

Confessions of a Homegrown Sociologist

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I've been committing sociology since my early youth. My parents and even my parish priest failed to detect early signs of trouble, even though I read the daily newspaper voraciously (a common warning signal among teenagers in the 1960s).

Father Breen may have sensed the growing danger of my curiosity about society. In reply to one of my many questions about how the world was unfolding, he fired back: "Do you think God is stupid?" But even this rhetorical rebuke was not sufficient to curb my interest in what made people think what they thought and do what they did.

As I got older and went to university, my peril deepened. I fell under the influence of political sociologists outside Canada's borders, such as Seymour Martin Lipset, who helped to spark my interest in Canada-U.S. differences with his book *Agrarian Socialism*, which sought to understand why socialism had taken root in Canada but never found much purchase in the United States. Mr. Lipset was celebrated as a great intellect, but he failed to grasp the obvious: The root cause of socialism is socialists.

At home, we callow undergraduates were exposed to the most famous exposé of Canada's power structure, John Porter's *The Vertical Mosaic*. The most debated sociological treatise of the 1960s, the work played a role in unsettling the entire country's power structure. Dangerous stuff, this sociology.

Perhaps my own sociological tendencies went unchecked because of Canada's permissive atmosphere at that time. In those days, Canadians mused with impunity about social trends and even the workings of power. Indeed, state-sanctioned sociology was widely accepted as a practice of good government. Governments funded shadowy networks of sociologists.

The perps were not limited to universities and institutes; they infiltrated the public service. The federal government even conscripted ordinary Canadians into this nefarious activity. It perpetrated coercive, large-scale sociology against its own people in the form of a robust census. Sociology also informed the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, arguably the most influential such inquiry in our history, whose conclusions seemed to many to undermine the colonial values that had made this country great.

The tendrils of this scourge – which feeds rapaciously on curiosity, data collection, analysis and debate – reached into every corner of society. Ringleaders in fields from public health and urban planning to marketing and social services used its tools and ideas, supposing it would enable them to better understand the behavioural patterns and even key attitudes of the people they sought to reach through their work.

All this activity was underpinned by the assumption that society influences the lives and behaviour of individuals. This notion, of course, is anathema to those who would attribute all success and failure to individuals alone. One of the most forceful proponents of this position, Margaret Thatcher, not only rejected the idea that society influences people but that society exists at all. The lady's not for polling.

My own tendency to commit sociology eventually became the source of my livelihood. I founded Environics, a polling and market research firm, rather like a sociological hit man: committing the offence on behalf of clients who prefer to leave the dirty work to others.

Although my crimes have caused me considerable mental strain, I have thus far been unsuccessful in persuading myself to give up on the observation of patterns, the measurement of group differences, the tracking of longitudinal changes, the search to understand correlation and even causation. When I read about the number of billionaires in the United States, I try to conclude that Americans are simply smarter than everyone else and have the bucks to prove it – but I soon fall into my old ways, wondering about the social, cultural, legal, educational and economic circumstances that enable these entrepreneurial feats. When I hear about a high concentration of crime in a particular neighbourhood, I try to conclude that there's simply a higher-than-average concentration of evil in those postal codes – and yet my restless mind continues to wonder whether there's more to the story.

I'm probably a lost cause. But, for other Canadians, there's hope. There's no reason why we as a society are doomed to continue to inflict this kind of questioning on each other. We can stop if we choose to. Drawing boundaries around the problem will be a challenge. Are daily traffic reports okay, as long as we don't study vehicle flows systematically in an effort to ease congestion? Can we still generalize about animals, provided we steer clear of primates?

It will be easy to slip backward. Some will still attribute a fondness for spicy food to a childhood spent in Mexico City. Others will explain grandma's frugality by noting that she went hungry during the Great Depression. We'll have to remind nervous Nellies that the root cause of cancer is cells – not cigarettes or asbestos. It will require a lot of work, but those who commit sociology can be stopped.

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