

**‘Things are a lot more gray now, as
opposed to black vs. white’:
student uncertainty on the edge of a
threshold in Introductory Sociology.**

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Presentation outline:

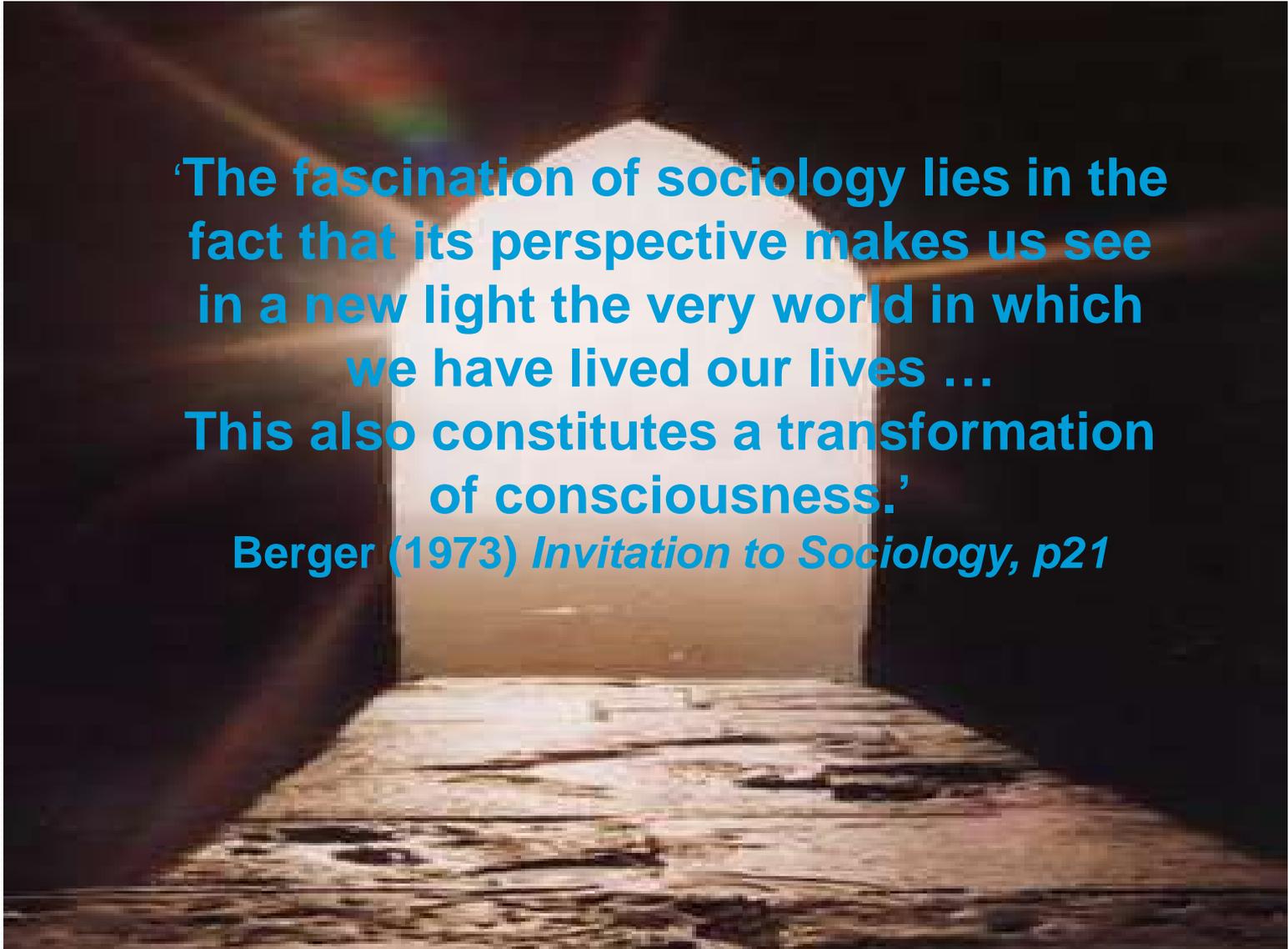
- Sociology as transformative
 - identifying student encounters with the *sociological imagination* as a threshold in this transformation process
- Some context to this research – why it matters to me
- Research design
- Selected findings
- Questions and discussion

Sociology as transformative:

'The fascination of sociology lies in the fact that its perspective makes us see in a new light the very world in which we have lived our lives ...

This also constitutes a transformation of consciousness.'

Berger (1973) *Invitation to Sociology*, p21



The genesis of this research:

- Ten years teaching Introductory Sociology course at a community college (small classes of 35 max.)
 - 13-14 week course - 3 or 4 hours in class per week
- Students may take Intro course at any time
 - in first semester or after several years at the College
 - some students take it as pre-requisite for other courses, others as an elective
 - most students take no further courses in Sociology
- My own teaching experience confirms sociology's power to open student eyes

For example: from course evaluations

- **What for you has been the most worthwhile/important thing you have learned in this course?**

“Agency and structure. As much as we have free will to do something, the society has already structured how things ought to be done. (This had never occurred to me before I took this class.)”

“The sociological imagination has really opened my eyes and helped me to see why individuals behave certain ways/end up in certain situations.”

“Sociological imagination. Just really broadened my perspective. Things are a lot more gray now, as opposed to black and white.”

My motivation to do this research

- Comments such as these show that taking sociology can have a major impact on students
- Also some research evidence – for example:
“When I took Social Processes I learned a lot.. after [that] your entire outlook on life and the news and just everyday occurrences is completely different. You can look at it from a much more critical perspective.... I think it helped me to be not only less judgmental but more educated.”
(Douglas College SoTL Cohort Project - Informant 20:19-20)
- This supports sociologists’ beliefs about value of taking sociology
 - but how typical is this experience? How many will ‘get it’?

What do students need to do to 'get it'?

- Persell et al (2007) identified common goals of Sociology professors teaching introductory courses
 - #1: helping students learn to think like a sociologist by using their “*sociological imagination*” (Mills, 1959)
 - = “the ability to see the relationship between individual experiences and the larger society” (Murray et al, 2012)
- The *sociological imagination* is encountered at the very start of the course (and in Ch. 1 of any textbook)
 - identifiable as a threshold concept that students must grasp to do well in this course

Why is this worth studying?

- Developing a *sociological imagination* has implications going beyond the classroom
 - grasping this enables students to develop a critical awareness of how society shapes people's lives
 - questioning what was previously taken for granted
 - i.e. this learning is not confined to the classroom but relevant to their own everyday experience –*transformative*
 - but this may seem threatening and provoke a *defensive reaction* (as noted by many sociologists, e.g. Haddad and Lieberman, 2002)
 - as such it can clearly be *troublesome*

Questions guiding my research:

- Does the *sociological imagination* meet the criteria for a threshold concept?
 - *Transformative and irreversible?*
 - *Involving troublesome knowledge?*
- What are the pedagogical implications of this?
 - How might thinking about this as a *threshold concept* affect my approach to teaching it?
 - What can I do to help students move through the *liminal space* of uncertainty and doubt?
 - How realistic is it to expect students to grasp this concept in one 14 week semester?

Data collection in 12 first year classes:

SEMESTER	Participating classes	Student participants	Participation rate
Summer 2012	1	36	90%
Winter 2013	2	65	100%
Summer 2013	2	63	95%
Winter 2014	2	64	89%
Summer 2014	2	60	86%
Winter 2015	2	47	89%
Summer 2015	1	30	94%
TOTALS :	12	365	92%

Research Design:

- Student background data collected in Wk 1 survey
 - programme, length of time at College, reasons for taking this course, expectations
- In-class data collection throughout semester:
 - *concept map* at start and end of course
 - weekly '*learning dossier*' responses (e.g. CATS)
 - student answers to specific *test questions* tapping the SI
- Follow-up survey 12 months after end of course:
 - perceived impact of course content, concept recall and ability to apply the 'sociological imagination'

Sample data collection schedule: W2015

Week 1	Survey: student profile, motivation for taking course
Weeks 2*,8, 10*	LD: Questions based on textbook reading for that week
Week 3	LD: 'Velcro' questions on course content Weeks 1-3
Week 4	Test 1 included question on the Sociological Imagination
Weeks 5, 9, 11*, 12*,13	LD: Questions based on class discussion of that week's topic
Week 7*	LD: Questions on applying sociology to everyday life
Weeks 1, 14	LD: Individual and Society mind-map + explanatory notes
Week 14	Final LD: 'Velcro' questions for course as a whole
Final exam	Final exam included questions on the Sociological Imagination and the 'American Dream'

* = questions which specifically stated "Hint: Use your *sociological imagination*"

Data Analysis: selected findings

- Main data collection completed Summer 2015
 - first wave follow-up data collection Fall 2015
 - second wave to be completed Fall 2016
- Focus today on combining findings from both phases of data collection
 - brief review of findings from main data-set
 - overview of main findings to date from follow-up survey
 - linking both sets of data: individual learning trajectories

Analysis of main study data: insights into processes within the liminal space

- **Test performance on questions on the SI:**
 - discontinuities between scores on Test 1 and Test 3 (some improve, others do worse)
 - differences between ability to *explain* and to *apply* the concept (e.g. with regard to the 'American Dream')

Learning dossier entries:

- reveal student misconceptions, partial grasp of SI
- also reveal student uncertainties regarding their own understanding

Uncertainty in the liminal space: S15-30

- **Q1:** From a sociological perspective, what is the problem with the ideology of the American Dream?

“The problem with the American Dream is ..” [incomplete]

- **Q3:** What for you are the most important things you have learned in this class about social class and social inequality?

*“As humans we are born into a class and **it’s up to us to positively change this (social mobility) through effort and hard work ...** I wonder exactly how much we can change our social situation and place in life compared to how much our environment (class) could change us ...”*

- i.e. Stacey seems to be ‘stuck’ at this point – on the edge?

Week 14 Final Velcro questions: S15-30

- Q1: What is sticking with you? i.e. what are the things you think you will remember even after the course is over?

“Something I see myself remembering is how much influence society has on the individual...”

- Q3: What have you found most interesting about the course?

“This course has opened my somewhat closed mind to new ideas and ways of looking at things. I have decided to take more sociology classes in the Fall...”

- i.e. she now recognizes her own shift in thinking

The follow-up survey:

- Methodology – online survey, Oct.–Nov. 2015
- Response rate: high - approx. 50%
- 50/75 survey respondents provided their names (enabling links to be made to data from main study)
- Focus on named subsample:
 - 70% female, 30% male
 - median age at time of taking course = 20 years
 - 60% had taken course 2 or more years before (2012, 2013)
 - 82% had taken no further sociology courses since then

Main questions – Q4, Q5 and Q6

- Q4 Thinking back to your experience of taking Sociology 1125, please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each of the statements below. (*set of 11 Likert scale items, scored 1-5*)
- Q5 In what ways (if at all) has taking this course made you think differently about how people act and the choices they make in their everyday lives?
- Q6 What do you think is the most valuable thing you gained from taking this course?

Q4: What did they think they learned?

- Taking this course made me more interested in thinking about how we can tackle the difficult social issues that confront our society.

Mean score: 4.12 40% strongly agree 38% agree

- Taking this course helped me to see how my life is impacted by what is going on around the world.

Mean score: 4.08 32% strongly agree 52% agree

- Taking this course enabled me to apply what I was learning to issues and problems I face in my daily life.

Mean score: 3.78 20% strongly agree 48% agree

- Taking this course has changed my views about the causes of social inequality.

Mean score: 3.66 24% strongly agree 58% agree

Q4: What did they perceive as general benefits of taking this course?

- Taking this course increased my ability to think critically and analytically.
Mean score: 3.94 18% strongly agree 62% agree
- Taking this course made an important contribution to my education as a whole.
Mean score: 3.76 24% strongly agree 40% agree
- *Taking this course didn't teach me anything I didn't already know from my own experience.
Mean score: 1.88 34% strongly disagree 52% disagree

Q4: Testing the SI as a threshold concept

- *Taking this course was challenging for me.
Mean score: 2.82 12% strongly disagree 28% disagree
- *Taking this course made me feel uncomfortable at times when it caused me to question some of my basic beliefs.
Mean score: 2.62 18% strongly disagree 36% disagree
- Taking this course made me realise that one semester is too short to really 'get' what sociology is all about.
Mean score: 3.96 30% strongly agree 44% agree
- I still remember the concept of the sociological imagination well enough to explain it to somebody.
Mean score: 2.72 10% strongly disagree 32% disagree

Q5: Thinking differently...?

- Awareness of influence of society on the individual

“This course made me realize that many of the actions we take and choices we make are impacted by the social constraints of society and that as individuals we in turn shape society.” (S13-02)

“[The course showed me] that the society in which one lives greatly impacts the way in which an individual acts and the choices he/she makes in their (sic) everyday lives.” (S13-16)

“I now understand that some of the choices people make are due to their macro environment and not their personal beliefs.” (S14-10)

Q6: Most valuable thing gained..?

- Critical thinking, new perspective on everyday life
- Becoming more open-minded, less judgmental

“It opened my eyes up to what "normal" is assumed to be in our Westernized society and made me question the assumptions I have and values I have.” (S13-33)

“I learned about how I myself am contributing to inequality in ways I had never thought of before. It showed me how little people actually acknowledge the social issues around us in our society and that we need to work hard to improve them.” (W14-40)

Tracing the learning trajectory: 'Sandra'

- Study participant S14-01
- Female, aged 20 at time of taking course
- In her 4th semester at the College
- Reasons for taking course:
 - recommended elective course for her program (Criminology)
 - personal interest
 - good fit with timetable
- No further sociology courses since then
- This student 'got it' from early on....

S14-01 – learning dossier entries

- **Week 3:** *“The sociological imagination: I feel confident that I understand this and could explain it to someone else.”*
- **Week 6:** *“The sociological perspective and sociological imagination have for sure given me a new way to look at the world. I have never been judgmental of the way people look, dress etc. but both of these ideas have allowed me to take it a step further. Rather than not be concerned about certain things I can instead try to understand them and their context/situation.”*
- **Week 13:** *“Poverty is caused/perpetuated by many factors, not just simply because an individual was/is lazy.”*

S14-01 – follow-up survey responses

- **Q4:** *“This course did make me question things I had previously believed, however I didn't feel uncomfortable.”*
- **Q4:** *“I have always been somewhat interested in social issues ... but since taking this course I have had many more discussions with my family and friends on the subject.”*
- **Q4:** *“Some of the concepts were difficult to wrap my head around and understand them enough to be able to reiterate them.”*
- **Q5:** *“This course taught me that the situations individuals are in are majority of the time the product of the society and their privileges rather than their own doing.”*
- **Q6:** *“This course taught me to be more objective and more of a critical thinker in every aspect of life.”*

Tracing the learning trajectory: 'Maya'

- Study participant S14-46
- Female, aged 24 at time of taking course
- In her 4th semester at the College
- Reasons for taking course:
 - recommended elective course for her program (Child and Youth Care)
- No further sociology courses since then
- This student 'got it' from about mid-semester onwards

S14-46 – learning dossier entries

- **Week 6:** *“As a child and youth worker I apply all these issues in many aspects of my life.... I work with a variety of children so I use my sociological imagination to better understand my clients and their behaviors.”*
- **Week 8:** *“I’m really engaged to (sic) the class material because I can apply it and see it in my everyday life. I’ve started to think like a sociologist outside of class and it is quite interesting.”*
- **Week 11:** *“I feel confident in thinking like a sociologist and engaging in conversation outside the classroom.”*

S14-46 – follow-up survey responses

- Q5 In what ways (if at all) has taking this course made you think differently about how people act and the choices they make in their everyday lives?

Q5: (I) relate it to every day and the interactions I have with people on a daily basis.

- Q6 What do you think is the most valuable thing you gained from taking this course?

Q6: Thinking analytically about what is happening around me, in my community and globally.

What can we learn from this research ?

- Some students seem to 'get it' almost immediately
 - this is simply giving them a vocabulary to name it
- Others take much longer to grasp the SI
- Importance of opportunity to apply the concept and see its relevance in everyday life – consolidates it?
- No obvious correlation between end of semester performance on test questions about the SI and long-term retention of the concept
- Follow-up survey findings suggest that many more students appear to have grasped the essence of the SI than can recall the term itself (*does this matter?*)

Returning to my original questions...

- Does the *sociological imagination* meet the criteria for a threshold concept?
 - *Is it transformative and irreversible?*
 - ❖ Evidence to date from main study and follow-up survey suggests that for some it is.
 - Does it involve dealing with *troublesome knowledge*?
 - ❖ Evidence indicates that some students struggle with this more than others.

What are the pedagogical implications of this research?

- How does thinking about this as a *threshold concept* affect my approach to teaching it?
 - ❖ Increased time and attention spent on it.
- What can I do to help students move through the *liminal space* of uncertainty and doubt?
 - ❖ Provide plenty of opportunities to reinforce it.
- How realistic is it to expect students to grasp this concept in one 14 week semester?
 - ❖ Maybe more realistic than I realized...?!



**Audience questions - and
further discussion?**

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