with some clear-cut advantages.

**Interdisciplinary challenges**

I will now consider some of the challenges this eclecticism has brought from a personal (experiential) perspective. To begin with the Review of UK Government Social Classifications, the task here was to review existing class schemes in the UK and to design a new scheme which was not only to some extent continuous with existing schemes, but also had a clear conceptual rationale that users in a range of disciplines could accept and understand. The first phase of the review established that: (1) end-users of class schemes in survey data analysis did want to continue to have social class provided as a measure; and (2) the existing class measures drastically needed revising. The next phase involved allocating occupations to social classes based on several criteria which were continuous with a sociological understanding of class. For various reasons which I will not explain here, we settled on John Goldthorpe’s (1997) conception of social class, as outlined in numerous papers and in the class scheme he and Erikson (1992) used for their well-known study of class mobility. It relies on a structural definition of class, perceived as a socio-economic position, thus separating this perception of class from others that conceive it in terms of, for example, culture or identity. It thus leaves these as external variables to be analyzed in relation to the occupational scheme (O’Reilly 1997). This was not a straightforward or unproblematic decision; it involved negotiating the various needs of different end-users (of social class measures) with some very differing and sometimes contradictory ideas about what class means and what a scheme is supposed to be measuring. However, it was within sociology that the notion of class had been most systematically theorized and elaborated. No other discipline could provide this conceptual base.

Having constructed the new scheme, we then found ourselves explaining what it was measuring (via various meetings and publications) to researchers who often use class schemes very uncritically, without engaging with the theoretical literature or thinking through the implications of the connections they discover. Some, for example, simply used class as a proxy for income (which the new scheme does not incorporate), some thought it was interchangeable with occupational classifications (which in practice measure different things), some preferred simply to use the distinction between manual and non-manual work (which the new scheme has shown is now less indicative of social class differences than in the past), and others just wanted to make sure the new scheme was continuous with measures they had used in the past. Others, of course, were more worried about how the theoretical (sociological) conceptualization of class was operationalized and would discuss this issue with us in great depth and with critical angst. Here sociologists were talking to others and amongst themselves.

In my work on migration, the difficulties were those of quantifying a very fluid phenomenon, and the challenges of rigid definitions. Whenever I presented my anthropological fieldwork on the Costa del Sol to sociologists, it seemed that they wanted numbers. “how many migrants are we talking about?” . and concrete terms . “who is a member of this community you describe, and who is not?” I, alternatively, was more interested in the fact that this movement was incredibly fluid; that it was difficult to find out who lived in Spain and when. Of course, since what we might call the “mobilities turn” (Urry 2007), it is now much easier to discuss migration in terms of mobility, flow and movement rather than stasis. But in the 1990s, I was stuck with the problem of defining a very fluid movement in terms with which sociologists were more familiar, using the language of expatriates, immigrants, emigrants and tourists. I thus constructed emic categories of living in Spain that reflected the way
those moving lived their lives, and that acknowledged that it is impossible to count them. I used their own descriptions, such as “we live here all year round”, “we come back and forth”, “we spend winters here” and “we are just tourists”, to distinguish mobility types, and provided a critique of rigid definitions of migration. I discussed and analyzed why it can be so difficult to count these particular migrants. because the pursuit of freedom is such an essential foundation of their way of life. I explored what the notion of community meant to them, and how they were creative in constructing, re-constructing and maintaining community boundaries in order to deal with their fluidity and marginalization. (I concede I did not then look much at transnational communities, as they were not yet a formulated concept, but I did talk about their constant and ongoing ties to home and the ambiguity of the notion of home.) Here sociology was expanding through empirical research.

However, I also learnt to cater to the demands of sociologists and thus gathered a range of numbers to present at conferences. I quoted figures of those registered on the census and town hall registers, and compared them with numbers of property owners and with estimates from knowledgeable insiders. The figure that tends to be quoted quite widely now as an estimate of the numbers of British living in Spain takes the numbers of those on town hall registers and trebles it, based on a formula I first used in a report in 2004 (O’Reilly 2004), and which became reified in a report by Sriskandarajah and Drew (2006).

Between 2000 and 2003 I joined an interdisciplinary team of researchers who were exploring international retirement migration (funded by the European Science Foundation). In our meetings, I was persistent in insisting that the migration of North Europeans to sunnier climes (which many of us were studying at the time) could not exclusively be conceptualized in terms of retirement, as the geographers and gerontologists were wont to do. I was concerned that giving this migration trend the label “retirement migration” thus excluded some of the key features of the mobility. To me, what characterized this movement above all else was the themes of leisure and escape; the fact that migration south is part of the history of tourism is more important in my mind than any links to retirement. Indeed, I believe retirement merely enables a move that many people who are not retired would like (and are beginning) to make increasingly across the globe. With all its fluidity, variety and flexibility, I believe this mobility trend is linked to broader phenomena, including second-home ownership, tourism, colonialism and global wealth inequalities, much more than it is concerned with the individual experience of retirement. I saw the imposition of the label “international retirement migration” (IRM) as a crude form of deductivism. Here the openness of a sociological imagination was informing the development of an interdisciplinary field.

The geographers and gerontologists on this team also tended to feel more comfortable with quantitative data and were not always sure what use to make of my in-depth qualitative findings in relation to their survey work. Geographers have been inclined to look for trends and patterns, to rely quite heavily on quantitative analyses, and not to understand fully the benefits and implications of a qualitative approach. So, again I learned to present my work in ways others would understand and appreciate. I felt compelled to draw general conclusions that could be summarized in a sentence or two and compared with findings from other disciplines. Nevertheless, as my research had not been conducted in a way that was easily comparable with theirs, because I had included younger, working and early-retired people, and because my methodology could not be standardized, my work had to be almost entirely excluded from a review of the field (Casado Di’az 2006). Here interdisciplinarity was impeded by epistemological difference (or perhaps indifference?).

There are other, more structural, institutional and practical difficulties associated with undertaking interdisciplinary research; what Steinmetz (2007, p. 58) calls “hard constraints”. It can severely impair one’s employability, for instance. Working across several disciplinary boundaries in the pursuit of a substantive interest tends to involve spreading one’s expertise so thinly that one is not recognized by a
particular discipline or subdiscipline, and fails to achieve renown in what is essentially a field of power (Bourdieu 1985). Luckily, this does not seem to have held me back so far, but I have lost count of the times I have been advised by mentors or senior staff to “try to determine your particular contribution to sociology”, or words to that effect. The current institutionalization of disciplinarity (of which there can be no doubt) assumes there is an entire body of knowledge one has consumed and understood. As a result, I have had papers rejected because there was too much geography literature I had not managed to incorporate, and while trying to correct this, I have had to spend less time reading and incorporating the advancing body of knowledge in sociology, and have had to omit some important sociological insights from other work. Moreover, the UK’s infamous research assessment exercise (RAE) recognizes one’s contribution to work in a given discipline. Departments submit their research to a discipline panel and, although interdisciplinary work is supposed to be acceptable in principle, in practice board members are often ill equipped to assess it. And there is always an implicit suggestion you should at least only intermingle with one other discipline. So, interdisciplinarity can be damaging to one’s intellectual health and employment status.

**Lessons learned: how interdisciplinarity has enhanced sociology**

If the above all sounds rather negative, there have, nevertheless, been several useful lessons learned. the crucial advantages of interdisciplinary work that I will explicate. As a result of working in interdisciplinary teams and presenting work outwith my discipline, I have learned always to clearly define my terms and not to take too much knowledge for granted: both theoretical frameworks and substantive fields have to be succinctly reviewed each time they are explored. I have learned to quantify phenomena where possible, and to draw clear boundaries around a topic at least for the purposes of the given piece. Explaining things to others outside one’s field or discipline thus yields a clarity and discipline that is beneficial to one’s work.

A further benefit has been the ability to import concepts from outside my own discipline of sociology. (As an aside, it seems important to my sense of self that I think of myself as a sociologist engaging in interdisciplinary work.) To defend myself against Andrew Sayer’s (2003) criticism, I am not guilty of not being able to see beyond the problems posed by my own discipline. It was difficult, for example, initially to locate work on migration within sociology because by the 1990s few sociologists had paid much attention to the subject (something amazing in the current climate). My interests were in geographical movement, social change, a sense of community and the meaning of home, and these are traditionally dealt with much better by geographers than sociologists. I have also acquired from geography a focus on (and questioning of) the concepts of space and place. Tourism, too, an important theme and contributor of crucial theoretical perspectives in my work, had been given much more attention by geographers than by sociologists and anthropologists. On the other hand, I believe I gained from social anthropology a perspective that aspires to an emic and holistic view of the social world, even as it embraces, methodologically and conceptually, the increasing interconnectedness of the world (see Marcus 1995).

My training in ethnographic methods has provided me with a unique way of understanding the world using participant observation that always sees humans as both subjects and actors, and that acknowledges and refuses to reduce more than absolutely necessary the fascinating complexity of the social world (Willis and Trondman 2000). Finally, I have acquired a substantive interest in (and written on) apparently unrelated topics such as the informal economy, volunteering, ethnicity, friendship, gender and quality of life. For this I thank social anthropology’s emphasis on inductivism. As Scott (2005a) contends, “sociological research develops through debates with scholars in other disciplinary areas”.

**Lessons learned: how sociology has informed interdisciplinarity**
However, I believe I bring to my interdisciplinary work a solid grounding in sociology, a sociological habitus, which is revealed through my particular conception of the social. I retain, for example, a phenomenological perspective that seeks to understand the experience of migration from the perspective of the actors involved. But, of course, I would not stop there with mere sets of individual perspectives and experiences. The social constructionist perspective that has informed human geography and its understanding of the social construction of space and place is also part of my disciplinary training. But I do not consider everything to be socially constructed. My sociological background lends a historical and social structural perspective that wants to include the pre-existing conditions of the migration. The history of mass tourism in coastal parts of Spain; the increase in expenditure wealth experienced by members of various Western states at certain times; the physical and social construction of areas migrants settle in. And the way these become dispositions; the tendency to look for escape; the associations of a lifestyle with tourism and leisure; and the way these impinge on actions and expectations (see O’Reilly 2000, 2003, 2007). During my first degree I acquired a substantive interest in social cohesion and community formation and maintenance that, since sociology emerged with the “problem” of modernity, have been at the heart of the discipline’s general conception of the social (Bhambra 2007). I bring these things to my interdisciplinary work.

A lack of discipline

My own disciplinary training and my sense of place in the disciplinary division of labor clearly remain important. The most important insights in my own work come from that combination of approaches, concepts, theories and frameworks we call sociology. However, I do not feel I have made a profound contribution to sociology. My work feels fragmented, weak and disparate. As I have been working across a number of disciplines, I have not had time to keep up to date with important developments in sociology, especially in sociological theory. Most of all, I have not been able to make the most important contribution to my work that sociology can make. That is to ensure I include both macro- and micro-perspectives, overtly to consider both constraints and actions, or (to be more precise) to theorize the relationship between what individuals intend and mean and the culture and conditions within which their actions take place. I am afraid I thus have doubts about the limits of interdisciplinarity and wish to return to more discipline in my own work. Before I discuss this further, I want to return briefly to a discussion of what sociology is.

What sociology is

To return to John Scott’s (2005a, 2005b) arguments, a disciplined sociology entails a clear sense of what constitutes the category of the social, something emerging from the interrelations between human actors and their subjectivities. But this something emerging is more than the mere sum of these actions and subjective meanings, it takes the shape of “facts” or “forms”, which become institutionalized or embedded in social relations, embodied as tendencies, acknowledged or witnessed by actors in the form of rules or laws, or simply acted upon as norms and conventions. A disciplined sociology must further remember, reiterate (and, for new students, learn) what this category of “the social” refers to, as a long history of sociological theory.

On close reading, then, sociology is not just one or other position, conception, theory, approach or methodology. It is a culmination (and continuing development) of ideas, all of which together attempt to understand the social in terms of the interrelationship of social actors and social structures (however these are conceived and however many layers entailed). This work began with the foundational theorists, who separately conceived of the realm of the social in terms of, inter alia, a materialist conception of history (Marx), the existence of social facts sui generis (Durkheim), meaningful action (Weber) or emergent forms of social life (Simmel). It is continued in the work of more contemporary theorists who conceive of the social using, for example, a theory of practice (Bourdieu 1977), structuration theory (Giddens 1984), analytical dualism (Archer 1995), or strong structuration (Stones 2005). It is advanced by developing concepts, whose task it is to bridge the
particular and the general, such as habitus and field (Bourdieu 1977, 1985), position practices (Bhaskar 1979), internalized structures (Stones 2005), performance and embodiment; or by resisting any “elision” of conditions, on the one hand, and actions, on the other (Archer 1995). Even such useful concepts in the field of public sociology as institutional racism (Murji 2007) owe their elaboration to sociological theories exploring the relationship of individuals to institutions. The whole history of sociology to date has been the history of attempts to conceive, understand and perhaps even predict the history, shape and form of human societies. The defining feature of this history has been pursuit of the ontological questions: what is society, what is individual, and how are they related? This is both sociology’s long-standing challenge (Morawska 2003) and its defining feature. As Bourdieu (1977, pp. 34) argued, neither phenomenological nor objectivist knowledge are satisfactory because objectivism constitutes the world “as a system of objective relations independent of individual consciousness and wills”, whilst phenomenology “sets out to make explicit the truth of primary experience” without questioning the conditions of existence of such primary experience.

To return to discipline
We must never forget that what sociologists do is explore the relationship between, on the one hand, structures, dispositions (embodied or otherwise), institutions, constraints, norms or outside forces, and, on the other hand, individuals (perhaps even psyches and bodies), impulses, wills, intentions, actions or meanings. This is not to say we should return to dualisms, but we must continue to address the various layers of this thing we call the social. This is what I have not managed to achieve, because I have spread my work too thinly. In my own work on migration there has been a lack of focus on the broader picture, on the conditions of existence referred to above. I have failed adequately to consider the location of British migrants within a macro-and historical perspective on migration. I have skimmed over any discussions about global wealth inequalities, all but ignored Britain’s colonial past and overlooked the long-term social, economic and environmental implications of what is a rather privileged or affluent migration. I have not spent sufficient time thinking through the relationship between the macro and the micro, nor fully considered meso-level structures, such as “habitus” or “internal structures” (see Bourdieu 1977, Stones 2005). I am just beginning to bring an emphasis on more broadly conceived social structures into my sociology of migration. I am working on a paper about the reproduction of social class in the context of affluent migration; I have explored children’s migration stories and their, heavily-constrained, migration choices (O’Reilly 2009); and I am currently trying to conceptualize “lifestyle migration” in the context of a broader perspective on mobilities. But no sooner do I begin to consider such broader patterns and structures, historical conditions or external constraints than I find I need to think through in more detail the relationship between those and the phenomenological data I have usually (perhaps because of my methodology) been more concerned to elaborate. This lack of perspective on both the particular and the general is a problem with migration research generally, as Morawska (2003) has noted, and this is why we must retain a general conception of sociology, a disciplined sociology and a professional sociology.

Conclusion: a disciplined sociology and a protected space
Interdisciplinary work offers its advantages and its challenges. I have demonstrated this through a close examination of my own work; not to make a claim that I am unique, but to offer a fairly common example. Sociology can be both enhanced and confirmed through interdisciplinarity and has a lot to offer other disciplines. But interdisciplinarity is challenging, time-consuming and can leave less space for important disciplinary advances. In sociology, disciplinary work is important because sociology explores and theorizes the social, especially the interrelationships of humans with humans, individuals and structures, the macro and micro, free will and constraints. It resists the temptation to focus on one or other side of the sociological story, on globalization at the expense of the local, on performance and embodiment at the expense of patterns and trends, on identity construction at the expense of culture, and so on, and vice versa.
Sociology must both embrace new specialisms and retain its disciplinary core (which is permitted to mature and grow), but this can only be managed with due discipline. I do not seek a “self-enclosed and paradigmatic field that is attentive to maintaining its boundaries” (Steinmetz 2007, p. 49). What I defend is a space for disciplinary work to proceed where it is protected from public, critical or policy concerns, at least at some level, and where it can be taught in full. This does mean sociology degrees and sociology posts in universities, sociology departments (or groups), sociology journals, sociology conferences, and so on. Indeed, as Burawoy (2005, p. 10) contends, sociology can have no public face without a strong discipline to offer; it can have no subfields without “true and tested methods, (and) accumulated bodies of knowledge”. Similarly, Fuller’s (2006, p. 199) New sociological imagination (even as it re-considers our relationship to nature, and confronts “biologically-based barriers”) demands a strong, scientific, sociology which can resist market demands and build on rather than deny its history. Indeed, I would argue that only someone with a sociology degree can fully comprehend his arguments, and even then with difficulty. Sayer (2003), alternatively, is only able to criticize the parochialism and reductionism of a disciplined sociology because he has such a solid grounding in sociology himself. He uses Bourdieu to analyze sociologists’ need to identify with a discipline, and in the process increases his own chances of success in “the game” of sociology. Finally, Urry (2005), whom Scott is addressing in his 2005 paper, also argues that interdisciplinary work should be based on strong disciplinary foundations. However, he believes sociology has no real center or essence, but that is because he overlooks its essence. He continues to equate society with “a society” (or nation), and to cite sociology’s range of substantive interests, including the entire world, as evidence of its lack of a core. He ignores what Scott calls the “general conception of the social”. He has failed to identify what is unique to sociology, which is its long-standing and continuing attempts to understand and to theorize the interrelationship between the world out there and the world in here.

Notes

1. For Steinmetz (2007, p. 55), transdisciplinarity is where “both parties to the relationship undergo change and interact in a new ‘third’ space characterized by a minimum of symbolic violence”, whereas in interdisciplinary “sociology retained its distinctive identity and subjected external inputs to its own logic”.

2. Sayer’s (2003, p. 5) definition of postdisciplinarity is strangely reminiscent of Urry’s (2007) mobilities paradigm and of the growing interest in mobile, virtual or multi-sited research: “Post-disciplinary studies emerge when scholars forget about disciplines and whether ideas can be identified with any particular one; they identify with learning rather than with disciplines. They follow ideas and connections wherever they lead instead of following them only as far as the border of their discipline”. Similarly, Steinmetz (2007, p. 58) suggests “the present situation is conducive to ‘visiting’ or ‘travelling’ outside the discipline”. This is all evidence of a paradigm shift, or even a fashion.

3. I am not including a list of references, as it would be too numerous. A glance at any number of key journals in these fields will reveal the growth in interdisciplinary collaboration as well as the normative nature of many such projects.

4. I realize I am now stereotyping, which is the danger when we try to take on too much and thus have to reduce the complexity of an issue. However, all stereotypes have their basis in reality, and I have met few phenomenological geographers. Of course, this is changing.

5. Scott (2005a) acknowledges that disciplines are not perfectly discrete.

References


744.


