

**Venturing into the unknown:
What evidence is there – one year later –
of the impact of a threshold concept on
students in a first year elective course?**

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Dr. Alison Thomas
Douglas College

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Presentation outline:

- Where this research starts from and why it matters
- Sociology as *transformative*
- Connecting to the SoTL literature
- Research design
- Selected findings
- Questions and discussion

Context – where this research starts from:

- 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
 - 60-70% of students take no further courses in Sociology
- So what lasting impact might this one elective course have on them?

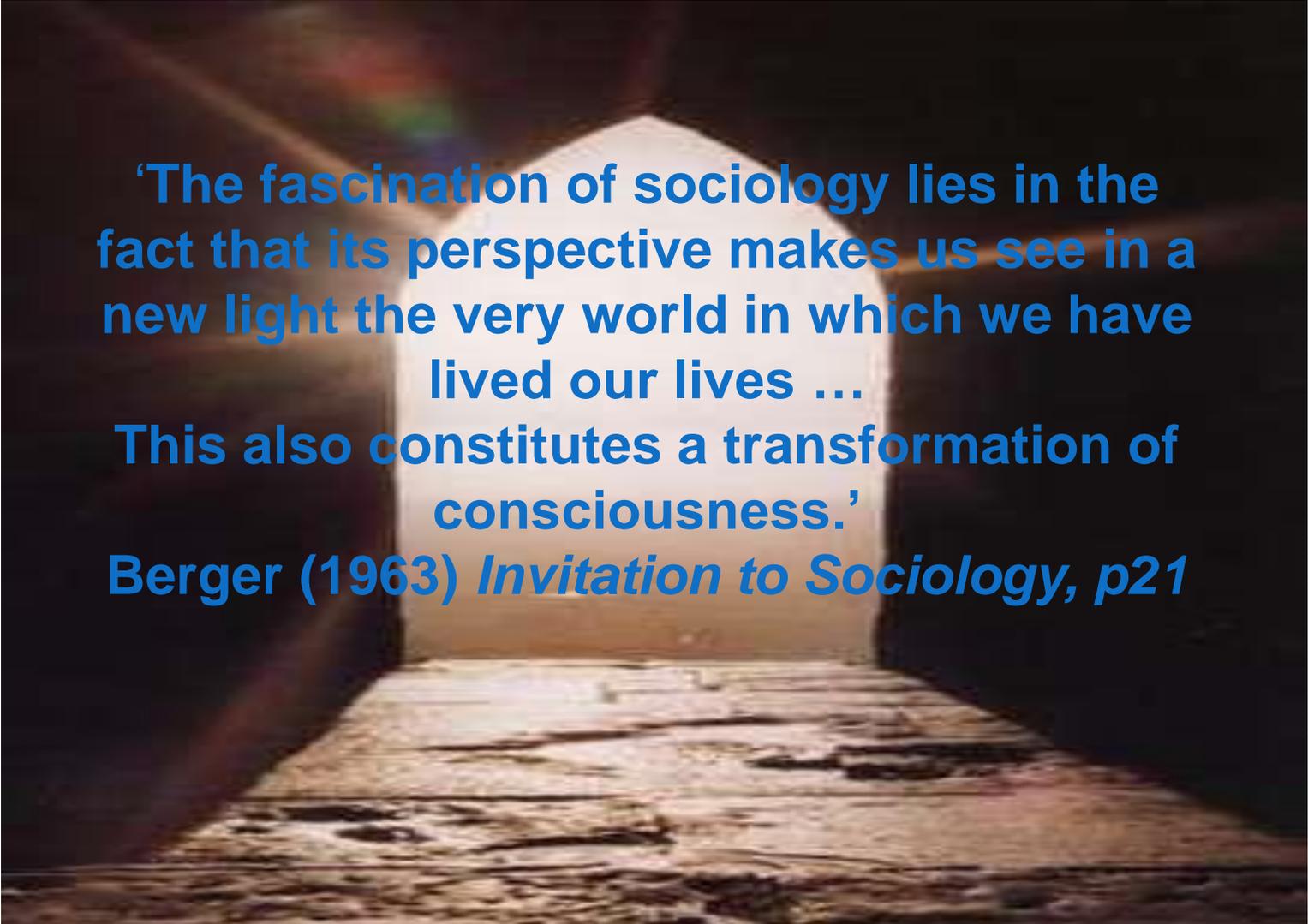
My motivation to do this research

- Course evaluations suggesting student ‘epiphanies’
- 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 the value of taking sociology (e.g. Howard and Zoeller, 2007)
- BUT - how many students actually benefit in this way?

Grasping the essence of sociology: the *sociological imagination*

- Persell et al (2007) identified main 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)
 - grasping this fosters a critical awareness of how society shapes people’s lives – including one’s own
 - and typically requires rethinking/rejecting taken-for-granted understandings of how society works

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 (1963) *Invitation to Sociology*, p21

SoTL theoretical framework

- Transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000)
- Decoding the disciplines – what ‘bottlenecks’ do students encounter in learning to ‘think like a ..’
(Pace and Middendorf, 2004)
- Threshold concepts (Meyer and Land, 2003)

also

- concepts of ‘deep learning’ (Marton and Saljo, 1976)
- ‘learning that lasts’ (Mentkowski, 2002)

Developing a set of research questions...

- Based on all of this I decided to embark on my own research with a series of questions:
 - How do students in Introductory Sociology courses grasp - and then apply - the ‘sociological imagination’?
 - Can this be identified as a ‘threshold concept’ in Sociology? - i.e. transformative and irreversible over time? (also ‘troublesome’)
 - Does this mean that students taking a single Sociology course can experience this as ‘transformative learning’? (‘deep’ learning/’learning that lasts’)

Research Design: two phase study

- In-class data collection throughout the semester:
 - *student background data* collected in Wk 1 survey (program, length of time at College, reasons for taking this course, expectations)
 - *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 online survey 12 months after end of course:
 - perceived impact of course content, concept recall and ability to apply the 'sociological imagination'

Main phase: data collection schedule:

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| 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*"

Follow-up survey - main questions:

- 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?

| SEMESTER | Participating classes | Student participants (main phase) | Student participants (follow-up) |
|-----------------------|------------------------------|--|---|
| Summer 2012 | 1 | 36 | 9 |
| Winter 2013 | 2 | 65 | 21 |
| Summer 2013 | 2 | 63 | 12 |
| Winter 2014 | 2 | 64 | 13 |
| Summer 2014 | 2 | 60 | 15 |
| Winter 2015 | 2 | 47 | 18 |
| Summer 2015 | 1 | 30 | 13 |
| <i>Don't remember</i> | | | 5 |
| TOTALS : | 12 | 365 | 106 |

Data Analysis and Findings:

- Main data collection completed Summer 2015
 - first wave follow-up data collection Fall 2015
 - second wave follow-up data collection Fall 2016
- Focus today on:
 - brief summary of findings from main phase data
 - overview of main findings from follow-up survey
 - *case-studies linking both data sets – individual learning trajectories*

Overview of main study findings:

- ***Quantitative data***

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

- ***Qualitative data***

Learning dossier entries:

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

Follow-up survey:

- Methodology: online survey, Oct.–Nov. 2015, 2016
- Response rate: high - 52%
- 72/106 survey respondents provided their names
(enabling links to be made to data from main study)
- *Respondent demographics:*
 - 72.7% female, 27.3% male
 - average age at time of taking course = 21.9 years
 - 76.4% had taken no further sociology courses
 - 14.2% had taken 1 further sociology course
 - 9.4% had taken 2 or more further sociology courses

What did they think they learned? (Q4)

| | <i>Mean score</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>% distribution</i> |
|--|-------------------|-------------|-------------------------------------|
| Taking this course made me more interested in thinking about how we can tackle the difficult social issues that confront our society. | 4.04 | .836 | 30.7% strongly agree 48.5% agree |
| Taking this course helped me to see how my life is impacted by what is going on around the world. | 4.11 | .786 | 31.7% strongly agree 52.5% agree |
| Taking this course has changed my views about the causes of social inequality. | 3.58 | .941 | 16.8% strongly agree 38.6% agree |

What did they perceive as the general benefits of taking this course? (Q4)

| | <i>Mean score</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>% distribution</i> |
|---|-------------------|-----------|-------------------------------------|
| Taking this course increased my ability to think critically and analytically. | 4.04 | .677 | 22.8% strongly agree 60.4% agree |
| Taking this course made an important contribution to my education as a whole. | 3.78 | .901 | 20.8% strongly agree 46.5% agree |
| Taking this course enabled me to apply what I was learning to issues and problems I face in my daily life. | 3.69 | .869 | 15.8% strongly agree 47.5% agree |

What has been the lasting impact of this course on them? (Q4)

| | <i>Mean score</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>% distribution</i> |
|---|-------------------|-----------|---|
| Taking this course didn't teach me anything I didn't already know from my own experience. | 1.88 | .886 | 35.6% strongly disagree 49.5% disagree |
| I still remember the concept of the sociological imagination well enough to explain it to somebody. | 2.97 | 1.053 | 33.6% disagree 34.7% neither agree/disagree 31.7% agree |
| Taking this course made me realise that one semester is too short to really 'get' what sociology is all about. | 3.98 | .883 | 29.7% strongly agree 45.5% agree |

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)

Returning to my original questions...

- How do students in Introductory Sociology courses learn to apply the 'sociological imagination'?
 - ❖ With varying degrees of difficulty
- To what extent can this be seen as a 'threshold concept' in Sociology? - i.e. *transformative* and *irreversible*, but also *troublesome*?
 - ❖ My data support the idea that it is.
- Does this mean that students taking a single Sociology course can experience this as 'transformative learning' and 'learning that lasts'?
 - ❖ For those students ready to grasp it, certainly.

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 – to consolidate it?
- No obvious correspondence between end of semester performance on test questions about the SI (or final grade) 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?*)

Pedagogical implications and outcomes

- How has 'venturing into the unknown' made a difference to my teaching?
- ❖ Change of focus – main goal now is to help students grasp the *sociological imagination* and 'get' sociology:
 - Increasing time and attention spent on this – reinforce concept constantly throughout course.
- ❖ Effects of doing this research on my approach to teaching this course:
 - Renewed my motivation, interest and energy.



**Audience questions - and
further discussion?**

Contact information:

- Dr. Alison Thomas

Department of Anthropology and Sociology

Douglas College

New Westminster, B.C.

V3L 5B2

Phone: (604) 527 5787

Email: thomasa@douglascollege.ca

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