

A response to the decent sociologist paradox

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Abstract. The paradox asserts “to be a decent human being, you have to treat people like they're special; but to be a decent sociologist, you have to remember they're not.” How then can a sociologist be a decent human being? I distinguish between rights and other things, such as beliefs or tastes, and draw attention to how respect for rights is compatible with a focus on the typical in research.

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In the novel *Elizabeth Costello*, the following striking piece of dialogue occurs:

'...But for the present you are not a problem, just an example.'

'An example of what?'

'An example of writing. An example of how someone of your station and your generation and your origins writes. An instance.'

'An instance? Am I not allowed a word of protest? After all the effort I put into not writing like anyone else.'

'Mother, there's no point picking on me to fight with. I am not responsible for how the academy sees you. But you must surely concede that at a certain level we speak, and therefore write, like everyone else. Otherwise we would all be speaking and writing private languages. It is not absurd - is it? - to concern themselves with what people have in common rather than what sets them apart.' (2003: 8)

The dialogue reminds me of the paradox of the decent sociologist, which has been put like this: to be a decent human being, you have to treat people like they're special; but to be a decent sociologist, you have to remember they're not.

How then can a sociologist be a decent human being? A solution to the paradox is to distinguish between rights and other things, such as beliefs or taste. Even if your choice of clothing is typical of someone from your background, I violate your rights if I do not allow you to wear anything else. Being a decent human being is to a significant degree about respecting your individual rights, even if what you do with those rights is somehow typical of what people from your background do. I can respect them while focusing on the typical in research, as sociologists do.

References

Coetzee, J.M. 2003. *Elizabeth Costello*. London: Secker and Warburg.

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