HE today:
Breaking out of the ‘Triangle of Sadness’

Also in this issue:
- Les Back reveals what sociologists can learn from music
- Is social work applied sociology?, a new study group asks
- Unhomed alone: 20 years of Desert Island Discourse
- A project to understand the lives of Afghan refugees
What can sociologists learn from playing music?, a journal article asks.

We take our regular survey of the world of sociology beyond our shores.

Michaela Benson writes about the books that have inspired her life and career.

Our six-page feature looks at 20 years of Desert Island Discourse choices.

Many staff feel pressured to return to work after a bereavement, research finds.

New project will explore experiences of Afghan families in England.

We feature reviews of books on Goffman, power and neo-liberalism.

Appreciations of the lives of Teresa Rees, Adele Clarke and John Stone.

Spring 2024

Main feature: UK higher education is trapped in a ‘triangle of sadness’, according to one vice-chancellor – an event looks at how to break free.

See page 16

graphic: AI-created imagery

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ISSN: 2634-9213

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University of Salford: Professor Gary Crawford has led a successful application for a £4 million international research project that will evaluate the European video game industry.

The project, called Gamehearts, involves researchers working with the owners of Manchester City football club, Imperial War Museums and the London Symphony Orchestra to explore how gaming technology could be used to enhance or replace the live experience.

“With Gamehearts we want to probe how gaming can be a driver for innovation and increased accessibility,” said Professor Crawford.

“We will explore how gaming technology and influences could be extended into the wider arts and cultural sector, in a way that helps create new interactive experiences that can open up cultural engagement to wider audiences.

“What makes Gamehearts unique and exciting is that we will be working with some of the main players in the world of gaming as well as Leeds, Newcastle, and Lancaster universities. The report can be downloaded at: http://tinyurl.com/3b0vbuild.

Professor Gary Crawford

University of Salford: Professor Monika Blascher has contributed to a new report which says there must be a step-change in the way we travel if the UK is to achieve its net zero mobility target.

The report, entitled Bridging the Gap, suggests instead of car use in any kind of the UK needs to be reduced by at least 20 per cent by 2030. Public transport or shared mobility systems need to be made more attractive than cars, particularly for short journeys between five and 50 kilometres.

The study concludes that development focused on improved public transport and better travel and everyday environments provides the most likely pathway to net zero transport.

Professor Blascher was among researchers who worked with Statcan, a global leader in sustainable design and engineering services, and the research network DecarboN8 on the report. Other contributors included Transport for the North, Transport for Greater Manchester, and Bay Council, as well as Leeds, Newcastle, and Lancaster universities. The report can be downloaded at: http://tinyurl.com/3b0vbuild.

University of Salford: A new Master’s programme on the behavioural and social science need to tackle climate crisis and other human-induced environmental problems is being launched this year.

The MA course, entitled Social change, environment and sustainability, will be based within the Sociology Department and the university’s Sustainable Consumption Institute. It will be led by sociologist Dr Daniel Welch.

The course will teach students about the changing world we live in, and what we can do to tackle the climate crisis, as well as general social science research skills. It will be grounded in sociological theory.

Students will study the need to shift society towards a focus on sustainability. Taught modules include energy use, biodiversity and the limits to economic growth.

It is expected that graduates of the course will work in areas such as corporate social responsibility, government, non-governmental organisations and charities.

£4m video project will work with Man City, the LSO and War Museum

Over 90% of Black Britons report racial discrimination at work

Public is split on immigration

University of Cambridge: Almost half of Black Briton look at how museums use video game exhibitions and draw on game-related technology in their galleries, and will assess if the games could be used to enhance or replace the live experience. It will also study how football clubs can use the metaverse to reach their fanbase.

More than 10,000 Black British people were interviewed on a range of social and cultural issues, including their mental health, for the survey, which was carried out for the Black British Voices Project.

The research found that 45% of those polled thought they were not treated fairly by British and 98% said they had compromised self-expression and identity to fit into the workplace, for example by adapting their speech or hairstyle.

On education, around 95% of respondents believed the UK’s curriculum neglects Black lives and experiences, and less than 2% thought educational institutions took racism seriously. Around 87% expected to see sub-standard levels of healthcare because of their ethnicity and 79% feared they still used stop and search unfairly against Black people.

However, over 95% said that Black representation was a major issue facing the country. Attitudes to immigration in the UK are more positive than in many other European counties, however. While 17% of Brits thought that immigration made a country ‘a worse place to live’, the figure was higher in Belgium at 24%, 27% in France, 49% in Hungary and 52% in the Czech Republic.

The report was co-authored by Dr Lindsay Richards in the Sociology Department.

£1.6m grant to study inequality

Newcastle University: The ESRC has given a £1.6 million grant to a team of researchers at four universities to investigate the health and care inequalities experienced by marginalised minority communities in the UK, including the Black, Asian, White and other ethnic minority communities.

The team will explore how health and justice systems could be improved to reduce the health inequalities experienced by these communities.

The evidence generated by this project will be presented to policymakers, practitioners and the public.

The research will be carried out by the North of England Research Consortium, led by Dr Stephanie Scott, of Newcastle University; Lyndsey Addison, of Durham University; and Michelle Addison, of Newcastle University.

Other researchers from Newcastle, Durham, Northumbria and Manchester universities are involved.

The fourth annual meeting of the International Association of Vegan Sociologists, held online last year, is available to view on YouTube at: http://tinyurl.com/ry8ykj.

The association was founded in 2020 by Dr Gary Wren, of the University of Kent.
Parents spending more time with children, but class gap widens

University of Essex: Parents from all social classes in Britain are spending more time on childcare than ever before, a new study says.

The research also found a widening gap in the amount of childcare time between mothers who went to university and those who did not.

The study, published in the Journal of Time Use Research, spans 54 years and is the most extensive analysis of the time UK parents spend on caring for their young children under 12 years old between 1961 and 2015, with a significant rise between 1974 and 1983.

In 1961, mothers spent an average of 96 minutes a day on childcare, which increased to 162 minutes a day in 2015, the latest dataset available.

Fathers gave 18 minutes to childcare a day in 1961, which increased to 71 minutes a day in 2015.

In 1961, there was no gap in childcare among educational groups, but the study found that from the 1980s there was a growing disparity between mothers who went to university and those who did not. By 2015 university-educated mothers spent an extra 20 minutes a day on childcare, or about 120 hours per year.

The study found that by the 1980s women in the professional class, most of whom also went to university, were able to devote the most time to childcare despite the fact that they had the longest working hours.

"Childcare is a key factor in human development, so if children are not getting an equal amount of parental time, they are not getting the same life chances," said lead author Dr Giacomo Vagni.

"This should be a cause for concern because differences in child development are a cause of longer term inequalities. This is something policymakers should pay more attention to and look at what can be done to level up the amount of time mothers and fathers spend on childcare.

"One reason for this increase in childcare is the growing competitiveness for places at top universities and in the job market. Parents have become increasingly aware of the difficulties that their children will face in their working life.

"It is worth noting that this responsibility still falls heavily on mothers. Fathers are lagging behind in terms of care responsibilities."

One explanation for the class disparity, said Dr Vagni, was that the unpredictable nature of unskilled jobs could make it difficult for working class parents to dedicate time to childcare, especially when they have non-traditional working hours such as early mornings, late evenings or weekend shifts.

"Physical demands of working class jobs may also leave parents feeling more exhausted after work, limiting their ability to dedicate as much time to childcare compared to parents in white-collar jobs.

"Childcare was defined as a wide range of tasks, from feeding and playing to teaching and cleaning.

Gaza statement ‘depletes systematic destruction of human communities’

A statement signed by around 300 social scientists, including the outgoing BSA President, Professor Gurminder Bhamra, has condemned the Israeli military assault on Gaza.

The statement, issued during a brief ceasefire in the fighting, says: "Israel's devastation of Gaza is a disproportionate response to the terror attack undertaken by Hamas on October 7th which killed over a thousand Israelis, migrant workers, and foreign citizens and took over 200 people hostage.

"The Israeli response has killed over 15,000 Palestinian men, women, and children, with an unknown number still buried under the rubble and uncounted, and the displacement of over a million people from their homes in the north of Gaza to the south.

"We understand these events as part of the ongoing Nakba, beginning in 1948, but with a longer history. The Balfour Declaration in 1917, for example, saw the British pledge to create a Jewish homeland in Palestine and there was an exponential increase in the movement of Jewish people to those lands in the aftermath of the Shoah.

"The Nazi regime's systematic slaughter of Jewish populations across Europe in the 1940s followed centuries of pogroms by Europe's Christians against Jewish minority communities. Appropriation of the land and movement of Jewish people to the UK in the aftermath of the Second World War left few options for Jewish people who no longer felt able to live in Europe. The creation of a catastrophe from ongoing European catastrophes must be acknowledged."

As sociologists, we deplore the systematic destruction of human communities. The current ceasefire provides a vital respite from the death and destruction unleashed by Israel and must become permanent with a negotiated political solution that is just to all parties.

"We do not believe that there is any military solution. International support will be needed to rebuild Gaza including the reconstruction of its hospitals, schools, and universities which have been destroyed. We commit to work with colleagues from the region to rebuild educational infrastructures in Gaza."

The signatories, almost all British social scientists, and including nine past presidents of the BSA, signed in their personal capacity and not as representing any institution: http://tinyurl.com/37k5hzsj

Sociology graduates are sadder but richer

For more information please contact Tony Trueman at: tony.trueman@bslsoc.org.uk or on 07964 023392, or BSA Chief Executive Judith Mudd at: judith.mudd@bslsoc.org.uk

The next issue comes out in July and the deadline for submissions is early May (please check with Tony or Judith). Books for review can be seen at: http://bit.ly/2gW3I6t

Liz Cain appointed head of MMU sociology

Liz Cain

Serious Youth Violence by Dr Paul Gray, Dr Deborah Jump and Professor Hannah Smithson; Substantive Use: End-Of-Life Care and Multiple Deprimation: Practice and Research, edited by Dr Gary Wilham, Professor Sarah Galvanis, Dr Sam Wright and Dr Gemma Varwood, and Long-Term Recovery from Substance Use: European Perspectives, edited by Professor Galvanis, Professor Alastair Roy and Amanda Cloward.

Recent completed research projects by staff include: Supporting solutions for South Asian communities: developing models for alcohol support, by Professor Galvanis, Dr Fox, Professor Surinder Guru and Naima Khan. This study involved looking at the experiences of South Asian women who use alcohol and other drugs, and the support offered to them. http://tinyurl.com/234ndhlp

Also, Dr Haribhan Goswami leads an international research network dedicated to improving wellbeing policies for children in South Asia, more details at: http://tinyurl.com/32bo8g6c

Would you like to contribute to Network?

Dr Glacomo Vagni

Dr Glacomo Vagni

Manchester Metropolitan University: The Sociology Department has appointed Liz Cain as Head of Department and Professor John Goldring as Deputy Head.

Over the past 18 months the department has welcomed 17 new staff, some as replacements for leavers and others as it grows in response to an increase in student numbers.

The Sociology Department has appointed Liz Cain as Head of Department and Professor Galvani, Professor Alistair Roy and Professor Galvani, Professor Alistair Roy and Professor Surinder Guru and Naima Khan as Heads of three new research centres.

The Staff have had books published recently, including: "Adverse Childhood Experiences and Multiple Deprivation: Practice and Research", edited by Dr Gary Wilham, Professor Sarah Galvanis, Dr Sam Wright and Dr Gemma Varwood, and "Long-Term Recovery from Substance Use: European Perspectives", edited by Professor Galvanis, Professor Alastair Roy and Amanda Cloward.

The research found that the average impact of undergraduate degrees on self-reported satisfaction of working-age graduates, on a scale of 0-10, ranged from -0.4 for Celtic Studies, to -0.11 for Creative Arts. Sociology’s score of -0.01 put it above Politics (+0.02) but below Psychology (+0.08).

The survey also looked at the average impact of undergraduate degrees on the gross earnings of working-age graduates relative to non-graduates with similar personal and work related characteristics.

Here, a sociology degree added 45% to salaries for Leaving Certificate highest increase out of the 55 disciplines studied. This was below the figures for Politics (60%) and Psychology (48%).

The highest figures were for Medicine and Dentistry (125%) and Economics (91%).

The study was carried out by five economists at PwC, who used Bayesian estimation and regression analysis for the research.

For more details see: http://tinyurl.com/37k5h3uj

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### Event discusses consumption in HE

**Consumption study group:** The group has held an online event, entitled Situating Consumption.

The three panelists, Professor David Evans, of the University of Bristol, Professor Jennifer Smith Maguire, Sheffield Hallam University, and Dr Mariana Dias, University of Manchester, shared their experience of researching and teaching consumption sociologically across different disciplines and departments.

The event, held in November, initiated a series of discussions on the status and place of the sociology of consumption in contemporary academia.

Following positive feedback from the audience and participants, the study group plans to continue the Situating Consumption series in the year, including an in-person event focusing on the post-pandemic high street.

The study group hopes to open a dialogue between sociology and other disciplines such as business, technology, food, fashion, sustainability, material culture, health, and social care.

The November event was organised by Dr Ilmuk Kardamir Hazir, who stepped down as convenor in January. Dr Katherine Appleford and Dr-Andrea Kova have begun as new convenors.

Dr Appleford is senior lecturer in consumer behaviour at the Business School for Creative Industries at the University for Creative Arts.

Her research bridges sociology, cultural studies, human geography and fashion theory. She is particularly interested in the ways in which fashion is used to construct theory. She is particularly interested in the implications for sociologies of inequality.'

The audio recording of the BSA’s Caste event audio put online.

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### Sports workshop helps researchers navigate careers

**Sport study group:** The group partnered with the British Society for Sport History to run a workshop to help doctoral students and early career researchers navigate the beginning of their career.

The event, in November, began with a keynote address by Dr Paul Campbell, of the University of Leicester, who spoke about how he had used history and sociology throughout his career.

The panel speakers were Dr Campbell, Dr Katie Taylor, of Nottingham Trent University, Dr Mark Dodge, of Loughborough University, and Katie Homes, an independent researcher and founder of the RunYoung50 blog.

During the event the participants peer-reviewed each other’s work in order to illustrate how peer reviewers see submissions.

The event finished with a panel discussion about navigating careers in the social science and humanities of sport in higher education currently.

The positive feedback from participants has led organisers to plan to run the event again.

### Record for BSA’s media coverage

Sociological research promoted by the BSA appeared in the media 427 times during 2023, a record number.

The BSA issued 11 press releases during the year, on topics including the effect of private education on voting habits, stress from fragmented working hours, carbon dioxide emissions by different social class, and racial bias among referees.

Sociological research promoted by the BSA appeared in the media 427 times during 2023, a record number.

National coverage included articles in the Observer, Daily Mirror, Independent, Daily Telegraph, and the BBC and ITV websites.

Most of the coverage was on online media, but also local papers in the UK and abroad.

The total of 427 exceeds the previous best of 319 in 2013. Over the past 15 years the BSA’s work has resulted in 2,161 articles in the media from its press releases, an average of almost three a week.
New President will be ‘strong ambassador’

Professor Rachel Brooks has spoken of her wish to be a ‘strong ambassador’ for sociology in her new role as President of the BSA.

Professor Brooks, who is Associate Dean, Research and Innovation, at the University of Salford, succeeded Professor Philip Abrams in January, and will serve for two years.

She has had close links with the BSA throughout her career, and is an editorial-in-chief of the BSA journal, Sociology.

Her duties include acting as an adviser to the Board of Trustees, hosting the annual conference, sitting on prize judging panels and presenting over award ceremonies.

Professor Rachel Brooks
Professor Brooks said: “I am delighted to be appointed as the next president of the BSA. I have been closely involved with the association throughout my career, in various capacities, and am very much looking forward to taking on this new role.”

“Sociology has a key part to play in helping us both understand and tackle the challenges that we face in the world today, and I hope I will be a strong ambassador for the discipline.”

Professor Brooks is also an executive editor of the British Journal of Sociology of Education, a companion volume to the Higher Education book series, a member of Governing Council of the Society for Research into Higher Education, and a member of ESRC Council.

The BSA has thanked Professor Bhambra for her service.

Professor Rachel Brooks

New President will be ‘strong ambassador’

A new editorial team on the BSA’s journal Sociological Research Online will bring two innovations to give voice to applied research that does not fit in elsewhere, and to reach readers beyond the academic discipline.

The team of eight, who took over last year, is led by Dr Tim Butcher, of the University of Tasmania, as Editor-in-Chief, with, as editors, Dr Rachela Colosi, Professor Sam Hilliard, Professor Christian Albrechtsen, Professor Simon Pattison, Dr Laura Way, and Professor Anna Tarrant, all of the University of Lincoln, and Dr Edmund Coleman-Fountain, University of York. Dr Tarrant and Dr Coleman-Fountain carry over from the previous team.

Professor Edwin van Tijlreijmen remains as book review editor.

In an article the team say: “How, where and to whom we communicate and publish our research are transformative in ways that could not have been predicted when Sociological Research Online was first published in 1996.

“Our digital devices are saturated with content seeking our attention. For any journal to reach into our digital lives and capture our imaginations it needs to be brave, learn from what others do today and try new things, but not forget its heritage. This gives us pause for thought as we consider what we will contribute to SRO as it reaches its 30th year in 2025.

“When first conceived, SRO was one of a few online-only journals; the only one in sociology. However, SRO is no longer alone; there are now many online-only journals; the only one in sociology. However, SRO is no longer alone; there are now many journals reaching their 30th year in 2025.

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“We have asked ourselves as an editorial team how we intend to build on the journal’s legacy of innovation and participation in ways that continue to provide opportunities to publish timely, relevant and interesting social research that reflects the diversity of understandings, interests and activities across the discipline around the world.

“One of our objectives is to give voice to applied research that doesn’t fit in elsewhere and so push the limits of our thinking. The other is to enable those voice to reach readers across the discipline and beyond – the wider sociology community.

“To achieve our objectives, we have implemented two major projects. First ... we will publish a special issue that aims to draw out, reflect on and augment key contributions and debates issues. Our second project is to launch a new category that reflects what is published in SRO and how we do that. This will include interviews with all authors, insights into reviewing and introductions to different formats.

“This new content will be published on a unique platform that integrates resources we already have access to, such as the SRO Twitter feed, the BSA Everyday Sociology blog, and its Discover Sociology space, to not only reach and engage the sociology community in new and creative ways but also extend the conversation to invite in a greater diversity of voices that open up academic debate, inspire the sociologists of the future and reach new audiences. The editors said they would build on “the substantive work” of the previous editors, who brought in the Beyond the Text and Sociology in Action sections to broaden the content of the journal.

“They thanked the outgoing team: Kahyn Hughes, Greg Hollin, Jason Hughes, Lucie Middlemass, Katharine Venier and Katy Wright.

Professor Brooks added: “We have asked ourselves as an editorial team how we intend to build on the journal’s legacy of innovation and participation in ways that continue to provide opportunities to publish timely, relevant and interesting social research that reflects the diversity of understandings, interests and activities across the discipline around the world. One of our objectives is to give voice to applied research that doesn’t fit in elsewhere and so push the limits of our thinking. The other is to enable those voices to reach readers across the discipline and beyond – the wider sociology community. To achieve our objectives, we have implemented two major projects. First ... we will publish a special issue that aims to draw out, reflect on and augment key contributions and debates issues. Our second project is to launch a new category that reflects what is published in SRO and how we do that. This will include interviews with all authors, insights into reviewing and introductions to different formats. This new content will be published on a unique platform that integrates resources we already have access to, such as the SRO Twitter feed, the BSA Everyday Sociology blog, and its Discover Sociology space, to not only reach and engage the sociology community in new and creative ways but also extend the conversation to invite in a greater diversity of voices that open up academic debate, inspire the sociologists of the future and reach new audiences. The editors said they would build on “the substantive work” of the previous editors, who brought in the Beyond the Text and Sociology in Action sections to broaden the content of the journal.

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The BSA has thanked Professor Bhambra for her service.

Professor Rachel Brooks
We are looking forward to welcoming you all to the annual BSA Medical Sociology Conference being held at the University of Warwick in September 2024. The call for abstracts is now open and we invite you to submit your innovative medical sociology papers for consideration. The deadline for abstract submission is Monday, 22 April 2024.

The following criteria will be applied when reviewing abstracts:

- **Academic Rigour**: Is the research credible and trustworthy, and does it contribute valuable knowledge to the field of medical sociology? Are the methods used or proposed included?
- **Relevance to Medical Sociology**: How closely does the research align with the core concerns and themes of medical sociology as a field of study?
- **Sociological Content**: To what extent does the research apply sociological theories, concepts, or methods to analyse a particular phenomenon?

When submitting your abstract, please indicate if your submission is an oral or poster presentation, or a special event. Please note that presenters will be able to present only one paper at the conference, although they may be authors of more than one.

At the point of submitting your abstract, please consider where your presentation may best fit in the conference streams listed below.

- Citizenship and Health
- Critical Public Health
- Diagnosis, Screening and Treatment
- Embodiment and Emotion
- Environment and Health
- Experiences of Health and Illness
- Health Care Organisations
- Health Policy
- Health Service Delivery
- Inequalities and Intersectionality
- Life-course - reproductive health; chronic conditions; ageing, death and dying
- Mental Health
- Open
- Patient - professional interaction
- Pedagogy and Methods
- Politics and Ethics of Health
- Professions
- STS and Medicine
- Theory

We will make every effort to assign accepted abstracts to the stream indicated by the author on the submission form. However, this is not always possible when some streams are over-subscribed. If we are unable to place your abstract in your desired stream, we will endeavour to place your paper within a similar stream though may add it to the Open Stream.

The abstract submission deadline is Monday, 22 April 2024. Abstracts received after this date will not be accepted. Submit today at: https://britsoc.co.uk/events/key-bsa-events/medical-sociology-conference-2024/submissions

For any questions or enquiries about the conference, please contact the BSA Events Team at events@britsoc.org.uk For further details about the Group, please visit the Medical Sociology Study Group: https://www.britsoc.co.uk/groups/medical-sociology-study-group/medical-sociology-medsoc-study-group/

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Letter condemns Israel attack

More than 2,000 sociologists and other social scientists have signed an open letter condemning the violence against Palestinians by Israeli forces.

The signatories, who are mainly based in the US, include well-known names such as Professor Michael Burawoy, of University of California Berkeley, Professor Craig Calhoun, of Arizona State University, and Professor Gargi Bhattacharyya, University of the Arts in the UK.

The statement says: “Sociology as a discipline is rooted in a recognition of relationships of power and inequality. As sociologists and human beings, we unequivocally condemn the latest violence against the Palestinian people in Gaza and the West Bank at the hands of the Israeli regime.

“The government of Israel has undertaken, in its own words, an ‘operation’ of Gaza – the second most densely populated place on the planet, home to 2.1 million residents, of which 1.7 million are refugees.

“While claiming its actions are a justifiable response to recent Hamas violence against Israeli civilians, it has targeted the civilian Palestinian population of Gaza, while exhibiting little regard for the loss of human life.

“We are witness to the regime’s full-supported genocide. This latest siege comes as a continuation and escalation of the daily violence Palestine has faced for decades from Israeli colonization; an apartheid regime where the occupation is in clear violation of international law, but persists with the support of powerful governments globally.

“As educators, it is our duty to stand by the principles of critical inquiry and learning; to hold the university as a space for conversation that foregrounds historical truths, and that contextualizes this past week’s violence in the context of 75 years of settler colonial occupation and European empire. We are also deeply troubled by the lack of concern and care for Palestinian and Muslim students of universities, as well as efforts to clamp down on student organizing and free speech.

“We cannot sit idly by while the continuation of this genocidal war. We demand that our governments push for an end to the occupation.”

Chile video game commemorates country’s dirty wars

A Chilean sociologist has found an unusual way to commemorate the landmine resistance to the brutal rule of dictator General Pinochet in the 1970s and 1980s. Jorge Olivares has created a video game, Dirty Wars: September 11, named after the date that Pinochet launched his military coup against Chile’s democratic government in 1973, torturing and killing thousands of socialists and trade unionists.

In the stealth and espionage game the main characters, Maximiliano and Abigail, confront the military regime by joining a resistance group and trying to avoid capture.

The game is Jorge’s Olivares’ first project as a developer and took him two years to produce. He hopes it will educate young Chileans about Pinochet’s rule.

“There is no consensus [about Pinochet’s regime] in Chile,” he said. “There is a so-called ‘desistential’ side, which I think actually justifies the game. Most of the people that follow the game are under 30. I made it for them. Youngsters learn more from video games than books.”

You can’t hurry love...

Couples who marry when aged between 28 and 32 are less likely than others to divorce, a new study shows.

Professor Nick Woolfinger, of the University of Utah, analysed US survey data from 2006-2010 and 2011-2015.

He found that prior to age 32, each additional year of marriage reduces the odds of divorce by 11 per cent. However, after that age, the odds of divorce increase by five per cent a year.

This drop in divorce rates may not be caused by couples’ ages, though. Rather it could be that people who wait until their late 20s or early 30s may be the kind of people who are more likely to succeed in marriage.

“The kinds of people who wait till their 30s to get married may be the kinds of people who aren’t predisposed towards doing well in their marriages,” writes Professor Woolfinger in a study published by the Institute for Family Studies.

India’s ‘toilet man’ dies at 80

Network readers may feel that the nickname ‘toilet man’ would be an undesirable one to aspire to.

But the southerner was a mark of honour for Dr Bindeshwar Pathak, who died recently aged 80.

Dr Pathak made it his life’s goal to leave India a cleaner place, by building public toilets and giving Indians from across the country access to clean sanitation.

The signatories, who are mainly based in the US, include well-known names such as Professor Alexi Gugushvili, of the Mediterranean Journal of Educational Studies, and was considered one of Malta’s eminent scholars in the field of sociology.

Tributes paid to Malta prof

More than 2,000 sociologists and other social scientists have signed an open letter condemning the violence against Palestinians by Israeli forces.

The signatories, who are mainly based in the US, include well-known names such as Professor Michael Burawoy, of University of California Berkeley, Professor Craig Calhoun, of Arizona State University, and Professor Gargi Bhattacharyya, University of the Arts in the UK.

The statement says: “Sociology as a discipline is rooted in a recognition of relationships of power and inequality. As sociologists and human beings, we unequivocally condemn the latest violence against the Palestinian people in Gaza and the West Bank at the hands of the Israeli regime.

“The government of Israel has undertaken, in its own words, an ‘operation’ of Gaza – the second most densely populated place on the planet, home to 2.1 million residents, of which 1.7 million are refugees.

“The government of Israel has undertaken, in its own words, an ‘operation’ of Gaza – the second most densely populated place on the planet, home to 2.1 million residents, of which 1.7 million are refugees. While claiming its actions are a justifiable response to recent Hamas violence against Israeli civilians, it has targeted the civilian Palestinian population of Gaza, while exhibiting little regard for the loss of human life.

“We are witness to the regime’s full-supported genocide. This latest siege comes as a continuation and escalation of the daily violence Palestine has faced for decades from Israeli colonization; an apartheid regime where the occupation is in clear violation of international law, but persists with the support of powerful governments globally.

“As educators, it is our duty to stand by the principles of critical inquiry and learning; to hold the university as a space for conversation that foregrounds historical truths, and that contextualizes this past week’s violence in the context of 75 years of settler colonial occupation and European empire. We are also deeply troubled by the lack of concern and care for Palestinian and Muslim students of universities, as well as efforts to clamp down on student organizing and free speech.

“We cannot sit idly by while the continuation of this genocidal war. We demand that our governments push for an end to the occupation.”

A Chilean sociologist has found an unusual way to commemorate the landmine resistance to the brutal rule of dictator General Pinochet in the 1970s and 1980s. Jorge Olivares has created a video game, Dirty Wars: September 11, named after the date that Pinochet launched his military coup against Chile’s democratic government in 1973, torturing and killing thousands of socialists and trade unionists.

In the stealth and espionage game the main characters, Maximiliano and Abigail, confront the military regime by joining a resistance group and trying to avoid capture.

The game is Jorge’s Olivares’ first project as a developer and took him two years to produce. He hopes it will educate young Chileans about Pinochet’s rule.

“There is no consensus [about Pinochet’s regime] in Chile,” he said. “There is a so-called ‘desistential’ side, which I think actually justifies the game. Most of the people that follow the game are under 30. I made it for them. Youngsters learn more from video games than books.”

You can’t hurry love...

Couples who marry when aged between 28 and 32 are less likely than others to divorce, a new study shows.

Professor Nick Woolfinger, of the University of Utah, analysed US survey data from 2006-2010 and 2011-2015.

He found that prior to age 32, each additional year of marriage reduces the odds of divorce by 11 per cent. However, after that age, the odds of divorce increase by five per cent a year.

This drop in divorce rates may not be caused by couples’ ages, though. Rather it could be that people who wait until their late 20s or early 30s may be the kind of people who are more likely to succeed in marriage.

“The kinds of people who wait till their 30s to get married may be the kinds of people who aren’t predisposed towards doing well in their marriages,” writes Professor Woolfinger in a study published by the Institute for Family Studies.

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‘We are in a very unstable equilibrium, largely maintained by international student fees’

Although higher education was currently “thriving”, action needed to be taken to stop losing “what is great about the system,” Professor Shitij Kapur, Vice-Chancellor of King’s College London, told a recent event. Professor Kapur was speaking after his paper, ‘UK universities: from a triangle of sadness to a brighter future’, was published by the Policy Institute. The paper attracted attention in the news media and the higher education sector generally.

In this, he said that students, universities and the government were all dissatisfied with the current situation, students because they were the most indebted in the world, staff because they were overworked and likely to be on insecure contracts, and the government and public because they were ambivalent about the value of universities.

Professor Kapur, who has studied and taught in universities in five countries, told the event that “we can see one of the finest in the world and it’s a university system worth fighting for”, it was also “in a bit of a funk. It’s not a very technical term, but what I would like to say is this is not a system in decline. It’s a thriving system, but it’s a system that’s in a state of precariousness. And unless we do something about it, we will lose what is great about this system.”

He cited a recent PwC/House of Commons report, which said that close to 40% of universities were working close to a deficit. In his address, Professor Kapur (picture right) set out the strengths of UK universities:

“Let me start with why I think we do have one of the finer systems in the world. It would be fair to say that the British university system now, since it has widened participation, offers one of the highest levels of access to all of our high school leavers.

“But more importantly, it’s not just access, it’s success. So if you look at the graduation rates of British universities – the average in the OECD is about 64% – we are at about 80%. So this is a university system with a high level of quality that takes students all the way through to graduation.”

Part of the reason for the high staff to student ratio in UK universities. “It would be fair to say that British universities have historically had a high student-to-staff ratio, as compared to some international comparisons. And they have good things to show for it.”

A recent event looked at the ‘triangle of sadness’ that UK higher education is trapped in, and how it might escape...

“If you look at the research outcomes in terms of international peer review citations and a technical index called field weighted citation index, you see that our universities produce some of the very best outcomes in research. So it is a very good system, dare I say the finest in the world, but I think our system sits within a triangle of sadness.”

The first unhappy group was students, who were happy with their education, but not the loan they had to bear. “The average English undergraduate today leaves with a [debt] load of about £55,000. That is the highest level anywhere in the world.”

Although some elite universities in the US had higher fees, “there are 18 million American undergraduates, all different sorts, and they do not on average leave with a £35,000 loan [to pay off].”

The English government today had made a low contribution to university education, he said. “Across the OECD, the average public contribution to university education is somewhere in the range of about 50% [of costs]. The English contribution to higher education is about 10% to 15%.”

“The second (unhappy group) is university staff. The English higher education system has been riven with industrial disputes. If you look at staff satisfaction surveys and the engagement of employees with their place of employment, you find that universities have been falling down.

“When you start to look for reasons and ask people about it, it turns out to be around workload and precariousness of employment. And it would be true that over the last decade that this has increased. So the students are not happy, the universities are not happy.

“When it comes to broader society, despite a considerable widening of access, the shine is coming off [universities] and it’s for different reasons. For some, the economic advantage of going to university is declining. It is still an economically good deal to go to university, there is a pretty good graduate premium, but it isn’t as high as used to be.

“For many people in the public universities have become a focal point of so-called culture wars.”

The success of bringing in international students is a great point of debate about immigration. “Universities have maintained their system over the last decade through a hefty increase in international students. While by many measures that’s a success – it is a mark of reputation – sadly it has gotten caught in the immigration debates, where it’s being seen as a problem.”

But it was a sign of success that students from abroad wanted to study here, he said. “Whenever you do surveys across the world and you ask who has the best quality system, the British system is always the first or the second. The number of international students that are coming here has exceeded the government’s expectations, and by some measures international student education is our third largest export.”

Professor Kapur said that the one fundamental reason underlining all of this was “that the financial and the business model on which universities were set after the Browne review in 2012 doesn’t work any more.

“The first fix is that we have to find a way to resource our universities in a way that keeps up with inflation. To look at the numbers, fees were set at £5,000 in 2012. If this had kept up with inflation, it would be close to about £13,500 to £14,000 today, but it is £9,250. So we are in a very unstable equilibrium, largely being maintained with the support of international student fees.”

“So either universities will continue to increase their reliance on international students – and that is now becoming, I would say, politically difficult and toxic in our own domestic environment – or they will sacrifice their quality of outcomes. I think that would be really sad, given that we have one of the finest systems in the world at the moment.”

If dependence on international students were reduced, then either student fees or the grant given by government would need to be raised.

“My preference would be that, given that the English undergraduate already has one of the highest loans, and given that the English public through the English government subsidises education to the lowest level in the OECD, we do need to look to a higher grant rather than higher fees.”

He also spoke about research costs. “What many of us don’t know is that a year ago our universities did about £1.6 billion worth of research, of which only £1.1 billion was externally funded. So where did that extra £5 billion come from? It largely comes from tuition fees. So there is a tremendous cross-subsidy.

“Where is research support coming from? Largely from international student fees. So I find it highly precarious that something that is vital to the nation’s strategic competitiveness is largely being funded by the decisions by individual families in Shanghai and Delhi to send their sons and daughters to be students at UK universities.”

He also advocated being open to a differential system, in which, through central decision mechanisms, universities are given different missions and funding according to this mission, as found in China and Singapore.

“Let me end by saying we have a world leading system. We need to defend it. The system is caught in a triangle of sadness, we need to break out of it.”
‘Because we got rid of number controls, more students now get their first choice of university’

David Willetts

David Willetts, a former Universities and Science Minister, (pictured far left) said: “These sorts of rather agonised discussions about higher education have been going on for a very long time.

“All those political parties, at the end of these deliberations and enormous amounts of political argument, always end up with something basically like the system we’ve had for the past 20 years, though with changes in the calibration.

“I would say, as an observation of education secretary across different political parties, higher education isn’t even a priority within the Education Department, let alone within government.

“I predict if Bridget Phillipson [current Shadow Education Secretary] were to become Education Secretary, I can tell you what her first speech would be. It’ll be ‘I’ve got to the important point early on how they’re going to invest in early years, how they’re going to increase access to childcare and how they’re going to enrich the primary school experience.’”

He said that this lack of importance meant that there was little chance of universities getting extra funding, and that the tuition fee, which he raised to £9,000 a year in 2012, this could just do it.”

He said the fee level should be increased, at a minimum at the rate of inflation. “Most of this agonised debate [about the triangle of sadness] would not be happening if we had simply indexed fees for the last 10 years. That is a blindingly obvious solution.

“One reason why the sector’s in a bit of a funk is they somehow persuaded themselves that the blindingly obvious is also impossible, which is not the case. You can just do it.”

He admitted that he was wrong in believing that when he raised tuition fees to £9,000 a year for students in 2012, this would lead to universities setting different fees to students.

“I said in the early days that there would be price competition, which was a silly thing to say and it was rapidly disproved.”

This was because the “great graduate repayment system of the sort we’ve got” meant students were willing to pay high university costs.

He spoke in favour of the lifting of the cap on student numbers entering individual universities, because this had enabled more students to go to the university of their choice. “Because we got rid of number controls, more people are able to go to universities that are not a commercial or credit card debt, he said. “It doesn’t affect your ability to take out a mortgage, despite the quote of parents. On the other hand, it’s not a continental European system with higher levels of public expenditure per student.”

James Purnell

James Purnell, Vice-chancellor of the University of the Arts London, (pictured near left) said that the success of higher education in Britain was because of “bold and wise” decisions taken by people in the past, by governments of the last 25 years and people around the sector, and the aspiration of students and parents.

“But if that is the case, why is it that we feel very differently today to day in many of our institutions?”

He said there had been a failure in meeting the “central challenge of policy questions about how you can reconcile individual choice with having an overall strategy that includes a plan to finance higher education.”

The 50% target for higher education participation set out in 1997 by the Labour government, for which he was a special advisor, created a framework for funding. But in 2014 the coalition government removed the cap on student numbers attending each university, and participation levels had risen to 55%, but with funding given to universities per student falling.

“So, I would say that, in the end, we’re stuck in the triangle because we still have a system that supports participation of 55%, but without the money or the underpinning consensus and frameworks to deliver that.”

He said he would also give more funding to high-cost courses, and fund new universities in areas of the country where there were none.

“It would not want to see universities differentiated in function. ‘Thank heavens we are not differentiated as they are in California, where you’re told what your job is. What we have is an open system with lots of implicit differentiation.

“We don’t tell Northumbria or Lincoln [universities] that ‘it is presumptuous of you to imagine you should do some research which might be so good that it’s funded.”

He said it if extra funding was available, he would put it into bringing back maintenance grants for students, so they would not have to work long hours at jobs while studying.

“I worry about students struggling to make ends meet at university. A most shocking figure, recently, is that we’ve now gone above 50% of students working. If it’s more than [a few hours a week], it really does start affecting their capacity to study and to enjoy their experience.”

James Purnell said: “I think it’s fair to say that this government doesn’t feel comfortable in its times with that expansion – there’s a feeling that too many people are going to university, but on the other hand, the government doesn’t want to come out and set a lower target for understandable reasons.”

This was because parents wanted their children to go to university. He pointed to the Millennium Cohort Study funding that 97% of mothers wanted their young children to attend.

He recommended that there was a consensus on the number of international students.

“We would work out how to make the system affordable, either increasing the tuition fee and grants, or increasing the number of international students.

“Having that framework would mean that the system was internally consistent, and I think it would allow us to escape the triangle of sadness that we’re debating today.

“If we don’t either we have to accept a lower level of quality or a smaller level of participation.”

James Purnell was special adviser on the knowledge economy to Tony Blair after the election of the Labour government in 1997. He was MP for Stalybridge and Hyde, and was appointed Culture Secretary and then Work and Pensions Secretary. He moved to the BBC in 2015 as Director of Strategy and Digital before taking up his role at the University of the Arts in 2021.

Vivienne Stern

Vivienne Stern, the Chief Executive of Universities UK, said: “Said issues raised in the debate were the consequence of moving away from an elite system to a ‘massification of the higher education system.

“I would argue that the massification of the higher education system has been a good thing for us and it’s been a good thing for every system that has been engaged in doing it. All but one of the countries in the OECD group have expanded participation in the last 10 years. The UK is out there towards the front with a 55% participation rate, though the countries that are ahead of us are Canada, Japan, Ireland, South Korea, Australia and Luxembourg.

“When I’m engaged in arguments with politicians about funding higher education, I like to point out, you do make a profit on your investment in higher education. The IFS [Institute for Fiscal Studies] calculated a few years ago that when you thought about the higher tax take and national insurance contributions, and you factor in things like the fact that only a very small proportion of graduates are likely to be on non-work benefits, the public purse makes a profit of about £110,000 for men and about £30,000 for women.

“It doesn’t help us with the problem that we face immediately, which is that it costs a lot to expand participation – but we have to carry on down this road because you’re still twice as likely to enter higher education if you are from the highest social groups in society compared to the least advantaged. So I’d say we’ve got massification, but we ain’t done with it.”

She said the simple solution was to link increases in the amount of money given to fund each student to inflation. “That’s not putting the government, that’s simply stopping it going down. It isn’t going to be a complete solution, but I think that at least puts the break on a decline which is accelerating and is beginning to lead to trouble in a number of cases.

“It’s essential for the UK to remain competitive to preserve our position as a leading research system, and funding for that is coming, largely speaking, from the international student fee.

“My message to the government for the last couple of months is if you cannot help us, at least stop it getting worse. Don’t actively do something that will make it harder for universities to subsidise domestic teaching and research (by taking away international students).

“It would be incredibly important that we don’t do anything further to make the UK an unattractive destination for international students.”

The event was organised by the Policy Institute and was entitled ‘UK universities: from a triangle of sadness to a brighter future?’. It was chaired by the Institute’s Director, Professor Bobby Duffy. The phrase ‘triangle of sadness’ is taken from a film of the last title.
‘What can sociologists learn from music?’

Sociologists are often secret musicians,
Les Back wrote in a recent journal paper. Thanks to him their secret is now out, and we have an account of the scale of musicality of a score of researchers.

Network takes a look...

Emma Jackson

Professor Back spoke to Dr Emma Jackson, of Goldsmiths (left). ‘At 17 she was playing bass in a female-fronted band called Kenickie, performing under the stage name of ‘Emmy-Kate Moretta’. Kenickie quickly rose to stardom as part of a wave of indie bands in the nineties. Kenickie had a meteoric rise but for Emma it was all over by the time she was 20. She had always planned to study sociology because it was her favourite subject at school, and at 25 she studied sociology at Goldsmiths, University of London. Having gained a PhD she is now one of the most interesting and distinctive voices in UK sociology.

“As a student Emma was very hesitant to talk about her musical life. More recently she has been more open to talk about it. Looking back on her experience now she realises just how much sexism she experienced in the music business, from being abused on stage, to condescending journalists who would assume that the only male member was the leader, and TV presenters who would ask the band to model sunglasses when they were there to feature their music. Developing a strong cohesiveness within the band was a way of coping and protecting themselves.”

Dr Jackson told him: “Guitar shops I hate still to this day... I went to go to buy a load of plectrums one day for the whole band – not just myself – and I was sort of ruminating over my choices and the man in the guitar shop – this is back in Sunderland – in the nineties. And he’s like: ‘do you know what a plectrum is? You pick... you strum... you do it over the strings of the guitar. And that’s what makes the noise come out. And I was like: ’yeah, yeah, I know thanks I am a band’. Then I noticed he had our local paper the Sunderland Echo on the table and there happened to be a piece about us in that Echo. Yeah my band’s in the paper. ‘Ok err’. But just those little kinds of things really you know call we micro aggressions now.”

“Actually sociology helped me to understand what had happened to us. For me, having been involved in music, I am used to standing up in front of people. Which helps when you have to do this for a job, which is quite a [strange] job. Trying to create things as a group rather than always be this sort of lone wolf academic. I think that’s a model of scholarship that’s really important to me. I always feel too over-precious about what you put out into the world... I mean, more trying and experimenting with different forms of writing and having a go at something. Rather than being the equivalent of the person who works on their music demo forever and something like more but never dares show it to anybody. Being the sociology equivalent of that is to be avoided – being very very one thing that you sort of polish and polish forever.”

Dave Beer

Professor Back wrote: “Dave Beer expanded on the relationship between music and sociological form in an interview that took place in his office at the University of York in 2018. He is a guitarist and was deeply involved in indie rock subcultures in the north of England during his youth. He uses music to shape his style of sociology, but also to inspire him and give him focus and desire to write.”

Professor Back explained: “I’ll let the music guide me and I still do that now. That is ... in literature, in poetry, in painting – they are all about the world. There is the world and then there is the representation, but with music...”

“Music is not something we consider to be a representational medium. Making culture in art, in literature, in poetry – we are hidden in the texts. It wouldn’t be obvious necessarily. It permeates everything...... I imagine the cover, the way the books are drawn and the music is the thing. It is not representing something else.”

Paul Gilroy

Professor Back began his article with Paul Gilroy, the renowned cultural critic who is now Professor of the Humanities at University College London and Founding Director of the Sarah Parker Remond Centre for the Study of Racism and Racialisation.

“While Paul Gilroy is recognized as one of the best interpreters of the experience of the African Diaspora it is not so widely appreciated that he also an accomplished guitarist,” wrote Professor Back.

Professor Gilroy told him: “I am sure that... my dabbling in music and my experience of playing, and my – sort of – rituals of playing, and the conversations that I have with people who are musicians who are not academics about the world, has enriched my understanding of what culture is and how culture functions.”

“It’s hard to begin to build an inventory of resources that come into one’s life in that way. There are people that have really influenced my understanding about what culture is and how it works.”

“Some of the most important of those people are really Ralph Ellison [The American writer, literary critic, and scholar best known for his novel, Invisible Man]. Someone went to the trouble of editing together a little volume of Ralph Ellison’s writings on music and he is in his head in a sort of special place because I think he is someone who became a writer because they couldn’t really cut it as a musician. Then of course there are other people [Ernst Bloch and [Theodore] Adorno who are similarly people who have a musical life and write music and produce music and to whom the experience of music making is an integral part of their critical commentary on everything else about culture and social life, in particular the question of utopia and how utopias become apparent to us, how they are able to enter into our lives.”

“I think as I’ve got more confident about my understanding of the relationship between music and utopia I began to see that there are all sorts of ways in which I’d brought things in from my relationship with music as organised sound that just wouldn’t have been there otherwise.”

“Music is not something we consider to be a representational medium. Making culture in art, in literature, in poetry – we are hidden in the texts. It wouldn’t be obvious necessarily. It permeates everything... I imagine the cover, the way the books are drawn and the music is the thing. It is not representing something else.”
Howard Becker

Professor Back wrote about musicians in the past. “My experience is not exceptional, and the story of musical sociologists goes all the way back to founding figures like W.E.B. Du Bois and Max Weber in the nineteenth century, for whom musical life was always woven into their sociological thinking. These founding figures had strong attachments to music and both men had fine singing voices. “In the twentieth century, Frankfurt School Marxist, Theodor Adorno, was himself an accomplished pianist and composer. As a young person Adorno even dreamed of being a professional musician. He famously argued that the commodification of music exacerbated this rationalization that resulted in a ‘regression of listening’ that also produces in the masses a moronic economic conformity to capitalism and political submission. “Du Bois, Weber and Adorno are not isolated cases, I could have chosen many other examples including pianists Roland Barthes and Stuart Hall. In recent times, we certainly have numerous appeals to use music to reimagine sociology itself. “Howard S. Becker’s classic study Outsiders is built out of his experience of playing jazz and popular tunes in Chicago strip joints and taverns in the 1940s and 1950s. He was just 15 years old when he started playing professionally in jazz trials during World War II when most musicians were in the army. He explained: “There was a shortage of musicians... so everybody winked at the fact that there were these kids like me working in there”. He became a “tone hound”, fascinated with the chord structures of the jazz repertoire but he also studied with the legendary Chicago jazz piano player Lennie Tristano. As a teenager he was playing in bars 7 hours a night until 4am, making $80 dollars a week and a living wage of $4,000 dollars a year. This was as much as a junior academic was earning in the 1950s.”

Professor Becker told him: “There’s a lot of musicians who are not very attentive. They are just barely attentive enough. I think that’s a skill you know. You have to learn to pay attention; to me it’s a Zen lesson. That’s the basic lesson of Zen Buddhism: pay attention. Pay attention to what’s right there in front of you.”

Professor Becker made the point that being a musician took sociologists off the campus and into a milieu they might otherwise never know. “One of the worst things that happens to sociologists is they become academics,” he said. 📌 Howard Becker is pictured above, playing piano.

In the second part of our feature on sociologists who make music, Les Back sums up his findings and we feature more of his interviews.

“It’s like a friend you take care of”

Evelyn Ruppert

Professor Back writes: “For sociologists, the physical and material aspect of music making takes off. The training they received as an interpretative device to understand cultural life.

Evelyn Ruppert, who is an authority on ‘Big Data’ and an actor-network theorist, illustrated this point: “It is less known that Evelyn, who grew up in Toronto, Canada, is a jazz trumpeter (although, now she rarely plays). And yet her earnest desire to play music has had a deep effect on her life. “She grew up in a large working class family; had a difficult home life and, in a way, the trumpet was her way of being noticed and ‘getting through school’. Playing in jazz orchestras helped her understand how the music was enacted through all the elements interacting: from the instruments to the social dynamics of feeling together, tuning to other people and improvisation when playing music together.

“There were also injustices and inequities in this world as the boys broke off to form smaller bands and develop their capacity.” Professor Ruppert told him: “For the last thirty years I’ve been using the different fits and starts to return [to music] and it somehow never quite happens. “I want to be heard... I wanted that loud shiny thing... it was a gender thing, I love the material and I spent hours shining that thing and cleaning it in the bath tub and taking it apart andreassembling, oiling... it’s almost like it’s a friend that you take care of.”

The object matters immensely but it is what comes out that is between you and the object that I feel is important. The sound, which is the two of you together, would be impossible for either to exist [alone]. That is amazing. 

“That, I think, is maybe a metaphor... one could not produce that [sound] without the-more-than-human relation.”

Cath Larkins

Professor Back also spoke to Cath Larkins, “a specialist in sociological research and a children’s rights activist who teaches at the University of Central Lancashire. She’s also a guitarist and singer. “Cath was born in the English Midlands in the 1950s and she came from a musical family with roots in South Wales. Her mother played the organ in church and her grandmother, with whom Cath lived for parts of her childhood, sang in chapel choirs and Eisteddfodau. “As a child she sang with her mother and grandmother, and although she learned to play the piano and read music, it was the guitar that she embraced as something that was truly her. She started playing at the age of eight and performed widely including opening for the Manchester Mardi Gras in 2002 and in front of thousands of people. “She was well-acclimatized to performing long before she needed to. I’ll be able to do the thing that I need to do from a completely different space.”

She told him: “On a day when I’m not writing – particularly if I’m dealing with something that’s really challenging – instead of trying to deal with it, craft the email right or stressing about how I’m going to manage a variety of people, if I have a guitar, I will pick it up and walk across and I’ll play some music. Then I’ll come back and I’ll be able to do the thing that I need to do from a completely different space.”

“There’s something really nice about having this whole part of you which is not the academic and not shared in that world. In the same way as it creates that internal space, it creates a sort of identity space as well.”

Doing my PhD, the way I analysed the data from the very first focus groups I did with Gypsy and Traveller young people... I wrote a song and a short story about it because it meant I could deal with some of the things I’d found challenging about it and expanding.”

See pages 24-29 for an article on Desert Island Discovers over the past 20 years, which features sociologists’ musical preferences.
A half century ago this year, Network’s first editor began work on the initial issue of the magazine. To mark this, we take a stroll through the archives, beginning with a look at the Desert Island Discourse feature, which began in 2004.

A little history...

Professor Gary Crawford played a big part in Desert Island Discourse, interviewing some of the earliest contributors to the feature and providing his own five books to the Spring 2012 issue. The idea for the feature was not his, however, as he explained in his contribution: “I can’t actually claim to have come up with the idea for the feature, as the original concept came from Andrew Blakie,” he wrote. “I think, if my memory serves me correctly, it was an idea Andrew mentioned to Judith Mudd [the BSA’s CEO], probably at the annual conference.

“I certainly remember it was Judith who brought Andrew’s idea to one of our Network editorial board meetings, and I remember everyone on the editorial board being really enthusiastic about it. So, although I certainly can’t take credit for coming up with the idea, at least I was able to recognise a good idea when I saw it. And I do think it has remained a good feature. Certainly I enjoyed the interviews I conducted over the years, and I have enjoyed reading them ever since.”

The first contributor, in the Summer 2004 issue, was, fittingly, Professor Blakie himself, now retired from the University of Aberdeen, who dreamt up the idea for sociologists to list books and a luxury that were important to them, in a written alternative to the venerable BBC series Desert Island Discos, where interviewees choose eight pieces of music.

Over the last two decades, a total of 30 men and 31 women have made 301 choices 273 works of non-fiction, 25 fiction books, three journal articles and two book chapters. Unsurprisingly, C. Wright Mills has been the most selected author, chosen seven times, five for The Sociological Imagination, which makes it the most frequently selected book. Other popular authors were Pierre Bourdieu (featured six times, four for his book, Distinction), Erving Goffman (five times), Zygmunt Bauman (four times), W.E.B. Du Bois (four times) and Stan Cohen (three times).

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Along with the old masters, we find some other popular living scholars: Beverly Skeggs was chosen four times (three times for Formations of Class and Gender), with Les Back, Donna Haraway, Gurminder Bhamra and Anne Oakley cited twice. Albert Camus is the only fiction writer to be cited more than once (two times, for The Plague).

Important books

What do the 301 choices say about sociologists? There are, of course, many references to socially important work. Paula Black (Spring 2006) says of her choice, Another Country, by James Baldwin: “Reading this novel almost literally knocked me off my feet. It transports us into the lives of the characters in such a way that I not only learned about the wider world though this novel, I also felt emotionally drained when I had finished it. Literature like this can teach us much about sociology: it flays out the theories on racism or sexuality, it engages us on a human, emotional level. Baldwin for me is a writer who reminds me of my responsibilities as a social scientist. The greatest sociological work produces greatest something akin to great novels like this but for the sheer beauty of language nothing bein James Baldwin.”

The Making of Men, by Mairtin Mac an Ghaill, was chosen by Mark McCormack (Summer 2021) because “it was revelatory to me. Showing how teenage boys used homophobia to police each other’s behaviours, Mac an Ghaill also showed how schools as institutions were implicated in these dynamics. His work was part of a broader British sociology of gender and education that captured both the importance of socialisation and the role of schools in the homophobic masculinity of the late 20th century. I found The Making of Men so powerful, not just because it explained my experiences as a trainee teacher, but because it perfectly captured my own school experiences as a closeted gay teenager when the time was written. My own youth had been a training in sociology through witnessing the way that homophobia was used to police gender and difference, and this book connected my own lay understanding with the sociological literature I had learned from.

Oli Williams (Autumn 2021) chose Susan Faludi’s Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women because “before university, I didn’t know a great deal about feminism. It was not something I was taught much about at school or had much exposure to outside of education. I got the cliché summary that I think the majority of young people (especially boys) who grew up in the 90s got – women causing unrest, and suffering and dying for the vote, and later on burning bras and declaring to shave armpits and legs to reject the idea that women are merely sex objects for men … as an undergraduate, I was for the first time exposed to books that laid out the history of feminism and the ideas, principles, politics and events that informed and defined the different waves and kinds of feminism. Laner I read Backlash and it was life-changing. Faludi documents the backlash against feminism after the advances made in the 1970s, and how feminism was painted as having won the fight for equality, but how this led to more, not less, misery for women.”

Influential books

As well as influencing their minds, some contributors tell us about how books have altered their careers and lives more generally. John Brewer (Spring 2018) recalled the “dog-earred copy of Ronnie Frankenberg’s edited collection, Communities in Britain, that I bought as an A-level student when it was reprinted by Penguin in 1969, with my aspiring sociologist’s underlining and scribbles in the margins.

“The scribbles are an auto-ethnography. I liked it so much because from the beginning it grounded sociology for me as the study of real life, enabling me to make sense of the rural community in which I lived and the miners who travelled to a neighbouring colliery – the pit that killed, young, both my father and his father. From truly rural Wales, to the mining village of Ashton, to the new urban housing estates, the book gave a glimpse of worlds I thought I knew but which sociology helped me understand better.”

For Rose Barbour (Autumn 2013), Beverly Skeggs’ book, Formations of Class and Gender, had a personal impact. “For me, this book was a revelation and served to confirm my feminist-acquired belief that ‘the personal is political’ At last I felt I had identified a kindred spirit and this account (complete with Skeggs’s frank and reflexive comments) began to explain the feelings of guilt and anger, not to mention suspicions of ‘fraudulence’ that I had also experienced – indeed, continue to experience – as a woman from a working class background attempting to forge a career in academia.”

Nicolia Ingram (Autumn 2018) said that she became a sociologist via a ‘burning bright’ moment of fate – I signed up for a part-time Master’s in education through a need to make sense of my own expectations of growing up on a council estate, attending a grammar school in Belfast, teaching in Belfast schools, moving to London and then moving back to the...
Living it up
It is perhaps their choice of the luxury item they would take with them to the desert island that reveals most about their priorities in life. Even when offered the choice of a luxury, some chose to take books. Howard Becker (Spring 2007) chose the complete works of Mark Twain as his luxury. Paula Black opted to stay in serious mode with her choice of all of James Baldwin. Mike Hepworth (Summer 2006) decided to take a few laughs during his exile and went for the complete work of Richmal Crompton’s Just William series.

For some, enforced leisure time was an opportunity to play, or learn to play, a musical instrument. Steph Lawlor (Spring/Summer 2008) wrote: “I’ve always wanted to learn the saxophone, so I’d like to have a saxophone, some sheet music and a ‘teach yourself’ book. I could learn without inflicting the noise on others or imagining myself in a smoky basement club.”

Kevin Hylton (Summer 2009) wanted his saxophone: “I’ve been playing guitar since around 1985 and I’d pick that as you can play anything you want at any time, so I could play it while I was doing other things. I could play Bob Marley the next, it’s so versatile. I don’t want to think about what would happen when I run out of strings though!”

Samm Whinster wrote: “My one luxury would be a piano to tinkle away on. Perhaps a ship’s square piano made ready up on the shore, complete with tuning fork and bit of sheet music.”

Gregor McLennan (Spring 2005) was tempted by earthly pleasures, but in the end turned to something more eternal: “A mixed case of Islay malts immediately appeals, but it would only last a couple of weeks. So instead, I choose a piano – I would finally have the time to get to grips with some twelve bar blues and the ‘Moonlight’ Sonata.”

Mark McCormack (Spring 2005) was asked: “I’ve always enjoyed playing music. I started lessons through the Merton Music Foundation when it still received some funding from the council. That funding was gradually eroded but the foundations prospered as a result. It is through brilliant and passionate teachers and dedicated parents, giving kids across the borough the chance to make music. I played in several different bands and orchestras, and was able to go on tour to Italy, Norway and France with the jazz band and the concert band. By the time I went to university, I was practising the trumpet an hour a day on weekdays, but that (gradually and then swiftly) decreased as university life and interests took over. I sang in choirs instead, so that is all more forgiving of little practice. I recently found my trumpet again, and it’s a beautiful instrument. But I don’t think I was the time to start playing again. I love the idea of having the time, space and absence of others to make this desert island to become good at the trumpet again.”

Feature continues overleaf

...tinking the ivories, blowing one’s own trumpet: the island as a musical interlude...
Living it up (some more)

For others, the solitary experience of hearing music was important. Joan Bausfield (Summer 2010) wanted “sets of CDs of operas by ... Mozart, Verdi and Handel” as well as something to play them on. These would help to distract me from the isolation that I know I would experience on a desert island.

By contrast, Chris Warhurst wanted “my Jam, Style, Culture: Paul Weller music collection and obviously something to play it on. At the risk of gross generalisation, the generation before mine gained their political education through student reading circles and workers’ education; mine gained it through punk. We rocked against Thatcher, racism, everything. Music collections are an autobiography. To me it through punk. We rocked against circles and workers’ education; mine gained it through punk. We rocked against

Brian Longhurst (Autumn 2004) was far away’, that triggered me to leave collections are an autobiography. To me it through punk. We rocked against.

For others, the solitude of the desert island is summed up in a word: “loneliness.” Abbe Gurminder Bhamra probably spoke for many when she opted for “the complete box set of The Wire and something to watch it on.” It has become almost passé among sociologists to claim a liking for The Wire, but my own spiritual coral and fish that, hopefully, surround it. To be honest, the idea of being on this island now, with these books and the chance of swimming, is starting to sound like quite an attractive prospect!” Gayle Letherby (Autumn 2006) wanted “my swim suit and my pyjamas.” Comfort was uppermost in Mike Savage’s mind (Spring 2023). “One thing which will surely look large on the desert island is sleeping. After years of sleeping on futons, in recent years I have become more aware of the glory of a comfortable mattress and if (this does not count as a second luxury) luxury short covers with fine cotton. Perhaps this is another link back to my doctoral studies? In any case, it might help me get a good night’s sleep.”

For others, the solitude of the desert island is summed up in a word: “loneliness.” Abbe Gurminder Bhamra probably spoke for many when she opted for “the complete box set of The Wire and something to watch it on.” It has become almost passé among sociologists to claim a liking for The Wire, but my own spiritual coral and fish that, hopefully, surround it. To be honest, the idea of being on this island now, with these books and the chance of swimming, is starting to sound like quite an attractive prospect!” Gayle Letherby (Autumn 2006) wanted “my swim suit and my pyjamas.” Comfort was uppermost in Mike Savage’s mind (Spring 2023). “One thing which will surely look large on the desert island is sleeping. After years of sleeping on futons, in recent years I have become more aware of the glory of a comfortable mattress and if (this does not count as a second luxury) luxury short covers with fine cotton. Perhaps this is another link back to my doctoral studies? In any case, it might help me get a good night’s sleep.”

High tech was the theme for others: Garry Crawford requested his Xlone, while Jacqui Gabi (Summer 2023) was more similar if more specific in his request: “A complete discography of Prince O’Connell wherewithal to play them”, while Brian Longhurst (Autumn 2004) was far away’, that triggered me to leave collections are an autobiography. To me it through punk. We rocked against circles and workers’ education; mine gained it through punk. We rocked against

This would be backed up by a powerful solar charger for an ebook reader, ready-loaded with books, including one on how to distil gin from rain or sea water!”

Dreading the thought of a diet comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprising solely coconut pulp and juice, comprin...
Michaela Benson is Professor in Public Sociology at Lancaster University and Chief Executive of The Sociological Review Foundation. She is: the author of several books, most recently Lifestyle Migration and Colonial Traces in Malaysia and Panama (co-authored with Karen O’Reilly, 2018); host and producer of the podcast ‘Who do we think we are? Debunking taken for granted understandings of race, migration and citizenship in Britain today’; and co-lead of Reordering Britain and Britons after Brexit (MIZGEN).

Your first choice is To the British on the Costa del Sol, by Karen O’Reilly – why did you choose that?

My first choice is the book that inspired my original PhD research. Don’t judge this book by its cover!

It’s a fantastic theoretically-informed ethnography that considers the migration of British citizens to southern Spain. It goes beyond the headlines of a population so often reduced to stereotypes – such as the image that graces the front cover, over which Karen commented as ‘their daily lives in intricate detail. Through this account, Karen makes visible transnational communities and identity-formation among this population.

Nearly 25 years on from its original publication, it remains a groundbreaking text. Not only has it inspired many of us working on related topics, it sets the stage for asking the deep questions about the sociology of migration, not least in centring migration which, in the British case, has led to the equivalent of 1 in 10 of the population born in the UK now living abroad. It features an approach that shifts beyond the methodological nationalism and problem-oriented approaches that predominated (even today) within migration research.

But it is more than this. To my mind, this is a book inspired by a long tradition of sociological and anthropological work on class and community in Britain, albeit explored via the practices of those living in Spain. It offers important insights into nationalism, community and identity-formation. As such, it is essential reading for those interested in working on class formation, as much as it is for those working on questions of migration and citizenship.

This book is also personally significant to me. Karen is a scholar who has carved her own path while bringing others with her along the way. I first met her in 2007, when I was in the final stages of writing my PhD.

Any anxiety that I might have had about meeting the leading scholar in my field last evaporated as we talked about our shared research interests over a coffee. Since then, she has been a firm mentor, colleague and friend, always on hand with advice and support.

An added bonus here is that looking at the cover will be a reminder to stay in the shade until I am rescued!

What made you choose your next book – Teaching Critical Thinking, by bell hooks?

Bell hooks has always been good to teach with. In my first job post-PhD, I taught using this book as a text: ‘Representing what is not seen: Black imagination’, alongside Gloria Anzaldua’s views onto whiteness in Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza. The majority white students were visibly taken aback by hearing about the violence of whiteness from Black and Chicana scholars. Talking to them, it became clear that this was the first time they’d been challenged in this way in the classroom, having to face not only their privileges but also how these were directly connected to the oppression of others. However, hooks’ reflections on pedagogy in the short book of essays, Teaching Critical Thinking, were a more recent discovery for me.

After a few years doing funded research, with very little teaching, and after changing universities and preparing new teaching materials, I had lost my confidence in the classroom. This summer, I decided to address it and packed up this book for inspiration. It turned out to be just what I needed. As I planned my teaching for the year. It put into words many of the concerns I have about teaching today; and much more. I was particularly inspired by these essays went back the question of what learning is and what it could be.

Messages that stood out to me were: how to build trust in the learning process; working with conflict in the classroom; bringing humour, collaboration and imagination into teaching; and encouraging creativity, curiosity and joy in students.

As in her other work, the frank and open writing style makes you feel that you are in conversation with books. It encourages you to think along with her and others that she is in dialogue with over the course of the collection. But, most importantly, the book made me take a step back and think about my own pedagogical practice and what I needed to do to refresh this. I knew that after the summer I would be delivering an optional module on migration for the first time, and while I felt confident in the content, I knew that I had work to do to bring engaged pedagogy front and centre in the design. Reading books gave me the inspiration to get off the starting blocks, developing small activities to include in lectures and seminars, and offering guidance and advice on how to approach the book. I’ve also drawn from readings to podcasts, included in the module guide.

But, above all, what Teaching Critical Thinking reminded me was that teaching is always going to be a work in progress. Reading this again from a desert island, I’ll be thinking about what I can bring to teaching when I return.

Why did you select your third work, The Intimacy of Four Continents, by Lisa Lowe?

I am an avid reader of almost anything published by Duke University Press, but this one really stands out in my mind because of its scope and also its interdisciplinarity. Lowe effortlessly weaves together the relationships between Europe, Africa, Asia and the Americas, as she considers different elements of the emerging capitalist economy of the 18th and 19th centuries – slavery, indenture, colonialism and imperialism.

But above all, what she shows are the intimate interconnections and mutability of Western liberalization and colonialism. Her central argument concerns how the celebration of abolition, underpinned by the logic of freedom, obscures its origins in colonial conditions (and the continuation of colonial logics, such as those that produce race). Moreover, it stresses the need to centre the peoples and events otherwise missing from these histories. This rests on an innovative methodology of ‘reading intimately’ that brings together archives of liberalism and colonial archives. For me, connecting different corners of the globe within this retold history offered a powerful reminder of how resurfacing forgotten connections between peoples, places and processes challenges canonical thinking. Interdisciplinary in flavour, and firmly located in the arts and humanities, this work by Lowe offers inspiration, methodologically and analytically, as we seek ways of situating contemporary social issues within a global political economy past and present.

Your fourth choice is Imperial Intimacies: A Tale of Two Islands, by Hazel Carby – why this book?

A memoir, this book draws out the intimate transatlantic threads that made her family. This is a real labour of love that showcases why we need to remember that, within living memory, Britain was an empire, and that this history of slavery, colonialism and dispossession has left its marks in the present. It is one of those books that I have gifted to many of my friends in sociology and beyond (along with Saidiya Hartmann’s ‘Waydown Love, Beautiful Experiments’).

In a context where there are evermore urgent calls to grapple with race and from our students to recognise the significance of colonialism in the present day, this book is an evocative and engaging text to think with. It encourages the reader to think otherwise about a range of sociological issues at their intersections, among them class, race, family and gender. I read this and Lowe’s book against the backdrop of ongoing calls from our students, and from within the sociological community, to decolonise, which challenges sociology in the UK to consider and shake off its methodological nationalism and presentist tropings. These two works are powerful examples of the affordances of troubling tendencies that underscore so much sociology today.

But it also offers a route map for those of us, who, like Carby, have families made through empire. I read this at a time when I had started to try to make sociological sense of my own mixed heritage, informed by a family history made through ‘imperial intimacies’ between England and Hong Kong, a British colony until 1997. As Imperial Intimacies shows us, such family histories, all too often kept behind closed doors, offer important insights into the sociological issues of our time.

Your last book is Indebted City, by Louisa Lim – what led you to this?

I return to Hong Kong with my final book. This is one of several new non-fiction books about Hong Kong published against the backdrop of the pro-democracy uprisings. It deals with core issues that we address as sociologists: depression, dispossession and resistance.

The pro-democracy uprisings were an important reminder that this is a place and people never given the right to self-determination that was supposed to accompany political decolonisation. Living in a territory handed from one world power to another, Hong Kongers have long been dispossessed of their own history and identity; its history told by others – whether the UK in its reflections on its ‘last colony’ or the People’s Republic of China. Uncovering the untold stories of Hong Kong and amplifying the voices of ordinary Hong Kongers, Lim carefully reveals the distinctive identity of Hong Kong and its people.

The golden thread through her enquiry is the King of Kwong (who also inspired her eponymously named podcast www.abs.net.au/listen/programs/mr-feet-of-god/2021/04/30). From the 1950s until his death in 2007, he became known around the city for his graffiti – Chinese calligraphy that exposed the British of stealing his land. Returning to the Kingdom throughout the book, she centres the story on how, in the past and the present, the people of Hong Kong have remained defiant, in the struggle for a city made in their image.

And for your luxury? Running a desert island … but it also helps that I’ll go anywhere without them. They offer me a way of getting out and seeing places, whether close to home or further afield. Running helps me to clear my head, whether before or after a long day. I’ve run through protest rallies, past writer’s block, procrastination and much, much more. A runner for at least a decade, what I like about it is that you can take yourself anywhere. I think that this might be useful on a desert island … but it also helps that I’ll have a comfortable pair of shoes.
Staff ‘feel pressured to return to work after a bereavement’

Professor Erica Borgstrom writes about research which shows that many staff don’t take the bereavement leave they are entitled to because of workload pressures

Bereavement during employment in higher education (UK) 2023 survey report. Milton Keynes: The Open University.

To what extent is social work applied sociology?, group asks

Rosie Buckland and Louise Isham write about starting a new BSA Social Work study group

The project was led by Professor Erica Borgstrom, of the Open University, and the project team currently includes colleagues Claire A. Harris, Dr Kerry Jones and Khadija Borgstrom, E., Harris, C. A. Jones, K. and Mallon, S. (2023) ‘Bereavement during employment in higher education (UK): 2023 survey report’. Milton Keynes: The Open University.

To what extent is social work applied sociology? – is there a disconnect between ‘social work academia’ and ‘social work practice’? These were questions that we asked each other, and that was essentially how the Social Work study group got started.

attended. We had presentations from Dr Jo Warner on ‘Social work and sociology: and then now’, from Dr Jessica Langston on her ethnography, ‘Why good social workers do bad things’, from Dr Will Mason on groundbreaking Child Welfare Inequalities Project (CWIP), and from Dr Daniel Edmondson on ways of measuring poverty.

Dr Warner’s presentation took as its starting point the lives of Jane Addams and Mary Richardson to highlight the tensions going back to the 1880s in social work, in what it should be, who it should be for and who should do it. Dr Langston talked about her own experiences as a children’s social worker to better understand how children’s social workers do social work. Dr Mason described some of the qualitative findings of the CWIP study to reflect on why children’s social work interventions in Northern Ireland had quantitative differences in outcomes to England, Wales and Scotland, and Dr Edmondson considered the sociological implications of different ways of measuring poverty and the poverty gap.

Unfortunately we didn’t manage to maintain momentum following such a promising start! Covid, family, new jobs, PhD completion and other usual life pressures meant the group fell down the list of priorities. It was a shame, as the publishing from the event never came to fruition, but we’d really like your help to get it going again. We’d like to see where that can take us.

Do you have ideas about what you’d like to see from the group? It’s not difficult to imagine how to best do it? We’d like to represent the interests of those who use social work services, carers, students, educators, researchers and practitioners, and we want to stimulate conversations, hold events and share and create work that adopts a critical, sociological approach to social work practice and theory. In terms of our positioning now, Rachel, our original co-founder, has left academia to return to social work practice, Louise is a social work academic and Rosie’s work is mostly in systemic social work practice but with a foot in academia.

So what happens next? We’ve set up a BSA Social Work study group Jiscmail group and instructions for joining can be found here: http://tinyurl.com/3ynm76s

We look forward to seeing you soon! – Dr Rosie Buckland and Dr Louise Isham

‘To what extent is social work applied sociology? – is there a disconnect between ‘social work academia’ and ‘social work practice’? These were questions that we asked each other, and that was essentially how the Social Work study group got started’
New project aims to understand the lives of Afghan families in England

Dr Caroline Oliver and Professor Louise Ryan write about a new project to understand the experiences of Afghan families who have settled in England.

Investigating experiences and outcomes, especially in employment, income and housing. This will also describe inequalities in experiences by region and by population characteristics. During our third phase, we have used participatory methods of both walking interviews and Photovoice research to generate insight into the most vulnerable, especially women and young people, are experiencing resettlement.

Our research aims to engage stakeholders throughout via podcasts, briefings, workshops and roundtables. It is expected that the results of the project will be of interest to Home Office policymakers, select committees and parliamentarians, and to women and girls working with refugee NGOs and the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Afghanistan and Afghan Women and Children.

Findings from the project will enable informed governance of migration partnerships, local authorities and NGOs to assess how resettlement schemes are working and how experiences vary regionally and by different populations.

For more information, please contact:
• Dr Caroline Oliver: c.oliver@ucl.ac.uk
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• Professor Maria López: m.lopez@londonmet.ac.uk
• Dr Janey Kele: j.kele@mdx.ac.uk

Lecture showed what decolonising the curriculum looks like

Jacqueline Ayegman-Duah, Head of Sociology at City and Islington College

Sixth Form Centre, writes about a recent talk with the former BSA President, Gurminder Bhamra

Since doing sociology as a 16-year-old in Durban, South Africa, Gurminder has always had an admiration for and respect for the discipline. Whether it be at Adel or degree level, sociology has provided Gurminder with the role in enabling students to critically examine and engage with the complex world around them. Recently City and Islington Sixth Form Adel sociology students were fortunate enough to receive a bespoke lecture from the esteemed university lecturer and author Gurminder Bhamra.

Gurminder spoke about the sociology of the industrial revolution, and racial capitalism and its links to modernity. Having such an engaging and knowledgeable speaker such as Gurminder come and speak to our students not only provided these students with a wealth of enrichment and successful methods of teaching, but also provided a valuable insight into the high-quality academic expectations of higher education. Through providing a depth of expertise, Gurminder was the embodiment of sociology in action and true testament to studying sociology beyond Adel.

Although the students were at first reserved and more content with actively listening rather than questioning Gurminder, they were able to utilise deep synaptic links not only to other topics studied in sociology but also to other subjects studied at school. This was not only important for drawing on the interconnectedness of sociology, history and economics, but also for the methodological framework of the intellectual curiosity of many of our students, so much so that a few recited much of what they had learnt to other students who were not in the session. During Gurminder’s profound session she explored the intricacies of racial capitalism and its relationship to the industrial revolution, the Empire and contemporary capitalism exploring how racial hierarchies are embedded in capitalist structures and its implications for society.

Despite only having one hour, Gurminder’s talk encouraged students to analyse the role of the Empire and the British industrial revolution, and its far-reaching consequences. The students gained valuable insights and were able to draw links between the historical oppression of Britain’s former colonies, as well as more contemporary forms of exploitation and ‘otherness’. For example, both students and Gurminder were articulate in applying racial capitalism to recent policies surrounding migrants in the UK.

Gurminder argued that historical narratives must be adjusted to include the experiences of colonised societies, highlighting the interconnectedness of global histories and the impact of colonialism on shaping contemporary social structures. Therefore, through exploring the true, and often state-of-the-art picture of the industrial revolution, Gurminder’s critical examination highlighted the significant relationship between this and the British Empire.

Gurminder was very successful in demonstrating to our students the exploitation of resources from the colonies and transatlantic slave trade, which contributed significantly to Britain and its stance as a global superpower. In doing so our students, and any others who were fortunate enough to have someone like Gurminder, who is both knowledgeable and passionate about her field, were empowered to challenge complex narratives and foster a more inclusive understanding of Britain’s past.

As a lover of all things sociology, it was a true pleasure to have Gurminder provide such a captivating, thought-provoking and inspiring lecture to our students. Not only did our students gain insightful content at a challenging and yet accessible level of access, they also demonstrated that students who were not in the session. Understanding the broader context of X social science as a whole.

Multi-photograph, Replacing keywords with names, and adding new names.}

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http://tinyurl.com/mr3v2k29
The Making of Meaning
Selections from Niklas Luhmann’s Works on Semantics and Social Structure
Edited by Christian Morgner
UPP 2022
352 pages £56 hbk
ISBN: 9780199549922

The Making of Meaning, a compilation of Niklas Luhmann’s essays, curated by Christian Morgan, represents a significant contribution to contemporary sociology, particularly in the domain of social order and the analysis of meaning. Luhmann’s theoretical framework, grounded in systems theory, extends to a nuanced understanding of how meaning is constructed within social contexts. The book’s essays address various aspects of this process, underscoring the importance of Luhmann’s work in contemporary sociological and interdisciplinary discussions.

Luhmann views society as constituted by communications, with each communicative act contributing to the ongoing construction and modification of meaning. This perspective aligns with the post-World War II shift in sociology towards a more refined understanding of meaning-making, influenced by globalisation, technological advancements, and various social movements.

In his introduction, Morgan critiques the dominant narrative that limits Luhmann to systems theory, instead highlighting his broader contributions to the sociology of knowledge and cultural sociology. For instance, it explores how Luhmann’s ideas can be applied to the study of empirical examples drawn on in the book to social structures and human identities and culture. The structure of the book into three sections highlights the contemporary views where individuality is shaped by exclusion and personal achievement. Lastly, ‘Culture as a historical concept’ investigates the historical and contemporary relevance of context, addressing the challenges in defining it within the social sciences. It underscores culture’s diverse scope, encompassing symbolic and material human artefacts, and traces its evolution from the 18th century, emphasising its role in comprehending social structures and human development.

Richard King’s reflections on the challenges of translating and interpreting Luhmann’s complex ideas in the final chapter are particularly insightful. He highlights the difficulties in making Luhmann’s essays accessible to English-speaking readers but also contributes significantly to the field of sociology, making it a must-read for scholars and students interested in the complex processes of meaning-making in contemporary society.

In summary, The Making of Meaning offers a comprehensive view of Luhmann’s thought, providing a valuable source of inspiration for many sociologists and interdisciplinary scholars. The book is highly recommended for its in-depth exploration of the dynamic process of meaning-creation, modification, and perception in social contexts. It not only broadens the understanding of Luhmann’s work but also contributes significantly to the field of sociology, making it a must-read for scholars and students interested in the complex processes of meaning-making in contemporary society.

Dr Steven Watson
University of Cambridge

Group Life: An Invitation to Local Sociology
Gary Fine, Tim Hallett
Polity Press 2022
224 pages £50 hbk, £15.99 pbk
ISBN: 9781509554133 hbk

Group Life invites a reconsideration of the macro and micro dichotomy on which sociology tends to be based. The authors call for a sociology which addresses relations between and within groups by drawing on a range of empirical data that brings theory to life. Readers are introduced to a variety of groups that the authors have studied, from mushroom collectives to roller derby fans. These examples not only aid the understanding of their arguments but point to the implications for social organisations. It is an advocacy for ethnographic encounters, as they suggest that ‘to understand how structure matters and how individuals navigate them, sociologists must watch and listen to groups and people gathered in local communities’ (p. 2).

Fine and Hallett argue that culture is often distinct to nationalisms but that studying small groups can illuminate social order at local scales. Local sociology is conceptualised here as understanding the ways that groups organise themselves internally and in relation to external social interactions. They propose that the stability of groups is shaped by ‘idioculture’ – shared history, routine and action that creates belonging – and is at the intersection of individual practice and wider public life. These ideas help extend symbolic interactionism, as the authors refer to the works of Cooley and Goffman to situate their work within traditions which remain familiar to sociologists today. However, Fine and Hallett focus on the ways in which groups come to establish meaning through identities that are both collective and reflective.

The ‘local’ in ‘local sociology’ points to its broadest sense as a way to highlight the embeddedness of everyday interactions in context. Indeed, many of the empirical examples drawn on in the book are of groups that meet physically. To take this analysis further, it may be useful to consider the applicability to online spaces, where the boundaries of group life may be less fixed, and to question the distinction between groups, social identities and organizations. For example, in our own research, farmers engaged in bridging (connecting with the public) and bonding (connecting with other farmers) on social media whilst also disrupting group life through the communication of contested political priorities. This resonates with the authors’ suggestions that disruption and rivalry do not necessarily undermine group stability. Group Life allows us to look beyond organisational studies, offering opportunities to theorise and investigate DIY social movements and DIY social communities that may congregate online.

This book would be a welcome addition to the study of small groups and DIY communities, offering lists on sociological theory as it grapples with the relationship between structure and agency, identity and purpose, discipline, as well as key concepts such as practices and identities. The structure of the book into three sections highlights the scope of group dynamics, focusing on the relevance to local sociologists, community, affiliation and wider institutions. Therefore, this book would also be beneficial for those who have studied sociological research communities as it offers insights into the levels of analysis possible. Following the Covid pandemic, we were reminded of the importance of small groups and DIY Life invites renewed focus on the locality at their heart.

Dr Bethany Robertson
University of Leeds
The authors, Radhakrishnan and Solari, seek to reconceptualise neoliberalism in The Gender Order of Neoliberalism in a way that adequately accounts for the specificities of historical conditions, and the regional and localised transformations across different regions. They draw from their own everyday experiences of intensive mothering while navigating the US academy system, and from their experiences of conducting fieldwork in different countries to establish a social order that is at once symbolic and real. The authors present an analysis of government and medical/scientific experts, concentrating on the pandemic as a totality. The analysis considers how the shifting objectives and priorities of the policy response were influenced by specific actors, subsequently zooming out to consider the relative influence of different groups. The extent to which policy followed or was even guided by the science is given sustained attention. As the narrative unravels, the authors show how policies became increasingly driven by economic, political and ideological concerns rather than scientific ones. The unfolding narrative provides a thick descriptive base upon which the authors present a comprehensive and strikingly sharp analysis of the complex and dramatic unfolding of events.

The focus on power which drives the analysis is conceived as an attempt to understand the role of various interest groups in shaping the health policy response to the pandemic. These groups include government, medical/scientific experts, health and care professionals, pharmaceuticals, the media and the public. To their conceptual framing the authors begin with the government as the central and most powerful actor, and then consider how other actors influence policy decisions-making and outcomes, seeking both evidence of actors reinforcing the dominant interest as well as contesting it. Drawing upon existing literature on the pandemic, the authors consider a number of issues related to the extreme uncertainty with which the government’s capacity to benefit in the pharmaceutical industry at the cost of global public health.

The authors conclude their chapter on the overwhelming impact of the pandemic and the policy response upon public health and social inequalities and evaluates the extent to which these can be explained by the theories of structural interests and countervailing powers. They conclude that the government’s response to the first wave was “closely and effectively”, contributing to a “devastating death toll” (p. 89), with limited evidence of countervailing powers working to influence or shift the balance of power outside the UK. While the risks taken with the vaccination programme paid off to a much greater extent in successfully limiting population mortality and morbidity, the analysis also shows how the government used the programme to protect domestic interests at the expense of others. Overall, this is a very concise, accessible and insightful analysis of a globally consequential set of events and is highly recommended for students and scholars of critical health policy, crisis management, and anyone who simply wishes to understand more about these momentous events. 

Dr Simon Bailey
University of Kent

The Gender Order of Neoliberalism
Smriti Radhakrishnan and Cinzia D Solari
Polity
2023
224 pages
£35.99 hbk, £14.99 pbk
isbn hbk: 9781509544899
isbn pbk: 9781509544905

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Network Magazine of the British Sociological Association, Spring 2024

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Teresa Rees, 1949-2023

Dame Teresa Rees, a ‘wise and compassionate’ expert on gender inequality and supporting students

The BSA has expressed its sadness at the death of Dame Teresa Rees, who died in September, aged 74.

Professor Rees was internationally-researched for her research on gender inequalities in education, training, labour market and science, and was an influential advisor to governments.

She studied sociology and politics at Exeter University and in 1975 moved to Wales, joining University College, Cardiff (which became Cardiff University) as a research fellow. In 1974 she married Gareth Rees, a fellow sociologist at Cardiff. They worked together on many projects on the labour market, education and training in Wales.

In 1988 she was appointed Director of the Social Research Unit at Cardiff, conducting research on trade unions, evaluating training provided by employers such as the civil service, and specialising in policies to improve the employment of women in science, technology and medicine.

She then became Professor of Labour Market Studies at Bristol University (1995-2000), before returning to Cardiff as Professor for Social Sciences.

There she researched ‘gender mainstreaming’, an initiative which tries to ensure that no policy decision can be taken without an assessment first being made of its impact on equal opportunities.

She was an advisor on equality matters to the National Assembly for Wales (now the Senedd), when it was set up in 1999. She also chaired two reports for the Welsh government on how to support students in higher and further education: Investing in Learners (2001), which led to the introduction of a guaranteed subsistence student grant, and maintenance costs; and Fair and Flexible (2003), which recommended the introduction of top-up fees.

Professor Rees was Cardiff University’s Pro Vice-Chancellor for Staff and Students (2004-2007), then Pro Vice-Chancellor for Staff and Students (2007-2013), before becoming Vice-Chancellor of the University of Bath (2013-2017).

Professor Rees’ work has been recognised with a number of awards, including a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 2015 and a Dame Commander of the Order of Australia in 2018.

She is survived by two sons and five grandchildren.

Adele E. Clarke, 1945-2024

Adele E. Clarke, the internationally known sociologist, died in January in San Francisco. She was 78.

Dr Adele E. Clarke, the internationally known sociologist, died in January in San Francisco. She was 78.

Dr Clarke made important contributions to sociology, qualitative methodologies, women’s health, and reproductive studies. She was recognised for her creative interdisciplinary.

With colleagues at the University of California, Dr Clarke offered the first curriculum in the United States focused on social, cultural and historical dimensions of women’s health.

She published important works, including Women’s Health: Differences and Complexities (1997, with Sheryl Rueck and Virginia Olesen) and Revisiting Women, Health, and Healing: Feminist, Cultural, and Technoscience Perspectives (1999, with Virginia Olesen).

Adele Clarke was born on 1 April 1945, in New York, and received a bachelor’s degree from Barnard College in 1969 and a master’s degree from New York University in 1970.

She moved to California in 1970, teaching at the College of the Redwoods and Sonoma State University, where she co-ordinated the women’s studies programme. She earned her doctorate at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF).

My research focuses on understanding the complexity behind public opinion formation, including political attitudes and party identity. Do the internet, traditional news sources or our social networks have the greatest influence on us? In this context, I cover topics such as political polarization, voting behaviour, Brexit and media discourse - exploring the key influences on opinion formation – whether the internet, online or offline news sources, or social networks - my research adds valuable insights into the forces that shape public opinion in our time.

I have worked with digital trace data, including browsing history data typically consisting of a sample ranging from 200 to 600 participants over a span of six months. Additionally, I have used Twitter data, encompassing millions of tweets related to significant UK political events such as Brexit deal negotiations and recent general elections.

More recently, my focus has shifted towards the extensive use of the British Election Study dataset, typically around 20,000 individuals.

The consumption of internet news appears to have a different and varying intensity of influence on voting behaviour when compared with activities like radio listening. Notable trends indicate that television news consumption correlates with an increased likelihood of voting in favour of leaving the EU in the referendum and supporting the Conservative party in subsequent elections.

What surprised me about pursuing a PhD in sociology is the vast diversity in research subjects and methodologies. Some of my colleagues collaborate on interdisciplinary teams on sociogenomics, meticulously analysing social behaviour literally at a molecular level, while others have travelled into some of the most remote and dangerous places in the world to conduct interviews.

Perhaps one of the most important challenges of doing a PhD is accepting the responsibility for one’s work. What I work on every day is my project and no one else’s. This means I have to make important decisions, carry out my work diligently, and be able to defend my work when challenged. It is a lot like running your own business. There is no line manager to blame if things go south. But that is also the best part – taking on full responsibility also means you can take credit for what you achieve.

I would advise anyone considering a PhD to choose a topic carefully, selecting something you are passionate about. Secondly, identify the best supervisor and reach out early. Your supervisor is truly the only other person actively supporting you, so ensure they are willing to do so. If you find a supervisor who shares the same passion for your project as you do, your PhD journey can be so much more rewarding.

To take my mind off my PhD work I either visit my family or do some creative work as a photographer. Besides that, I am a passionate hiker and mountaineer. Spending a day in the mountains clears my mind, not to mention the endorphin boost from conquering a mountain.

Meet the PhD: Clemens Jarnach

‘Television news consumption correlates with an increased likelihood of voting in favour of supporting the Conservative party’

'Throughout this PhD journey, I have worked with digital trace data, encompassing millions of tweets related to significant UK political events such as Brexit deal negotiations and recent general elections. I have also used Twitter data, encompassing millions of tweets related to significant UK political events such as Brexit deal negotiations and recent general elections.

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John Stone, 1944-2023

Professor Stephen Mennell, of University College Dublin, writes about his friend and colleague, Professor John Stone

John Stone, Professor of Sociology at Boston University and internationally renowned authority on ethnicity, race relations and a host of related questions, died – still in harness, teaching and researching – on 11 October 2023.

John was my oldest friend in sociology. We both arrived at St Catherine’s College, Cambridge in 1963, to read economics. Neither of us regretted receiving a good grounding in economics, but, being mathematically uninclined, we were both scared silly by the already self-evident future of that discipline. Fortunately, in those days sociology was taught as what might now be called a ‘minor’ within the Economics Tripos, and we were inspiredly taught by Philip Abrams, David Lockwood and John Goldthorpe. So, upon graduating, we both switched to sociology.

John went to St Anthony’s College, Oxford, for his DPhil. His thesis was on British migrants to South Africa. He had already been visiting the apartheid state as an undergraduate, of which I of course disapproved, but all was well by 1964 when he emerged with both a doctorate and a wife, Rolene. From 1970 to 1974 he was assistant professor at Columbia University, before returning to St Anthony’s as a Fellow, 1974–79. From there he moved to Goldsmith’s College, University of London, as Reader in Social Science and Administration, eventually becoming both Head of Department and professor. And then it was back to America, first to George Mason University from 1989 to 2001, and finally to Boston University, from 2001 until his death. In both cases, he initially served six-year terms as Chair of the Department – of which more in a moment.

During his time as a Fellow of St Anthony’s, John founded the journal Ethnic and Racial Studies and edited it until he departed for the USA. It rapidly became the leading journal in the field. Although ethnic and race relations always remained central to John’s concerns, they were just the hinge on which his wide range of interests pivoted: group closure, the emic, or native sense of the word, and the etic, or technical concept he was attempting to develop. Nevertheless, he read through the entire first draft of my 2007 book The American Civilising Process, making countless suggestions for its improvement. In particular, he proposed that I merge two long chapters that were beginning to make even me feel tired, and the resulting single chapter on integration struggles became one of the best in the book (well, I think so!). And this generosity with his time, sociological insight and editorial skill were just some of the many traits that made John loved and admired by his colleagues.

At the memorial meeting for John organised by his friends in November 2023, his colleagues from Boston University and George Mason University reminisced about his wit and wisdom – his ‘shredding’ of post-structuralism was remembered – his good conversation and, especially, the unstinting help and support he gave to staff and students, both of which he regarded equally as friends. He was, said one friend – a Roman Catholic priest – ‘a good shepherd’, even though he had no time for religion. John was memorably described as “an anti-bureaucratic humanist”. He broke ruthlessly through formal procedures. He loaded the bureaucratisation, corporatisation and de-democratisation that have been ruining universities, and as Head of Department both at George Mason University and Boston University did his best to fight them off. More than two decades after he left George Mason University he was still remembered as “a giant in the land”. A certain British manner and humour seems to have driven some of the apartheid’s wild. One dean at George Mason found John so impossible to deal with that, when he came to the end of his term of office, she awarded him not the usual one year’s leave, but two years’. Thereafter, John honoured the Dean (well, sort of) for this period by referring to it on his CV as his ‘Zita Tyer Distinguished Research Fellowship, GMU’.

Quite a character!

John Stone, 1944-2023

Events listing

25 March

Goldsmiths

Sociology and the New Materialisms: A New Materialisms Study Group One-day Conference

3-5 April

Online

Crisis, Continuity and Change: BSA Virtual Annual Conference 2024

26 April

Aston University

Drug Policy and Drug Cultures – Ambiguities and Tensions: A Postgraduate Regional Event

27 April

Coventry University

Connecting Postgraduate Researchers Through Gender Research: A Postgraduate Forum Regional Event

1 May

Online

Women’s Spaces of Knowledge: An Auto/Biography Study Group Seminar

1 May

University of Derby

Querying the Effectiveness of the Social Mobility Agenda: An Early Career Forum Regional Event

7 May

University of Edinburgh

Exploring How Different Arts Inform Sociology Research: A Postgraduate Forum Regional Event

8 May

Online

Teaching Sociology in Higher Education: Pedagogical Practices and Possibilities: A BSA Event

12 June

Coventry/Hybrid

Being, Becoming and Belonging: Exploring Diasporic Identities: A Postgraduate Forum Regional Event

8-10 July

University of Northumbria

Religion, Justice, and Social Action: Sociology of Religion Annual Conference

10-12 July

University of Reading

Disappointments and Dissonances: Auto/Biography Summer Conference 2024

11-13 July

University of Warwick

Medical Sociology Conference 2024

Would you like to contribute to Network?

We are looking for letters, opinions and news articles

For more information please contact Tony Trueman at: tony.trueman@britsoc.org.uk or on 07964 023392, or BSA Chief Executive Judith Mudd at: judith.mudd@britsoc.org.uk

The Summer 2024 edition of Network will be published in July. Copy deadlines are around two months before publication (please check with Tony or Judith).

We try to print all material received, but pressure of space may lead to articles being edited and publication being delayed.

Books for review can be seen at: http://bit.ly/2gm3I0t

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42 Appreciation

Network Magazine of the British Sociological Association, Spring 2024
The UK system is in a bit of a funk – it’s a thriving system, but it’s in a state of precariousness, and unless we do something about it we will lose what is great about this system.

Looking back on her experience now, she realises just how much sexism she experienced in the music business, from being abused on stage, to condescending journalists who would assume that the only male member of the group was the leader.

“I sat in college one afternoon and read it from cover to cover – it made me laugh, it made me cry, it made me angry, above all it made me think and made me want to be a sociologist”