PRACTICE NOTES

Sociological analysis for social work: A teaching and practice toolkit

Tony Stanley and Stephanie Kelly

Dr Tony Stanley is a Senior Lecturer at the School of Health and Social Services, Massey University, Auckland. Dr Stephanie Kelly is a Lecturer at the Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology.

Abstract

Sociology provides one of the necessary analytic frameworks for the making sense of social issues; issues that directly affect social work practice. Nevertheless, the application of sociological theory in practice is a contested area of social work. To assist the application of sociological theory in social work practice, this paper introduces a practical toolkit; one that is theoretically rich and simple to use. The authors have used this to teach sociology for social work, showing good dividends for social work students. We think it will offer practitioners and their managers a 'nuts and bolts' mechanism that can easily be drawn on in practice to enhance the sociological analysis of social issues.

Introduction

Thinking sociologically is a core skill for the beginning and competent social work practitioner. In fact, sociology provides one of the necessary analytic frameworks for the making sense of social issues; issues that directly affect the lives of the vulnerable. It makes perfect sense to suggest that what happens at the socio-political level of society will directly affect the lives of everyday people. Political changes to public housing policy or to the levels of subsidy within the health system have direct outcomes for residents and patients, as they go about managing their lives. According to Dominelli (1997) sociology offers social workers a descriptive, explanatory and predictive capacity for practice. Yet this is not without its critics. Sociology has been called 'left wing rubbish' and unnecessary for social workers by Edwina Currie, former UK Minister of Health (Dominelli, 1997, p. 8), while Sibeon (1991) has argued for social work to focus on middle range theories, leaving the socio-political level to other disciplines. Davies (1985) went further, arguing that the social sciences serve no useful role in social work at all. We disagree with Davies and the other critics who have argued that sociology has little relevance for social work. In fact, this paper makes a strong case for sociological analyses in social work, and we present a very simple practice tool to help beginning and experienced practitioners achieve this.

This article sets out the relationship between sociology and social work and then introduces a simple model, which Stanley developed in the teaching of sociology for social work and which Kelly has continued and built upon in her teaching. We explain the model

in detail because it has shown dividends for social work students and we think it offers practitioners and their managers a practical toolkit to guide sociological analysis of social issues. Before getting to the model, we argue why sociology is crucial for contemporary social work practice in Aotearoa/New Zealand. We then visually present the model and discuss the inter-related sections of it. We have introduced social work students to the model early in our sociology classes, and we describe how we have done this. In concluding, we suggest that this model is more than a teaching tool, but a toolkit for practitioners that they can use to guide social analyses for daily practice in their role as 'change agents'. As seasoned sociologists and social work educators, we want to suggest that for practice gains to be tangible, students and practitioners need a sociological toolkit that is accessible and easily recalled long after study has finished.

A sociological connection

Sociology is one of the cognate disciplines of social work, along with psychology and social policy. This is not a new relationship by any means, and one that has its origins in the social case work tradition of early twentieth century social work (Leonard, 1966). The relationship is one set to continue, as the New Zealand Social Work Registration Board lists sociology as one of the key disciplines that social work education must offer. Mostly this occurs at the foundational level of social work study and if grasped at this stage can be carried on by students to engage in research and policy analysis. We agree with Dominelli (1997) when she makes a compelling case for sociology being part of social work's theoretical and practical work. According to McDonald (2007) sociology offers a theoretical knowledge base from which explanations about particular social phenomena can be drawn. What is less clear is how this actually operates in practice.

What is sociology?

Sociology helps us to understand ourselves and people around us, and the ways in which we are all shaped by the society in which we live, and how, in turn, we help shape our society. A brief illustration here will help reinforce this point. There are many laws in New Zealand that existed long before we were born. And there may be a law or two that we have a direct involvement in making (e.g. the repeal of the Crimes Act (s)59). So, we are subjects of the laws already in place, and we can have a direct influence in the making of new laws. Recent legislation to outlaw gangs in South Australia, being closely looked at by New Zealand Justice Minister Phil Goff, is a good case in point. A law change like this will have implications for those in gangs, those who have family members in gangs, the police, courts, lawyers and many others. Sociology helps us to describe, understand and explain this example, and for social workers, offers us a sound theoretical base from which to do this.

In the next section we explain the sociological toolkit. There are three interrelated stages that make up the toolkit, and we explain each in detail and show how we engaged students with the model.

The sociological toolkit

According to Mills (1959) the gift of sociology is the way it helps us connect the individual circumstances of one person into a wider social context (that is our shared 'society'), and

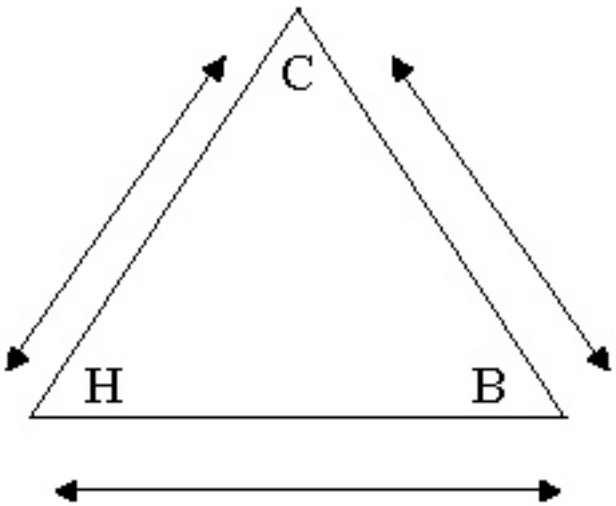
this, we think, is a crucial skill for social workers. He argued that our 'private troubles' are always in a traceable relationship with wider 'public issues':

> The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and its promise. To recognize this task and this promise is the mark of the classic social analyst (Mills, 1959, p. 12).

Mills gives us three areas of questioning to help us trace the connections between 'private troubles' and 'public issues':

1. What is the structure of this particular society? (Its Context.)
2. Where does this society stand in human history? (Its History.)
3. What varieties of people now prevail in this society? (The Biography of members.)

The questions about the type of society we live in, the people that make up this society and the way that our society has developed are interrelated. To teach this point we offer the students the first of two triangles.



Each question that Mills offers is positioned at a point on the triangle and then this is discussed in small groups. We ask students to think of a social issue or an event covered in the media and to use this as a starting point for their sociological questioning. A key learning outcome for this experience is for students to see that the questions Mills offers open up further questioning. To illustrate this point: Gangs and gang affiliation frequently feature in mainstream media. Each part of the triangle offers us a way to think about gangs in New Zealand society.

This is achieved by the variety of questions posed:

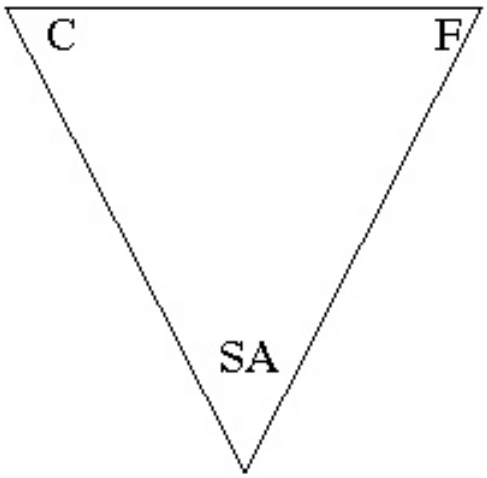
1. Where do gangs live?
2. Have we had gangs like this in other periods of history?
3. Who are the people in the gangs?

Possible answers to these rather simple questions might be that gangs tend to live in urban settings, and have been part of New Zealand society for over 60 years and predominantly attract male members.

The next stage of student learning is their introduction to the founding fathers of sociology – Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber – and the broader perspectives of traditional sociology. In making the theories of the founding fathers more accessible to students, we introduce a second triangle. The aim here is for students to be exposed to the ideas of Marx and to be prompted to pose questions about the structural institutions in society (like class and economy), while being reminded that Durkheim had some really interesting arguments about the cohesion of society and the rules and moral codes that also guide particular behaviours. To round off the traditional theorists, we introduce Weber's ideas on social action sociology. Like the first triangle, the aim here is for an accessible model to be used, over a succession of class sessions, where students engage with the traditional sociologists and some exciting theories.

The second triangle has three sections:

C = Conflict Sociology (Marx)
F = Functionalist Sociology (Durkheim)
SA = Social Action Sociology (Weber)



To enhance student learning, we use small group exercises again. A range of social issues are introduced and students develop a range of questions informed by one of the areas of traditional sociology. Students pose questions about the groups and institutions in society that hold power and control over others (Conflict Sociology) while for others questions about the roles and functions of the same groups and institutions emerge (Functionalist Sociology). The social interactions and sets of meanings held by members of these groups and institutions are then considered.

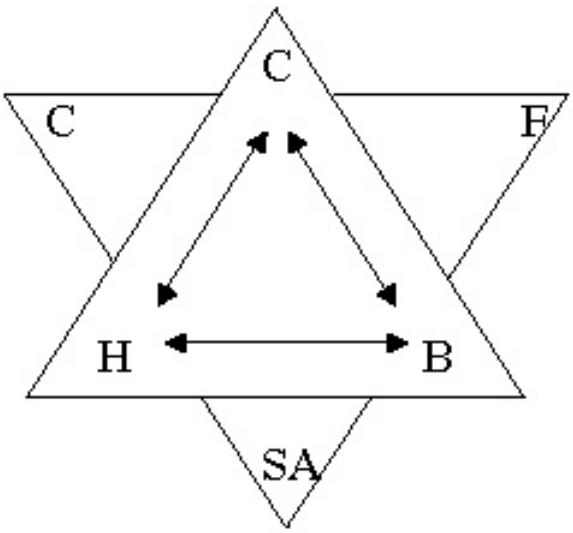
Rounding off, students consider the interrelationship of these three points, opening up to discussions around the cautions of considering these as mutually exclusive. This becomes an exercise in reflecting on previously held binary views that can exist within the discipline, such as: individual/structure; micro/macro; client/institution; personal worldview/dominant political ideology. Bridging this binary provides students with what Weinberg (2008) would refer to as the practical 'nuts and bolts' of doing sociology for social work, connecting the role of the individual (as both client and practitioner), with understandings of wider structural power.

We wanted our students to see that sociology offers multiple ways of making sense, and that different theoretical traditions will illuminate particular aspects of a social issue. Picking up on our gang example again shows us the next level of questioning that aids a sociological analysis:

1. How does a gang maintain control over others?
2. What holds the gang together?
3. How are new members inducted into the gang?

The answers to these questions might include coercive power or explicit violence to others; a sense of belonging and brotherhood; and the acquiring of a patch through achieving prescribed actions that may include violence to others.

The final stage of teaching sociology for social work involves the overlaying of the two triangles. This is the final diagram we want students to remember and for beginning practitioners to be able to recall in practice. The goals here are for students and beginning practitioners to visually recall the model, remember that sociology offers several pathways for questioning, and when used together assist in building a sociological analysis of a particular issue, social event or personal experience.



Trying it out: Analysing a social issue

As part of the *doing* sociology in class, students are asked to self select a social issue that is of interest to them for their final written assignment. The assignment is an opportunity for students to apply the model to the social issue and to develop, at a beginning level, a sociological analysis. This is a 2,000 word assignment broadly separated into three sections. In the first section, the student describes the social issue and draws attention to how the media present it. Next, the student selects at least two sociological theories that they will use to pose sociological questions about the selected issue. In the final section of the paper students apply the theories, through the questions posed, and then present a beginning analysis. The goal here is for section three of the assignment to be a more in-depth discussion than section one. In all cases in past years, students found that by posing sociological questions informed by the toolkit, they were doing sociology and developing sociological analyses. Prior to handing in the written assignment, students had a chance to present their beginning analyses and gain peer feedback from classmates. This showed the student that they had indeed achieved a beginning analysis because they were able to discuss the issue in a deeper way. They were also reminded that the toolkit offers many theories, and the two chosen would show *an* analysis, not *the* analysis. As teachers, we invite them to do more sociology, and to keep digging deeper in the development of rich and useful sociological analysis.

Teaching sociology for social work poses a range of challenges for the teacher and students. As mentioned, sociology is taught at the beginning stage of social work education, over a fixed number of sessions. Many students find the language of sociology new and confusing. Our sociological toolkit assists students to learn about sociology because it provides students a tangible framework upon which they can, through a range of building block exercises, try out sociology and apply theories to real everyday social issues. Students see how a sociological analysis is achieved, at a beginning level, and carry out their own piece of sociological analysis.

The model has been delivered over three academic teaching years at Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology (CPIT), and student feedback to us has been overwhelmingly positive. Students have really liked the double triangle model and the opportunity to apply theory to an everyday social issue. This has been evidenced in classes in sociology, research methods and social policy for social work. The model opens students' eyes to the notion that power is not monolithic, rather, a verb that is created in practice and through negotiation, making 'the personal political'.

Practice can only gain

The application of theory in practice is one of the most contested areas of social work. Just how this is done and to what success has been the domain of many social work scholars and continues to pose challenges for teaching staff. However, we propose that this model of sociology for social workers is a tangible toolkit. Practitioners need only remember the double triangle and this should prompt them to recall the sections of the model. Beginning with the sociological imagination and reinforced by the traditional theorists, the practitioner should be able to pose questions about institutional structures and groups in society and issues of power and control that may be operating in individual lives.

One of the benefits offered by a structural approach is a redefining of 'the problem' as something greater than one's own personal situation (Weinberg, 2008). According to Weinberg, structural theories can emphasise the unequal distribution of resources. Further, the linking of those that 'have not' with the likelihood that their insufficiency is tied to broader societal ills is a key contribution to social work. But as we have argued, Mills' triangle opens up the field of practice to a broader vision that takes into account institutional barriers and broad social categories (Weinberg, 2008).

We think that the toolkit could be used in supervision sessions to help stimulate discussion about societal and structural issues as they affect and shape the experiences of clients. Further, we think that the toolkit could be used with clients as it offers a useful visual and accessible tool that helps explain how we made our analysis.

Conclusion

Social work theorising offers pathways for engagement and intervention. Yet it is sociology that offers a rich theoretical tapestry for the thinking about social issues, societal contexts and the ways in which we are all shaped by external events and changes at the structural and inter-personal level. If we are to advance debates about how these shifts and changes affect the vulnerable, the very least we will need is a sound sociological analysis of the issues. Our model provides one toolkit to help practitioners achieve this.

The toolkit helps counter earlier arguments that sociology has little relevance for social work (Sibeon, 1991). Quite the contrary, as we think that being able to articulate how we reach our social analyses in practice is ethical practice. Just imagine the sorts of discussions that could happen with clients, supervisors and policy writers informed by the toolkit. This is the promise and gift of sociology for social work.

Perhaps you could use the model in your case work. What might you find? How might this analysis tool help a supervision session by offering fresh ways of viewing issues and the situation? Will it help you develop a deeper analysis? We think it will, as Mills reminds us:

> The sociological imagination, I remind you, in considerable part consists of the capacity to shift from one perspective to another, and in the process to build up an adequate view of a total society and of its components. It is this imagination, of course, that sets off the social scientist from the mere technician (Mills 1959, p. 232).

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