

Jubber, K. (2007). Sociology in South Africa A Brief Historical Review of Research and Publishing. *International Sociology*, 22(5): 527–546.



Chapter 2

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SOCIOLOGY

In Chapter 2, we give an outline of the history of sociology, showing the ways that the discipline and the questions it asks are shaped by wider social, economic, and cultural transformations. This account of sociology's history is not an objective capturing of the one 'true story' of sociology's development but is, instead, the story of Western sociology which has come to dominate accounts of how sociology took shape.

However, there are multiple histories (plural) of sociology where social, economic and cultural shifts in different contexts influenced, and continue to influence, the discipline of sociology in these particular places. Sociologists have, for example, given accounts of the development of sociology in India (Uberoi et al. 2008), Australia (Germov and McGee 2005), and China (Freedman 1962). In many of these contexts, the development of sociology looks different from the dominant Western story, owing partly to the effects of colonisation.

One such example is given by Ken Jubber who offers a historical review of the development of sociology in South Africa. He argues that despite a 100-year history, very few people outside of South Africa know anything about the story of South African sociology. Jubber's article demonstrates that the history of sociology presented in textbooks like ours cannot be transposed onto all geographical and political contexts. While there may be some commonalities across these histories (for example, ties to 'science' disciplines in the early years), context-specific events, policies, and cultures are important and shape this history.

Using academic articles as his data source, Jubber traces South African sociology back to 1902 when the South African Association for the Advancement of Science, which listed sociology as one of the 'sciences', was established. He then goes on to show how the history of South Africa became central to the way that sociology developed with emphasis on the issues and intersections of race, ethnicity, identity, nationalism, and poverty.

Jubber documents the story of South African sociology through literature-based methods. This means that he did not collect primary empirical data for this article but, instead, made his argument by piecing together data, theories, and reflections from other academics' published work. This kind of literature-based methodology lends itself well to studying the history of a phenomenon as new empirical data would add little to the 'story' being told. Through reviewing literature from as far

back as 1903, Jubber draws attention to the colonial and racial politics which have shaped South Africa's history and influenced the development of sociology as a discipline. In particular, he analyses the 'institutionalization of structures of racial segregation' through Apartheid, which began in 1948, and segregated South African society according to ethnicity (page 531).

Reading and reviewing academic literature to get a feel for how a phenomenon such as racial segregation was understood at the time is important for any piece of academic work; when we conduct primary research, we call this part of the project a 'literature review'. But using academic literature as a methodology like in Jubber's article goes beyond simply reading literature which you have been recommended or that you found on a certain topic to contextualise your empirical research. Instead, researchers using this method take a more rigorous approach to finding, sifting, and critiquing relevant literature which is then treated as data rather than just as contextual information.

Literature-based methods rely upon researchers identifying key terms or topics and searching literature databases for all relevant publications which match with these terms. This will return a huge number of publications but researchers will then read through all of these matches to determine which are relevant (i.e. help answer the question), and which are high enough quality to be included as data (i.e. are from reputable academic sources). This is sometimes called a systematic literature review where researchers go through a particular set of steps in conducting their literature-based research and report their findings in a particular way (see Boland et al. 2017 for a guide).

But Jubber's article isn't based on a *systematic* literature review – it is less structured and doesn't report findings so much as telling a story. For Mary Dixon-Woods et al. (2006), using literature in this way doesn't have to be too mechanical and positivistic. Instead, they argue, that a degree of flexibility and the incorporation of literature which sits outside of traditional academic parameters can help to develop a holistic overview of a topic or research area. Nonetheless, always central to the process of literature-based methods is the process of *critique*, asking ourselves questions like what is being said, who is the author, how did they carry out the research, when was it done, are the arguments relevant, what are the strengths/weaknesses? (see Aveyard 2010).

While Jubber's more flexible approach to literature can be freeing for researchers, it has also been critiqued, and the freedom and flexibility of this method is also part of its weakness.

For Petticrew and Roberts (2006), using literature-based methods in an unsystematic way can mean that researchers unwittingly miss important literature because the initial literature search didn't trawl every relevant database. But, Hammersley (2013:113) suggests that unstructured literature methods may also deliberately miss literature so that researchers may 'select and interpret research evidence... to support their own pre-given views or interests, and thereby claim scientific backing for these'. While systematic reviews require researchers to provide detailed information about their search terms, databases, and modes of analysis, more flexible literature studies such as Jubber's do not require this same level of reporting so there is a risk that researchers may only pick and discuss literature which

supports their approach rather than giving a holistic, more objective picture. Yet Hammersley (2013) questions how transparent researchers can be when using literature-based methods given that researchers make small subjective decisions all the time in research which we may not even recognise as subject decisions – how can we report these if we're not always aware we're making them? Moreover, he argues that to aim for transparency is to assume that a reader or reviewer will, later on, have the capacity and knowledge to fully understand what the researcher did and will be able to repeat the process exactly.

This lack of transparency is linked to the lack of structured protocols or processes for undertaking literature-based methods. In empirical methods (which you will learn about in Chapter 4), there may be a degree of flexibility but the 'core' components remain fairly unchanged. For example, you may undertake interviews whilst walking, or you may use comic books as a basis for interview conversations but the interview itself is still pretty-defined as researcher asking questions that participants answer. But, for literature-based methods, there isn't this same clarity of what the method *is* or what researchers are meant to *do* – is it enough to just read literature and re-report the arguments? Or do researchers need to do an analysis? How should this analysis be done? How does a research distinguish between literature which is used to contextualise the study and 'literature as data' for literature-based methods? These are difficult questions without a clear answer and, for Armitage and Keeble-Allen (2008) present particular issues for students who are new to research in general and literature-based methods in particular. Again, it is the flexibility of literature-based methods (often praised as a positive) which underpins this lack of clarity.

QUESTIONS:

1. Ken Jubber argues that not much is known about South African sociology outside of South Africa. How much do you know about the development of sociology in the global south?
2. What kinds of research questions might literature-based methods be useful for answering?
3. Armitage and Keeble-Allen suggest that students can struggle with the flexibility of literature-based methods. How might you write a guide for students using this method?

REFERENCES

- Armitage, A., & Keeble-Allen, D. (2008). Undertaking a Structured Literature Review or Structuring a Literature Review: Tales from the Field. *The Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods*, 6(2): 103–114.
- Aveyard, H. (2010). *Doing a Literature Review in Health and Social Care* (2nd edition). Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Boland, A., Cherry, G., & Dickson, R. (2017). *Doing a Systematic Literature Review: A Student's Guide*. London: Sage.
- Dixon-Woods, M., Bonas, S., Booth, A., Jones, D.R., Miller, T., Shaw, R.L., Smith, J., Sutton, A., & Young, B. (2006). How can Systematic Reviews Incorporate Qualitative Research? A Critical Perspective. *Qualitative Research*, 6: 27–44.
- Freedman, M. (1962). Sociology in and of China. *British Journal of Sociology*, 13(2), 106–116.
- Germov, J., & McGee, T.R. (2005). *Histories of Australian Sociology*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
- Hammersley, M. (2013). *The Myth of Research-Based Policy and Practice*. London: Sage.
- Petticrew, M.A., & Roberts, H. (2006). *Systematic Reviews in the Social Sciences*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Uberoi, P., Sundar, N., & Deshpande, S. (2008). *Anthropology in the East: Founders of Indian Sociology and Anthropology*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black.