

# Practical Sociology: Sociology graduates are ideally placed to solve our practical problems.

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*In the States, 'clinical' sociologists are frequently hired to address problems within all various organisations and corporations. The UK is still catching up to this, argues [Nick Fox](#). There are some great examples of the use of sociological approaches in public and private sectors, but sociologists interested in applying knowledge to fields of work outside academia need to identify the tools, knowledge and skills needed to address real-life problems.*



Seventy five years ago New York academic Walter Argow wrote in the *American Sociological Review* about the [lack of 'practical sociology'](#). His students, he argued, would have few opportunities to flex their sociological imaginations in the world of work, though sociology's concepts and theories had a direct bearing on social problems from poverty to crime. 'That which hurts the sociologist's ears most is not the babble of inquirers after his (sic) work, but the increasing thunder of silence.' ([Argow 1941](#))

Argow might be saddened by the similarly barren landscape for practical sociology in Britain today. Despite sundry tales of sociological 'impact' rolled out for REF reports, you'd be hard pressed to find an office door in the corridors of retail, business or government that described its occupant as 'sociologist'. That's not the case for our neighbour disciplines. You find psychologists of work, of education, of forensics, and of course, clinical psychologists. Economists ply their 'dismal science' in the backrooms of corporations, government offices and financial institutions. By contrast, sociologists seem to reside exclusively in universities and a few social research outfits.

Yet there are many thousands of sociology graduates working outside academia, in every sector of the UK workforce, from marketing to politics, management to teaching. However, they are doing jobs that reflect their adopted sector, rather than their degree subject. That could be considered a huge success story for sociology. It shows the wide applicability of a sociological education; the flexibility of our graduates to apply their knowledge to new fields of work; and the willingness of employers to recruit our graduates.

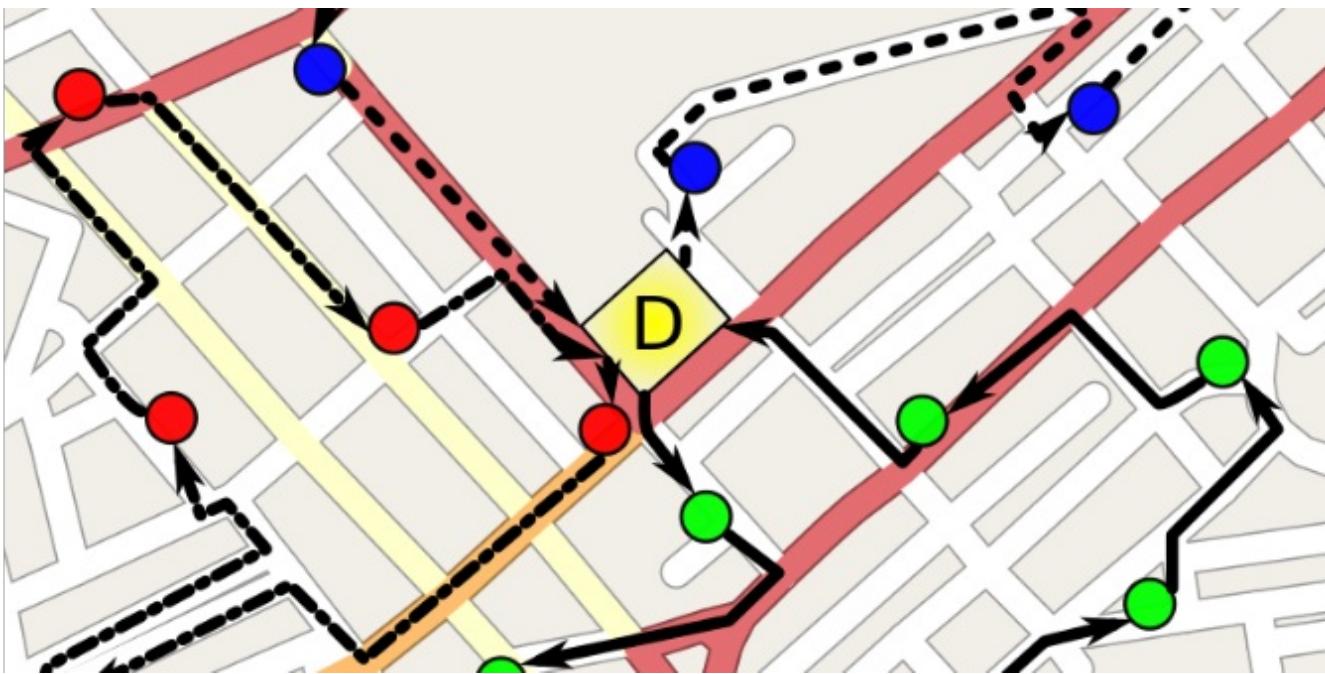


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But, as a discipline, aren't we missing a trick? Why shouldn't sociologists employ their skills and knowledge directly and practically in many fields – as Argow suggested? I don't just mean 'public sociology', political activism or doing applied research, whether as market researchers or for independent social research outfits. Sociology graduates are ideally placed to solve practical problems in the worlds of retail and industry, to oil the wheels of social interaction with their models and theories, and even to develop new ways of working that can be more effective socially and economically. Or to resolve contemporary problems, from gender violence to climate change. We have the concepts (like 'social capital' and 'intersectionality') and the theories ('social mobility', 'moral panic'). There just don't seem to be 'practical sociology' jobs applying them.

The good news is there are precedents for a practical sociology. Maybe US sociologists took Argow's homily on board, because in the States 'clinical' sociologists address problems within all kinds of organisations and corporations. They even have a [journal](#) to report their successes. Here in the UK, there are independent 'consulting sociologists' too. Take professor emeritus Robert Dingwall, previously of Nottingham University and now offering his expertise to public and private sectors. Commissioned by a research council to advise on public participation, Robert developed scenarios for the consequences of scientific work, and resources for members of the public to manipulate these scenarios to achieve preferred outcomes.

'Sociologists are particularly good at understanding unintended and perverse outcomes of innovation, or stimulating different ways of thinking about how to introduce new ideas, products, services or technologies', he said.

Another sociologist, Dr Carol McNaughton-Nicholls of Truth Consulting regularly applies sociological theory to clients' practical and strategic challenges. She's used Goffman to explore the every-day roles played by target audiences, and critical theory to assess how certain behaviour labels individuals, and hence to predict future behaviour. 'Commercial research should situate people within their wider context, to understand their needs, attitudes and how behaviour is shaped by material culture. Understanding consumers requires an implicit sociological imagination and sensitivity to cultural difference.'

Despite these examples of successful practical sociology, perhaps there are barriers to its development more widely in business, industrial, public and governmental sectors. While some sociological concepts have made it into the mainstream, other useful notions and models have not been promoted assertively. Have psychologists' statistics

and economists' quantitative models queered the pitch for sociology's more discursive approaches? Or is sociology just too wedded to social critique to be acceptable to business and the establishment?

I've raised the idea of a more practical sociology in meetings over the past year – within the BSA *Sociologists Outside Academia* group, and with early career researchers. The first challenge will be to explore what a 'practical sociology' would entail, with sociologists employed to use concepts and models to address problems in industry, business, government, education or health. We need to identify the tools needed to address real-life problems like gender imbalances in promotion, turning around a failing product, or improving policy uptake. We need to identify the skills and knowledge a practical sociologist needs in different work sectors. And we need to consider the ethics and politics of practical sociology work.

To establish an agenda for practical sociology, we are running a workshop at the British Psychological Society, Tabernacle St, London EC2 on Monday 17 October 2016. If you're interested, or have suggestions on how practical sociology could develop, please book a [place here](#).

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.*

## About the Author

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