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Generational differences in the career beginnings of teaching sociologists

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Abstract
The narratives of nineteen academics in Australian universities about their entry to teaching in the discipline reveal differing institutional contexts in the pre and post Dawkins university system that have affected the ways in which careers can be made. Participants can be drawn to Sociology in order to understand or to change the world, but their initial attraction to sociology was shaped by the availability of the discipline; for older entrants there was a search for an intellectual home while younger ones made a simple choice from available options. While all participants reported elements of luck in their entry to academic life and of making pragmatic choices about their careers, two decades of structural changes to higher education mean that the kinds of luck they have and the choices they make differ considerably. There is some suggestion that changes within the discipline have also affected careers. The questions are posed whether the two groups are ‘generations’ of sociologists, and, if so, what might be the implications for the professional association and for the discipline.
Introduction
In the 50th year of The Australian Sociological Association (TASA) it is timely to reflect on changes to the ways in which sociological work is done. A majority of the association’s members are employed as academics. This paper reports on how 19 academics currently located in Australian universities were drawn to the discipline and obtained their first positions. We can speculate that these experiences helped shape their professional identities and ask if there are generational differences in the identity of sociologists over time.

We begin by discussing the institutional context for Australian sociology, noting major changes since TASA was founded. We then briefly note the changes to the intellectual context over the same period. After outlining the context in which the data were collected, we examine how the sociologists were drawn to the discipline and achieved their first steps into careers as sociologists.

Australian Sociology’s Institutional Context
When TASA was founded in 1963, the university sector was relatively static, small, homogeneous and elitist and Sociology was offered only in a few places under its proper name (see Marshall, Robinson, Germov and Clarke, 2009). Since then radical change has occurred. There are now 38 public universities and sociology is taught in most of them. While for the first half of the C20th, Australia could be seen as a ‘data mine’ for overseas social scientists (Connell 2005), by the early 1960s, chairs of sociology emerged at newly established universities. In the ensuing decades the discipline spread and gradually penetrated even the oldest of the Sandstones. Though the expansion period appears to be over (Germov and McGee 2005) Australia now produces quite a lot of sociology.

The previously homogenous university system is now in practice a vertically differentiated system of institutions competing for government funding. With the ‘marketising’ of higher education (Coaldrake and Stedman 1998; Marginson 1999; Marginson and Considine 2000) universities have been thoroughly corporatized and now exist in a post-industrial knowledge-based economy where education is a ‘key commodity’ (Blackmore and Sachs 2007 p 1). Simultaneous with these changes, bureaucratic scrutiny of the university classroom has increased. In this marketised environment, the academic workforce is increasingly casualised and opportunities for entry to ongoing positions are severely reduced. Between 1989 and 2007 the proportion of casual teaching staff in universities increased from 12.7 per cent to 22.2 per cent (Coates et al 2009, p 7) with women more likely than men to be casual consistent with increasing casualisation of the workforce as a whole. The typical career path of contemporary young academics includes a longish period in part-time work or time limited positions funded on ‘soft’ money, with no guarantee of continuation. They are employed in an environment demanding ‘performativity’ (Blackmore and Sachs 2007) where managers have the power to make or break nascent careers on sometimes unclear grounds and where union support may be ineffectual, making non-compliance difficult (Pusey 2003). Such an environment is likely to impact on the ways in which young academics pursue their careers, and the interviews reveal two distinct groups whose opportunities differed.

Australian Sociology’s Intellectual Context
The dominant theoretical and methodological traditions when TASA was founded were functionalism and survey research. The surrounding social climate for sociology in the 1950s and ‘60s was politically conservative. Richmond (2005) and Encel (2005) both note resistance to the creation of sociology departments, while Bryson (2005) notes that Marx was blacklisted in teaching. This situation did not last long. By the late 1960s, first ‘conflict’ theories, then resurgence of Marxism and the explosive re-emergence of feminism as an intellectual and political framework brought radical change to the discipline. Qualitative data was re-valued, and sociology engaged in the methodological ‘paradigm wars’ (Denzin 2008). The contest between sociology as a ‘value-free’ or ‘value-choosing’ discipline became fierce enough to justify the notion of a ‘coming crisis’ (Gouldner 1971).
These conflicts gathered momentum between the 1970s and 1990s as fields of study, concepts and approaches within the discipline emerged and shrank. The concern that sociology has no ‘mainstream’ of its own emerged in the 1980s (Scott 2005). Post-modernism, challenging both the idea of ‘science’ and of the ‘the social’, shook the discipline in ways that still reverberate. Since the 1990s, there has been discussion of the ‘fragmentation’ of sociology (Scott 2005). This term encompasses both ‘shrinkage’ as sub-disciplinary areas such as sociology of crime grow into new disciplines like criminology and the ‘cultural turn’ linked to post-modernism. Questions about the moral stance of sociologists are currently typified by the ‘public sociology’ debate. (See Clawson et. al. 2007). Thus undergraduate students encountering sociology in 1960 met a very different discipline from students of the 1990s. Those undergraduates who went on to postgraduate work and academic careers did so in very different institutional contexts. The accounts we examine below demonstrate this.

Background to the data

The accounts come from a project that aimed to map the teaching of sociology in Australia, and identify the issues faced by teaching academics. To help identify these issues, we interviewed 19 people teaching or having taught in at least one Australian university. All but three came from the two universities used as case studies in the project, ‘BigU’ and ‘UTech’. ‘BigU’ is an established university with considerable prestige, offering a traditional generalist BA, with both city and rural campuses. Its city campus attracts students from more privileged backgrounds than the rural one. ‘UTech’ is a former College of Advanced Education with an inner-city campus, offering only vocationally oriented degrees, to a highly varied student population.

We aimed to interview all staff in each department, but in the end were able only to talk with about two thirds of them. In three cases, the interviewer knew the participant. At the start of the interviews, we asked for a brief account of participants’ entry to a teaching career. While our original intent was to use the question only as an icebreaker and context-setter so it played no part in the final report, it became clear on re-reading this material that the participants’ narratives offered a picture of varied experiences. After completing the report, we returned to the ice-breaker questions with a view to finding out whether there were any patterns in what brought people into sociology rather than another discipline. We coded the material first deriving categories ‘up’ from the data, working independently. After discussion firmed up the coding categories, we were able to collate them under two main themes and compare two groups. The material was managed using NVIVO8.

We are concerned primarily with participants’ descriptions of what brought them into the discipline and into their early positions in academe. We can say nothing about the later progress of careers, or the impact of gender. Our non-representative sample comprises eleven male and eight female sociologists, interviewed in 2008. Since the project focussed on teaching sociology, few of our participants were in research-only positions. Hence we do not investigate the link between teaching and research in academic careers. The sample is also biased towards ‘successful’ careers. With the exception of Glenda, all participants had completed their PhDs and as table 1 one shows, the group over-represents the upper echelons of academic staff in Australian universities where the bulk of academics are employed at senior-lecturer level and below (DEWR 2010).

Taking the formation of a unified national system of the Dawkins era as the point of demarcation, we have an older career group who have been sociologists for over twenty years, and a younger group dating from around 1990. The younger group have known continuous change to higher education, and have spent most of their careers in an environment shaped by the mantras of economic rationalism and The New Public Management. The older group have spent at least some time in universities shaped initially by Menzies liberalism, then by Whitlamite ideals. The link between length of sociological career and chronological age is not always straightforward—some of the ‘younger’ group of sociologists are in late middle age, and while both authors are ageing baby boomers, in career terms one would fall into the older group, the other count as a very young sociologist.

Table 1. Participants by age group  career group, university, position level, and position type

Generational differences in the early careers of teaching sociologists
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>Career Group</th>
<th>University</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>position type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Albert</td>
<td>older</td>
<td>Younger</td>
<td>BigU</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Permanent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>older</td>
<td>Older</td>
<td>UTech</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Permanent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cassie</td>
<td>middle</td>
<td>Younger</td>
<td>BigU</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Permanent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darren</td>
<td>middle</td>
<td>Younger</td>
<td>UTech</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Permanent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>older</td>
<td>Older</td>
<td>BigU</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Permanent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glenda</td>
<td>middle</td>
<td>Younger</td>
<td>BigU</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Casual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry</td>
<td>younger</td>
<td>Younger</td>
<td>BigU</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Permanent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>middle</td>
<td>Older</td>
<td>BigU</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Permanent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonathon</td>
<td>older</td>
<td>Older</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Permanent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julius</td>
<td>older</td>
<td>Younger</td>
<td>BigU</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Emeritus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lachlan</td>
<td>middle</td>
<td>Younger</td>
<td>BigU</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Permanent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liz</td>
<td>younger</td>
<td>Younger</td>
<td>BigU</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Permanent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaret</td>
<td>middle</td>
<td>Younger</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Permanent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>younger</td>
<td>Younger</td>
<td>BigU</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Permanent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>older</td>
<td>Older</td>
<td>UTech</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Permanent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martine</td>
<td>older</td>
<td>Older</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Permanent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon</td>
<td>older</td>
<td>Older</td>
<td>BigU</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>Permanent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve</td>
<td>younger</td>
<td>Younger</td>
<td>BigU</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Permanent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yvonne</td>
<td>middle</td>
<td>Younger</td>
<td>UTech</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Permanent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The discussion which follows points to some similarities in attitudes and differences in experiences between the older and the younger career groups first of all in terms of what drew them to sociology, then in terms of how they began to find academic positions.

Understanding and changing the world and seeking or choosing a home

Fifteen of our nineteen interviewees talked about their entry to teaching sociology in terms of intellectual interests linked either to understanding or to changing the world. These terms intentionally imply the antithesis that Marx intended when he popularised this distinction (Marx 1845) and also invoke the ongoing argument around the extent to which sociology should engage in politics (and from which political direction), the most recent manifestation of which is the ‘public sociology’ debate (Clawson et. al. 2007). Some of our participants clearly show a preference for one intellectual interest; for others the two variations are complexly intertwined.

Of the ten participants whose intellectual interest in sociology converged with activism, Martine’s account stood out as an example. She underlines the importance of the discipline in her life when she says, ‘[i]t wasn’t even a career decision. It just seemed the best possible … most important … thing to do’. Amplifying this, she made clear that the content of the discipline had an intellectual attraction as ‘the most important form of knowledge’ as well as being important to her as a young activist:

I saw the kind of stuff we were doing was the most important information that people could have… it was urgent to find means of disseminating and debating stuff about the structure
of society and patterns of inequality, and questions of justice and social dynamics and so forth, which I guess is sociology. There was no sociology department in either of the universities I’d been studying at … So I went overseas … then came back … [and] came to a sociology department long after I’d begun to teach sociology and I guess I still thought that it was the most important information, most important form of knowledge there was. And teaching was a way of disseminating it, a way of developing it. (Older career group, level E)

Jessica, too, was drawn to teaching sociology for its potential to change the world:

It’s important to have generations of students who can use [a sociological] framework in understanding the world and I hope the things in the world will improve as they perceive them … If we don’t teach the way of framing things then people remain, often, unreflective about the way in which they operate in the social world and I hope that sort of teaching provides them with some way of re-examining the way they see things and … do things. (Older career group, level C)

Eight sociologists offered accounts that suggested entering life as a sociologist because sociology offered a means of ‘understanding’. The stories of Albert, Jonathon, and Simon offered suggest discovering the discipline in a way that was personally stimulating and made sense of their environment.

Albert, one of the younger academic career groups, describes gradually discovering the discipline that excited him. After 25 years secondary teaching, he enrolled for a Bachelor of Letters to study sociology because:

I was … thinking look I’ve done history … politics … German language and literature [and] I’ve lived in Germany. And I really want to do something a little bit different but preferably something that might incorporate those particular disciplines. (Younger career group, Level B)

Jonathon, from the older generation, who sees himself as a social theorist more than a sociologist, nonetheless offers an account of sociology’s appeal suggesting discovery:

Sociology provided a neat framing … to think about things I’d been thinking about for some time which was also in an ongoing sense continuing to provide intellectual challenge for me. (Older career group, Level E)

Simon, also from the older generation began studying engineering, dropped out, then eventually enrolled in an Arts degree. He sees himself as having had an intellectual interest in the terrain of sociology even before he encountered the discipline:

Even when I was doing engineering I had to do a project … [that] was actually on … the politics of [an engineering issue] … so I [was] … interested in those kinds of issues rather than the … purely technical. I did honours and a masters in social anthropology… [which] was really a sociological thesis (Older career group, Level E)

There is no strong relationship observable between the career groups as to preference for understanding or changing the world. There is, however, an observable difference in the way they encountered the discipline, reflecting the spread of sociology discussed earlier. The contemporary
availability of sociology at undergraduate level means that, for the younger career group, entry to the
career of sociology no longer requires a quest for an intellectual or institutional home.

Martine’s comment that she taught sociology long before she was in a sociology department, like
Jonathon’s remark that sociology gave him a ‘framing’ for things he had been thinking about, and
Simon’s story all suggest something like a search for the congenial way of thought. While not all
the pre Dawkins group told of a search (as shown by Jessica’s quote above), the data suggest a
different experience for those coming later to undergraduate study. Difference between the older and
younger groups in what drew people to sociology is exemplified by Cassie, who says she fell in love
with the discipline as a student and since then has ‘strong identities as a sociologist’. For her,
sociology was simply there to be loved. Unlike Albert, Simon, Jonathon and Martine she did not need
to search for a disciplinary ‘frame’ or an institutional location. She was able simply to choose
sociology from the available disciplines. Her search, as we will see later, was for a job teaching
sociology.

Liz, also in the younger group, is focussed on teaching, which she had wanted to do since childhood,
but says, ‘I was studying [sociology] and … loved engaging with … social issues,’ so it appears that
the content of the discipline engaged her. Again, her intellectual interest is there as a matter of course
rather than as something sought and eventually found. Henry’s comment exemplifies the way in
which sociology had become a matter of choice:

What drew me to teaching sociology, I suppose it was, in a
sense, because I went down a path of under-graduate Masters
of PHD and sociology, and what do you do with sociology?
(Younger career group, level B)

Of course, the links between career group and choice of discipline are not simple as the table below
shows. Not all participants could be clearly categorised. Julius, in the older group clearly chose the
discipline:

My father is a sociologist so I grew up with sociology …So
that's just from day one and that's why becoming a
sociologist was natural. (Older career group, Emeritus)

He had the choice because he was born and initially educated in the US, where sociology was a well-
established discipline. Jessica, Australian by birth and education, was an undergraduate at one of the
universities that offered a major in sociology, early in the expansion period of the 1960s, and so, like
Cassie, she takes sociology for granted as her discipline. Thus despite complexities, we can see in
table 2 a pattern in the initial attraction to sociology that reflects the spread of the discipline in
Australia.

Table 2. Participants by career group and initial attraction to the discipline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial attraction seen as a choice</th>
<th>Younger Career Group</th>
<th>Older Career Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cassie Darren Glenda Henry Lachlan Liz Margaret Maria Steve</td>
<td>David Jessica Julius</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither choice nor search</td>
<td>Yvonne</td>
<td>Mark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial attraction seen as a search</td>
<td>Albert</td>
<td>Andrew Jonathon Martine Simon</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Changing Disciplinary Context and Career

David’s story suggests that the intellectual changes within the discipline sketched earlier changed the
attraction of sociology for him. When he began teaching, sociology allowed him ‘to ask the kind of
questions that I was interested in asking and exploring’. The theoretical turn of the 1980s, with its reduced emphasis on empirical investigation, made teaching less enjoyable to him and lay behind his decision to move from teaching to research: ‘the more abstract, discipline-orientated, research literature that dominates sociology probably had less and less interest for me’. He seems to have found sociology initially appealing as a foundation for changing the world but the ‘more abstract’ sociology of recent years was personally unappealing and unsuited to his brand of activism:

my [temperament] was … better suited to dealing with real issues and also my interests have long been engaging with community issues, talking to community groups, being involved in politics’ (Older career group, level E).

So that he “moved progressively towards something which wasn’t conventional sociology”. While there is no direct evidence from Julius that his career had been affected by changes in the discipline, a comment he makes on how teaching the discipline became somewhat more difficult suggests that changes in the discipline may also have affected careers:

Developing and sustaining sociological or social perspective …got to be a whole lot harder under Maggie Thatcher and wet whimish sociologists who didn't believe there was a thing called society. …Sociologists that don't believe in the reality of society are as about as useful as theologians who don't believe in God. (Older career group, Emeritus)

There are insufficient data to pursue this further, but the possibility that changing orientations within the discipline have impacted on careers remains. We turn now to discussing the impact on participants of the changing institutional context. We explore how the academics interviewed for this study understood and made use of the opportunities available to them at the start of their careers in sociology.

Fourteen interviewees drew on two principal narratives to explain what happened once they found identity as sociologists. These narratives were ‘luck or chance’ and ‘pragmatism’. Since the first is about opportunity (or its lack) and the second about what one does with opportunity, the narratives could coexist. As with the narratives about understanding and changing the world, there is no clear difference between the older and younger group in which narrative they used. There is however, a discernable difference in the narratives related to the types of opportunity available for pragmatic use.

Luck or chance and opportunity

Eight interviewees (Cassie, Glenda, Julius, Liz, Mark, Simon, Steve and Yvonne) used the luck or chance narrative to explain how they entered sociology. Cassie said that she had always had ‘strong identities as a sociologist’ and that the state of the labour market influenced the course of her career:

When I finished my PhD, the labour market was really flat and I went and got a research job [at a centre] and kind of went down a bit of a public health and sociology track but I was really delighted to get this job … because I wanted to keep doing the kind of research work that I had been but also have the opportunity to teach. It’s just been a long term goal really, since doing the PhD. I did want to be a teaching sociologist. (Level C younger group)

Liz, some years younger than Cassie, found herself working in the same university but by a more roundabout route, which underlines also the chance nature involved in the getting of some academic jobs today. Her route into sociology began when her honours supervisor suggested she enrol in a PhD. When she enrolled in a PhD, she, ‘really thought more about teaching Sociology’. To support herself, she taught in TAFE and continued doing so after completion of her doctorate:
I was teaching some horrendous subjects that just didn’t engage me. They were fun but they weren’t up my alley and … then an eleven-month contract came up here. I applied for it and got it and I’ve been here ever since. (Younger career group, level B)

What evidence there is in Liz’s account of luck or chance in her finding permanent employment at a Sandstone university is limited to a bland statement of fact: ‘I applied for … [an eleven-month contract] and got it and I’ve been here ever since’. What this does not reveal is how or why an ‘eleven-month contract’ transformed into permanency. The reason that the (young career group) interviewer, did not ask her to elaborate, and Liz did not to give details of the transformation of her employment status is possibly a shared assumption that the change contract staff to permanency happened as accidentally or unexpectedly through patronage, or a policy change rather than being the result of Liz doing good work.

The story Yvonne told of how she came to be working as a level C in a university of technology is one of happy coincidence, which she describes as a ‘natural progression’:

I taught multiculturalism and then there was a gender and education unit that we also developed that I was involved in. It was a natural progression from there to sociology of education subject … when the person who was here left. (Younger career group, level C)

According to her, she was working in a number of related areas when a colleague departed or retired and because she was ‘the right person in the right place at the right time’, she was able to assume her former colleague’s teaching responsibilities and position.

These stories underline the truth of the fairly common aphorism of employment placement agencies and careers counsellors cite that 85 per cent of jobs are not advertised. They also underline the difficulties faced by younger career sociologists today when advertised jobs for sociologists are scarce.

Julius was one of two academics interviewed for this study whose choice of a career in sociology was, as we saw earlier, influenced by family background. The effect that luck or chance played in his career was apparent when he described opportunities available on completion of his PhD. The job market in the 1970s was such that he ‘had various offers of jobs’, a situation that nowadays is almost unheard of in the humanities. He found himself a head of school five years out from completion of his PhD, which, he conceded, ‘was a bit frightening’.

Mark, in the older group says he took on post-graduate study to avoid conscription, and his eventual career in sociology was the result of being offered a teaching fellowship in a new sociology department by the head that was setting it up. The conjunction was happy but accidental: ‘I think he was trawling around looking for people and I was quite interested in political and sociology’, Simon was another baby boomer who was spoilt for choice in the, early 1970s. According to his account of his early career, he ‘sort of stumbled into’ sociology. After studying engineering and travelling, he thought he ‘would like to go back to university’ and toyed with the idea of ‘doing philosophy and maybe English literature and maybe environmental science’. In the end, sociology appealed more than these and more than music as a career and he ‘stuck with it’. His account suggests ability and hard work, but in a context where opportunities for positions were available:

Got a scholarship…went to [an Australian university] , another scholarship, Commonwealth postgraduate award, then transferred back to [another Australian university] and finished up, where I ended up teaching for some time (Older career group level E)

Steve was from the younger group and his account, while emphasising luck, is differently nuanced form the stories above. When outlining his early career in sociology, Steve admitted that the fact that
more casual teaching was available in sociology than the other subject in his double major influenced his decision to pursue it. And, as he did not receive an Australian Post-graduate Award, a casual tutorship was the most efficacious means to support him while studying for his doctorate. He also found the teaching enjoyable because it kept him ‘grounded’ during that time and understood his decision to do post-graduate sociology as ‘more of a process that happened over a period of time’. When in 2000 a 0.5 position became available at his current university, he saw that it ‘might be foot in the door and it certainly ended up being that’.

Albert notes that after he completed a master’s degree, he thought his engagement with sociology had ended, but:

> People were telling me, “You ought to go on and do a higher degree” … [And] I then thought … maybe I could get a job in the academic world … I made … three applications and got the third one, which was here … They required a PhD … [which] I was very happy to do. (Younger career group, level B)

This sounds as though he is an exception to the pattern of struggle for opportunity in the younger group, but it is worth noting that he had already established a career as a secondary school teacher, and also that his position (gained on the third attempt) is on the rural campus of Big U.

It is clear from these accounts of opportunities available to them at the beginning of their careers that date of entry to the field strongly affected career paths and career prospects of sociologists in Australian universities, 1968–2008. Not surprisingly, the accounts support an argument Mark Davis made more than a decade ago in *Gangland: cultural elites and the new generationalism* (1999), which is that the baby-boomer generation had privileged access to power and influence in academia, the arts, media, and other fields of intellectual work, and has not yet released its hold on these. Unlike Davis, the younger career sociologists interviewed did not express any animosity towards the more fortunate older group, perhaps because they are as we have noted relatively successful in spite of the structural obstacles they face.

Pragmatism and opportunities

Comments on strategic actions taken by participants as they built their careers is a thread woven into many accounts, and can co-exist with comments on luck or chance. Two sociologists, however, described how they responded to the opportunities that were available to them in ways that highlight pragmatism. Neither studied sociology in their undergraduate degree. Jonathon’s degrees were in history and Maria’s first degree was in psychology. Jonathon is now a professor at a university of technology and Maria is employed as a senior lecturer at BigU’s rural campus. Their narratives suggested pragmatic decision making and tactical moves that strengthened their claims to positions in sociology.

Because of long years in higher education, Jonathon’s narrative is more detailed. It included various strategies he used to ‘embed’ social science in his institution’s professional programmes and a description of how he then wrote a bachelor’s degree with honours in social science, where he seems to be talking about a strategy to ensure the continuity of his department:

> [The] essential challenge, which was common to many ex-CAEs, was to shift from being a supplier of service teaching to other people’s programmes … to become a provider of our own degrees. (Older generation, level E)

Maria’s story is, by comparison, more straightforward. She graduated overseas in psychology, then took a masters degree followed by a PhD in sociology and thus became an ‘ambivalent’ sociologist:

> I strongly identified as a psychologist but … [like] many psychologists who take up different theoretical perspectives
like post structuralism … we don’t fit in traditional psychological departments. So when I decided I wanted an academic career, I had to reconsider my disciplinary affiliation. I had an opportunity to do a PhD at a sociology department and I took … that … But it has always been an ambivalent relationship to sociology because it’s not where my undergraduate training has been. (Younger generation, level C)

When she arrived in Australia, she began a long haul working in education departments and in teacher education. She moved only recently to BigU and continues to wrestle and is content with her disciplinary identity: ‘I don’t know … whether sociology … drew me but I did feel that sociology … is flexible enough to … grasp people who sit on the margins in a disciplinary way’.

The interesting difference between these two accounts is in the sense they give of how easy or difficult it was to make those pragmatic decisions. Responses to obstacles, such as Mark’s decision to engage in post-graduate study instead of being conscripted into the army, or opportunities, such as Steve’s use of the ‘foot in the door’ of a half-time position occur, throughout many career narratives. Getting a foot in the door takes persistence and skill, and also can only be done if the door is ajar.

Sociological generations?

Two major themes occur in the career narratives of this small group of sociologists, one concerning understanding the world versus changing it, the other luck versus pragmatism. These are not linked to the time in which careers commenced but whether a sociologist had to seek out a disciplinary and institutional home, or could simply identify sociology as their preferred discipline depended on the time at which the careers began. The accounts of early progress within institutions reflect differences in opportunity. Movement from postgraduate study to permanent work, chances, and the pragmatic moves made by individuals all take place in the context of structural change in Australian higher education. The older group might be lucky in finding a new department with several positions; the younger sociologists might get a lucky break when a colleague leaves. There is the possibility that the changes taking place within sociology have helped or hindered individual sociologist’s careers. If David’s career had begun in the 1990s, would he find it easier or harder to move from teaching and research to research-only career today?

The sketched changing structural and intellectual environment and the impact it seems to have had on academic careers suggests the possibility of ‘generations’ of sociologists. Karl Mannheim argued that generations, like classes, can limit their members to a ‘specific range of experience’ such that members of one generation can be distinguished from another by the time of their birth, ‘being exposed to the same phase of the collective process (1997: 36, 41). As Mannheim observed, identifying the distinctive characteristics of generations is difficult. One problem lies in the overlapping nature of human existence: while some of us are being born, others are dying. Another problem exists because generational identity is mostly determined after the event and ‘kept alive through the generation which witnessed’ it (Attias-Donfut and Arber 2000). A further complication when we speak of academic generations is that, as we have already noted, some university staff will be chronologically senior, but relatively ‘young’ university workers. Edmunds and Turner (2002) deal with the definitional problem by invoking Bourdieu’s notion of habitus and focussing on key cultural experiences, especially traumatic ones, as the element that shapes generations.

Bourdieu’s use of the term ‘academic generations’ as part of his explanation of the May 1968 conflict in French universities refers to ‘agents who, even when they are the same age have been produced by two different modes of academic “generation”’(Bordieu 1988: 1530). He stresses the clashing habitus of the young academic generation who were strongly aware of ‘the contradiction between the promises written into their appointment and the future which was really ensured by the unchanged career procedures’ (ibid). Does our data suggest the existence of two ‘generations’ of sociologists?

We cannot see our older and younger sociologists as self-identified generational groups in
competition for scarce resources which might serve as a rough definition of the approach of Edmunds and Turner, and is certainly the kind of picture painted by Davis. Neither can we rule out other explanations for the differences we note, such as lifecycle stage differences or the bias towards success amongst our older interviewees. We do however, find the idea of ‘academic generation’ implying some kind of shared habitus based on changing institutional forms and practices a provocative concept.

It raises potential questions for further research, most notably the issues of identity. Our data offer nothing direct on the question of whether or not the differences we have discussed in the process of being attracted to sociology, then of beginning a career as an academic sociologist result in self-perception for instance as a ‘baby boomer sociologist’ or a ‘DEST generation sociologist’ but they suggest that the question is worth asking, which in turn raises questions about the future orientations of Australian sociology. Both the groups and generations we discussed contain people whose interest in sociology has been sparked by desire to change the world as well as to understand it. Will this continue in the future if the opportunities available for young sociologists to find full time secure work diminish further? What will be the impact of the current university climate on the ways in which sociologists in the future do their sociology? If the professional identities of sociologists changed radically, what are the implications of this for the still-debated questions around ‘public sociology’? Will we see the kind of intergenerational warfare Bourdieu suggested in the highly specific situation of French universities circa 1968 and Davis has suggested characterises Australian intellectual life?

Finally it raises practical questions. Returning to our data, it is worth noting that Glenda in the younger group, the only casually-employed sociologist who agreed to be interviewed, was apparently happy enough with her situation. Her brief narrative about becoming a sociology teacher fits the ‘luck or chance’ category. Since, like most sessional staff, she did not have an office to herself the interview took place in a room also inhabited by the department printer. She said cheerfully:

I have an educational background, so I’ve taught for years. And I’m, yes, studying sociology at the moment. So, kind of just fitted together… I taught in TAFE. So, I really like teaching… that age group. And now that I’m sort of studying again, it’s fabulous. I think I missed the teaching side of things. Enormously. So, I really, really like the idea of sessional teaching. That’s someone’s printing. (Younger career group, level A).

Glenda clearly did not mind not having an office or a permanent job while she was a postgraduate student. We do not know her prospects or feelings now. We agree with Abbas and Mclean (2001) that casualised work teaching sociology is something in which academic sociologists should take a ‘moral and practical interest’. TASA might need to consider this as an issue as it grapples with other aspects of doing sociological work in the early C21st.

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TASA was originally the Sociological Association of Australia and New Zealand SAANZ. For conciseness we ignore the name change.