Editorial Foreword

Graham Crow and Catherine Pope

Joint Editors, Sociology

One of the ways in which the question ‘What is sociology?’ may be answered is by attempting to set out how the discipline is distinct from neighbouring fields of study, such as anthropology, economics, geography, history, philosophy, political science, and psychology. The upshot of these comparisons may be that sociology is presented as having a distinct object of study (such as ‘society’, or ‘social institutions’), or it may be claimed that sociology’s distinctiveness lies in the particular types of questions that sociologists pose (such as ‘what are the mechanisms by which people manage to live together?’). These exercises serve a purpose, because there are various contexts in which it is necessary to identify the boundaries of the sociological sphere. Editing a sociological journal provides a good example of one such context. As we noted in our previous editorial foreword, editorial teams inevitably play an important role in influencing conceptions of what counts as sociology and what does not. We also noted that sociology’s boundaries are blurred rather than clear cut, and are subject to change rather than fixed. The history of the discipline’s evolution is a fascinating one, not least because it includes episodes in which people have pushed at the boundaries of what is considered to be a sociological topic or concept, or what is accepted as a sociological question.

In this issue of the journal the first article, by Peter Dickens and James Ormrod, seeks to break new ground by considering what a sociology of the universe might entail. This may be new territory for sociological investigation, but the article’s argument is that it is open to sociologists to research the cosmos through the extension of the well-established sociological agenda focusing on how humanity interacts with nature. In outer space as on earth, the imprint of social class differences is discernible. The article thus pushes at the boundaries of sociology by arguing that developments in outer space are worthy of sociological study. Furthermore, it seeks to innovate as well through its argument that the fantasies that are actively being pursued in outer space and people’s responses to these are better understood by drawing on psychoanalytical
concepts alongside sociological ones. The expansion of social activity into outer space has roots in commercial processes that are an extension of globalization, but it is also driven by what the authors regard as adult narcissism relating to the pursuit of power and control.

The second article also seeks to draw on psychoanalysis to extend the range of sociological investigation, although in Claudia Lapping’s argument this is done by focusing on data related to a single case collected at a much more micro level and analysed through the concept of ‘resistance’. Her proposition, that new ways of analysing interview data can be opened up by paying attention to details of research participants’ emotional responses, is a controversial one because of its imputation of motives and desires that are not readily articulated and of which participants may not even be conscious. It also raises profound questions about the role of the researcher in the generation of interview data, because the point about the potential of this approach to illuminate emotional dynamics applies to both parties in the interview situation. Emotions are the subject of the next article, by Merran Toerien and Celia Kitzinger, who use conversation analysis as their method of investigation. Again they argue that there is much that can be gained from the analysis of a single case study in order to reveal the significance of aspects of interactions of which participants as well as observers may be unaware. The stuff of sociological research, it is argued, is not only what is said in a conversation but how it is said and how it relates to non-vocal actions. It follows that the sociology of emotions needs to be undertaken using methodological techniques that are sensitive to the subtleties of how emotions are managed. In rising to this challenge, sociologists may learn from the experience of researchers in neighbouring fields such as discursive psychology and debates relating to membership categorization.

A rather different approach to the study of group membership and identities is adopted in Sue Grundy and Lynn Jamieson’s article on the extent to which young adult residents in Edinburgh identify with the identity category ‘European’. Along with this social-psychological aspect there is a strong element of political sociology in this research. Scottish nationalism may lead to emphasis being placed on Scottish as opposed to British citizenship, but this picture is complicated by the European dimension in which the European Union embodies a conception of a shared identity within an imagined community from which small nations stand to gain particular benefits. The overall findings show that there is considerable diversity in the understandings of what ‘Europe’ means for young adult residents of Edinburgh, ranging from the perspectives of those who are passionately committed to the European ideal to those for whom it is little more than an empty abstraction. The importance of group membership is one of the key conclusions of Gad Yair’s article on the work of James Coleman. Although Coleman is well known as an exponent of the rational choice paradigm in which social actors are understood to be motivated by the maximization of individual utility, Yair reveals that Coleman’s empirical research tended to point in a different direction – one in which key importance was attached to the influence of approval by other people in the actor’s social group.
Peer group norms rather than rational calculation accounted for many of Coleman’s findings. Yair argues that such explanations make sense within Coleman’s broad framework if people’s decision-making is understood to be driven by the desire to reduce the anxieties surrounding existential uncertainty by conforming to the norms of the group. The argument that actors prioritize short-term approval over longer-term interests is one that has implications for rational choice analysis within sociology and beyond.

The closest neighbouring discipline to Shane Blackman’s article is anthropology, focusing as it does on the methodological challenges of ethnographic research and the ethical dilemmas of how far it is appropriate for a researcher to participate in the practices of the group under investigation. Drawing on a variety of episodes from his own experiences in the field, he argues that the accounts of research that are written up are likely to be sanitized to at least some degree, especially if the research touches on illegal behaviour (such as drug-taking) or reveals sides of the researcher’s character that might be open to censure (such as the expression of violent emotions). Reflexivity requires that taboo topics are subjected to scrutiny and it follows from this that inclusion of more extensive discussion of these issues in research reports may be regarded as good practice. It is 30 years since Colin Bell and Howard Newby called for accounts of sociological research to include fuller details of ‘how research is actually done’ (1977: 12), but the case for repeating the appeal remains compelling.

The seventh contribution to this issue is a research note in which David Blane, Gopalakrishnan Netuveli and Mel Bartley engage with the methodological and policy issues that are raised by the trend towards longer life expectancy at middle age. Their discussion provides an excellent illustration of the benefits of periodic reassessments of the classifications of the population that are employed in sociological research, and of the equally important point that good research requires that the research questions are clear and incisive. This journal has, over the years, seen the publication of a number of such informative research notes, and the editors are keen to maintain this tradition. The same is also true of the final pair of contributions, which are part of the journal’s tradition of encouraging debate about developments in the discipline. John Abraham’s response to an earlier article by Joan Busfield on the pharmaceutical industry and her response to this are in the best traditions of healthy discussion of what it is that sociologists do.

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