

Is the Sociological Clinic Open for Business?

Nick J Fox, BSA Sociologists outside Academia

Sociology has much to say about the grand problems facing contemporary society, from climate change to migration to wealth and health inequalities, as readers of *Discover Society* know. But sociologists are also addressing the smaller problems of everyday life, ranging from improving urban spaces to enhancing work and productivity.

I'm in the corridors of a large UK company's headquarters. It could be a utility company like BT or Virgin Rail, or a high street store such as Marks and Spencer or Tesco. I pass office doors with names and job roles. There's an economist, now here's a work psychologist. I stop outside a door marked 'Katy Roberts: Sociologist'. I knock and go in.

Katy's hard at work at her PC, her desk high with papers; another table groaning under a mass of files. 'My job is to sort out whatever problems the company has', she says. 'I never know exactly what's going to land on my desk from day to day. That's the exciting thing about working as a company sociologist.' Recently she's been looking at ways to enhance the company workforce's involvement in the company business plan, and how to use social media more effectively for marketing a new product. She also has a case load of individual issues that her colleagues have brought for her to solve.

The company employed Katy specifically because of her skills as a sociologist – she has a BA in Sociology and a Master's in Social and Public Policy. 'I use sociological theories and concepts to address all kinds of problems, and bring a sociological perspective to bear on issues that management just don't have the background to fully appraise and resolve.' Sometimes, says Katy, when she has a problem to address, she will interview staff members, or even go and observe them at work. Other times she will use her sociological understanding and experience to propose different solutions and discuss these with managers or workers.

OK, I'll be honest with you now. There is no Katy Roberts, and if I ever walked down that corridor there was no door with 'Sociologist' on it. Sure there was an economist, and a work psychologist, but no sociologist. Sadly, you'll be hard pressed – in the UK or much of Europe for that matter – to find someone employed as a workplace sociologist, be it in a company, in local government or the voluntary sector. Every year, about 8,000 new sociology graduates enter the jobs market, and gain all kinds of employment where they use their sociological knowledge to greater or lesser extent. But these jobs don't have that 'sociologist' title, apart from the few who take up teaching or research posts in universities, or work in independent research organisations.

That's not the case in the US (or in South Africa and a few other places). There sociology is flourishing in all kinds of workplaces: in business and industry, local and national government and in charities. They often call it 'clinical sociology', maybe because people consult sociologists with work or other problems the way you'd consult a doctor, a therapist or a counsellor. Though in clinical sociology, the patient will be an organisation or a company rather than an individual.

Seventy-five years ago, the New York sociologist Walter Argow wrote an article rather like this one in an American sociology journal. He too was concerned about the lack of 'practical sociology' in the US at that time, and called for an effort to reach out beyond universities. Since then Stateside sociology has risen to his challenge, and practical sociology is doing well. You can read about their work tackling the everyday problems of contemporary life in their *Journal of Applied Social Science*.

For the past year, the British Sociological Association (BSA) group *Sociologists outside Academia* has been focusing on the potential and possibility for practical sociology here in the UK. We are convinced that sociology is essential not only for understanding the big problems that face society, but also the daily issues that need addressing at work, at home or in the community. We believe sociologists have the concepts (like 'cultural capital' or 'moral panic'), the theories

(social mobility, socialisation) and detailed knowledge of organisations and human interactions that can address such everyday problems.

While I've been working on this project, I've been meeting up with UK sociologists who are doing practical sociology. Some call themselves 'consulting sociologists', others run businesses that provide sociological expertise to industry, local government and voluntary organisations. I talk to independent sociologist Robert Dingwall, who describes his work for a UK government research council to enhance public participation in science. He's developed resources so members of the public can explore the consequences of scientific work, and apply this to their lives.

Truth Consulting is a London-based company that regularly applies sociological theory to solve its clients' practical and strategic challenges. 'Understanding consumers requires an implicit sociological imagination and sensitivity to cultural difference', director Carol McNaughton-Nicholls tells me. She's used cultural analysis to understand norms of healthy eating in different national settings, Goffman's theories of every-day roles to explain consumer behaviour, and critical theory to assess how certain actions can label individuals.

I hear too from Jan Fritz, past president of the US *Clinical Sociology Association*. 'Clinical sociologists here in the United States intervene in all sorts of ways, including counselling, sustainability, conflict intervention, management and policymaking'. There and elsewhere, clinical sociologists can be accredited by the *Association for Applied and Clinical Sociology*, while many US universities offer qualifications in clinical sociology.

So the question remains: why has sociology not colonised UK workplaces and therapeutic settings the way that other social sciences have done? While some sociological concepts have made it into the mainstream, other useful notions and models have not been promoted assertively. Maybe psychologists' statistics and economists' quantitative models have queered the pitch for sociology's more discursive approaches. Perhaps UK sociologists lack the

confidence to use their knowledge and skills to address the many small problems and issues that we face every day. Or is sociology just too wedded to social critique to be acceptable to business and the establishment?

The US experience suggests all these barriers can be overcome, and sociologists can contribute productively to improving daily life at work or at home. To start the development of a UK practical sociology, we want to explore these and other issues. In October 2016, the *Sociologists outside Academia* group, along with *The Sociological Imagination* and Sage Publishing Ltd, will launch their project to set an agenda for practical sociology in the UK. Among the questions we shall attempt to answer are:

What has prevented the emergence of practical sociology in the UK?

What are the core knowledge and models that are needed to solve the problems that organisations, businesses and the public sector face?

What kinds of skills would be needed to work as a practical sociologist?

How would a practical sociology career pan out?

If you are interested in this project for a 'practical sociology', or even fancy developing a career as a practical sociologist, come and join us.

Date: Monday 17 October from 12.30 to 4.30.

Venue: British Psychological Society, Tabernacle St, London EC2A 4UE

Cost: BSA Members £5; Non-members £8; full-time students and BSA Concessionary members £3.

Tea and coffee provided: please bring your lunch.

Please book your place at

<http://portal.britsoc.co.uk/public/event/eventBooking.aspx?id=EVT10571>

More information

The Association for Applied and Clinical Sociology offers individual certification for clinical sociologists worldwide: www.aacsnet.net

BSA *Sociologists outside Academia* group: <http://www.britsoc.co.uk/specialisms/soa>

The Sociological Imagination: <http://sociologicalimagination.org/>

Biographical Note:

Nick J Fox is honorary professor of sociology at the University of Sheffield, and co-convenor of BSA Sociologists outside Academia.