

**Professionalism rather than Professionalisation?  
- A paper for the TASA Professional Issues Working Party -**

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**AUTHOR FINAL VERSION**

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Over recent years there has been a renewed debate regarding professionalisation in Australian organised sociology. The pressure seems to be coming from at least two discernibly different directions.

Firstly, those working as sociologists in the academic setting have been re-propelled towards the 'external' worlds of government, industry and social and environmental policy and practice - under the somewhat contradictory demands of economic rationalism and sociology's own desire to make a contribution via critical analysis of the conditions for social life. I say 're-propelled' because in the 1970s there was an extensive connection between sociology and the worlds 'outside' - but in those days academic labour was a resource offered pro bono.

'Drivers' now include: attracting (and retaining) students who will see sociology as valuable for future employment; collaborating to attract grants and funds from consultancy for research, policy and program development and increasingly also for course development.

An additional concern has been that, with the strengthening of vocational and professional education, sociology has either become 'merely' a service discipline, or replaced outright by 'non sociologists' or those whose primary identification is not sociology. Academic sociology has been cut and spliced into other departmental and faculty structures with an increasing threat to its ability to retain a strong disciplinary area in its own right. When I did my Ph D - a comparative study of academic and social-policy oriented sociologists in the 1970s-1980s - my academic 'sample' was a typical sociology department of 25 full time staff. That same department is now no more - and its 9 staff hang on in another-named department altogether. Our way of understanding the world is less and less recognisable to others *as* sociology. I was using standard sociological concepts to get a handle on a topic recently with some colleagues 'outside', and one said - 'gee, how do you know how to think like that?' Like Kevin McDonald I think psychologisation is now becoming standard explanatory fare to the point an alternative framework is seen as noticeable, even remarkable (although community psychology is fast making inroads).

The other demand for the professionalisation of sociology comes from a weak voice in terms of its standing within the academic sociological community - that of those of us who have chosen to utilise our sociology 'outside'. From *our* point of view, we are of course 'inside' and academic sociology has often become pretty much 'external' to us. Ironically we now find ourselves in the place where 'it's all at'. When there was a strong community of sociologists in non-academic settings in the 1970s and 1980s we were making pleas and attempts to remain within the sociological fold. Unfortunately academic sociology unwittingly strengthened its grip on sociology per se in ways that we 'outside' experienced as exclusionary. Almost all sociologists trained in the heyday of sociology in the 1970s and 1980s, around 30,000 of us, appear to have now more or less lost their identification with sociology.

## Recognising sociologists working outside the academy

The most startling figures are the membership ratios of SAANZ/TASA itself. Bob Connell, myself and now Ann Ring have `done the stats' at intervals since 1985 from the SAANZ/TASA Membership Directories.

Fig. 1 Academic and non academic members of TASA/SAANZ  
(As a % of total membership)

	Academic members	Non academic members
1985-86	66.66	33.33
1988	74	26
1995	84	16
1999	89.8*	10.2* <sup>1</sup>

I think we have something of a chicken and egg situation.

I don't think sociology, or rather TASA, will have greatly much more appeal to those who might become (or remain) self-identifying sociologists until things change. That is, I don't think those who leave to go outside the academy will greatly want to be in touch with academic sociology until academic sociology comes closer to collaborate with us in those worlds in which we work `outside'. But I'm not sure those inside academic settings will see those of us `outside' as `proper sociologists' enough to want to, particularly while non-academic sociologists are not part of the sociological discourse.

As a fresh sociology graduate, being `birthed' from an environment of the Endless Cutting Critique into a world of contradiction and paradox in which one must always take an action (no matter how critique-able) to have any effect, can be a jolt to say the least. Suddenly the `instruments of social control/state apparatus/or the signified' may be people who go home and cry at night for what they haven't seen an alternative to doing during the day.

However while some notable individual academic sociologists have bridged the gap in their personal practice, I don't think academic sociology per se will easily come closer to those `outside' worlds except perhaps as grant or tender competitors. Ironically, academic sociologists who compete successfully may come to more or less respect the world `outside' academic sociology. And they may even then find academe no longer as conducive. Indeed some prominent hitherto academic sociologists have set up their own consultancies. They have found that they can both usefully contribute to the world *and* generate and draw on `high theory' - though they may lose some interest in publishing in internationally refereed journals. This impoverishes the literature - just as it always has. But the literature sits within a particular

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Ring and I independently calculated the 1999 figures. I have averaged her 38-48 members (I had counted approx. 50 incl. d/k and retired).

discourse and we non academic sociologists most often speak another language, and one which is frequently mistaken as less sophisticated. As Judy Horocek's marvellous cartoon of cowboys with one drawing their pistol on the other observes: 'This discourse ain't big enough for both of us'.

### **Dialogue across differences/discourses**

And that is, I think, one crux of the matter. Again there are notable individual exceptions, but as a discipline, the assumptions still come faintly across the fence between the two settings. From the site of the gown - it is 'they of the dirty hands/the atheoretical, listen to them, good heavens they still speak of 'social action', roles, values and 'systems' and are *still* colluding with 'the enemy'. And from the site of the town - it is 'they of the irrelevancy/the detached-from-reality, listen to them, going on about 'culture' and 'discourse' and they are *still* endlessly saying either 'it's all awful' or 'we need further studies'.)

This is partly an issue of respect - and given the current situation whereby academic sociology has successfully managed to equate sociology with *academic* sociology, I'd say that the primary disrespect is for sociology graduates who do not stay in academe. Let's say it out loud. 'We in academe keep the best sociology graduates for academe'. Well - even if we imagine for a moment that that's true, what a disastrous game plan that would turn out to be. Other professions/disciplines have their best and brightest out there in practice - and then they learn from them, award them students for practice placements, bring them in as guest lecturers, collaborate with them on joint research and consultancy, give them adjunct professorial roles and honour them as keynote speakers at their conferences. Think about law, medicine, social work, nursing, teaching. Do any of them consign to practice their second class students and then quietly look down on them? And how do we think our graduates might feel about that? And how do we think employers feel about employing such sociologists? Do we think they don't somehow pick up on the status assigned to sociology graduates 'outside'?

I've just spent four years in a psychology department. (If you are in academe and have now immediately written me off, I rest my case! You already mistrust a sociologist to not be able to hold their perspective outside academic sociology! If you are a non-academic sociologist and think I've lost it, I doubly rest my case! You no doubt think I've become a doubly out-of-touch academic!)

But what I learned about psychology was the difference between some of their highly desirable (and quite copy-able) professional pride and PR practices - and their truly powerful professionalisation, which, if sociology ever tried to emulate, would nevertheless yield a laughing stock in its own terms. On the one hand you might be able to protect your library holdings or argue for more Proper Accredited Sociological staff against slashing by threatening loss of accreditation of your courses (ah! all those EFTSUs), but you'll have such a tiny job market for your Proper Psychologists you'll be desperate for alternative jobs for your graduates - jobs easily held now by non-accredited sociologists. (But, a warning, increasingly easily claimed by psychology-trained graduates, especially community psychologists, as their assumed conservative and individualistic rationality is what has been wanted in neo-conservative economic rationalist workplaces up until now.)

Interestingly I think as economic rationalism is running its course, employers are looking again for constructivists and systemic thinkers. Community psychology and organisational development/learning aim at this new market. They have not yet been split asunder as we have

into empirical research folk and (sometimes literally departments apart from) our cultural studies colleagues. Ironically what many employers and consultancy groups are seeking is something akin to old fashioned sociology - but it's systemic thinking of a critical or organic nature, rather than systems theory of the cogs and machines kind. But note I say 'akin' - not the same. This kind of sociology is to be found now in management and business departments and workplace learning outfits - as organisational learning/development, organisational dynamics, systems thinking, and so on. These terms are now beginning to appear as advertised job titles.

### **What is to be done**

Academic sociologists have their own frantic priorities as their student numbers have risen at the same time as the demands for them to do research and get grants. How on earth can sociology-in-academe connect better with sociology outside? How can the collaboration be strengthened? Let me address what I'd love to see (and have seen a few academics already experiment successfully with). I'd love academic sociologists to want to learn more about what we 'out here' do, what we experience, think and observe. To nurture our graduates out here more. Be informed by them. Collaborate with them. How? Easy, peasy.

Start with the ones you already respect.

Follow up two or three of your best graduates who leave the academy (whether by choice or preference, but preferably by preference. Then they are more likely going to be the ones who will most want to put down roots as a sociologist 'out there').

Keep in touch with them. At a minimum, every six months or so. Know where they are. Start a database of their home and work phone numbers and mail addresses, not just their disembodied e-mail addresses. Know what they are currently doing in their work, what they are thinking, and worrying about. Know about their workplaces. Visit them there. Know the issues they face. Continue to engage them in sociological thinking. Know them well enough to be able to occasionally send them two page extracts on something you think might be useful. (Don't send whole chapters much less just the publication reference details. They are unlikely to be read. Not enough like work at work. Too much like work at home.) Listen to their reaction. Does it confirm their realities? Help them? Listen carefully for any modifying response. ('Well it's kind of like that... but actually it's really more like...'.) Theorise together.

You are now effortlessly collaborating as an equal with a non academic sociologist! Aim for two or three every year. That's a great start. In ten years you will be well into your own longitudinal study of applied sociology and you will also have your own substantial practice sociology network. Here's what else you will then easily be able to do to recognise sociologists working outside academe and increase your students' identification with working as a sociologist 'outside':

- . You'll have alumni to invite to give (paid) guest lectures.
- . Former students whose work you can showcase on Open Days.
- . Practitioners and agencies to offer students wanting a research project placement.
- . Practitioners to show your course outlines to, or to ask what courses their sector needs.
- . People to invite onto course development or course advisory committees.
- . Industry collaborators for research projects.
- . Avenues for your involvement in their work or sector.

## The promotion of sociology

You have also extended your efforts towards promoting sociology per se. Here's some ideas I picked up from psychology and from the evaluation profession that seemed to me to have a lot to do with pride in their discipline, understanding its value and strengthening their community of interest.

- . With your database of former students and research student placement agency contacts, you could send them departmental seminar programs. You could also send these to Nexus so non-academics can see what's being worked on, thought about etc.
- . We 'out there' could really do with updated annotated indexes of Current Concepts, Words and Ideas (a Compendium/Digest).
- . In psychology where I worked there was a standard text '*The Human Mind*'. It is large, beautiful and gorgeously produced around the myth (and pictures of) Psyche. It showcases, proudly, who they are and what they know: the history of their discipline, its numerous famous names and their work, all the famous exemplars of theory and research, the range of perspectives, etc. etc. It's a book a student would be delighted to buy and proud to keep on their shelves for the duration of their careers. It won't easily date - or would only need additions as the years pass.
- . The Australian Psychologists Society has launched a publicity campaign with an attractive logo and saying: 'Good Thinking'. Its ads are very clever, likening having your own psychologist with whom to discuss your performance with having a lawyer for your Will, or an accountant for your tax! No, we might not try for the executive market first up! - but can you think of an equivalent for sociology? (Can we be critical *and* self-respecting too?)
- . I once proposed a leaflet for enrolment/Open Day type usage - featuring famous household words and concepts that are from sociology and featuring several famous Australian sociologists and their famous ideas. ('Economic rationalism' would be first off the blocks.) Deakin did a very nice poster a while back of some of our sociological fathers. Others must have made similar efforts (and be able also to add the mothers of sociology). Might be nice to pool all the various efforts. Maybe overseas sociology associations have done such things too. Could we send them all to the TASA office?

## The sociology curriculum

It'd be great if we could know what we know. If we don't know what we'd expect from someone who's a sociologist - especially compared to what's to be expected of psychologists, historians, political scientists, social workers and doctors - and in detail beyond a three-liner, then it might be pretty hard to sell our discipline.

Even if it means including the different 'sociologies', the conflicts and disagreements, at least people would know sociology when they (and we) encountered it. And students could 'find' themselves in our curricula.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> I'd love to do a 'then' and 'now' study following up my PhD research when I asked sociologists in 1979-80 what they considered then to be the key sociological texts, theorists/writers, etc.

## Services to TASA members

Again I will speak specifically to the ecological remnant of non-academic sociologists still in TASA. Think of us as an endangered species. Think affirmative action and habitat-restoration.

- (a) Journal editors could publish at least one paper per issue by a non-academic. Or an entire issue.
- (b) Journal editors could publish short Research-in-Progress descriptions, or call it 'speculative' or 'from the field' or 'practice sociology' but try and encourage the slightly different discourse.
- (c) Consider a non-academic position on the TASA Executive (or pro rata vis a vis membership ratios).
- (c) I would suggest a highly specific survey to both the 50 or so TASA non-academic members, and perhaps another 50 or so non TASA members who are known to have done sociology or 'been' sociologists. I'd want to ask and find out (and be asked) the following kinds of candidate questions (see ATTACHMENT A).

## To summarise

- [1] Academic sociology to come closer to collaborate with those 'outside', to respect the work of outside sociology. In the current lingo this might involve for example, 'supervised professional practice programs', 'industry placements', 'student placements', and 'sandwich courses'; or spending time in 'the field' as observers of non-academic sociologists' work/worlds; perhaps secondments to each other's.

Academic sociology cease to equate sociology with *academic* sociology.

- [2] Have the best and brightest students (and staff) go out to practice and encourage them to do so:
  - . Nurture graduates outside more,
  - . Learn from those outside,
  - . Invite them back in to report on what they are working with,
  - . Encourage sociology alumni organisation,
  - . Involve them in teaching programs,
  - . Place student research projects with them,
  - . Seek out their contributions to conferences,
  - . Send them summaries and abstracts of recent literature,
  - . Do not sit in critical judgement of them,
  - . Ask them to take students for practice placements,
  - . Have them as paid external PhD supervisors,
  - . Bring them in as guest lecturers,
  - . Bring them in as course development consultants,
  - . Collaborate with them on joint research and consultancy,
  - . Give them adjunct academic associate and professorial roles,
  - . Honour them as keynote speakers at sociology conferences.

[3] Academic sociologists learn more about what sociologists 'out there' do, experience, think and observe:

- . Start with the ones you already respect.
- . Follow up two or three of your best graduates who leave the academy (whether by choice or preference, but preferably by preference).
- . Keep in touch with them every six months or so. Know where they are working. Keep a database of home and work phone numbers and mail addresses, not just disembodied e-mail addresses. Know what they are doing, thinking, worrying about. Know about their workplaces. The issues they face. Continue to engage them in sociological thinking. Know them well enough to be able to occasionally send them two page extracts on something you think might be useful.
- . Aim for two or three every year. In ten years you will be well into your own longitudinal study of applied sociology and you will also have your own practice sociology network.

If not every member of staff can or will do this, at least have one nominated liaison person per department.

[4] TASA keep outside sociologists up to date and involved by:

- . Publishing in Nexus seminar topic lists, thesis topic lists, conference abstracts,
- . Invite non-academic sociologists to sociology seminars,
- . Publish an Annual State of the Discipline re. current ideas, theories, Methodological debates, keywords, big names, etc.

[5] TASA learn from others re. disciplinary promotion, and do have an agreed 'base' sociology curriculum. We have to know what we know. Have a web page with exemplary course descriptions and readings.

Others on the Working Party had additional ideas - I've just gleaned these from my writings on the topic over the past 20 years. Most exciting was to find the handful of non-academic sociologists at the Adelaide conference - there were 7 of us (compared to the several hundred at the 1976 La Trobe university conference). They had new energies, and I have proposed to our Working Party they be engaged collectively to take the issue forward for TASA's further consideration.

ATTACHMENT A  
**Proposed Survey of Sociologists Outside Academe**

How strong would you say your self identification as a sociologist is?

Now?.....

Has that changed from in the past? .....

Can you try and rate your current identification as a sociologist on a scale of 0 (extremely weak), to 10 (extremely strong)? (Circle number)

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

**TASA**

How many years have you been a member of TASA?

Can you say why you joined TASA in the first place?

If it differs, can you say why you continue to remain a member of TASA now?

Is there anything you hope or wish TASA would do that would make your being a member even more compellingly of value to you?

**Academic sociology**

As a sociologist outside academe, is there anything you can see that academic sociology could do to contribute to your continued holding of a sociological perspective or otherwise assist you?

As a sociologist outside academe, is there anything you can see that you could do to contribute to/assist academic sociology?

Is there anything you could or would like to say about the existing academic sociology curriculum/curricula?

If the academic sociology curriculum/curricula was to be re-developed in some ways, is there anything you could or would like to say about desirable changes?

If you had a free hand (and a desire) to promote sociology, what kinds of things would you want to do/see done?

**Terminology**

What terminology would you like to see adopted to describe sociologists-outside-academe?

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Do you identify with any of these? (rank three from best - 1 to 3)

- Non-academic sociologist
- Applied sociologist
- Professional sociologist
- Practising sociologist
- Practice sociologist
- Industry sociologist
- Clinical sociologist

[Actually I'd run a focus group to generate more ideas and think through the problems expressed in the past e.g. 'non-academic' as negative/absence; 'applied' implies others are 'pure' (and not applied); 'professional' is tricky if we are not, technically (and implies academics aren't); etc.]