Disciplines, Professions and Specialities

Disciplinary ‘specialities’ are conventionally regarded as mere divisions of larger, formal bodies of knowledge. Defined by a specific set of problems and objects of study, they are assumed to emerge in a rational process of cognitive division. Ronald Akers (1992:4), for example, distinguishes between disciplines (bodies of knowledge with their own perspectives) and specialities (areas of study) on this basis. In this chapter we re-consider the idea of disciplinary specialities, suggesting that they, like their parents, should be theorised primarily as sites of social action and structural forms. Extending this new understanding of disciplines into an investigation of disciplinary specialties means paying close attention to the social relationships between the parent and its speciality. This has been an arena of particular neglect in the social science literature. Here we take the opportunity to examine the forms of differentiation existing within and between all intellectual fields – no matter how large or small – and regard these as the product of social action and structure. This means taking note of the competitive as well as collaborative social arrangements which constitute the field, but most importantly, building a focus on the ‘fracture lines’ of academia, for every struggle over resources, prestige or territory within one field tends to reverberate through its neighbours. Only in this way can a full understanding of disciplines and specialities be produced, because these are, in a fundamental sense, produced and reproduced through their relationships with other intellectual fields: that is, by their border relations.

A number of factors shape these border relations. One of these, briefly discussed in the first chapter, is professionalisation. Professionalisation has long been a subject of research interest to sociologists, but it has also been one of the few research topics adopted by sociologists to reflect
on their own practices and social roles. Self-consciously reflecting on
the discipline as a profession has allowed sociologists to consider the
discipline as having an organisational presence to support its members,
provide services, and encourage communication between sociologists
and the broader public. Yet this has also been a fraught exercise, for
not all sociologists have been comfortable with the notion of sociol-
ogy as a profession. While some of the features of professions may be
welcome – perhaps its capacity to represent the discipline in the pub-
ic arena, provide it with a public identity, and defend its reputation
and standards – others have been more controversial. In particular, the
social control function of the professions has brought discord, for our
own sociological theories of the professions have linked all claims to
expert knowledge with political and market power, prestige and social
inequality. Comfortable with offering a critique of other professions,
sociologists have been less keen on self-analysis and have often resisted
strategies to further the discipline’s professional status.

This matter is of relevance at this point because although sociology
has been regarded as both a discipline and a profession, the relation
between its disciplinariness and its professional status has not been at the
forefront of social theorising. Ironically, this is in large part the result of
specialisation within sociology, for historically, some sociologists have
explored disciplines while others have separately studied the profes-
sions. Moreover, those investigating disciplines have regarded them pri-
marily as intellectual fields and formal bodies of knowledge concerned
with specific subjects and organised around particular methodologies or
approaches; while those engaged in studying the professions have, since
the 1970s, focused on these as mechanisms of social control and funda-
mentally about power, that is, as special occupations with the capacity
to control their own work and the labour of others. More recent theoret-
ical development has bridged the divide between power and knowledge,
enabling their inter-play to be given greater attention. These newer
ways of thinking about the social world need to be introduced into the
investigation of the history of sociology and its specialities.

This chapter will suggest it is sociology’s twin status as both a pro-
ession and a discipline which is the key to understanding the nature
of the field and its specialities. The professionalisation of sociology
has been particularly evident in the capacity of sociologists to bar-
gain in the broader marketplace, but its full effects are dependent
on the processes of disciplinariness. This is because professionalisation
is mostly ‘blind’ to the particularities of our knowledge base and the
subtleties of status positions between sociologists. It is the forces of