

The Australian Sociological Association

Applied Sociology Thematic Group For those who work outside University

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The big event in the Sociological calendar in November was, of course, the Annual Conference. I had originally thought that I would not be able to afford to go, but almost at the last moment my finances improved to the extent that I could make it. I enjoyed my time there but understandably, there were very few from this section who could attend. Reflecting on what I got out of the conference; the most important thing for this Group was an increased realisation that the factors that contribute to the professional standing of those who work in academia is very different to how professional standing is gained by those who work outside.

To operate effectively in both groups you must have a broad grasp of sociological theory, research methods and how and where they can be applied. The academic usually has the dual role of passing on knowledge to new comers in the discipline and regularly publishing their own work, either in writing or as conferences papers. Thus the academic sociologist is usually concerned with people and issues within the discipline.

As you well know, for those working outside academia, the environment is quite different. Here you are working alongside people who have no understanding of sociology, and other professionals who already know that their discipline can solve all the problems of the world, be they economists, engineers, psychologists or social workers. Over this environment you have a boss who doesn't want to know what theory you use and is not impressed with two pages of reference. He or she simply wants to know what you can contribute to solving the issue that is concerning them at the moment. In other words they do not want a nicely balanced academic paper; they want, in the briefest form possible, your assessment of what should be done. To do this means that you have to know your discipline thoroughly, not by rote but as a body of knowledge that you can incorporate, and mix to make what you know, able to be integrated into a larger whole. This means you may possibly have experienced what Thomas Huxley once noted: "the great tragedy of science is the slaying of a beautiful hypothesis by an ugly fact". At the conference, one sociologist employed outside academia, who is in a position to give undergraduates real sociological work experience, complained that he had found that sociology departments rejected his offers with the response that they didn't want to get involved in that sort of thing, whereas other departments were eager to send students. There is a lot of understanding still to be developed.

If you are about to holiday, have a great time, if you are to continue working, I hope the stress levels will be low.

Alan Scott
Convenor