

# Changing Society – What is the role of the Sociologist?

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*My dear Pedro,*

You asked me when you were 7 years old, why I was going to university to study sociology and why I wanted to become a sociologist.

Now that you are 18 years old and entering into the world, I see it as an appropriate time to explain what I now do as a living to you.

In my work as a sociologist, I have been successful in driving through changes that make our education system able to prepare your generation for the world that will await them as they leave school. You will have experienced these advancements in the past few years.

When I was younger I wanted to be a spy because I loved 'people-watching', especially observing the ways in which people interacted with each other. Sociology gave me the opportunity to turn that passion into a subject I studied and a career I pursue in our changing society, but sadly I never get asked if I like my drink "shaken not stirred".

When I started, someone told me that sociology should be an academic study only; they said that it researches what has happened in the past and reports on its findings. That was never enough for me because I knew that it could do more than this. Whilst this is valuable; it is not the type of sociology I practiced. I was keen to ensure that what we learn can be used proactively to help shape how society, legislation and social policy should develop in the future to increase the quality of life of every member of our society. This was the trigger that motivated me to continue my studies in sociology.

**I believe there are four key things a Sociologist should undertake:**

1. We must INTERROGATE what has happened, using facts and data to build a picture of the changing patterns in society.
2. We must INTERPRET those facts and data in a way which brings meaning, and use our insight to draw meaningful conclusions from the past.

3. We must use our privileged position to INFORM, to tell policy and decision makers across society of these key conclusions, so they can use this insight to help shape future policy and practice.
4. Beyond informing, I also believe it is critical that we INTERVENE to ensure that we shape the future and make society a better place for all its citizens.

I said I would attempt to illustrate what I mean practically, in a way that will be relevant to your life and experiences when you leave school. So let me give you some examples of the ways in which I hope your educational experience, and those of your peers has helped to prepare you for the challenges of the world you are now entering into as an adult.

There are a number of different approaches sociologists can take when regarding education. Some have what is called a 'functionalist' attitude. This is the belief that education needs to help support young people gain the right skills for their life ahead. It also means that it should follow a 'meritocratic' model, where natural talent should be able to rise to the top, regardless of the potential influencing factors of wealth, ethnicity or gender. Others have a 'Marxist' approach to education. They hold the belief that the education system serves the needs of the ruling class. This is done through reproducing the imbalances of a capitalist culture and justifying these inequalities by the myth of meritocracy.

Pierre Bourdieu published a theory between 1971 and 1994 relating to the achievement differences between pupils from different social classes. In general, the middle class achieved higher than the working class. He developed a theory about 'cultural capital' which demonstrates how the education system is middle class so therefore benefits middle class children. The ideology within the system is that of middle class, meaning that working class children are at a disadvantage because these views and ideas are alien to them. These working class children lack middle class qualities so have limited chance of high achievement in this system. I was inspired



by this study to work further against cultural capital to create an equal chance for all members of the education system.

## 1. What did I interrogate?

I built on Alice Sullivan's work, conducted in 2001. She was one of the few sociologists who have attempted to examine Bourdieu's theory. She studied four different schools, giving questionnaires to find the occupation of the parents and their educational qualifications which led her to derive their social class. She asked the pupils a series of questions, such as the books they read or the music they listened to. She further analysed how this impacted educational achievement at GCSE level. She found that there was a clear link between the nature of television programmes watched and pupil attainment. I used this as a foundation for my own study.

I designed my study at a particularly critical time in the development of

addition, all but 17% of the lower income cohort agreed to go on to study to A Levels, a 44% increase.

- In the A Level cohort, performance in the lower income cohort increased by 27%, again improving A Level performance to only 14% difference.

An additional 30% of the lower income cohort went on to go to University.

Clearly these results were driven by a combination of factors:

- Real potential was identified early in the cycle, through the study I designed.
- The teachers were then able to nurture this potential using the same focus on personalised and culturally relevant learning.
- The pupils were able to build on their own self-esteem and achieve a wholly different level of academic performance.
- Both teachers and pupils embraced the personalised learning approach; they accessed a far wider set of references and material by embracing the internet and social media.

When I was at school, the internet was something you did at home, and the use of social media was frowned upon, not embraced. My interpretation was that these powerful tools should be used as a core part of the education system, to enable people like you access and become familiar with their world. For you, this means being able to connect directly with the people and culture of your heritage and background. Every child should have the personal ability to engage with their personal background and the influences that make them who and what they are.

### 3. How did I use this interpretation to inform policy makers?

To be honest, I learnt from your mother, who wrote tirelessly about the issues of adoption, and campaigned to have the laws successfully changed in the United Kingdom. So I did the same; I spoke to teachers up and down the country; I found there were a group of like-minded sociologists who felt that it was critical to ensure:

That all children were able to access their own personal heritage.

That the use of the internet and social media was the most effective way for individuals to access this personal fingerprint.

We were able to present factual data from my study, which demonstrated the

clear benefit that the approach had already delivered.

Based on this ground swell of opinion, I then spoke to the local and national politicians and began to ask them to consider piloting this approach.

### 4. How did I intervene?

Luckily, I only had to do two things to campaign for change – to present the data from the study and showcase the successes. The pupils who had benefitted from the first study became my spokespeople and case studies; they came and told politicians how it had changed their ability to thrive in an education system that was not helping them at that stage. From a local pilot, the approach was picked up by the authorities and turned into a national pilot, and was then adopted and launched across all schools. It also became the introduction for the University's updated 'Personal Statement'.

Now you will look back at this (I hope) with amusement, as you have your personal profile and fingerprint, as you are far better able to understand where you come from and what has made you what you are; you are as a result far better prepared for the adult world you are now entering, than I ever was.

So in answer to the question "what does a sociologist do?", at its best, they are able to interpret the world around them, and use this interpretation to change the world for the better. A sociologist has a very privileged position, being able to look deeply at the trends affecting society. For me, with this privilege came the responsibility to use that position to shape policy and execution.

This is a great thing to be able to do, and I am hopeful that you will have seen a direct benefit in your own education, and can look forward to your adult life safe in the knowledge that you are as well prepared for that life as possible.

With very best wishes and I am looking forward to seeing you soon, your cousin

*Amy Mackenzie*

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educational theory and practice in the United Kingdom. At the time, the Education Secretary, Michael Gove was seeking to introduce

changes that I believed would take education backwards, not forwards. He believed that the way forward was to move away from individual learning. Instead, he proposed to change policy and go back to a more traditional and consistent view of achievement. He believed that this would set much more consistent standards and tests to evaluate success – much less course work, like I did at school and much more focus on exams at the end of the course. I believed that this would cause a further divide between pupils with different ethnic backgrounds or incomes.

My study set out to understand whether a more personalised assessment would help uncover the real intelligence of individuals and their ability to progress. I created a set of individual assessments based on the cultural backgrounds and income of the pupil's parents. For my initial study, I picked a secondary school in a major metropolitan area in the United Kingdom that was non-selective but had a high variance in household income. I furthered this research by recreating this study in different parts of the country and in different types of schools, ranging from boarding schools to selective and non-selective comprehensives.

### 2. How did I interpret the findings?

Over a two year period, this more personalised approach to identifying potential and improving self-esteem in pupils who have previously thought to be low achievers, had a positive effect.

- In the GCSE cohort, performance in the lower income group improved 32%, and was only 11% worse than the high income group. In