

Sociology and Employment Skills

If physicists study energy and matter, then sociologists study individuals and society. What makes sociology unique among academic disciplines is its focus, from a myriad of angles, on the linkages between our individual experiences and the context of the wider society in which we live. Investigating the social ties between individual and society, agency and structure, or private and public is at the heart of sociology. Adopting this way of seeing – what C. Wright Mills called “the sociological imagination” – helps us understand how the world in which we live powerfully shapes what we do and how we do it.

Sociology also highlights social difference – the pervasiveness of power and inequality in everyday life. Just like physics, sociology has a revelatory mission, an ability to highlight things that are not immediately visible to the untrained eye. At its core, this revelation is most often about the hidden injuries, or advantages, of social power. This is immediately relevant to how our social location, as in our social class, ethnicity, gender, or sexuality, as examples, influences our rights and opportunities, our privilege and oppression, as well as our thoughts and actions.

Sociology thus offers a special way of seeing, and thinking, that differs from other disciplines. Any linkage of this perspective to immediate employment opportunities may not be immediately obvious, yet training in sociology provides a set of specialized skills that many employers value:

- i) the ability to think, reason, and understand across time, space, and circumstance
- ii) an understanding of the constructed nature of social life, including its categories, processes, and changes
- iii) an alertness as to how power operates across different levels of society, from the macro to the micro and back and forth
- iv) the ingenuity to look beyond the manifest/visible/obvious so as to also comprehend the latent/invisible/non-obvious
- v) a facility to see issues from a variety of vantage points, from positions of both privilege and paucity, and especially from standpoints different than our own
- vi) an appreciation of how context matters in shaping both our actions and our emotions
- vi) an awareness that meaning matters, and that, unlike physics, the social world is not subject to deterministic laws but is nevertheless soaked through with patterned, recurring regularity

Like other disciplines in the social sciences, sociologists also are skilled at communications (oral, written, and increasingly, digital), at research methods (both qualitative and quantitative), and at policy analysis. Indeed sociology is like most of the humanities and social sciences in focusing mainly on analytic thinking skills, or soft skills. The following are among the generic skills that employers want and that are nurtured in the humanities and social sciences – communication, creativity, ethics, perseverance, reasoning, reliability, sociability, teamwork, and did we say communication! These valuable skills, and many others, are the hallmark of a good liberal arts education. We would be remiss not to stress, even though this pamphlet focuses upon sociology and the labour market, that these generic skills and the specialized sociological expertise we have highlighted are also beneficial beyond the employment sphere in nurturing good citizens.

What makes sociology distinctive is the sociological imagination, an ability to comprehend from multiple vantage points the complicated interconnectedness of public issues and private lives. Sociologists may not know how to construct a bridge, but they know how bridging and bonding capital works to make effective networks. And they know that networks are critically important to success, for individuals, for organizations, and for nations. Sociologists know how to think socially and how to use that thinking creatively and constructively. Without meaning to be too flippant, sociology helps you in thinking beyond the box, outside the circle, and behind the edges.