



Spring/Summer 2010 No 9

Sociology For All

Politics Special

Sociologists Outside Academia newsletter

In this, our first themed edition of our newsletter, biographical pieces and articles show the application of the sociological imagination for those of us working in jobs outside of academia that have a political dimension. Tony is Researcher for Early Years and Childcare at Kent County Council, Gary is a Trade Union Official in Dorset and Maruta aspires to work in international policy research and shares her internship experiences. We also have article contributions from Bill looking at the election issues and old age and Hilary looks at the issue of politics and power through a sociological lens. And as usual we update you on all the latest exciting news relevant to our group.

We welcome your comments and feedback and suggestions for what you would like to see in future themed editions.

Best wishes

Annika & Tiffany (co-convenors) and Alastair (co-editor)

news

SOA in Network

You may have seen that we now have a regular space in Network. Our first piece was an interview by Tiffany with Jude England, Head of Social Science Collections and Research at the British Library. She shows how having a varied background, both inside and outside of academia places her in an ideal position in her job; "My background gave me the exposure to different companies and individuals, which makes a real difference to this job." Read the full article on pages 26-27 of the Spring 2010 edition. In the Summer edition, Anika Baddeley has submitted an article, following on with the library theme putting the attention back onto digital library access issues which is a continuing problem for some members. Anika argues; "To restrict sociological work to that which is performed within universities poses a threat to the strength of sociology, a discipline that after all is built on social debate – something which can only be enhanced by the development of a system that allows the ability for current scholarly discussion to be accessed by all interested parties and not dependent on institutional affiliation." If you have a story to tell about your information services needs, please get in touch so we can build a case to those in charge of the licensing agreements.

The deadline for the Autumn/Winter edition of Network is 15th August. If you have something you would like to write about, would like to be interviewed or can offer ideas for what we should fill our space with, please get in touch.

Applied Sociologists on LinkedIn

LinkedIn is a professional networking site and there are some good groups on there. The Sociology Network and Sociology Graduates are two such groups you may be interested in joining. Thanks to Hilary for this information.

SOA on Facebook

We now have a Facebook presence. Please become a fan of us if you have a Facebook account. Search 'BSA Sociologists Outside Academia' or find the BSA's Facebook page and join us from there. We hope to use Facebook to connect with members of the BSA, Early

Career Forum, Postgraduate Forum and Sociology at Work. If you know of a group you think we should connect with, let us know and we look forward to seeing you on there.

Sociology at Work –Working Notes journal

Thanks to those of you who completed the Sociology at Work questionnaire. Our Australian friends who set up the international applied sociology website wanted to collect information about what it is sociologists outside academia do and will present their findings in Working Notes - their new forthcoming online journal. We are all encouraged to submit articles to this new journal, which is a mixture of peer-reviewed and general interest articles to do with applied sociology. We look forward to seeing what the publication will look like and look forward to contributing in the future. <http://www.sociologyatwork.org>

Resources

Alastair has been working hard collating a wide range of resources from the Internet which are of use to Sociologists Outside Academia. This annotated list of resources will be made available on the Sociology at Work website for the benefit of people like us worldwide. If you have resources to add, please get in touch.

BSA Conference 2010

Unfortunately, none of the co-convenors from SOA were able to attend this years conference due to work commitments, but we would like to offer our congratulations to Tina Basi who was short listed for the Philip Abrahams prize at the conference. Her book 'Women, Identity and India's Call Centre Industry' was up against:

Ben Pitcher – 'The Politics of Multiculturalism: Race and Racism in Contemporary Britain', Monica Sassatelli – 'Becoming Europeans: Cultural Identity and Cultural Policies' and Vicki Squire – 'The Exclusionary Politics of Asylum'.

Monica Sassatelli scooped the prize.

If you were at the conference either presenting or as a delegate, we would be interested in hearing from you.

BSA Conference 2011

The conference in 2011 is called “60 Years of Sociology” and will be held at the London School of Economics. SOA has been encouraged to submit a proposal for a special event in the Teaching, Learning and Professional Issues strand. We were thinking of having a panel session of 3 or 4 sociologists who work outside academia chaired by Tiffany who has experience of chairing debates. The special events will be used to advertise the conference. The deadline for submissions in May 28th. Tiffany has a few contacts and will be approaching them and we are keen to hear from any SOA member who thinks they would be suitable to be a panel member. Keith Kahn-Harris, one of SOA's founders has already volunteered, so thanks Keith!

SOA's 5th anniversary year - 2011

It is SOA's 5th anniversary in April 2011. The group was launched in 2006 at the conference in Harrogate, With the 60 years of Sociology theme for the BSA annual conference, it would be fitting to showcase how diversity within the BSA has been embraced over the past 5 years. All suggestions, big or small, on what we could do to mark the occasion would be welcomed.

Events in 2010

We have an exciting offer from Dave Harris who is C-SAP associate and SOA member to put on event and maybe make a publication out of it. We are just in the process of talking about this and have some ideas brewing.

Asking the Climate Question

On Saturday December 5th 2009, I (Annika Coughlin) joined 50,000 other people on 'The Wave' march around London to demand action on climate change. The march was timed just before the Copenhagen Climate Summit held during 7-18th December. In Copenhagen and other parts of the world similar and larger scale protests were also held but it has been argued that no real progress had actually been made during the summit (carbon-news.blogspot.com). The Stop Climate Chaos Coalition who coordinated The Wave, are now following up the march with an 'Ask the Climate Question' 2010 election campaign. The idea is to ask the politicians who are canvassing in your area a climate question. The question you ask is up to you depending on what you are most concerned about, but they have three big questions to ask Parliamentary candidates:

Will you commit to putting the UK on track to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 40 per cent below 1990 levels by 2020, through genuine emissions reductions here in the UK?

Will you commit to ensuring at least 15% of all energy comes from renewables by 2020?

Will you commit to providing the UK's fair share of the money that developing countries need to adapt to climate change and develop their economies in a low carbon way – on top of existing overseas aid commitments?

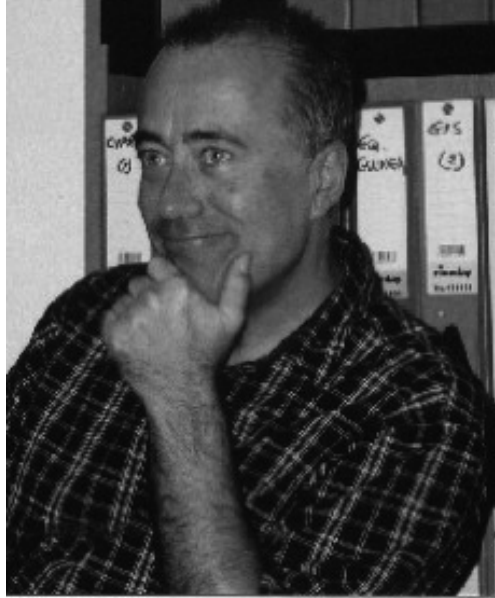
They have made an action pack which includes posters you can put in your window and tips on how to go about asking climate questions when your prospective MP comes knocking on your door.

For further information go to:

<http://www.stopclimatechaos.org/ask-the-climate-question>

biographies

Tony Alderton



I am a Researcher with Kent County Council (KCC) in the field of childcare and early education. My job can be a very rewarding, but it does require a high level of training and experience and also a huge amount of dedication and hard work.

I have a first class honours degree in Social Policy and Trade Union Studies (1993) from Middlesex University and a PhD (1998), completed at Bristol University. The title of my thesis was 'Trade

Unions and Japanisation'. This looked at the effects of so-called 'new management practices' on industrial relations and trade unionism and placed particular emphasis on personnel issues. It also included topics like Health & Safety, Recruitment & Retention and issues of work-life balance.

My current research work at KCC has enabled me to become involved in an array of research projects all within the framework of childcare and early education. This is an area often bound by vigorous time frames, imposed either by KCC or by project partners, including the government. For example, a recent initiative with very tight government deadlines was the 'Children's Centres Project'. Here, I was responsible for deciding where the Children's Centres should be placed in Kent and the catchment areas they should cover with regard to population, deprivation, the geographical logistics of the proposed sites, and the interplay between the centres and existing services. Round One of the development saw the placement of 20 centres. This covered approximately 16,000 children aged 0 to 4. Round Two saw the placement of another 32 centres, covering 42,000 children. The final Phase Three will see another 32 centres, covering the remaining 0 to 4 years population of 32,000 children. All these rounds have been subject to strict government deadlines, whilst also conforming to local government requirements for effective consultation periods with the affected communities. To date, all rounds have been completed on time and many centres are now open and offer early education to all 3 and 4 year olds, full day-care to all 0 to 4 year olds, and family health and support services for all families and children.

biographies

Another major research project I recently set up, in conjunction with Canterbury Christchurch University College, is called 'The Economy of Childcare'. This set out to explain what factors are important in understanding the demand and supply of quality childcare provision and includes issues surrounding employment and work-life balance. I am also actively involved, in partnership, in delivering an effective 'Information, Retrieval and Tracking (IRT) Strategy', in light of the Green Paper 'Every Child Matters, which arose out of the Victoria Climbié case. Other current areas of my research revolve around food and nutrition in the early years, the importance of outdoor play, and international differences between play activities.

My employment at KCC enables me to use my full range of research skills, both quantitative and qualitative. I do use general sociological theory, but also more specific social policy and childcare theory. However, my favourite part of the job is statistical analysis and knowing that my work makes a real difference to the lives of children and families. My role means I have sole responsibility for analysing all information in the pursuit of effective childcare and early education provision in Kent. Kent CC is a very forward-looking council. I am therefore allowed an element of academic freedom in my work and I continue to impress upon my team the need for a 'sociological imagination' in the work we all do.

I also manage a substantial budget within KCC and I have line management responsibilities for a small team of staff. I act as an academic supervisor to a Research Assistant involved in 'The Economy of Childcare Project' as well as being responsible for their day-to-day line management. My work also entails coming into contact with Social Services Directorates, Health Primary Care Trusts and voluntary agencies.

After leaving university, I became a Research Officer at Bath University for six months and then a visiting lecturer in Business Systems and Employee Relations and SPSS based Research Methods at the University of the West of England. Both these positions were on a part-time basis. Previously I worked for some time in the Civil Service as an Executive Officer based in the Inland Revenue Enforcement Office in Worthing before returning to academia and undertaking my PhD studies. I have also worked in the Seafarers International Research Centre at Cardiff University.

My work at Cardiff was a political, social and economic audit of the working conditions of seafarers in various parts of the world and I also helped to compile 'The Impact on Seafarers' Living and Working Conditions from Changes in the Structure of the Shipping Industry', sponsored by the International Labour Organisation (ILO). Particular

biographies

emphasis in my work at Cardiff involved the analysis of multi-national crewing patterns; the effects on shipboard health and safety of reduced port turnaround times; maritime labour market policy at the national and international level; and the global control and organisation of the maritime industry.

In summary, I would say that I followed an academic career purely by chance. It was never a burning ambition with me. My initial route into this career was through my involvement in trade union activities and employment relations. I was a full-time lay trade union activist in the Civil Service, and my manager very liberally allowed me to take up an opportunity to study for a certificate in employment relations at Middlesex University. I managed to achieve a distinction in this course and this led, quite naturally, to carrying on for a BA degree. As I also did well in this course, getting a first, tutors then started advising me to try for a PhD. Again the theme of my PhD, whilst being in the broad sociology discipline, was mainly based upon employment relations. Again luck played a part in my career after that, as I was fortunate enough to obtain a lengthy consultancy job at Bath University, undertaking childcare audits for Wiltshire and Swindon local authorities. I then had a short-term contract with Cardiff University, as mentioned above, but when the chance of a permanent job in the childcare sector came up, I was very fortunate to obtain it. I was never that interested in lecturing in universities, and research was my main interest. Unfortunately, research jobs in academia tend to all be on short-term contract bases. I have also been lucky enough to compile a substantial publications profile in all of the jobs I have undertaken so far in my career.

talderton@hotmail.com

biographies

Gary Pattison



I am a Trade Union Official working for GMB on an indefinite secondment from Dorset County Council. GMB supports union members in a wide range of workplaces. The union is a vast amalgamation of many organisations that have come together over many decades (most of the 20th century). GMB gets involved in human resources policy development, negotiating collective agreements concerning the terms and conditions of members and political

organisation. We also represent individual and groups of members in grievance and disciplinary hearings and promote health and safety and employee well being.

My background is in sociology and politics. I completed a PhD in 1993 and achieved an associate professorship while teaching in Istanbul. On my return to the UK in 1999 I found it difficult to find meaningful employment in the UK universities. The first post was at Portsmouth, a half time research assistant position that only paid the bills through several other temporary part time contracts. In rapid succession I moved from Portsmouth to Oxford Brookes, to South Bank and finally to Southampton.

Throughout this period my record at winning research funding improved, as did my publication record. Following a book based very much on my PhD research I went on to publish several papers. One favourite, researched and authored in 2004 for the journal 'Planning Perspectives' was called Planning for decline: the 'D'-village policy of County Durham. From the 1930s to the 1970s the contraction of the coal mining industry in County Durham was followed closely by plans to abolish many of the settlements that had supported the mining population. The article examined the development of the policies that were used to classify villages for demolition, the local resistance that

developed in defence of the villages and the justifications provided in support of this policy. The bulk of the research was based on archived contemporary newspaper reporting of the events as they happened. Never the less I had moved a long way from my original academic base to planning, community development and human geography. In terms of research bids most of my success had moved on to policy led research – evaluations and base line studies for Single Regeneration Budget Programmes, New Deal, Sure Start and so on – a long way from my academic interests. I also felt that my time was fully consumed searching for the next post permanently rather than putting my energies into grounded academic work.

In a desperate bid for some sort of stability I looked at where I could move to escape from the terror of the temporary contract. I concluded that we live in a closed society and that there was simply no way that anyone from an industrial working class background would ever be allowed to seriously work in higher education. The answer was a research-based post as a spatial planner in local government. Unfortunately local government struck me as primarily interested in management hierarchy rather than delivery. From day one I felt that my treatment was somewhat different to colleagues, scathing reference was often made to my academic background and insufficient trust was invested in me to seriously do the job. It came as no surprise that my post was down graded following a job evaluation exercise. At this stage I had to make a move. When the unions first started looking at equal pay there was a view that equality meant that we would be able to run with cases on race and ethnicity, LGBT, disability and possibly even age. Certainly it was felt that a male equal pay claim should be possible against female comparators who were paid more for a job of equal value. I took a case forward and won without the need to go to tribunal. Subsequently legal precedent has made it almost impossible to run with male equal pay cases. From this point onwards I became more involved in trade union work and eventually took on a full time trade union role.

My day-to-day work involves quantitative and qualitative data analysis, research and policy writing. My previous teaching experience comes in useful as a Trade Union Official as I have to do a lot of public speaking, negotiating and communicating on behalf of clients. It is essential to have knowledge of employment law, health and safety, industrial organisation and equalities. Sociology forms a useful context for a lot of the cases I work on. Sociology helps with attempting to develop bottom up democratic activism and my knowledge of critical social theory has been useful in explaining to members why power relations are as they are, especially in relation to diversity issues to do with gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity.

I will always identify myself as a sociologist and my work is all about making society a better place for union members and for the wider collective political ideals that the union supports. It is very satisfying to win cases, especially for low paid employees who very often lack confidence to run with things themselves. I oversee the union across Dorset County Council, West Dorset and North Dorset District Councils and a smaller number of public sector employees elsewhere in the area. We have members across all sectors from professionals to care workers in adult and children's services and a large number of teaching assistants. Much of the area that I cover is rural in nature and the role involves a great deal of travelling. It also involves a great deal of political work with the trade's councils, political parties and movements, the community and so on. Like many academic posts the role is self managed and based on personal interest and commitment. Indeed it's just about perfect for someone with my antagonism against authority. I keep promising that I will start writing again but time never quite permits this and I am not sure that it's such a big priority for me anymore.

G.Pattison@dorestcc.gov.uk

biographies

Maruta Herding



When I first started studying, I chose Sociology for two reasons. The first was an epistemological one, or curiosity: I wanted to study an area that seemed the least obvious to me – society. Why do people do what they do, why this way and not any other way and how can we best explain it? This is probably the very basic underlying question of most research projects, although I do hope to have some answers by now. The second reason for studying Sociology was more pragmatic and arose from a vague

desire to do “something useful”. When I flipped through a brochure on working in international organisations like the United Nations, which recommended studying law, political science, economics or sociology, the latter appeared the most attractive.

So in 2001, I matriculated for Sociology and Philosophy at the University of Freiburg in Germany, graduating in 2007 with a “Magistra Artium” (in return for taking five to six years, this degree used to grant utmost freedom and independence to students, but is now being replaced by the more structured and shorter BA and MA degrees). During my studies, I spent a year abroad at the American University in Cairo, doing a graduate diploma in Middle East Studies and learning Arabic, which I thoroughly enjoyed.

My Master’s thesis dealt with segregation and urban conflicts and looked at the case study of the riots in French suburbs in 2005, arguing that conflict may have a positive effect in terms of politics of recognition, when socio-economic segregation dominates the power relations in an urban region. When writing up my thesis and preparing for the final exams, I stayed in Paris for seven months and took advantage of the facility that makes going abroad a cakewalk: the Erasmus exchange.

Combining the two experiences of the Islamic environment in Cairo and the youth cultural and migration aspects of the French suburban study, I then decided to embark on a PhD project at the University of Cambridge that would deal with Islamic youth culture in France, Britain and Germany. This phenomenon is a very religious type of youth culture, manifesting for example in hip-hop with religious lyrics, Islamic street wear or Muslim media products. Apart from documenting the scenes and analysing what they consist of, I am trying to find out why this movement is emerging at this time in these

biographies

places by investigating the internal perspective of the producers and consumers of that youth culture as well as the external perspective of the societal context. Last year, I collected qualitative fieldwork data chiefly in Frankfurt, Marseille and Birmingham. Having started the project in 2007, I aim to finish it by the end of this year.

Meanwhile, I am still trying to figure out what my place as a sociologist will be. Still guided by both the epistemological and the practical understanding of sociology, I am fascinated by the uses of sociology outside the university, such as in research centres and think tanks that do political consultancy.

I strengthened this view during the three internships I completed during my studies. My first internship was in 2004 with the NGO and aid organisation Medico International in Frankfurt (<http://www.medico.de/en>), where I worked for four weeks in the departments for project management and public relations. Medico International offers funding and health policy advice in Africa, Latin America and Asia. Unlike Médecins Sans Frontières, the organisation does not employ doctors, but works with local medical partners in the respective country. Having spent two months in Israel and visited the Palestinian territories in 2000, I was involved in two Near Eastern projects during the internship. One dealt with the then newly built wall between Israel and the Palestinian territories and the impact it had on the health situation, for example whether the Palestinian population still had access to health care services. My task was to write an account using sources from local partners and international organisations. The other project engaged with a psychosocial support programme for children and teenagers at a refugee camp in Lebanon, and I updated the brochure information used for public relations and fundraising.

I did my second internship during my stay in Egypt in 2005. I spent six weeks at the Al Ahrām Center for Political and Strategic Studies in Cairo (www.acpss.ahram.org.eg/eng), a supposedly independent think tank, although its supporting organisation, the Al Ahrām Foundation, is a government institution. The researchers did appear independent and often critical of the state at a time when an opposition movement was forming, but some topics may have been more welcome than others; independence seemed to be granted particularly on the topic of Egypt's north-eastern neighbour, with which the government officially pursues good relations. My task was to further explore the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and the EU's common foreign and security policy towards the Middle East. My final report dealt with the historic development of such a policy, as outlined in the Barcelona Process, the attempted demarcation against US policies and the possibility of Arab partners to actively shape the EU's policies.

biographies

In 2006 finally, I worked as an intern at the German Federal Foreign Office (auswaertiges-amt.de/diplo/en). For eight weeks I was placed at the Department of Cultural and Media Relations with the Near and Middle East within the Directorate-General for Culture and Communication. I issued several reports, for instance on the Danish Cartoons Controversy and the reactions of the German press, the new Arabic channel of Germany's international broadcaster Deutsche Welle or the presence of Islamist groups on the internet. The internship was a unique insight into diplomacy and the way a ministry is run, thanks to the fact that interns got well integrated into the work of their respective department. Thus even though the internships did not have a direct link to sociology, they were closely connected to a range of sociological topics and approaches. The unpaid work eventually paid off in terms of experience, probably influencing my future plans. As much as I am intrigued by academia, I want to leave it at least for a while and go towards policy research. As always, a bit of both is welcome: after having already passed a substantial period of time at university, I would enjoy to carry on researching, but with a pinch (or more) of "real-life" impact added to it.

Would you like your biography featured in a future newsletter?

Please email or post 600 words (approx) and a photo to Annika at the addresses given at the end of the newsletter.

article

Bill Bytheway retired in 2009 and lives in Swansea. Previously he was a researcher in the Faculty of Health and Social Care at the Open University. His sociology education started in the late 1960s when working as a statistician in the Medical Sociology Research Unit in Aberdeen. Currently he is writing a book for Policy Press, provisionally titled 'Unmasking Age'.

In this article, Bill looks at the different perspectives which have underlined how issues of old age have been addressed in political debate over time. He argues for the need to have a different perspective when looking at politics and age that isn't patronising or ageist calling upon sociologists to participate in the debate.

Just Rewards

Bill Bytheway

The publication in 1989 of 'Workers versus pensioners: intergenerational justice in an ageing world' (Johnson et al, 1989) sent a shiver of apprehension and excitement through the body of British social gerontology. For the first time it seemed, we were connecting with the unfolding 'big' history of the world in which we lived. The opening chapter for example made the case for a redistribution of resources to younger generations and it ended: "If no action is taken, the competition for resources between workers and pensioners will break the fiscal basis of modern welfare systems, and quite possibly this will undermine the democratic consensus upon which the western economies are based" (p. 15).

Is this consensus being undermined? Although the issue of inter-generational equity has received some attention over the past two decades, population ageing is leading at most to a slow disintegration of welfare systems rather than something more cataclysmic. Certain significant shifts in government policies are under way, and these are becoming more apparent in the UK as we approach the impending general election: a prospective rise in retirement age, changes in pension policies, and the reorganisation of responsibilities relating to age-related illness and disability. A clear distinction remains between those age groups represented by 'workers' and 'pensioners' and this is evident in the manifestos of the parties contesting the election. As a consequence, pensioners are portrayed implicitly as a drain on the economy, consuming scarce resources and testing 'our' tolerance and sympathy.

There is an alternative perspective: an electorate made up of different generations, each associated with a particular event or experience. For example, domestic policy over the last sixty years has been dominated by a sense of debt towards the generation who 'fought in the war'. In contrast, a more negative view has developed of the 'baby-boom generation' with a more selfish attitude, typified by the T-shirt slogan 'Spending My Kids Inheritance'. And then these 'kids' are 'Thatcher's children' with no experience of the pre-1979 welfare state. We all age with the politicians and voted for (or against) them in the past. Adopting this perspective, it becomes easier to understand links between personal biographies, generational experiences and the histories of government.

Identifying and labelling generations is a way of developing popular stereotypes, generating expectations and explanations for a range

of political and cultural behaviours. To a limited extent we are free through reference to our personal biographies to associate or disassociate ourselves with a particular generation, but date of birth, and thereby age, constrain our choices.

A generational perspective raises awkward questions regarding the position of older people in 2010. On the one hand they have worked hard for many years, paid comparatively high levels of taxes and into national insurance. Many expect appropriate 'pay-back' for these lifelong contributions: an adequate pension, medical treatment and social care as needed. At a time of economic crisis however, pensions offer older people a degree of security denied to younger generations. As the latter face an uncertain future, it seems mean if older people insist on their share of increasingly limited resources.

AgeUK (formed by the amalgamation of Age Concern and Help the Aged) claims that 40% of the votes cast in the election will be by people over the age of 60: "We are the generation who could decide the next election." In this way it is equating age group and generation. It is interesting then to consider how it formulates the 'five key issues' that the next government 'needs to address':

- * Money: re-linking the basic state pension to earnings.
- * Respect: scrapping forced retirement at 65.
- * Support: protecting social care and support from impending cuts.
- * Participation: protecting free local travel for everyone over pension age.
- * Health: ending the scandal of malnutrition in hospitals.

AgeUK bases its case for action more on 'maintaining independence' than on 'claiming rights'. For example, the government is urged to provide 'decent care and support to stay independent', and the free bus pass scheme is defended on the grounds that it 'gives us freedom and independence'. Independence is linked to costs: for example, AgeUK rejects the plans of the Labour and Conservative parties to postpone the restoration of the link between pensions and earnings on the grounds that: "delaying this decision will save the next government relatively little money but would result in even more of us being plunged into poverty". Malnutrition in hospital is seen similarly as making it more likely that, 'we will take longer to get better' and, by implication, cost the health service more. So, not unlike the political

parties, AgeUK is sustaining the worker/pensioner distinction by focusing on the current and prospective interests of older people rather than their dues.

Whilst vulnerable of course to all sorts of prejudices, a generational or biographical approach to the explanation of differences by age is less dualistic and confrontational than that expounded by Johnson et al. It enables us for example to contrast the age profiles of the membership of the political parties, and to consider the implications of such differences for how further members might be recruited and how the wider public votes. Similarly it enables more nuanced discussions of how the experiences of men and women are changing over the years. It is interesting for example to note the question posed by a member of the audience in the second televised debate: 'Having brought up five children, worked most of my life, reached the age of 84, do all of you think that state pension of £59 per week is a just reward?' The questioner's biographical positioning was matched by Gordon Brown acknowledging that the pension credit was an attempt to 'make up the pension from what you've had as a result of your earnings being interrupted during the course of your life'. He recognised that women of her generation have had a raw deal through the calculation of the state pension.

I would suggest that sociologists (particularly those free of the anxieties and pressures of academe) can participate in current debates by focusing on the unfolding histories of different generations and disregarding ageist or patronising concerns regarding the position of 'pensioners' in the Britain of 2010.

bill.bytheway46@googlemail.com

Johnson, P., Conrad, C. and Thomson, D. (eds.) (1989) *Workers Versus Pensioners: intergenerational justice in an ageing world*, Manchester University Press, Manchester.

Hilary Burrage is a professional writer, consultant and social researcher. She works in the areas of sustainability, regeneration, knowledge and strategic policy, and has post-graduate qualifications (M.Sc.) and research experience in the Sociology of Science and Technology (particularly knowledge ecology and the knowledge economy), Social Policy, Health (especially teenage pregnancy) and Education.

Her biography appeared in *Sociology for All*, Issue No. 7 Spring 2009.

In this article Hilary discusses how the sociological imagination shapes her understanding of politics as she tries to make sense of the General Election, Politics and Power. Hilary argues that as a sociologist you can either observe society from afar or get involved as Hilary is compelled to do.

Power, Politics and the Sociological Prism Hilary Burrage

The sociological prism, once perceptually engrained, is deeply compelling; and never more so than when focused on Power.

Engagement in General Elections, then, is a sure-fire prescription for the turmoil of erupting ideas and frustrating half-finished debates, should one be thus sociologically inclined.

I am a sociologist. When will I ever learn? Here I am again, trying to make sense of the most unpredictable General Election for decades (yes, I can recall the last one), and acting as voluntary Agent for a Labour Candidate who has held our Constituency for the last three parliaments, and thoroughly deserves to hold it again this time around as well.

But all national predictions are off. No doubt the glass will clear but, at this point in these fascinating hustings the context in which all the political contenders find themselves defies coherent analysis, even using my special prism.

And who can say whether the Sociology leads the Politics, or vice versa, for those of us who put this sociological prism to use on a daily basis? Do we see power in action and respond by developing sociological analyses, or does sociological analysis take us to the perception of power (in all its guises), and it is that which triggers our understandings of the action?

Perhaps it doesn't matter, one way or the other. The sociological imagination takes most of us in just one of two directions. Either we become observers from afar, perhaps from the rarefied heights of the increasingly mythical ivory tower (or even from the more cynical parts of that less mythical establishment, the media), or else we somehow find ourselves Involved.

Self-evidently, I took the latter route. In the course of my sociological career – a term I use in the technical rather than the advancement sense – I have taught my subject at all levels and in many modes, taken membership of a wide range of public bodies and committees, spent time as a researcher, been a community volunteer and (separately) a social worker, developed a business, engaged in numerous backroom centre-left political roles, and written thousands upon thousands of words – and that's before we even mention the countless conversations, debates and occasionally genteel disputes, using the spoken word, with real people.

article

There is, in Sociology, no going back. Sociological perceptions and understandings of the world we live in can always be sharpened and redefined; but they can rarely be blunted and put away.

And so the sociological imagination is fed, wanting forever to know more.

Why do climate change scientists find it hard to acknowledge that human behaviour may now be a more pressing research issue than yet another modelling exercise about ice caps? And what's the scope for the green economy?

How can the advantages of Sure Start be rolled out most effectively to reach all who might benefit? And how can students from disadvantaged backgrounds be encouraged to raise their game and their ambitions, to realise their potential?

Why does public health still rank low in the hierarchy of medical glamour and influence? Which aspects of teenage pregnancy need to be seen as matters of most concern for those involved?

What's the most effective way to tackle housing issues, or the consequence of policies such as 'right to buy'? What does genuine engagement in the renewal of 'communities' entail?

Can Big Science be made to work to the advantage of economically challenged parts of the UK? And does technology have the potential to 'solve' problems like the energy crisis?

What do we actually mean by 'sustainability'? Do we really understand that there are many different sorts of 'stakeholding' - all of them legitimate, but some of them more overtly evident than others?

These and many others are questions which I, like other sociologists, have had to try to address in the course of my professional and civic life, working in local authorities, colleges, health research, regional and government departments and in regeneration.

And, within these multi-disciplinary dialogues, I've had to cope with the uncertainties inherent in any available evidence base for attempts to resolve very real matters of the here and now - uncertainties which social scientists often accommodate more comfortably than policy makers, natural scientists, entrepreneurs, politicians, practitioners or indeed the media and general public do.

article

The tensions endemic in such often pressing discourse about realities nonetheless offer their own challenges and rewards.

The more I have engaged in the process of policy development (and often concomitant change management), the more I realise how broad the spectrum of perceptions is, and often how little of this spectrum is common ground. Few even of those most experienced and committed to positive progress seem routinely to articulate positions which acknowledge multiple valid perceptions or levels of operation.

The idea that silo and single level thinking are major obstacles to coherence is of course not new. But mostly articulation of this issue has concerned specific practices and disciplines.

A wider, more generic perspective may however offer considerable scope for the development of broad-brush shared understandings - and thereby consolidated progress in bringing forward complex and multi-faceted public issues such as those listed above.

Typically, each actor / participant in such dialogues brings his or her own story to the table; but rarely are these stories all heard, in the heat of the discussion. Indeed, quite often those who have the least understood story to tell - usually those have least power and influence - are also those whose story is ultimately least well embedded in the final narrative. This tends to be the case whether the issues concern health, politics, regeneration or, say, the environment or sustainability.

My particular perception here of the world and its problems takes logically me to a left-of-centre politic. But it has also of late taken me to a new and very personal project: that of A Million Small Conversations, www.millionsmallconversations.co.uk, or 'amsc' - strapline: connecting small ideas for bigger sustainable change.

Watching disputes and dialogue over the years, I've seen that when people with different perceptions are given real opportunities to talk one-to-one they very often come to a mutually understood position, and from there, in discussion with others who have done the same, they devise constructive ways to make progress. But it takes time, and it takes patience.

I aim to make such opportunities openly available on my amsc discussion forum, so that people of all sorts can share as equals their experience and views in ways which permit further supportive interrogation, until there is a tested bedrock of common understandings (or divergence) on a whole range of emerging issues. This will I hope in turn encourage the dialectic to take off in yet more

article

diverse directions. And all the time, we will be sharing ideas and knowledge, which before had been within the singular silos of specific practitioner or interest groups.

This may seem some distance from activities normally associated with membership of an advisory body, or being a time-pressed election agent, but my objective is the same: to share developing insights into how power and influence operate in daily life, and to drive towards sustainable progress using my personal prism, the sociological imagination which shapes so fundamentally so many of these understandings.

<http://www.hilaryburrage.com>

resources & publications

Pattison, G. (1999) Restructuring Culture: Identification of Difference and the Regulation of Change in Ex-mining Communities (Urban and Regional Planning and Development Series). Ashgate.

This text presents an analysis of community breakdown and its relations to the agencies of economic regeneration in a specific locality of East Durham. Whilst based on a specific case study, the book aims to present more than a text about mining communities. It offers a clear theorization drawing on several major themes extracted from post structural discourse and repackages them as usable tools for empirical research. In this way, the case study materials hold much wider theoretical meaning which could be applied in many areas of social research. Further to this the text offers a counter balance to more conventional research on community structure and public participation in planning and economic regeneration. Firstly, an ethnographic study is pursued within the community structure of a specific locality. Secondly, the position, interests and scope of influence of the areas main pressure group is considered. Thirdly, the book turns its attention to agencies of economic regeneration operating in the area. In this way it is possible to determine the wide ranging and very different perceptions of the same spatial area held by the different groups, and ultimately the images which each held of the other. Finally, this point of difference is explored through the theorization of Jean Baudrillard in terms of a series of conceptualization which dominate much of his work and ultimately ideas of mass society and those outside that mass.

If you have a publication old or new you would like to publicise, send the details and an abstract to us.

contacts & contributions

We would like to hear from you if you have recently had a book review, journal article, book, video etc. published. Perhaps you've given an interview for radio, TV or a publication or any kind of achievement (no matter how big or small) that you wish to share with us here at 'Sociology for All' If so, we'd love to hear from you.

We would also welcome any article you may feel would be of interest to our readers as well as events reviews, biographies and anything else you feel should be included in the newsletter. Perhaps you would like to become a regular columnist. Why not send us an abstract of an article you have had published?

Google Group

To sign up to our Google Groups mailing list go to <http://groups.google.com/group/sociologists-outside-academia> and request an invitation. Once signed up you can view other SOA members' profiles and post messages.

If you have any questions or difficulties signing up, please email Annika.

Annika Coughlin

annika.coughlin@gmail.com

Tiffany Jenkins

jenkins.tiffany@gmail.com

or write to : BSA, Sociologists Outside Academia, Bailey Suite, Palatine House Business Park, Belmont, Durham DH1 1TW

<http://www.britsoc.co.uk/specialisms/soa>

<http://groups.google.com/group/sociologists-outside-academia>

email the SOA google group: sociologists-outside-academia@googlegroups.com



The British Sociological Association.
The BSA is a company Limited by
Guarantee. Registered in England and
Wales. Company Number: 3890729
Registered Charity Number 1080235

Newsletter designed by Rosalind Shaye
e: rosalind@glitteringpoppies.co.uk <http://www.glitteringpoppies.co.uk>