Article

Journal of Sociology
1–20

DOI: 10.1177/14407833211041402
journals.sagepub.com/home/jos
SAGE

The state of the discipline: Australian sociology and its future

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Abstract

Debates about the state of Australian sociology have raged for as long as sociology has existed in Australia. Concerns about the discipline's future may be inevitable for a critical, reflexive discipline, but to those entering the discipline, it is neither instructive nor productive to be subjected to lingering disciplinary anxieties. After more than fifty years, it is time to take stock of the differing visions of sociology, and examine the arguments about the health, or otherwise, of Australian sociology. To advance this debate, we consider the signs and benchmarks of a 'successful' sociology as expressed in The Australian Sociological Association magazine, NEXUS, and key writings from Australian sociologists. We suggest that much of the disagreement over the status of sociology derives from the way 'disciplines' and 'success' are defined. Regarding sociology to be an heterogeneous, multi-modal, social institution and practice, we propose a way forward in our efforts to represent ourselves.

Keywords

Australian sociology, boundaries, discipline, history of sociology, sociology of knowledge

The early history of Australian sociology as an academic discipline is a tale of beginnings, false starts and interruptions, and has been carefully considered in various publications (e.g. Collyer, 2012, 2017; Connell, 2015a; Germov and McGee, 2005; Harley and Wickham, 2014). In his opening address at the first conference of the Sociological Association of Australia and New Zealand in October 1964, Leonard Broom, an American visitor to the Australian National University, offered a positive view of the future for Australian sociology, pointing out that, although the number of scholars

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interested in sociology was small in comparison to the US, he was impressed by the willingness and receptivity of public officials to engage with sociologists in Australia, by the wages of sociologists relative to other workers, and our level of access to influential decision-makers. This assessment was tempered with one caution: 'But sociology comes to these parts late, and it will therefore come more expensively and less easily' (Broom, 1964: 8). Broom's remark was well-founded and prescient. Sociologists in Australia have had to fight, often fiercely, for adequate resources and legitimacy. For example, the struggle against the economist Douglas Copeland for the establishment of sociology in Australia produced a tension between the disciplines that has not yet dissipated (Bourke, 2005; van Krieken et al., 2016: 22). (A more detailed history can be found on the TASA history website; see Collyer, 2013a.)

Since its institutionalisation, assessments of the viability and future of Australian sociology have been mixed. On one hand, there have been many positive evaluations of Australian sociology. For example, Gavin Kendall, convenor of the 1998 Australian Sociological Association (TASA) conference, remarked: 'I think the quality and relevance of sociological work in Australia is very high, and that the collegial spirit in Australian sociology is strong indeed' (1999:7). Australian sociology has also been described as 'healthy' and 'one of the dominant strands of the social sciences' (Germov and McGee, 2005: 355), and Chilla Bulbeck, as Chair of the Stephen Crook Memorial Prize panel, remarked that the books submitted for the prize 'made for a rich, strong and diverse field, demonstrating the robust state of sociology in Australia' (in Gilding, 2009: 2). These encouraging views of Australian sociology are particularly evident in relation to the sub-fields of sociology. For instance, Dan Woodman (2013: 22) stated 'The sociology of youth research community, both in Australia and globally, is particularly vibrant', while James Jupp, in reflecting 'on the development of migration studies since the 1950s . . . praised the role of sociology in advancing our understanding of contemporary issues relating to migration in Australia' (cited in Anonymous, 2013: 7).

On the other hand, negative assessments of the discipline have been numerous. Stephen Crook once complained sociologists are held 'in contempt' by government and its supporters (Crook, 1999: 2), and argued that sociology had a 'clouded' future due to 'the leaching away of our salience' (Crook, 2005: 420). Peter Beilharz and Trevor Hogan (2005: 413) have characterised sociology as 'adrift, irrelevant, and negative', while Jo Lindsay (2013: 4) suggested 'sociology has an image problem in Australia – we have a low profile and low status relative to other disciplines'. Likewise, Nick Osbaldiston noted, '[w]e're a country that doesn't have much recognition of sociology' (in Harley and Osbaldiston, 2013: 38). In 2000, Bryan Turner concluded:

> [sociology] is often merely a servicing program for other disciplines . . . is frequently internally fragmented by ideological disputes, theory factions and disagreements about methodology . . . and [sociologists] have not been able to address major social issues successfully, often because there have been continuing gaps between theory elaboration and empirical research. (2000: 16–17)

The most negative assessment, however, has been proffered by Kirsten Harley and Gary Wickham, who conclude that 'sociology in Australia has never gained a strong foothold

in universities and has had to be satisfied with brief bursts of relative success clouded by constant threats of merger into "sociology and" configurations, or "and sociology" configurations, or worse still, of closure' (2014: 27).

Is it possible to reconcile such disparate views of sociology? And what might constitute a 'successful sociology'? Few claims for 'success' or 'failure' are based on evidence, and rarely are they attached to specific statements about the nature and role of sociology. And yet, the way we define sociology is fundamental to its evaluation. Our argument is that 'success' or otherwise can only be legitimately claimed in conjunction with a clear statement about the dimension of sociology under analysis. Is it an arena of knowledge? A way of looking at the world? An organisational form? A community of scholars or activists? A profession? A discipline? Too often, sociology is presented as if it were a one-dimensional entity without need for further explanation. Under more detailed analysis, sociology becomes a multi-modal, heterogeneous concept covering a variety of human practices, sets of ideas and forms of organisation. Criticisms of sociology often conflate these dimensions and fail to state the basis of the claim.

In this article, we examine the multiple dimensions of sociology and the varying ways Australian sociology is understood and assessed. Our primary data source is the discussions of the discipline expressed in the TASA members' magazine, *Nexus* (regularly published since its establishment in 1979), and relevant TASA presidential addresses, as well as published editorials and reports from Australian-based sociologists. We utilise the theoretical framework of boundary analysis to examine these differing views, understandings and their implications. This theoretical framework is developed from Gieryn's (1983, 1999) concept of 'boundary-work', where rhetorical claims are made about a discipline, informing practical strategies to establish epistemic authority over a sphere of knowledge and distinguish it from other disciplines. The concept has been utilised variously, but most relevantly in the analysis of the history of sociology's development in America (Evans, 2009) and Sweden (Larsson and Magdalenic, 2015). In the Swedish study, sociology was distinguished from Finnish sociology and the Swedish disciplines of ethnology, ethnography and cultural history, through vigorous public debate in the post-war period, as well as practices such as the establishment of Chairs and the production of textbooks. In the Australian case, while there is some sharing across society about what sociology is and what it is not, there is less consensus about the discipline's boundaries among its sociologists. When Australian sociologists express uncertainty about the discipline's boundaries, and offer a pessimistic evaluation of its capacities and roles, there can be significant consequences both within and outside the universities. These are real consequences, because *symbolic boundaries*, while equally 'real' and important in themselves, become crucial as they translate into *social boundaries*, where differences are manifested as inequalities in access and resources for social groups (see Lamont and Molnár, 2002: 168). It is apparent that a more systematic analysis is needed, particularly given the current challenges of neoliberalism in the Australian higher education sector and the geopolitics of the global knowledge system.

We proceed by examining the discursive field and its claims, organising the analysis into four fundamental dimensions: sociology as a body of intellectual knowledge, as a vocation, a profession, and an institution. These dimensions are implied, but rarely made apparent within the discursive claims themselves, although sociologists often emphasise

at least one of these dimensions when undertaking boundary-work and making claims about the discipline. They are analytical categories only: in the everyday life of the sociologist, there is much overlap between them. We show how these categories have been associated with one or more disputes about sociology, and offer alternative readings. The resulting analysis indicates that Australian sociology, rather than 'fragile' and 'precarious' (Harley and Wickham, 2014), should be declared 'healthy' with encouraging prospects.

Four dimensions of sociology

Sociology as a body of intellectual knowledge

This is perhaps the most venerated dimension of sociology – at least among the discipline's elite. Discussed as a circumscribed area of knowledge about society (Lopez, 1982: 8), with its own 'object' of knowledge – 'the social' (Wickham, 2012) – sociology is argued to have its own history, historical figures, key texts, and a theoretical and methodological tradition. This understanding of sociology emerged early in our history. Edward Shils (1965: 1406) described sociology as moving from an immature field in 'disarray' to one with a 'unified theoretical orientation' and defined intellectual and professional boundaries. Quite *how* this 'unification' had been achieved was a matter of discussion, and some, such as Talcott Parsons (1965: 33), saw it as the result of a consensus 'regarding the relevance of the classical canons of scientific method'.

Criticisms about this almost sacred element of sociology continue to be fiercely rejected, and deviations from convention are not readily tolerated. This is evidenced by the consternation raised by Raewyn Connell's (1997) article 'Why is Classical Theory Classical?', which pronounced the canon as a *myth* and sociology as a political and cultural solution to global expansion and colonisation. Criticisms abounded, with, for example, Randall Collins (1997) denouncing this as an attack on our sociological foundations and a 'sociological guilt trip'. Connell again unsettled many sociologists with her book *Southern Theory* (2007), although postcolonial critiques of 'Western' knowledge had by that time become common in other disciplines and in international scholarship.

That there should be a defined epistemological 'core' of sociology, which can unite the study of specific social phenomena into a coherent whole, is a recurrent refrain among scholars contemplating the state of Australian sociology. As early as 1911, Francis Anderson commented that '[s]ociology, like any other science, may have a more or less direct bearing on practice, but its first concern is with knowledge, with the facts and the explanation of the facts' (2005 [1911]: 85). Sixty years later, Jerzy Zubrzycki argued for a return to 'the core sociological enterprise' (2005 [1971]: 236), and in more recent periods, this aspirational 'core' has been variously envisaged as an agreed focus, object of study (Scott, 2005; Wickham, 2012), common body of theory or collection of theorists (Harley and Wickham, 2014).

These ideas are used to distinguish sociology from 'not-sociology' – they draw and protect the symbolic boundaries around the discipline – and provide its practitioners with an identity. Questioning the apparent consensus, or framing the discipline as a 'social construction', threatens these boundaries, and is thus, for some sociologists, an indication

of disciplinary decline. This illustrates one dimension of boundary-work: protection of the discipline's autonomy (Gieryn, 1999). And for these sociologists, the current proliferation of paradigms and approaches is a problem. For example, Wickham (2012: 340) regards the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a period of unification for sociology, and argues that our current ambivalence over the 'object' of 'the social' is to some extent responsible for sociology's lack of public influence. Similarly, Bryan Turner (2012: 373) claims that sociology's 'lack of integrative paradigm' has led to a 'fragmented and unstable discipline'. Harley and Wickham posit the lack of such a core as 'deleterious to the long-term health of the discipline' (2014: 54), arguing that the current inability to project 'an appearance of unity to those outside' hinders sociology's attractiveness to funders and other external bodies (2014: 105).

For these sociologists, 'the sociological core' and 'the social' are fundamental disciplinary features, and their loss is destructive of the discipline. Yet not all share this view of the discipline. In an alternative reading, such features as 'the social' or a set of historical texts may be understood as 'boundary objects': a concept we borrow from Star and Griesemer (1989: 393) to describe interfaces that facilitate the movement and creation of knowledge across social worlds. Boundary objects are not ahistorical, but formed discursively through disciplinary debate and interaction. And there are many sociologists who disagree with this vision of a past coherence and homogeneity. Frank Jones, for example, argues:

> it has been a feature of sociological thought throughout its history that there has never been anything other than a fragile consensus about what the appropriate subject matter of sociology is, how its products should be evaluated, [and] what constitutes sociological theorising. (in Jones et al., 1983: 196)

Similarly, Ron Wild notes, 'Vastly different conceptual paradigms are inherent in the nature of sociology and I do not think there is more of a crisis in sociology than there has been before' (in Jones et al., 1983: 211). Jones goes on to propose: '[s]uch differences in approach and understanding constitute a crisis in, and for, sociology, only when they stifle free and open discussion, when the tension between them ceases to be productive of intellectual and social progress' (in Jones et al., 1983: 202). Rather than looking back to a mythical past of shared objectives and programs, some sociologists see new opportunities. American sociologist Patricia Hill Collins, for instance, regards sociology's interdisciplinary inclinations as a strength, and any attempts to 'purify the discipline' as misguided and impoverishing (2012: 93). In the Australian context, Nicholas Hookway embraces this version of sociology, stating that '[s]ociology no longer has – if it ever did – a monopoly on "the social" . . . [and] rather than seeing contemporary visual or non-textual culture as a threat to sociology, we need to take advantage of the opportunities it provides' (2013: 10).

These are indeed diverse interpretations of how well sociology might be functioning as a body of intellectual knowledge, and this suggests the need for some evidence by which its 'success', or otherwise, might be judged. Has sociology continued to grow as an intellectual project in the Australian context, and to contribute to world sociology? In other words, is the conceptual, *symbolic* work of sociologists, continuing to translate into identifiable *social* categories in the world system of knowledge production?

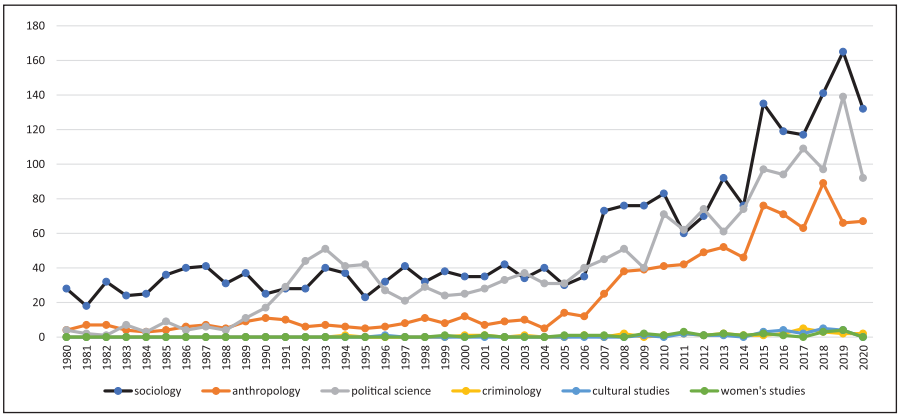

Figure 1. Growth of publications from sociology, anthropology, political science and emergent fields, Australia 1980–2020.
Source: Web of Science. Core Collection. Date of analysis 12 November 2020. Search criteria: (1) sociology/anthropology/political science/criminology/cultural studies/women's studies – all fields; (2) document type, articles; (3) date range 1980–2020; (4) countries, Australia (5) WoS categories, sociology etc.
Note: Countries/region refers to publications with at least one author from Australia.

With the aid of Web of Science (WoS) software, the contribution of Australian sociologists to key national and international sociological journals over the past four decades can be demonstrated (e.g. the *Journal of Sociology*, *Health Sociology Review*, *Journal of Historical Sociology* and *Journal of World-Systems Research*). In Figure 1, the trend in sociological publications is compared with output from some of our closest established disciplines, anthropology and political science, and three newly emerging fields – criminology, cultural studies and women's studies – where a number of sociologists are now employed. The emergent fields share the same low output trends (and barely register on the graph), while the traditional disciplines show healthy outputs. While there are concerns about the veracity of the WoS database (see Collyer et al., 2019: 87–8), it nevertheless provides indicative data for the flourishing of Australian sociology, and the maintenance of an independent disciplinary identity despite the sharing of its boundary objects with emerging fields.

Sociology as a vocation

The idea of sociology as a 'vocation' initially stemmed from Weber's (1994 [1917]) lecture, where, faced with a growing division of labour, and its tendencies toward impersonal, rule-based, rational control in the workplace, he argued that specialised occupations, such as sociology, have become imbued with 'some immanent meaning through passionate commitment. In other words, we have turned sociology into a vocation, pursuing it as an end in itself' (Burawoy, 2016: 380–1).

This notion of vocation encapsulates the lived experience of being a sociologist, the *meaningfulness* of our work and careers. Sociology, like other disciplines, provides many

intellectuals with a social space within which they can structure their lives. Messer-Davidow and Shumway (1991) touch on this when defining disciplines as 'forms of life'. We suggest then, that disciplines are 'social things', providing a world of meaning towards which, in the Weberian sense, social action is oriented. Belonging to a discipline can confer numerous benefits, including a sense of identity and inclusion; opportunities for building and maintaining a commitment to certain values and perspectives; social acceptance and legitimacy for one's work; and a vehicle to secure resources and status for individuals (Collyer, 2012: 39). Many sociologists would agree with Ylijoki that academics find their work 'so "satisfying", "stimulating" and "absolutely fascinating" that one becomes totally captivated and absorbed by it . . . academic work is not really work at all but rather a vocation that is embedded in dedication and commitment' (2019: 110). This commitment to sociology can lead to a sense of belonging for a distinct social group, and is encapsulated in Dan Woodman's comment: 'I think of TASA members as my people' (2013: 22).

While there is little doubt that sociology is a vocation for many, its *function* as a vocation differs across the sociological community. In other words, while 'doing sociology' is clearly meaningful, it means different things to different people. For many, sociology enables the opportunity to bring about change in the world, or improve the lives of particular social groups. This is sociology functioning as a vocation. For others, sociology is fundamentally an intellectual endeavour. This too is sociology functioning as a vocation. It is equally meaningful, and its value to the individual is not diminished if one's audience is composed primarily of one's peers and students, and if it is 'up to others' to operationalise these ideas.

However, what sociology represents, what is meaningful about it, can be divisive. One of the more acrimonious points of dissension has been the *internal* boundary distinction between 'applied' and 'academic' sociology. Zuleyka Zevallos, former co-convenor of the Applied Sociology Thematic Group for TASA, uses the term 'applied sociology' to refer to sociological work performed in universities, in government, in the community or in private consultancy organisations. Its distinguishing feature is 'the translation of sociological theory into practice for specific client groups' and its purpose is 'to produce positive social change through active intervention' (Zevallos, 2008: 1). While many sociologists engage in both forms of sociology (to various degrees over their careers), others are devoted, in a vocational sense, to one or the other. Moreover, the extent to which academic sociologists have been engaged with communities, government or industry, has varied over time. Yoland Wadsworth (2001: 14) claims that in the 1970s 'there was an extensive connection between sociology and the world "outside" – but in those days academic labour was a resource offered pro bono'. For some sociologists, this level of activism, this attention to community, policy, or politics, has increasingly been denigrated within academic sociology.

The distinction between applied and academic sociology has increasing salience in the context of a hostile funding environment and a reliance on metrics to assess the performance of academic staff. In some institutions, offering courses in applied sociology has been used to combat a decline in the 'traditional pool of students taking general degrees in the humanities and social sciences' (Anonymous, 2000: 7). At the same time, the emphasis on producing publications for international refereed journals as a marker of

individual and departmental 'success' has meant the systematic under-valuing of applied work (e.g. media appearances and community engagement). This contributes to the tension between applied and academic sociology and, for some, creates an experience of exclusion and marginalisation (Vanclay, 2001: 5).

When sociologists seek to determine whether sociology has been 'successful', the response is often dependent on what 'immanent meaning' sociology has for the individual concerned, that is, whether one has a greater affinity with academic or applied sociology. If sociology is 'an end in itself', is it the sociologist's role to directly participate in solving social problems, or to pursue intellectual and empirical work while others act on this knowledge, or both? For sociologists who see their role in the first category, such as Vanclay (2001: 5), sociologists must work as an 'inter-disciplinary social scientist (rather than a sociological theorist)' in order to fulfil sociology's three roles: 'the solving of social problems; the creation of knowledge; and the making of meaning'. While Vanclay suggests that applied sociology has made 'a considerable contribution to these three roles' (2001: 6), academic sociology, he contends, has performed poorly, as it has 'largely been irrelevant' and 'inaccessible' (2001: 5). There have been repeated calls from some in the sociological community to engage more fully with contemporary problems, become more political (Germov, 2001; Rowe, 2009: 5), and enact more 'public sociology' (e.g. Burawoy, 2005). Some sociologists see a 'lack of engagement' in policy discourse and legislation as an indication that sociology has 'failed' (Turner, 2012: 369). Others regard sociology's impact more positively. For example Raewyn Connell claims '[s]ociology has, I believe, had a cultural impact partly by spreading awareness of the mutability of social forms, for instance, the diversity of family patterns in the contemporary world' (2009: 32).

Assessments of sociology's impact on public life often do not fully take into account that measuring 'impact' in the social sciences is more difficult than in fields of knowledge such as medical science, where direct causal chains can be identified (or at least claimed) between the development of, for example, a new pharmaceutical product and a change in health outcomes in a given population. In the social sciences, a better indication is to examine the participation of a discipline such as sociology in debates and social reform. Sociological production is a *collective* exercise, with many sociologists contributing to social change over time, spreading sociological ideas and tools throughout the community. Historical and narrative analysis, rather than metrics, can demonstrate sociology's impacts in many areas of social life, including multiculturalism, gender equity, education, industrial relations and HIV/AIDs education and prevention – and positive assessments have been made in this way (e.g. Connell, 2009, 2015a, 2015b). Nevertheless, an indication of 'impact' – the rendering of symbolic boundary-work into social boundary-work – may be found in the number of projects awarded funds by the Australian Research Council to undertake social science research. After all, these funds are awarded to projects deemed to have 'significance' and likely to confer social benefits, and are also a public acknowledgement of sociologists as an expert social group. Table 1 provides an indication of sociology's success in the awarding of competitive funding, relative to some comparative disciplines, with a respectable average of 23%. Success rates differ by discipline, and vary slightly each year. In 2020 the success rate for all disciplines was 21.3%.

Table 1. Grant success rate: number of research grants funded as a percentage of applications for sociology, political science, anthropology and criminology 2011–2020.

	2011–12		2013–14		2015–16		2017–18		2019–20		Total	
Sociology	(50/191)	26%	(40/191)	21%	(27/147)	18%	(33/142)	23%	(40/172)	23%	(190/843)	23%
Pol. Science	(36/198)	18%	(55/206)	27%	(37/197)	19%	(24/163)	15%	(32/187)	17%	(184/951)	19%
Anthropology	(26/95)	27%	(28/96)	29%	(15/83)	18%	(16/71)	23%	(13/82)	16%	(98/427)	23%
Criminology	(13/51)	25%	(11/53)	21%	(5/50)	10%	(12/50)	24%	(7/52)	13%	(48/256)	19%
Average %		24%		25%		16%		21%		17%		21%

Source: Combined total of all National Competitive Grant Scheme grants (Future and Laureate Fellowships, Centre of Excellence, Discovery – Early Career, Indigenous and Projects, Linkage infrastructure and projects, Special Research Initiatives) 2011–2020. ARC public data sets: https://www.arc.gov.au/grants-and-funding/apply-funding/grants-dataset

Sociology as a profession

Professionalisation has been a disputed concept within sociological discourse since the mid-20th century, though the initial focus was the traditional professions of law and medicine, with little interest shown in sociology itself. The few reflections on sociology that can be found are not in scholarly papers, but informal reports, often written for members of the discipline. Talcott Parsons (1959) examined the nature of sociology as a profession from a structural functionalist perspective, focusing on the idea of a *canon* as one of the fundamental 'traits' marking sociology as a profession. Subsequent analyses of the traditional professions challenged this structural functionalist approach from multiple perspectives, including Marxism, Weberianism and Feminism. These argued it was not the existence of such traits, but the position of power held by some occupational groups which distinguished them as professions.

This alternative view of professions has been widely accepted in contemporary sociology. Yet the functionalist proposition that the viability of sociology as a profession depends on its adherence to a core set of texts, ideas and methods, lingers. Any suggestion that the 'core' of sociology must adhere to a specific set of texts, ideas and methods necessarily begs two questions: (a) which texts, ideas and methods, and (b) how they are selected. From the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, all disciplines, including those which have become professions, were formed within specific historical contexts and shaped by political, economic and cultural forces. Thus knowledge, even sociological knowledge, has a social origin. When this sociology of knowledge proposition is applied to sociology itself, the intellectual canon (which specifies the formation of the discipline, its forebears, intellectual traditions and key texts), is revealed to have been a social construction and the work of key disciplinary figures, particularly Talcott Parsons and C. Wright Mills, in the first half of the 20th century (see Connell, 1997: 1537). Likewise, the very idea of sociology as fundamentally a study of 'the social', is said to have been discursively produced in the early 20th century as a professional strategy to distinguish sociology from biology, also an emerging discipline (Collyer, 2010; Bradby, 2012: 6–7). These ruminations have resulted in studies of past scholars who *should* have been included, particularly women and people of non-dominant races or ethnicities (for example, McDonald, 1994; Stafford, 1994).

More recent assessments about the professional status of sociology have been mixed. In the American context, Stephen Turner (2000: 51) proposes a primary indicator of a discipline's 'success' is its capacity to produce work for members and sustain its market position. He characterises disciplines as 'cartels that organise markets for the production and employment of students', and argues it is their capacity to provide a disciplinary identity and influence the market, rather than their knowledge claims that produce 'success' (S. Turner, 2000: 51–2). For Bryan Turner (2012), the professionalisation of American sociology has damaged the discipline. He argues that American sociologists have forsaken intellectual engagement with 'the social', and created an empirical and quantitative science in collaboration with interest groups, thus limiting the discipline's intellectual focus. This, he suggests, has led to weaker engagement in the public sphere, and a decline in public authority and prestige. John Scott (2005), speaking from a British perspective, builds a 'bridge' across the two positions, proposing the professionalisation

of sociology has been its 'guardian'. For Scott, professionalisation provides sociologists with a vocational identity and a commitment to sociology as an intellectual endeavour. Both are crucial to sustaining market position.

In the Australian context, the assessment of sociology as a profession has been fiercely debated for over five decades. Although sociologists such as Sharyn Roach Anleu (in Martin et al., 2000: 7) continue the debate over whether a professional body – with the authority to determine who may teach or practice sociology – could be beneficial; TASA members have largely rejected full professionalisation. At the heart of the professionalisation debate are three interrelated issues. First, opportunities for employment as a sociologist; second, autonomy over our work (which we examine in the next section); and third, a long-standing normative ideal that the professional association be democratic in its governance, with an inclusive, welcoming and tolerant sociological community. Flexible disciplinary boundaries have no doubt been a consequence of our early establishment as a small, settler-colonial community where few of the interested newcomers had sociological qualifications: although the strategy has continued as a fundamental principle of the association. These three ideals, recurrent themes within the professionalisation debate (and well documented in TASA's newsletter *Nexus*), are in tension with the alternative: an hierarchical, conventional discipline with rigid boundaries and strict gatekeeping practices. Yet there have been occasions when tensions have surfaced, particularly over the extent to which TASA *should* be more representative of sociologists working outside the academy (e.g. Ring, 1999: 8). (Unlike the Australian Psychological Society, which is located outside academia and represents psychologists working in universities *and* the community, TASA has always been hosted within universities, making it difficult to represent community-based sociologists).

Australian sociologists have been happy to support their professional association to run effectively and facilitate communication across the sociological community; but have been reticent to support more overt professional strategies, even if this might increase cultural or market power. Moreover, while many consider TASA to be a 'successful' association, they are acutely aware of sociology's tentative position in the public arena. Without 'cultural power', as Stephen Crook notes, it would be 'unrealistic' for sociology to make professional claims similar to those of the discipline of psychology:

> Even granting that the psychology model is appropriate (and many of us would doubt that it is), TASA's claims would be simply dismissed or ignored by relevant stakeholders, such as State governments, universities and many practitioners. (Crook, 2001: 2)

It is evident that ideas have changed over the decades, particularly with regard to notions about what constitutes an appropriate job for a sociologist, and *where* they should work. The ideal working environment in the 1970s and 1980s was envisaged to be in a department of sociology, with staff engaged only in research and the teaching of sociology curricula. However, views have changed as new generations have entered sociology, and as the job market has altered. Dramatic shifts over the past fifty years have meant that academic positions are now available in many arenas within universities – including sociology departments/schools, multi-/inter-disciplinary units, and new fields of practice (e.g. cultural studies or criminology) – as well as new jobs in the community, the private

Table 2. Disciplinary identities in the public media 1986–2021.

	1986–90	1991–5	1996–2000	2001–5	2006–10	2011–15	2016–21	Total
Anthropologist	20	63	997	2,176	2,966	2,757	2,661	11,640
Sociologist	23	57	519	1,447	1,552	1,762	2,148	7,508
Political scientist	30	59	369	942	1,508	1,351	2,120	6,379
Criminologist	16	16	486	1,034	1,461	1,233	1,675	5,921

Source: Factiva Data Base, search undertaken April 2021 for use of words 'sociologist' etc. All sources, subjects, English language, within Australia. Includes many publications including *The Australian*, *The Conversation*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Crikey*, etc. Note that 2021 data is not for a full year period.

and public sectors. Some sociologists still cling to the ideal of the 1970s, regarding applied work, or university positions within multi-/inter-disciplinary units as less desirable. For this group, the current job market tends not to be viewed positively. For others, who regard the opportunity for 'public' sociology, or teaching in an interdisciplinary environment in a more positive light, a more optimistic assessment of sociology's health in the contemporary environment tends to follow. For example, Beilharz and Hogan (2005: 399), recognise that Australia has too small an intellectual culture to sustain a job market, and point to the way Australian sociologists must move into other departments, disciplines and specialities to obtain work and build careers.

Little evidence is available to show whether Australian sociology's market position has been sustained, or weakened. Staff numbers for sociologists in the universities are not available, as neither the universities nor the Department of Education, Skills and Employment collect these (data on staff to student ratios are collected only for aggregated groups such as 'Human Society and Culture', not for individual disciplines, and are discussed in the next section); and there are no decisive figures on the availability of work for sociologists outside the universities. This makes it quite difficult to obtain a firm sense of whether sociology is growing or shrinking as an employment category. Nevertheless, other indicators of professional status can be employed, such as the capacity to extend beyond the symbolic boundary out into the world, to take the credibility and skills developed within sociology to act on the public stage. While most assessments by sociologists about the public presence of sociology have not, as we have seen above, been particularly positive, this is in part the result of a paucity of knowledge about the discipline. Most sociologists are unaware of the career trajectories of graduates and the number of sociologists in key positions within the university sector (as vice-chancellors for example), in government, in parliament, in businesses in the private sector and organisations in the community. Likewise, there is insufficient knowledge among sociologists (and others) about the major public contributions that have been made to debates and policy (for an exception, see Beilharz and Hogan, 2005: 407–8). Yet sociologists *are* present in public discussions, as evidenced in Table 2. Here we note the number of times the word 'sociologist' appears in mainstream media in comparison with four other disciplines. Sociology has a solid and increasing public presence, although there is some hesitancy among sociologists to label themselves 'sociologists' (unlike the Americans, who are more likely to refer to themselves as sociologists than either the British or the

Australians, see Collyer, 2012: 210–11). This is evident when sociology is compared with the greater presence of the anthropologists, who have a similar size workforce.

The capacity of sociologists to build their public presence and increase market power is limited in the Australian context. Although Burawoy (2005) and others regard public sociology as essential to the discipline, the intensification of academic work, pressures to publish in academic journals and the anti-intellectualism and funding cuts of successive Australian governments have made such practices difficult for all disciplines. Thus, it is worth noting that 'failure' in this regard may not indicate a weakness within sociology, but rather the strength of the opposition.

Sociology as an institution

Institutionalisation is the process through which 'ideas and social practices become structured into more resilient, predictable and permanent arrangements' (Collyer, 2013b: 338). It is an ongoing process rather than an end-point in the production of organised forms of knowledge, and a fundamental way of sustaining disciplines inter-generationally. In 1959 Parsons wrote about the importance of institutionalisation through the formation of departments. These, he argued, enable the training of new generations of sociologists and provide sociology with an indication of its 'success' (1959: 551). For Parsons (and many others), a 'secure position in university faculties . . . is the structural base from which a scientifically oriented profession can most effectively operate' (1959: 552).

In Australia, in contrast to the United States where professionalisation has played such a significant role, the processes of institutionalisation are even more salient in the sustainability of disciplines. Enormously dependent on government to fund universities, Australian sociology, like its counterparts in Brazil and Argentina, has grown with the universities, and in recent decades higher education policy has been dominated by neoliberal and managerial ideologies (Connell, 2015b; Collyer, 2017). And like other 'Southern tier' sociologies, Australian sociology is significantly shaped by the global knowledge system. Sociology's success, or otherwise, must be assessed within an environment where journal ownership, major publishers, and even the software tools used to measure the metrics on which the academy now depends; are controlled by global North institutions (Collyer et al., 2019; Connell, 2009). How universities respond to the global context – and to government – very much determines the fate of sociology as an institutional form.

Debates about sociology's institutional location intersect with discussions about the strengths and weaknesses of disciplinary diversity. Bryan Turner (2012: 373) sees diversification as fragmentation: '[b]ecause sociology lacks an integrative theoretical paradigm, the number of topics the discipline addresses continues to increase in an unwieldy manner'. Likewise, Harley and Wickham (2014: 41) suggest that a 'broad church' sociology, offering a wide choice of courses, is potentially unattractive to students, who are 'likely to turn away and try to find a discipline which presents a more united face to the world, with a clear disciplinary core'. (The argument is not, however, presented alongside evidence of student preferences.) There are others who see sociology's diversity as 'constructive flexibility'. British sociologist John Scott (2005) argues that sociology's

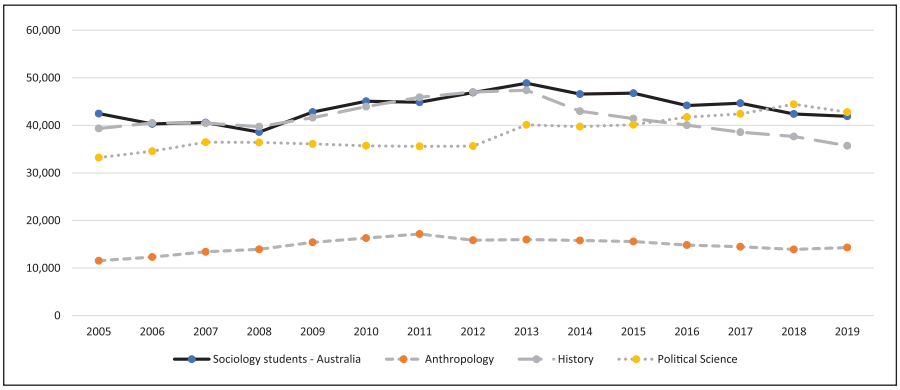

Figure 2. Undergraduate student numbers: four disciplines, 2005–19.
Source: Data provided on request from Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs.

'openness to contemporary developments' keeps it alive as a discipline. And other sociologists may also view multi-/inter-disciplinary units positively. Reporting on a Teaching Sociology TASA thematic group annual workshop, the convenors, Kristin Natalier and Kirsten Harley, stated:

> those extra-disciplinary contexts are a means of strengthening the discipline; indeed, they may be its saviour: they allow us to reach a much larger number of students, embed sociological knowledge in contexts and professions not traditionally associated with a sociology career path (whatever that may look like today) and require alternative and creative ways of building sociological perspectives and understandings. (2013: 12).

For these sociologists, sociology is not an unchangeable, 'sacred' knowledge project so much as a practical set of tools for exploring the world. This 'toolbox' makes sociology highly amenable for service teaching (in the education of nurses, police officers, social workers, etc.); enables sociology to offer a broad range of 'interesting topics' that are attractive to students; allows sociologists to teach in areas akin to their research interests; and produces many 'spin-off' disciplinary projects (which may become disciplines in their own right). From this perspective, the formation of new sub-fields and disciplines, and the expansion of explorations of 'the social' into other disciplines are both markers of the 'success' of the sociological enterprise. And they are examples of the proliferation of symbolic categories that have become new social divisions, providing new opportunities for employment, knowledge production and education.

Empirical data can be provided to show the ongoing health of the discipline within a dramatically changing institutional context. As previously noted, it is difficult to access good statistics on sociology, but Figure 2 offers an indicative view of undergraduate student numbers since 2005 for sociology, anthropology, history and political science. These students have enrolled in at least one subject classified by the university as a sociology unit (i.e. excluding units with contents that may contain sociology, but are coded to a general social science or humanities code). All four disciplines have broadly retained their numbers in the face of major institutional change.

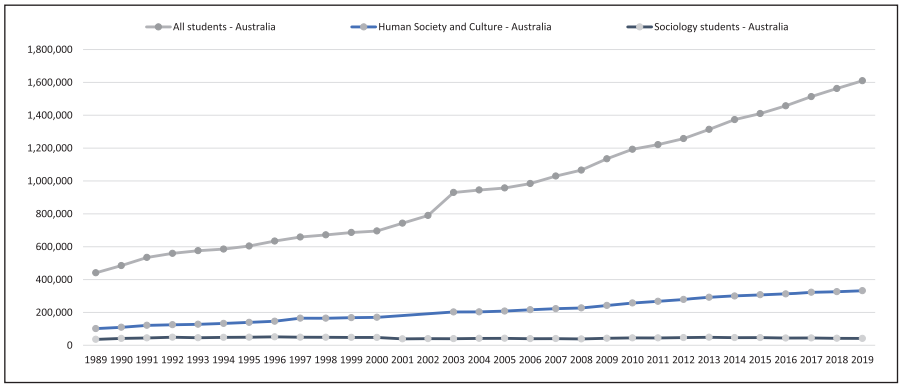

Figure 3. Student numbers: sociology, Human Society and Culture, 1989–2019.
Chart is indicative only, given changes in methodology and measurement categories over this period.
Sources:
Total student numbers (2003–19) from the Department of Education, Skills and Employment website, https://www.dese.gov.au/higher-education-statistics
Total student numbers (2001–3) from University of Sydney publications, derived from DEST publication *Students 2002 (etc.): Selected Higher Education Statistics*.
Total student numbers (1989–2000) from Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs publication *Higher Education Students Time Series Tables 2000*.
1989–2000 cluster statistics refer to Department of Education 'Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences' cluster. From 2003, figures refer to the new cluster, 'Human Society and Culture'. There have been changes to the disciplines included in each cluster.
Statistics for sociology students supplied on request from Department of Education, Skills and Employment.

Institutional change is evident in Figure 3, where the diagonal line indicates a major increase in overall undergraduate student numbers. Between 1989 and 2019 the sector was reorganised into a mass education system, with the erasure of all forms of higher education institutions except universities, which increased university enrolments by 58% between 1989 and 2000, and 70% between 2004 and 2019. Students are now studying at universities to gain skills in fields that previously would have been gained at TAFE (Technical and Further Education), colleges of advanced education, institutes or in the workforce. For example, students can study real estate and property management at Griffith University, retail marketing at Open Universities Australia, tourism and events management at the University of Canberra, learn how to design an exercise program or operate spa equipment at Torrens University, or learn to fly an aeroplane at the University of New South Wales. The line in the centre of the graph represents the number of students in the arts, humanities and social sciences (renamed as Human Society and Culture). This cluster of disciplines and fields remains attractive, gathering 21–25% of all Australian university students between 1989 and 2019. The line at the bottom of the graph represents sociology student numbers, indicating these have not grown significantly over the period (41,829 students in 1990 and 41,913 in 2019).

In 2009, most universities were reported as offering a major course in sociology, that is, a 'full suite' of units (methods, theory and specialities) (Marshall et al., 2009), and this remains largely the case. While there has been a downgrading of sociology departments

and majors at some universities (e.g. Flinders University), with all the attendant distress for staff, there has been growth and expansion elsewhere (e.g. ANU, Melbourne and Adelaide). Moreover, although the traditional disciplines, including sociology, appear not to have grown their student enrolments, this is largely a figment of classification, as many additional students are enrolled in sociology units classified as anthropology (as found at the University of Western Australia) or general subjects shared across several disciplines or fields (e.g. criminology or police studies). The national figures for student undergraduate teaching *within* the sociology departments are thus largely the consequence of institutional 'reform', as well as sociology's tendency to 'spawn and nurture' other areas of knowledge production – a process Marshall et al. (2009: 9) regard as sociology's 'perpetually expanding empire'. As such, sociology is said to have 'been a victim of its own success'. An alternative reading is to regard this as the way universities have managed the proliferation of *symbolic* categories of knowledge and the growth in new *social* categories through the boundary-work of sociologists and other academics. Essentially, sociologists have strategically dealt with institutional demands for the cost efficient use of human resources and the need to improve market position by deploying its boundary objects ('the social' and its research tools for instance) into alternative social spaces, capturing or constructing new 'audiences' and 'publics'; some of which have resulted in new but durable boundaries that protect the identity of sociology as a 'traditional' discipline.

Final reflections

The above discussion has indicated some major fault lines in Australian sociology, stemming from differing conceptions of what sociology is (or should be). Conflating these multi-modal conceptions of sociology – as an intellectual project, a vocation, a profession or an institution – has produced debate over the continuing relevance of the sociological canon, and whether it provides coherence or constraint; about the effect of a diversification in topics, methodologies and frameworks; about divisions between applied and academic forms of sociology; and about the proliferation of sub-fields and multi-/inter-disciplinary units, and whether these should be considered as dilution, fragmentation, or healthy diversity. These internal, discursive disputes often form the basis for assessments about the health, or otherwise, of sociology. Yet, as we have demonstrated here, it is the translation of this *symbolic* work across the disciplinary boundary into *social* categories that needs to be the focus of attention.

Amidst these debates about *how* sociology should be understood and assessed, little attention has been paid to appropriate comparators. Australian sociology tends to be compared with sociology in Britain or the US, but it is more appropriate to assess our achievements against other postcolonial countries, countries with small or dispersed populations, and settler-colonial histories. Australian sociology has survived despite its location far from the global metropole, and continues to face major hurdles within an anti-intellectual and neoliberal culture. These external factors should not be disregarded in favour of disciplinary self-critique, and there is much need for research of this kind.

While important issues of casualisation and precarious work have not been addressed here, and complacency in the industrial arena is certainly to be avoided, it is time to

reassess the strengths of Australian sociology and pronounce the discipline in good health. More undergraduate students have been introduced to sociological tools and insights than ever before, we are increasing the number of our PhD students, and producing more job opportunities for sociologists than we have ever done in the past. With their growing numbers, sociology graduates cannot all be placed in named sociology departments, and so new multi-/inter-disciplinary units have opened up new spaces for sociologists, infiltrating all areas of the university as well as the world beyond. And while some sociology departments have dissolved within larger interdisciplinary schools, the 'sandstone' universities – Adelaide, Sydney, Melbourne – which were reluctant to host sociology in the 1970s and 1980s, have become amenable to sociology. Moreover, sociological publications have continued to increase and find their way into international journals, and we have several sociology departments rated highly by the government's own ERA program. It is clearly time to change our focus from 'What's wrong with sociology?' and instead ask 'How, and in what ways, is sociology currently valued?'

The boundary-work of sociologists is never finished, and must be conducted on the basis of good information. This means improving the knowledge sociologists have about their own discipline, and encouraging them to have a more positive image of the discipline's strengths. This in turn means insisting our institutions gather more meaningful statistics and stories about sociological endeavours, improving our web presence, and – importantly – encouraging sociologists to identify themselves as sociologists when appearing in the public arena.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Fran Collyer disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This project was supported by an Australian Research Discovery grant, DP190103179.

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