My first encounters with sociology were thoroughly tied up with what felt like a broader setting free of my identity. The chance to study the subject for the first time motivated what was to become a somewhat life-shaping decision to leave my rural town comprehensive at 16 and study A-Levels at Plymouth College of Further Education. I didn’t really know what sociology was at the time but was taken by the idea of debating questions relating to education, religion, families, criminal behaviour and the like. It appealed to my developing interest in Politics (with a capital P) and contrasted with the more traditional offerings at school. It felt like something I could identify with as well as study. Conveniently, as it turned out, college also enabled a much-needed break from school itself, and the peers with whom I had negotiated– not particularly successfully – my early teens.

I’m not sure whether A-Level Sociology was quite what I expected – there was some politics in there, but the finer-grained analysis of different elements of the social world introduced all manner of questions that hadn’t occurred to me before. Centred, inevitably, on an early edition of Haralambos (a much maligned text that I actually rather admire), classes offered a mix of open debate and structure – and although the syllabus was limited, there was ample encouragement to think critically and question everything, as it seemed (Haralambos and Holborn, 1991). Looking back, this fitted perfectly with a developing (and fairly pretentious) sense of myself as ‘alternative’, both culturally and politically. Yet amongst this embrace of opposition and difference, the incessant practicing of exam answers in class was helping me to write and argue in an organised and coherent way, a rather less romantic but equally essential ingredient for any sociology career.

If my first encounters with sociology were orthodox, then disciplinary parameters became altogether more complex during my undergraduate degree in Media, Culture and Society at the wonderful Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham. Staff at the Centre had generated a uniquely fertile and supportive atmosphere of learning, their passion and commitment for their work and its broader significance transferring itself to students with an intensity I’m not sure I’ve seen before or since. Still, it was not until half way through my second year that I began to transform from an enthusiastic but inconsistent undergraduate to a would-be scholar. I specifically remember getting my first genuinely high mark - for an essay on Marx and alienation – as something of a watershed moment. I also did well in a subsequent project on Foucault’s History of Sexuality (1978), a book whose deconstruction of normally unquestioned categories probably inspired me more than any other text at this early stage. The achievement of high marks and positive feedback provided me with the confidence and drive to read more extensively and - in spite of the chasms in my knowledge - to feel l
could contribute and argue rather than regurgitate. Becoming a ‘real’ academic still seemed a distant prospect but it felt like something had clicked.

Yet the place of sociology in all this was unclear, and, even more so, the notion of actually being a sociologist. At Birmingham the emphasis was on the interdisciplinarity of cultural studies, the degree combining sociological features with various aspects of the social sciences, arts and humanities. Was I on the road to becoming a sociologist, then, or something different? The ambiguity persisted during my PhD studies. Enabled by the good fortune of being offered a teaching-based studentship in another Birmingham department, my project comprised an ethnographic study of goth subculture. For a time, I regarded myself as a budding cultural studies scholar, until one day at a popular music studies conference, I found myself publicly labelled a sociologist during a conference session in which I had rather brazenly (and clumsily) questioned the value of textual analysis of music as compared to empirical studies of the producers and listeners. I had, it seems, ‘committed sociology’, to coin a phrase. I wasn’t sure I concurred with the label at the time, but gradually became more reconciled to it. I was increasingly arguing from what felt like an empirical, sociological perspective, against understandings of youth cultures derived from theoretically driven cultural analysis including, ironically, the seminal work of the Birmingham CCCS on post-war subcultures (e.g. Hall and Jefferson 1976). At the same time, my encounters with different forms of cultural studies were increasingly leading me to conclude that the ‘version’ of this discipline that had been conveyed at Birmingham was rather more ‘sociological’ - at least in some respects - than in cultural studies departments elsewhere, something reflected, possibly, in the Centre’s eventual renaming as the Department of Cultural Studies and Sociology.

Yet, as all good sociologists (and cultural studies scholars) will tell you, the labels we come to identify with also reflect the ways in which we find ourselves positioned, including within the institutions in which we work. And so my identity as a sociologist of culture and media was further cemented at the University of Northampton, where I took up my first academic job, as a Lecturer in Sociology within the School of Social Studies, contributing – alongside a separate Cultural Studies School rooted in the arts – to degree programmes in media and popular culture. I had dreamed of becoming a lecturer at Birmingham and, after a couple of years at Northampton, was shortlisted for a lectureship there, only to narrowly miss out. As it turned out, it was a lucky escape because, in 2002, the Department of Cultural Studies and Sociology at Birmingham was, unforgivably, closed down.

For all my horror at the closure of the CCCS and, with it, the ending of that particular personal dream, I was also discovering the value of developing my perspective, experience and knowledge in pastures new. Providing an ideal environment for my first post as a sociologist of media and culture, Northampton enabled me to learn about the intricacies of academic life at a high quality teaching-intensive institution with an able and supportive set of colleagues. Opportunities to develop my approaches to teaching and learning, both individually and with others, were ample. I learned about the importance of being able to teach far outside my main areas of expertise – and about how this could broaden my knowledge. I built up a substantial portfolio of lectures that would serve well for a number of years. And I learned about course design, academic administration and, of course, some of the internal politics and diplomacy that universities involve. Finally, I started to learn how important it is to
continue to find at least some time to write and research, even when writing 2-3 new lectures a week.

For it was the publication of a book based upon my PhD (Hodkinson 2002) - alongside the teaching experience I had gained - that opened the door to my move, four years later, to the Department of Sociology at the University of Surrey, where I have now worked just over a (gulp) decade. As at Northampton, my primary orientation, both in research and teaching, was the sociology of culture and media, which suited me perfectly. But the sense of being a sociologist became stronger at Surrey. Partly this reflects the clarity and strength of the identification with the discipline among colleagues but increasing pressure to gain publications and prestige within the discipline itself – not least as a result of the alignment of subject groupings within external assessment exercises – also played a role.

Speaking of which, as a high performing research Department, Sociology at Surrey also opened my eyes fully to the pressures and realities of research and writing in a national higher education context increasingly driven by publication targets and research income. It has taken time and some anxiety to adjust. I had published a well-received book and some chapters for edited books were in the pipeline when I joined Surrey, but regularly publishing journal articles was to become something of a struggle. My first journal submission took a hammering from reviewers and was rejected outright. I later published a revised and much-improved version of the paper elsewhere (Hodkinson 2005), something that provided a valuable lesson in itself. My next two journal papers, though, also required more review iterations and anxiety than would have been ideal. While I later was to learn that such processes are perfectly normal, it remained the case that I wasn’t really producing as many journal articles as would have been ideal.

This was partly because I had thrown myself enthusiastically into various aspects of course delivery and administration at Surrey as well as organising external conferences, seminars, journal special editions and the like. But feeling relatively at the centre of things provided crucial fulfilment, enjoyment and motivation for my developing career so I don’t regret it. I might have been more astute, however, with respect to the number of book chapters published in my early career. All appeared in well-received collections, helping to bring my work to a broader audience and strengthen professional relationships and networks, but, in light of the importance of RAE/REF in the UK, at least one of them probably ought to have filled a slot in the journal papers section of my publications list instead. The warm glow generated by an invitation can make it hard to say no, but learning when to do so can be important. A further issue was that, having exhausted publication possibilities from my PhD, I found myself with little new research about which to write. I became somewhat locked into a cycle whereby I would write a research grant application, get turned down and then write another. The editing of an anthology (Hodkinson and Deicke 2007), writing of further book chapters (e.g. Hodkinson 2006, Hodkinson 2008) and, eventually, a text book (Hodkinson 2011a) helped maintain a healthy looking publications list on the whole. But the relative paucity of journal articles and the research bids cycle were interconnected in the sense that I had slightly lost my focus, for a few years, on what – for me at least – is as fundamental to being a sociologist as anything, which is going out, doing social research and writing about it.
And so it was that the solution to one of the stuttering elements of my developing career was to design a small project, buy a digital recorder and go out and interview people. The immense fulfilment that this generated has prompted me to reflect on how sad it is that, in externally funded sociology, principal- and co-investigators rarely get to do much hands-on research. I’ve therefore made the most of what makes me tick as a sociologist, both in this and another more recent piece of collaborative research funded by a small (though invaluable) internal Surrey grant - at the same time as continuing to try, try, try again with those research bids, of course. Most significantly from the point of view of contributing to my Department’s well-being, my ‘unfunded’ research has contributed to the publication of a relatively healthy number of journal articles in the last few years (e.g. Hodkinson 2011b; Garland and Hodkinson 2014) with, hopefully, more in the pipeline. The lesson here? Do prioritise external funding but don’t wait around forever for it to come through. Sociologists, at least in my case, need to keep doing research and the approval of research councils and the like is not – I hope – a prerequisite for doing so.

As well as carrying out and writing up research, the last few years have been dominated by greater administrative and decision making responsibilities – most notably as Deputy Head of Department but also as co-editor of the journal, Sociological Research Online. I’ve also begun to come to terms, slightly grudgingly, with the notion of not being quite so young, new or naïve as I was - and that can carry its own pressures. In terms of location, I have been lucky enough to have the occasional possibility to move, and there’s little doubt that sometimes a new position can reinvigorate drive, imagination and ideas, but I’m happy to have stayed at Surrey on both a personal and career level. Like everywhere, we have had our share of pressures and strains, but I continue to find Sociology at Surrey an inspiring place to be and, most importantly, a friendly, collegial and supportive community amidst an increasingly challenging broader environment. Such things are easily taken for granted.

There’s a great deal more I could have included in this short piece. Being taken by surprise at media interest in my work at various points - and managing the various challenges this can bring - is one example, though I’m not sure I’ve really worked out how to do so effectively. In terms of the substance of my sociology, I might have reflected more, perhaps, on the connections between elements of my research and my personal identities and affiliations, most notably with respect to music and style subcultures, which have seldom been too far from my interests both in work and leisure time. The benefits and complexities of ‘insider research’ are something I’ve dwelt upon in detail elsewhere (Hodkinson 2005). Of greater importance here, though, is the broader point that, from my days as a precocious A-Level student, I’ve felt fortunate that life within and outside work seem to have informed one another so fruitfully. And I imagine this is probably so, in one sense or another, for many sociologists. It’s one of the reasons why, in spite of ongoing insecurities, uncertainties and everyday pressures, I continue to feel lucky that I get to be one.

References


