

The wisdom of sociology: Sam Richards at TEDxLacador

So, when I was young, I thought that my freedom and my independence were the two most important things in my life. And in fact, I thought that happiness could only come from me directing my own destiny, in a way that was independent and free from the influences of other people. And then I began studying sociology. And this kind of threw a wrench into that thinking because the core idea of sociology is that we are shaped by other people around us. So, how could I be free?

Nonetheless, I continued, I held these two things in balance largely because I only understood sociology down here. And I think, in retrospect, I was like most people, because we all know that we are shaped by other people, but so many of us, myself included, for many years, still felt that, in the end, we are drivers of our destiny, in the end, we make free decisions. So, I continued. And then this all came to a crashing halt.

In the summer of 1988, I was in my bedroom, and I was preparing a lecture for the following day, a class, I was teaching an Intro to Sociology class, and my girlfriend, at the time, she said, "Hey, can I look at your book?" So I said, "Sure." And she started reading my textbook. And she got to the end of the first chapter and she said, "This is amazing. This is the most amazing material I have ever read." She said, "This is life-changing." And so me, at the time, I had been teaching for four years, I had taken probably 30 sociology classes, written maybe 40 or 50 papers, I was studying for my PhD comprehensive exams. I wasn't really expecting much, it was an old textbook. But what happened?

In 30 minutes, this young woman, this 23-year-old girlfriend of mine, who had never taken a sociology class in her life, turned me into a sociologist. And here is what she said. She said, "Sam, this freedom that you're talking about all the time..." She said, "I don't know what you're telling the students, but let me tell you what this book is telling you to tell them. Listen, you're not free. You're not free!" She scoffed at me. I remember her laughing at me. She said, "Look. Here is what the book is telling you. Everything you think, everything you feel, everything you imagine, everything you hope for, everything you do, down to the tiniest, most minute, personal, and private actions, everything is shaped by factors and forces outside of your control that you'll never see nor will you ever understand. You're freedom is an illusion."

Okay. So now, for me, this was like a mortal blow to my entire understanding of the world. In retrospect, I can see that I was kind of sleepwalking through the world as a sociologist, and what she did was she got me to understand not sociology down here but sociology up here. And now, I'm going to bring that to you. And I am going to give you an example.

So imagine that I'm alone in my room. And it's dark, and it's tough times. I'm not happy. I'm struggling. I'm in pain. Just a really difficult period in my life. And I'm thinking about ending it all. I'm thinking about committing suicide. And not only am I thinking about it but I have some pills. And I know that if I take these pills, I will die. And I have to make a decision. It's the most personal, the

most private decision that I could ever make in my life. Nothing compares to this. Nobody is involved in this decision, except me. What will I do? I'm not thinking about anybody else.

So let me tell you what a sociologist says. Sociologists would say, "Look, this might be a personal decision - and it is, at some level - but it's also a profound sociological moment." And there are two things to look at, to help see this. One, suicide rates are steady over time. They don't change very much. So in this person's community here, maybe let's say, on average, let's say 100 people killed themselves last year. This year, it will be about 100 people. Next year, approximately 100 people. The following year, roughly 100 people. So this person is sitting here, in this private moment of despair, thinking that they are making a free decision, but they are embedded into a structure. Into a structure that leads all of the people just like them, who are sitting in their private moments of despair, to make decisions in coordination, somehow. Such that about 100 of them will decide to take the pills. How is that? How is that possible, if they are free and acting alone?

Second idea: whatever groups this person is embedded into, be they their religion, socioeconomic status, their family, race, whether they are male or female, whether they live in a city or a rural area, whatever it is, they all have different suicide rates. How is that possible? If each one of these people who are contemplating killing themselves is making a free individual act, a free decision, how is it possible that they all have different suicide rates? The suicide rates for human beings should be the same, but it's not. Because somehow, we are embedded deep into a structure of life that shapes us; even, even the most private, personal actions. Okay?

So, this person's sitting here not thinking about sociology, not thinking about it's coming toward the end of the year, and it's looking like the suicide rate is going to be the same as it was last year, not thinking about any of that. Not thinking about how these things are pushing all these people forward. No. They're thinking this is a personal, private decision. But what if they saw the sociology? What if they were thinking like a sociologist? In fact, what if we all thought like sociologists? What would happen? First off, we would see that we are never alone. We're supremely connected. Absolutely connected to others. We would see that our problems, they are not our problems. My problems aren't my problems. They're not mine, they are ours. Any problem that I have, any suffering that I engage in, it's a problem and a suffering that I share with everybody.

In sociology, we talk about the sociological imagination, personal troubles, public issues. The other thing, we would feel empowered. I used to think that I was empowered by being separated from other people. But in fact, what I discover as a sociologist, is that I'm empowered by seeing the interconnectivity, seeing myself in this larger web. And the other thing is inspiration, I feel inspired. When I think like a sociologist, I'm inspired because I'm connected to all the other people. My actions are the actions that other people are engaging, and my thoughts, my concerns, are the same as others. So, I'm doing it for them, and they are doing it for me. And finally, the most interesting piece, what I think is really the most interesting piece, is that the groups that I'm most connected to may not be the ones that I think about and that I see on a regular basis. It may not be my family. It may not be other people who are like me, in my community, in my culture. The groups I'm most

connected to might be invisible. I might not know any of these people, but I'm really connected to them. This is the wisdom of sociology.

But now I want to give you another example. This one hits close to home. Remember my girlfriend? So, I acquired enough wisdom to marry her. And for 25 years, we have been living together, very happily. We love each other dearly. We work together, we play together. It's a wonderful marriage. And five years ago, she went through a rite of passage. And her rite of passage is that turbulent time, those swirling waters that women go through that we call perimenopause, that time leading up to menopause. Lots of pain, lots of suffering. It's a struggle. And we went into it together. In here, this marriage, this love, and suddenly we're questioning. We said, "What's going on?" And the struggle. And we were in our quiet times together, we were alone. We were looking at each other, and we were saying, "How can this be? We've worked so hard. What's happening?" And always we apply sociological wisdom. And here is what we see. We are not alone. We are members of an invisible tribe. And the invisible tribe is all of the people, all the women, all the couples that are going through this. Just like us. We don't see them. But we are members. We are a big community. And suddenly, we reach out, and we are part of this global web. So we imagine ourselves, in those times, those difficult times, we imagine ourselves holding hands with all of these people, all around the world, who are going through what we are going through. And here we are, in our private, private time together, but we're not, we are holding hands, we are connected to life, and when we are connected to life, we feel powerful, we feel like, "Yes, we can do this!" Other people need us to do it, and we need them to do it. This is so much bigger than we are. It's beautiful. And so, the wisdom of sociology. [Foreign Language] I, always, I am humanity. [Foreign Language] We are humanity. [Foreign Language] Thank you.