



**TASA** The Australian  
Sociological Association

## Applied Sociology Contact Email for May 2017

"They say a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, but it is not one half so bad as a lot of ignorance."  
**Terry Pratchett.** I have just been reading Dean Burnett's book, *The Idiot Brain*. It's worth a read. It's a book about how the brain works. This, it transpires, is not how most of us think about it. One section I thought ought to be of particular concern to Sociologists is the section on how the brain is influenced by other people. This is our territory, not the psychologists'. It deals with: how we can be conned. How the brain reacts to being part of a group and lots of other situations.

Sociologists are usually concerned with the big picture, so where does sociology meet with individuals? Dictionaries of Sociology devote parts of their space to this question. Pointing out that movements, like "The New Right", are characterised by "a commitment to individualism, enterprise culture, laissez-faire, populism, the ideology of capitalism, and displays elements of the authoritarian personality". Another Dictionary of Sociology tells us that "individualism is a ramifying collection of philosophical, political, economic and religious doctrines, underlying which is a recognition of the autonomy of the individual human being, in social action and affairs."

This is all very well, but our concern is what happens when the individuals come together and are faced with making the joint decisions required for the operation of committees, organisations, or government. I was once asked to sort out an organisation problem, where two parts of the organisation were virtually at war because they had to apply a particular approach to their patients. Both sides thought that their approach was the one that mattered and that the proposed change would upset the programme by demanding access to the patients in the institution in the same time slot. I was able to sort that out without too much trouble in a way that allowed both sides to have equal access to the patient at different times.

However, when an individual joins a particular organisation they are required to conform to the corporate decisions. Like when you can take a meal break, or what the advertising really means. In a political organisation you must vote with the organisational decision, even if you do not agree with it. It can be argued that your view should be accepted or that the corporate decision should be accepted but both have consequences for the individual.

This could mean that sociological proposals are based on the expectations of the dominant theory rather than any assessment of a problem which lies behind that approach.

Another book I have read this month is both a delight to read and a rather inventive way of serious teaching. The book is called "Plato and a Platypus walked into a Bar... Understanding Philosophy through Jokes" written by Daniel Klein and Thomas Cathcart. *Published by Oneworld in 2016*. I am sure that with a little effort someone could write a similar teaching device for Sociology, which might get over the seemingly general impression of University students that Sociology is a waste of time.

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