

Burton, S. (2016). Becoming Sociological: Disciplinarity and a Sense of 'Home'. *Sociology*, 50(5): 984–992.



Chapter 1

WHAT IS SOCIOLOGY?

In Chapter 1, we give an overview of what sociology is, and how it's different from other disciplines. We also show that sociology overlaps, and shares theories and methods with other subjects like psychology, philosophy, human geography and even medicine. For some sociologists, the 'fuzzy boundaries' of sociology brings all kinds of problems in being able to definitively say what is we actually *do* and *why*.

But, for others, the overlaps and flexibility of our questions, theories and methods offer lots of exciting opportunities to make sense of the social world, share our research with non-sociologists and to bring people into the discipline from outside. One example of this comes from Sarah Burton who came to the discipline after an undergraduate degree in English Literature during which she found herself asking difficult questions about the social construction of texts - questions which sociology was best placed to help her answer. In fact, her English Literature lecturers often asked Burton 'shouldn't you be in sociology?' (Burton, 2016: 986). And so, she moved into sociology for her postgraduate degrees.

Having come to sociology from a different subject, Burton has thought a lot about the nature of sociology and its purpose. In her article 'Becoming Sociological: Disciplinarity and a Sense of Home', Burton shares her reflections on her movement into sociology and what she thinks sociology is. Throughout the article, Burton makes playful analogies between her experience of entering sociology and the experience of the protagonist in Lewis Carroll's classic novel 'Alice in Wonderland'. For Burton, as for Alice, the new world in which she found herself was curious and the people seemingly 'mad', but there were also lots of opportunities for fun and adventure.

In the article, Burton uses a method known as **autoethnography** which is a form of qualitative research where the researcher uses reflections on their own experiences to explore the broader nature of society. This method disrupts traditional ways of researching the social world where sociologists have tended to give voice to research participants and relegate our own experiences into the background.

This isn't to say that we try to paint ourselves out of research. In fact, sociologists engage heavily in a process called 'reflexivity', which involves us being honest and explicit about the ways that research may be influenced by a researchers' characteristics. For example, Egharevba (2001) talks about her white participants' reluctance to discuss racially-sensitive subjects with her as a Black researcher. This isn't to say that

Egharevba is a bad researcher or was asking the wrong questions but that a researcher's characteristics (in this case ethnicity but also sex, age, sexuality, disability) are likely to have an impact on what participants are willing to discuss when the research is related to those particular issues. Reflexivity also works the other way where researchers think about how their research has shaped them, their thinking, and their research questions.

But researchers who engage in reflexivity will still seek participants' perspectives and experiences as data. Autoethnography is different because the research data *is* the researchers' experiences. In doing autoethnography, researchers will take their experiences of a certain event or experience and will analyse this to learn more about particular parts of the social world.

In Burton's paper, she uses her experience of being a newcomer to sociology to understand what sociology is and where it's heading. In this case, the part of the social world being analysed is sociology itself. Burton reflects on her conversations with established sociologists who described to her their perceptions of sociology's inability to define itself as presenting a problem for the discipline. She also talks about her early work getting to grips with sociological theory and method. Much like you're doing now, Burton started off trying to understand how we do sociological research (methods) and how we make sense of that research (theory); something that didn't come naturally to her (see page 986). Thinking about these experiences allowed Burton to make some broader points about what sociology is.

Through this autoethnography, Burton draws some conclusions about sociology. She describes it as 'a verb, not simply a descriptive noun' (see page 987) meaning that sociology is a method of thinking in itself – the sociological imagination. She also comes to the conclusion that sociology is playful and has lots of flexibility to exploring the social world in fun and interesting ways. By reflecting on her own experiences, Burton is also able to think about where sociology is going and what its future holds, and she leaves us with the questions 'what do we care about and what sort of discipline do we want to be part of?' (page 991).

Autoethnography can be a really useful method. In this case, it enables us to think about what sociology is but autoethnography has also been used to explore diverse topics including international adoption (Wall 2008), disability in education (Castrodale and Zingaro 2015), and responses to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in New York City (Ellis 2002).

Yet, autoethnography presents some problems. For some researchers, this method is too introspective and places the researcher at the centre of analysis, rather than the research looking outwards at the wider social world, its inequalities and injustices. Sara Delamont (2007) argues that sociologists simply shouldn't be the focus of research. She suggests that the discipline has always been concerned with those who lack power and privilege in society (see Chapter 12) rather than sociologists who are fairly well-paid and on the right side of the power divide. For Delamont, our job is to 'go out and research ... not sit in our homes focusing on ourselves'. She continues that this kind of introspective method doesn't provide the deep analytical insights that we'd normally expect from sociology because the focus is too heavily geared towards one (quite privileged) individual's experiences and reflections.

For Delamont (2007), auto-ethnography also presents ethical issues. She asks, for example, whether its ethical to publish autoethnographies in which we talk about how others feature in our experiences without gaining consent from those people.

QUESTIONS:

1. Sarah Burton used the example of Alice in Wonderland to think about sociology. What book or TV series you like do you think applies to sociology?
2. Burton leaves us with two questions: what do we care about and what sort of discipline do we want to be part of? What is your response to these questions?
3. What kinds of topics do you think autoethnography could be useful to address?
4. What do you think in general of Sara Delmont's critiques of autoethnography? Is it unethical? Is it an 'abuse of privilege'?

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