

SOCIOLOGY

My students often ask me, "What is sociology?" And I tell them, "It's the study of the way in which human beings are shaped by things that they don't see." – Sam Richardson (Sociologist)

Sociology is the study of society and sociologists are people who try to make sense of the social world – past, present and future. The discipline of sociology gives students the tools with which to take a fresh look at social life. It provides theoretical frameworks and language with which to understand, describe and analyse a broad range of human social activity.

The range of sociological interests is wide. These include gender, class, sexual identity, ethnicity, families, social change, health, morality, politics, religion, sport, work and leisure, technology and social media. The focus of sociology is on exploring, understanding and explaining changes in behaviour and social relationships at different levels.

On one level, Sociology looks at the body and how people's ideas about their physical self affect social practices – for example how people form a sense of identity, taking into account the effects of gender or class. A related sub-topic would be the issue of eating disorders, gender and body image. Other topics may look at parenting, child-raising practices, the incidence of divorce, and the ways in which parenting roles are changing. The importance people attach to ethnicity is also of interest to sociologists. The significance of cultural identity has been growing as people move around the world more freely. At another level, Sociology examines how people organise themselves, creating major social institutions such as the State. It also examines the dynamics of macro processes such as population change and globalisation.

Sociologists are the people who ask the 'why' and 'how' questions of the world, and seek to provide answers and explanations for why the world works differently for different groups of people. Sociologists are interested in social groups, their position in society, their experiences, how they interrelate and the image they have of themselves. They are also interested in finding out about social differences between people and explaining why they often turn into social divisions and inequalities. To research these differences, Sociology graduates find out about



the different views and experiences of people, observe what people do, as well as use quantitative data on levels of employment, income levels, educational attainment, physical and mental health. They then try to explain why these differences occur.

WHY STUDY SOCIOLOGY?

The process of making sense of data involves forming ideas or concepts from the detail of a situation. By developing and applying theories people can make sense of the world they confront. In doing this, Sociology graduates can understand the deeper significance of things and form a bigger picture within

Career View explores how degrees and courses relate to employment opportunities and to life/work planning. It includes graduate destination information and current employment issues. Your comments and suggestions are always welcomed.

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their field of interest. The findings and understandings that students gain are useful in many areas including human rights, marriage equality, healthcare, politics, social services, local and national government and iwi development.

Sociology has the flexibility and adaptability to develop as a discipline and be responsive to accelerating social change. Connected to the discipline of Sociology is the emerging and important field of Gender and Sexuality Studies. This involves a critical examination of current thought on gender and sexuality issues, exploring gender diversity and sexual identity, activism and how ideas around gender and sexuality impact knowledge, power and class in society.

As they take a more focussed look at the way governments and institutions try to solve issues facing society, students who study social policy will have learnt how to analyse policy and develop options. They know about the different policy instruments or ways that the government can achieve its social objectives. They also understand the complex ethical and constitutional arrangements in managing public sector organisations and comprehend the significance of the Treaty of Waitangi in practice.



WHAT SKILLS DO SOCIOLOGY STUDENTS DEVELOP?

Sociology provides students with a broad range of skills, important in today's world. At a general level, these include critical and creative thinking, research, writing and analysis, and the effective communication of ideas.

Sociology students do extensive **research**, and build the ability to analyse information and data. For example they may gather descriptive and statistical data through participant observation, interviewing, analysis of documents, or through designing and conducting surveys. With the growth of data informing decision-making, the process of asking questions, gathering information (facts and concepts) and evaluating material is a highly transferable skill sought by many employers.

Particularly at postgraduate level, as students plan and execute a major piece of research, **strategic planning** and **project management** skills are developed. A key part of this is being able to think a situation through and anticipate a range of consequences – big picture thinking.

Communication skills include clear, succinct written communication and oral fluency which is the ability to express concepts simply and concisely using appropriate language that carries the flow of ideas. Tutorials and seminars develop the ability to listen and attend to the substance of what is being said, including the emotional context, and to summarise content accurately. Presentation credibility, the ability to inform and explain to others in a persuasive and professional manner is also developed. Non-verbal communication is an important aspect of presentation credibility, particularly important in social science research and policy settings.

Relationship building is the ability to develop enduring and constructive alliances with people across all social, political, economic and ethnic groups.

Abstract reasoning is the ability to make logical connections between ideas and formulate conclusions. Sociology students will often apply complex theoretical frameworks to problems to come up with solutions, see patterns and recognise trends in order to predict outcomes.

Creativity in the process of social research is the ability to make connections and arrive at insights. Through assignment and project work students also learn to formulate new questions and hypotheses; some may come up with innovative methods and apply theory in original ways. **Flexible thinking** is

also needed to let go of one line of reasoning and develop another when findings differ from expectations. The ability to see the big picture and the connections between the many different facets of human activity is a skill students develop as they examine issues through the lens of social science. This **multidisciplinary approach** enables graduates to get alongside and collaborate with people from different disciplines in a range of settings.



WHERE DO SOCIOLOGY GRADUATES WORK?

Across public and private sectors employment options are diverse and exciting. In many fields of work, from entry-level positions through to senior levels of management, the ability to understand and work with others is essential, along with well-developed communication and thinking skills. Technical expertise is not always the main criterion for employment, but a conjoint degree or double major that includes other work related content such as law or management can be an advantage.

The **public sector** includes Government departments and ministries with a particular emphasis on social policy development and who recruit at the graduate level. Graduates could advise in areas of social policy, such as poverty reduction, social housing policy or the corrections system with Government agencies such as the Ministry of Social Development, Oranga Tamariki Ministry for Children, Ministry of Education, Department of Corrections or Department of Internal Affairs. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFAT) has an annual graduate intake for policy officers to work in the area of foreign policy and considers high-performing, well-rounded candidates from a broad range of disciplines.

Typically, a graduate entry-level position may require excellent, proven analytical skills; high-level oral and written communication skills; strong people skills; self-confidence and the ability to relate to and work with a diverse range of others; a good postgraduate degree – Honours degree or higher; or a conjoint degree, including either law, economics or science; an interest in issues pertaining to the work of the particular ministry.

Policy analysts and researchers need to be strong analytical thinkers, able to carry out detailed, thorough research using quantitative and qualitative methodologies. They must be able to see the big picture, think imaginatively and across disciplines, consider trends and possibilities in the longer term as well as gain a detailed understanding of a particular field. Excellent written and verbal communication skills are essential.

Local government has policy and/or strategy units that carry out research, provide policy advice and put policy into action across a range of activities, including housing, disability, sport and recreation, human resources, public health (e.g. homelessness, mental health, child health and safety, nutrition and physical activity), event management, emergency management, health and safety, community centres, holiday programmes, urban design and planning.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are any non-profit, voluntary citizens' group, which are organised on a local, national or international level. Task-oriented and driven by people with a common interest, NGOs perform a variety of service and humanitarian functions, bring citizen concerns to Governments, advocate and monitor policies and encourage political participation through provision of information. Some are organised around specific issues, such as human rights, environment or health. They provide analysis and expertise, serve as early warning mechanisms, and help monitor and implement international agreements. They do employ graduates, often with experience paid or voluntary, for policy, research or advocacy roles. **Community work** is another area that Sociology graduates with a strong applied focus and voluntary experience may



Belinda Brown photography

progress into, as well as roles such as team leadership, management, fundraising co-ordination and communications roles.

Private sector. Corporates and multinational organisations often recruit through university careers services for policy and business analysts, researchers, management trainees and other roles. Selection is highly competitive especially when open to all degree disciplines. Companies that are considerably affected by government policy decisions have roles suitable for the skills and knowledge of Sociology and Social Policy graduates.

Consultants and business services in the emerging area of **business or service design** help organisations understand their stakeholders and design their products and services. **Consultancies** employ high-achieving graduates, although prior work experience and a double degree may be preferred. Graduates need to have at least a basic knowledge and application of microeconomic concepts, be well informed, with a good general knowledge of history, geography, politics and current affairs, produce clear, concise written work and speak articulately and confidently, and have skills or experience using analytical techniques. Consultancy firms can also provide public, private and not-for-profit organisations with evaluation and research, policy, organisational design and business improvement services.

Skills in written and oral communication, social research, qualitative interviewing and fieldwork provide an excellent base for work in

communications and media. Roles in the media can require a further journalism qualification, although work in this field is fast-changing and other communications, design or writing qualifications and experience are leading to increasingly flexible work in this field. **Public relations** specialists seek to manage public opinion by presenting positive information to those the organisation wants to influence. **Communication advisers** are responsible for promoting an organisation's image and reputation to the public, as well as informing staff and clients about what is happening within the organisation. This may involve writing web content as well as material for articles, annual reports or media releases. **Human resource and industrial relations** advisers work in large public or private sector organisations. They may work with a consultancy or run their own business.

Large **unions and employee organisations** employ policy analysts, researchers and advocates. Policy analysts in unions will spend considerable time analysing issues in depth and breadth, researching and writing submissions to influence legislation, preparing reports, giving briefings and consulting widely with membership, staff and other relevant stakeholders.

Education. Teaching Social Studies and other related subjects in secondary schools is a rewarding career for graduates with a passion for interacting with young people. Social Studies allows students to investigate diverse cultures, social, political and religious systems. Students may do a postgraduate teaching

GRADUATE PROFILES

qualification. Educational research and policy are other options.

Teaching at university level usually requires a PhD. Graduates can advance their research and teaching skills by undertaking a Master's degree or PhD and may have the opportunity to tutor undergraduate students. Many students also go overseas to study. Other roles in tertiary institutions include academic advisors, career consultants, trainers or administrators.

There are a range of **professional roles** which require separate training but which can complement a Sociology degree. These include: law, journalism, social work, educational, clinical or organisational psychology, counselling, design or police.

JOB TITLES

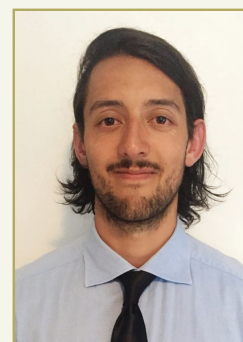
The following is a sample of job titles taken from our graduate destination surveys. Some roles may require postgraduate or other qualifications and training.

Academic adviser • administrator • career consultant • communications adviser • community development adviser • community coordinator • content developer • development adviser • English language teacher • foreign policy officer • fundraising coordinator • human resources adviser • information management adviser • library assistant • journalist • marketing adviser • mediator and dispute resolution adviser • lecturer • ministerial writer • policy analyst • policy adviser • primary teacher • programme manager • project coordinator • public health adviser • researcher • research assistant • research analyst • secondary school teacher • service designer • social media coordinator • social science researcher • social worker • tutor • writer



Jamie Osborne

Merchandiser
180 degrees



I chose Sociology as a major as it complimented my Media Studies minor really well and I found that it better suited my style of learning. I enjoyed the big picture and analytical side of it: why things are the way they are, and the chance to look at how society works. The lecturer would ask a question and answer with another question, which really blew my mind!

After completing my BA, I travelled to the United States with IEP, a programme for graduates to gain work experience and travel. I would recommend this experience post-degree: it validated my skill set and most importantly developed my resilience and work ethic. As an outgoing person, I find it very easy to build relationships. Even so, learning to listen and see all sides of an argument helped. I had also developed a 'thick skin', from presenting a point of view and having it subjected to critique. It was a very different working culture in the States: people are a lot more direct and tell you how it is. Firstly, I was moving furniture in the sweltering heat in San Diego and then in hospitality in San Francisco, working under pressure alongside people from very different backgrounds, who would not hold back in 'chewing me out' sometimes!

This work experience has stood me in good stead for my role as a Merchandiser or Brand Ambassador. I use my people and networking skills to build trusted relationships with customers and clients. This in turn increases our clients' brand awareness and generates new sales opportunities. I need to be awake to what is happening in the market and how people will respond. People will put up barriers, but I have developed strategies to overcome them, knowing how to ask the right questions.

The study of Sociology has helped me to develop tolerance, patience, understanding, respect, and a confidence and open-mindedness that I don't think I would have developed otherwise. This drives my marketing and business skills, and the ability to learn as much as I can about products. I am currently also managing my own property management business, and solving difficult problems under time pressure. A lot of my brand promotion work is with food and beverage products. My goal is to develop a business in food production and promotion: my family background is in dairying and it would be great to return to the land and marketing of products in some way.

Ruth Stuart

Database Research Administrator
Victoria University

I came to university after completing a Certificate of University Preparation as a bridge to tertiary study. As part of that certificate, I took a course that introduced me to the Social Sciences and I became more interested in the field. I've always been really interested in working out how theory relates to real life and how it can inform new solutions. I eventually completed a BA with a double major in Sociology and Anthropology.

For my Honours year, I wanted to do something that was relevant to me, so I decided to draw on my experiences as a teen parent to look at teen parents and how they're served by welfare policy and the welfare system. I focused on how support payments to teen parents are distributed and controlled, and in particular how this affects the parent's sense of agency, physical environment and access to services. As well as interviewing teen parents and analysing relevant policies, I also researched prevailing attitudes towards teen parenting, particularly on social media, which helped me consider the issues through a different lens and think more broadly from other perspectives.

One of the things that Sociology does really well is train you to be aware of all the moving parts in a situation, being open to thinking about a whole system, and how you might do things differently. That's important in my current role, which involves administering and developing Victoria University's large alumni database for fundraising and the engagement platform. I love my job, as I have a real eye for detail, am a process-driven thinker and I enjoy looking at how a business can achieve its goals in the most efficient way using technology. I like using these skills and this training to help others, particularly those people and groups that need a bit of a hand with data management. I volunteer as a group facilitator for Mothers Network Wellington, am setting up their fundraising database and I'm on their governance board. I've recently set up my own consultancy to do more of this work for other businesses.

I would advise anyone considering studying Sociology to go for it. You will be a much more active, informed citizen as a result. One of the best outcomes for me is that I have a nearly 10-year old who knows who Marx is, and can talk knowledgeably about the redistribution of income!



Anna Adcock

Research Fellow
Centre for Women's Health
Research

The original majors for my undergraduate degree, were Māori Studies and American Studies. I was drawn to these subjects in large part due to my own experiences growing up Māori in Aotearoa New Zealand. I have always been interested in exploring inequalities, in particular those perpetuated by colonialism. There are so many choices when studying Sociology, especially at postgraduate level. Don't be put off by all the 'dead white men'. There will be theorists and theories that fit with your interests. A few years ago, after a career in teaching, I was interested in doing postgraduate study, and it was then that I decided that Sociology would fit well with my interests and enable me to better understand how society works in reproducing and reinforcing inequalities.

Sociology is an incredibly interesting, versatile subject. You can apply sociological theory to (almost) everything that involves people. I most enjoyed learning about and engaging in critical discussion about different (and sometimes opposing) sociological theories and works. At Master's level, I honed my critical thinking and research skills. I learnt how to choose compatible social theory and methods of research. In particular, I sharpened my qualitative data analysis and project management skills. I focused my Honours and Master's work around Kaupapa Māori research paradigms. I believe Sociology complements Kaupapa Māori Research – that is, research conducted by Māori, with Māori, and for Māori; or research that is conducted in a Māori way.

While completing my Honours year, my supervisor connected me with a research group at Otago University, Wellington that was looking for emerging researchers to analyse interview data from a longitudinal study looking at the experiences of pregnant Māori women aged under 20 years old. I was able to do a qualitative analysis of government agency interviews from the study. I was then invited to analyse more data for my MA thesis. That work led to me being employed as an assistant research fellow with the group after I finished my postgraduate studies, and then to my current role as a research fellow (with the same group) in the newly established Faculty of Health at Victoria University of Wellington.



Chris Nimmo

Policy Analyst
Seniors Policy
Ministry of Social Development



I chose to study Social Policy (and, in my BA, Development Studies) because I wanted to focus on something that shapes people's lives and wellbeing. I'd done really well in science at school but in the end I decided that I was much more interested in people than atoms. I decided to take a music degree alongside my arts degree perhaps mostly because I wasn't sure whether I could function without music!

What I particularly enjoyed about my studies was bringing the concepts I learned in Social Policy into other areas of study – for example, looking at the Malaysian social security system in a course on Malay civilisation – and thinking about the values underlying policy choices.

I think the most important thing I took away from my postgraduate studies is discipline – discipline in working style, because you just have to turn up, study and write methodically, but also more importantly discipline in thinking, pushing yourself to avoid lazy assumptions or conclusions. If you spend long enough trying to explain how a particular set of policies came about, it becomes evident that people and their decisions are far more complicated for any single theory to explain them.

I see discipline in thinking as the most important influence in policy analysis. While it's something that you can learn from a wide range of subjects (I've read some amazing old papers recently where the author clearly had a solid background in the classics), studying social policy also gave me a lot of practical knowledge of how government functions and how our social security system works.

The advice I would give to prospective Social Policy students is really the same that I would give to any student. Listen to your lecturers, and question them. Actually read your readings and check the sources. Try to understand why people believe what they do about how the world should work, and do the same with your own beliefs.

Bronwyn McGovern

Principal Advisor – Custody
Department of Corrections



I don't think I had a typical academic path as I went to university when also raising four children. I came up the hill to Victoria, looking for an '___ology' to study. It was the people factor and learning about the workings of society that led me to focus my energies on Sociology. I found it to be a discipline grounded in core social science theories and robust research methodologies.

With the encouragement of my tutor, I continued to postgraduate study and in depth lines of inquiry more to my own choosing. By the time I had completed my Honours degree, I'd also welcomed my fifth and last child into the family! After achieving First Class Honours, I successfully gained a Victoria University scholarship and embarked on doctorate study. My sociological street study examined, via a detailed case study of the late Ben Hana (Brother), aka Wellington's 'Blanket Man', what it might mean to live life 24/7 in public space. Doing doctorate study was as much a degree in tenacity and real-world learning, as it was a contribution to academic knowledge. It was also a privilege to experience the reciprocity and generosity of the people I worked with, especially Brother. I saw how challenging and polarising it was for Brother to have made the choices he did.

It was that experience combined with post PhD employment as a research fellow in another university that led me to realise an academic career was not for me. I progressed into an advisory position with the Department of Corrections who were looking for a social scientist without custodial (correction officer) experience, to question and challenge how things are done in prisons. I work with custodial staff across all levels of the organisation (as well as with prisoners), and with various internal and external stakeholders to explore alternatives, develop new initiatives, and make recommendations towards best practice.

It amuses me that back when doing my PhD, I was sure I did not want to end up filed away in some Terrace high rise. And yet here I am, enjoying a government role based in National Office, that also enables me to get out in the field to work across the prison estate, seeing with my 'sociological eye', and working collaboratively with others to make a difference.