

Sociology and the Canadian Labour Market – Neil Guppy

CW Mills' sociological imagination – linking private troubles and public issues – offers new BA graduates an important perspective for understanding labour markets. Finding employment is a largely private matter but it is shaped profoundly by public issues. These issues, the context in which people seek jobs, relate to the health of the economy, the likelihood of older workers retiring, and the competition for work in specific sectors. Recent graduates, in all fields of study, have entered a tough labour market. The financial crisis of 2007-08 has had a lasting sting. Only gradually are opportunities returning. In what follows we stress the public issues Mills would highlight to reveal something about the context into which graduates will venture when looking for paid employment in the next few years.

Labour Market Composition and Size

Several key trends augur well for the future labour market success of sociology BA graduates. First, the labour market is expanding. In 2010 there were about 18.5 million Canadians working for pay, a number likely to rise to between 20.5 and 22.5 million by 2031 (Martel *et al.*, 2011). Second, the service sector, where the vast majority of sociology graduates are employed, is expanding the fastest. Although the Canadian economy remains significantly tied to resources, Table 1 shows that the vast majority of jobs and a huge slice of our economic productivity occur in the service sector – in areas such as communications, education, finance, health, human resources, management and administration, media, and transportation. Over 87% of labour market jobs are in the service sector. Certainly some of those service industry positions are McJobs, low paying with little security, but a significant portion of them are good jobs with stable career paths. Third, older workers have been delaying retirement in recent years, in part because of better health but also because of the financial crisis and its impact on pensions.

Table 1 Percentage Distribution of Canadian Economic Activity by Sector (2010's)

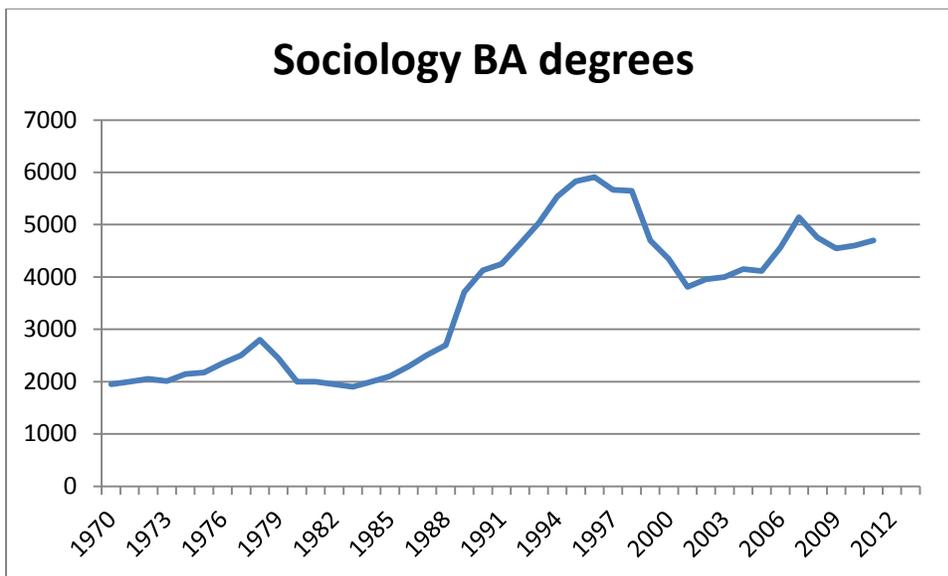
Economic Sector	% of Goods/Services Produced (\$ Value)	% of Labour Force Jobs
Agricultural	2	1
Industrial	29	23
Service	69	87

Source: Statistics Canada, CANSIM, Table 282-0008

There is good news in all of this. In a nutshell the employment market for sociology BAs will be expanding over the next few years because the demand for workers will rise as older workers retire and as the labour force in services continues to grow.

Sociology Degrees

The number of students pursuing degrees in sociology continues to be strong. Figure 1 below charts the number of graduates with BAs in sociology from 1970 to 2012. There is clearly an upward slope in degrees awarded to sociology graduates, although this rising slope is mainly a function of more graduates from Canadian universities, not from an increasing proportion of students pursuing honours or majors in sociology. Nevertheless these are robust numbers given that many new academic programs have been introduced in the last few decades that directly compete for students who in earlier years often chose sociology (e.g., programs in criminology, development, public policy, women's studies).



Source: Statistics Canada, BA degrees by field of study (Education in Canada plus special tabs; the series breaks in the late 1990s and the data before and after may not be strictly comparable but the upward sloping trend is robust)

It is also worth briefly noting here a point that Duina and Guppy develop below; there is a loose fit (or loose coupling in sociological parlance) between degrees and jobs. We mean this in two important ways. First, there are few positions in which a job title explicitly says "sociologist." This does occur at Statistics Canada, in post-secondary education, but not in many other places. Second, many managers, lawyers, and planners, among others, have first degrees in sociology but professional degrees (e.g., an LLB or a JD) in their subsequent fields. Their sociology backgrounds are thus often invisible, hidden behind their newer professional identities. The context of a labour market that is loosely coupled has at least two other strong implications. First, set your expectations accordingly. You will not find a wealth of job advertisements or learn through word of mouth about many employers offering positions described as "sociologist wanted." Second, there are employers with positions that will value the skills you have, but you have to work to find them. The professional networks of lawyers or planners are not

as tight for sociologists with a BA. Recognizing opportunities or identifying positions where you can thrive will require effort. This loose coupling between credential and career is true of many other fields of study, including anthropology, english, geography, history, and political science to name a few.

Occupations Sociologists often Occupy

So, you might rightly ask, what do you do with a sociology BA? The job titles listed in Table 2 give you concrete examples of where sociologists are often employed. There are a couple of important things to note about this list. First, it is only a partial list. Second, many organizations use different titles for the same basic job. Third, many of these jobs can be filled by graduates from other social science disciplines (another loose coupling effect). We should end on a comparative note. The expansion of the service sector is happening not only in Canada but also in many other countries in the world. In the case of developed economies, to the extent that there is growth, it is primarily happening in services. When it comes to developing or emerging economies, service jobs represent the main areas of growth. This, too, is good news for sociology graduates since it expands international opportunities in a global world.

Table 2: Occupational Destinations for Sociology BAs in Broad Labour Market Sectors		
Business	Community Affairs	Government / Quasi-Govt.
Actuary / insurance	addictions counselling	affirmative action work
administration	adoption counselling	community affairs
advertising	case management work	development aide
computer analyst	child development	foreign service work
consumer relations / research	community organizer	human rights officer
data entry manager	environmental organizer	information officer
human resources specialist	family planning	legislative assistant
insurance agent	fundraising	not-for-profit organizations
journalism	gerontologist	personnel coordinator
labour relations officer	group home programmer	policy research
market analyst / consultant	health outreach	social movement organizations
marketing	Health planning / research	urban / regional planner
Media (print, radio, TV, Web)	homeless / housing worker	
merchandiser/purchaser	hospital administration	Social Research
personnel officer	housing coordinator	
production manager	marriage / family counselling	census officer/analyst
project manager	occupational / career counsellor	consumer researcher
public relations	public health worker	data analyst
publishing (editorialist)	rehabilitation work	demographer
quality control manager	residential planning	market researcher
real estate agent	social services organizations	social research specialist
sales manager	social assistance advocate	survey researcher
sales representative	welfare counselling	systems analyst
technical writing	youth outreach	
Teaching / Education		
admissions counsellor	continuing studies	corporate education/training
alumni relations	co-op education / placements	community relations
post-secondary recruitment	public health educator	records and registration
school counselling	student development	teacher

Conclusion

Understanding the public nature of the forces impacting labour force dynamics helps in appreciating your journey through the job market. That journey is shaped both by your own efforts and personal biography, but also by larger contextual factors bearing on the ebb and flow of jobs.

Reference List

Martel, Laurent et al., ““Projected Trends to 2031 for the Canadian Labour Force” *Canadian Economic Observer* August 2011, Statistics Canada 11-010-X.