



'Sociology' and 'Psychology'- I have shared a relationship of fascination with these two words from the time that I vaguely knew what they meant. It is quite absurd actually, the idea of studying society, people, their brains, emotions, reactions, (all of it/the whole lot!). Having studied subjects like English and Math for the first 16 years of my life, these topics seemed to be scattered, disorganized, and all-in-all impossible to look at through one fixed framework. How can our actions and feelings be explained by a set of theories and rules? True, they cannot. As I later found out, the social sciences are not monolithic, in that, they do not use one, single theory that everyone in the field agrees with and follows. They each carry their own view point, ideas, questions, and answers. Perhaps this is the reason that both sociology and Psychology contain many, many facets, and, for me, this multi-faceted ness is one of the beauties of the social sciences.

Another very appealing feature was that, somehow, these subjects have a lot to do with 'us' as human beings, and just 'you' and 'me' as people. I have had an obsession with finding out more about the human race, and myself; and if I may be a little judgmental, I think we all share this obsession on some level, even if to varying extents. These two subjects seem to cater to that obsession. They seem to have a personal element in them, something that directly corresponds to who and what we are. Whether directly or indirectly, we were studying ourselves. Studying ourselves as subjects and looking back - this is what drew me to studying the social sciences.

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Over the past two years or so, sociology and psychology have occupied a fairly large portion of my life. The journey began with me being an enthusiastic 16 year old who was excited about these two subjects, though. I did not have much of an idea of what studying these subjects involved. I felt each of us was conditioned into a certain way of thinking. Be it unconscious or conscious, in my experience, this conditioning has proved to be important- primarily to understand these subjects, and then to let my thoughts travel beyond this basic understanding, thus to form my own opinions and ideas about various topics. This process began on one of classes without being blatantly apparent to me. This kind of thinking that began in class was initially as though I had to peer through a peep hole to look at issues in different way; to think subtly, to look at matters through different lights, see things in different shades, and most importantly, to understand that there are always many perspectives and view points, and each of them have their strengths and weaknesses. A certain issue or phenomenon cannot usually be understood and explained if looked at solely from one of these viewpoints. There will always be another point of view that holds its own positives and sounds as convincing as the other.

Eventually, this framework leaked into other parts of my life. I began to see the world around me through this framework. The slums on the road side, the tall sky scrapers towering over us, the vegetable vendor pushing her cart with a baby on it, the fancy malls, even with all its contradictions, I was able to make some sense of it. Soon enough, I began to see things that are closer to my heart through this perspective- some aspects of home that I had always taken for granted, like patriarchal forces, jump out at you. The patriarchal structure is one such example. The traditional role of a 'housewife' (and in my opinion, demanding) has always been taken up by my mother, and, my father, as convention holds, has been the financial pillar of the family- the man in charge of money matters. Even relationships and other issues in my personal life came alive as I looked at them through my own framework. It helped me see that there were multiple

sides to any story. For example, the whirlwinds of teenage life, with all its conflicts and insecurities, are brought into perspective when you understand the story through the other person's point of view, and think to yourself that he/she is also like you, and you would probably behave in the same way when put in a similar situation.

My experience in and outside class have been responsible for fostering this kind of an outlook.

My time in class has been valuable because that is where my knowledge bank lies. That is where the seeds of several ideas, that could potentially flourish into so much more are sown. That has been the place where I have developed my roots in the soil of the social sciences. One might wonder what happens during class time that allows for such engagement. Of course, we do learn the basics of our subjects there. In the case of sociology, it would include Marxism, Feminism, Functionalism, Interactionism, Religion, Crime, Media, Family, the works! The field of psychology is a whole different universe, with its exceedingly interesting studies, the various disorders and treatments. But, our classes have gone beyond studying sociology and psychology out of a textbook. Our conversations, discussions and heated debates, all lend the class a different spirit. For instance, there was a sociology class in which we were discussing 'social constructs'. This term, in case you are unfamiliar with it, refers to aspects of society that have been constructed by us, as compared to being a product of biology or instinct. Some arguments in sociology suggest that these social constructs establish a structure in society, which influences the way each one of us thinks and lives life. Love is an example - can you think of love as constructed, made up? They say it is not real! Yet we all experience the feeling of love so strongly - the heart racing, the constant chattering inside your head about that one special person, attraction that seems so natural and real. This theory states that it is only because of a certain conditioning that we feel emotions such as love. When questions like 'why is it that most of us from the upper-middle class fall in love with others of the same background are asked, it is striking, even scary sometimes, when you try to answer them.

Another extremely interesting topic came about in our psychology classes - we were studying a paper about split-brain patients, whose corpus callosum (the band connecting the two hemispheres) is operated upon in such a way

that the connection no longer exists. Such a procedure is usually conducted on persons whose epilepsy is so severe that it makes them dysfunctional. The results of this study indicated that there were two level of consciousness in one person. The left and the right hemispheres each led a life of their own, with their own memories and ways of expression. Generalizing from this, we could ask ourselves if we also have two levels of consciousness. Who is the real me? Such questions sparked off a lively discussion in the classroom. It created an atmosphere of exploration. Such dynamics pushes you to think about yourself and the world around you, and points to the relevance that these subjects have to our everyday lives. Self- reflection and critical thinking become common activities, perhaps even the norm in these classes.

This kind of an environment acts as a springboard from which I can take off and stray into other areas of interest. An advantage of both sociology and psychology is that I can look out of my window, and my laboratory is right there - at least to the extent that it allows for information through observation, and sometimes interaction.

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We went on a field trip from school to one of the slums in Bangalore, and had an interactive session with the domestic workers who lived there. It was very interesting for me to see that the walls between 'us' and 'them' were broken down just a few minutes into conversation over a cup of tea. Their lives, stories, problems were all of a sudden not out there, completely disconnected from our lives, but something that I could relate to and empathize with. Asking the flower vendor her name or how many children she has,

or complimenting the rickshaw driver on his radio set did not require a relationship – it was amazing how little it took to strike up a conversation.

The social sciences help people open up in this way, it has surely sculpted sensitivity in me. When I look around, there are people from all walks of life, and, on the surface of it, they seem to be worlds apart. And maybe they are. But social science has changed the way I now look at them and reinforced the fact that we are all human. At the end of the day, we are the same. When you adopt this kind of an outlook, distinctions like poor-rich, Hindu-Muslim, Indian-

Pakistani, fair-dark, fail to make much sense.

Closing in to the end of my A-level course in sociology and psychology, and reflecting on the past two odd years, it has been a delight to have studied these subjects. Their contribution to everyday life, their presence in the hustle and bustle of our cities, the life within each of these subjects, has made my experience truly colorful. My biggest take away from this subject is that it has made me innately sensitive, and helped me see subtleties of human nature. I look forward to studying the social sciences in college.

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