

Choosing Sociology Students' motivations and projections

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Introduction

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Study choice is a complex research topic that is addressed from various disciplinary perspectives (Brown, 2002). Within sociology, a number of approaches use different theoretical understandings and methodologies to examine the interplay between individual interests, abilities, motivations or goals, and social, economic, cultural, and educational conditions. The potential of sociology lies in the explanatory power of social influences, barriers, and allocations caused by social, gender-specific, regional, or generational differences and inequalities that frame an apparently subjective free choice. Therefore, sociological approaches on motivations and decisions for a specific discipline take biographical experiences of migration, social status of the family, gender constructions, the economic situation and labour market opportunities, or the prestige of the discipline into account.

This thematic bulletin is about choosing sociology and aims at providing a better understanding of the motivations of students choosing sociology nowadays and their visions of their role in society as sociologists. Foregoing bulletins have dealt with topics related to the issue of studying sociology and working as a sociologist. Descriptions of the bachelor and master programs can be found in Bulletins 130 and 134, information on the integration of sociology in other study programs (e.g. universities of applied sciences) is available in Bulletin 140. Empirical results on professional career paths and the labor market for sociologists were showed in Bulletin 155 as well as in the article of Losa et al. in Bulletin 134. Bulletin 132 presented debates on ethical guidelines for sociological research, which are intended to guide the development and dissemination of sociological knowledge by sociologists.

This bulletin continues these reflections on the professional self-image of sociologists by focusing on the subjective orientations and motivations, as well as the biographical experiences and projects that frame the decision to study sociology. Due to the content of the study programme in sociology, students are aware of the societal conditions and inequalities in educational and professional careers. Therefore, it is interesting to know more about how far moral, ethical, and political orientations lead to their study choice, and if the topics in sociology teaching are decisive in their reflections on their role as (future) sociologists in society.

What is already known about these issues? A study of students in sociology at the University of Bamberg shows that the decision for sociology is often hastily made, which is also caused by the fact that for many students, sociology was not their “first choice” (Sarletti & Blossfeld, 2006). Research on motivations for choosing sociology at the University of Munich (graduates from 1983–2011) demonstrates that personal interest in sociology was the most important motive for taking up sociology studies among all cohorts. Political interest is still named second most frequently, but the number drops from 61 % in the first cohort to 40 % in the last cohort (Mozhova & Brüderl, 2014). The authors observe a diversification of motives in the younger cohorts: today many different factors together exert an influence on the decision to study sociology. And even those motives that do not have much to do with the content of sociology, but rather emphasise organisational conditions of study, are becoming more important: study restrictions, time to earn money, or studying sociology as a stopgap solution. Another study by the University

of Rostock indicates that the choice of studies is also driven by the motive of being able to transform social structures, in other words, by the desire or hope to be able to influence social conditions (Morosow & Schicka, 2011).

As far as we know, there is no specific study on students' motivations for sociology in Switzerland. However, Pogle and Molo (2007) compared the motives for studying social sciences with the motives for studying technical or natural sciences. No differences were found in the interests for the three fields and the motive of interest has been highly rated in all fields. However, interesting differences are found regarding "values and convictions" as well as "personal enrichment". Students in social sciences rate these motives higher than those in the two other disciplinary fields. On the other hand, the "prestige of the discipline and the professors", "income of the profession", "opportunity to find a job", and "interesting and recognised career" were much less decisive in the decision to study the social sciences compared to technical and natural sciences.

Regarding the question of which study contents are important to work as a sociologist, studies show that, on the one hand, specialist knowledge of sociological theory and from the sociological specialisations, and on the other hand, training in methods and statistics are central (Hinz, 2005, Bauer et al., 2006).

The contributions

For this thematic Bulletin, we asked students in sociology at the various universities in Switzerland to provide insights on their own and their colleagues' motivations for studying sociology, as well as their projections as future sociologists. Our call for contributions included the following questions to guide their reflections:

- 1) Motivations for choosing sociology
 - › While the discipline is little taught at the secondary level, how did they encounter sociology?
 - › What made them decide to study sociology?
- 2) Sociologists' role in society
 - › How do they project their role in society as sociologists?
 - › What challenges do they expect to face in their role of sociologists?
- 3) How can training support their professional integration as sociologists?

We received seven contributions. Some are single authored, others were prepared collectively, some mixing students in bachelor and master programs. Across the contributions, a number of elements re-join findings mentioned above and are worth highlighting. First, students in sociology are enthusiastic about their capacity to analyse social processes and to question taken-for-granted phenomena. They appreciate the competences they gain over their study programme to take distance from widely shared assumptions and to develop critical thinking. Second, many acknowledged that sociology is not an obvious choice of study, some discovered the discipline by chance – when introduced in other study domains – or it was a second choice after being disappointed with other academic paths, notably in the "hard sciences". Such entry into sociology reflects the still marginal position of the discipline in pre-university education and in society in general. Therefore, becoming a student in sociology requires first an opportunity to discover the discipline, then persistence and conviction. Indeed, others – relatives and friends – also need to be convinced of the choice for sociology since the discipline does not lead to a clear professional path.

Nevertheless, contributors to this Bulletin reported their fascination or even wonderment as major motivations for pursuing this course of study. As could be expected, internal motivations – personal interest, goals, and values – seem to play a particularly important role in choosing sociology, more than external motivations associated with expected income or social position granted by education. In their contributions, students valued the fact that the skills acquired in sociology programs offer them crucial tools to understand current crises and social problems – global warming, infectious diseases, social and educational inequalities – and to analyse social change. At the same time, they acknowledge that the value of gaining a “sociological lens” comes with a price. The capacity to question social phenomena implies to adopt a reflexive stance on the discipline itself and on its role in society. Indeed, their reflexivity teaches them that sociologists are embedded in the very power dynamics that they strive to uncover.

Sociologists’ engagement in societal debates is discussed in different contributions. Students address the multiple tensions existing around their engagement in social and political issues, including their responsibility to not jeopardise the credibility of the discipline in society. They consider it is a privilege to pursue higher education studies at a university and to become a sociologist, which gives them an obligation to not only better understand society and analyse social phenomena, but also to contribute to a more transparent and equitable world.

The first contribution by Lucas Caluori, Vanessa Leutner, Aaron Steiner, and Lisa Steiner, at the University of Luzern, is entitled “Showing what we do. Making sociological research visible”. It combines considerations about their decision to study sociology with the presentation of two

research activities developed over the course of their studies. One project dedicated to Food waste exhibited scientific posters in different settings and led to the publication of a collective book. The second project consists of 30 postcards explicitly questioning the image of Luzern conveyed in conventional postcards of the city. These illustrations are used to emphasize the importance of making sociological insights visible in society, which can contribute to render the discipline more attractive for future students.

Carine Meyer at the University of Neuchâtel proposes a text on her personal trajectory in sociology entitled “Sociology through the eyes of a student”. After exposing her motivations to study sociology, she enumerates different roles of sociologists in society and the challenges they face. While she discusses the importance of sociological insights in a rapidly changing world, she considers necessary to reinforce the legitimacy of sociology in society. She concludes on the importance of flexibility, curiosity, and reflexivity as central values of the discipline, to be shared with new generations of students.

Fanny Klaffke, at the University of Basel, wrote a contribution based on her own experience and the input of a few students who shared their motivations and experiences with her. Her text “Finding identity and responsibility in choosing sociology: Students’ motivations and projections” emphasizes tensions between the institutional expectations set by the Bologna reform and the time required to acquire sociological competences. She also elaborates on the acquisition of a “sociological lens” to understand and explain social phenomena, with students in sociology having to be aware of their privilege to have accessed this academic path and the associated responsibility they then carry to put into practice their capacity to analyse society.

A group of three students from the University of Zürich proposes a quantitative analysis on the role of social origin and gender on different motivations leading to opt for sociology. The text of Deborah Imboden, Strahinja Popovic, and Diego Strassman Rocha entitled “Reasons for studying sociology from an inequality perspective. A case study at the University of Zurich” shows that interest for the discipline and the wish to better understand society were the most cited motivations of sociology students. Their analyses of available data did not reveal major effects of the two selected determinants of motivations.

Trajectories across disciplines are described by the text “From ‘hard’ sciences to ‘soft’ sciences: Three different trajectories towards sociology” of Annabella Zamora, Tina Latifi, and Jimmy Clerc from the University of Geneva. All three of them came to sociology after having first studied a hard science discipline. They discuss their passage towards sociology at the light of the existing literature, describing the extent of students choosing social sciences compared to STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). They conclude their contribution suggesting that external motivation such as professional and financial outcomes are more frequently related to hard sciences, while internal motivations would be more prevalent among sociology students.

The last two contributions are more specifically focused on the role of sociologists in society. Aitor Meyer, a bachelor student at the University of Neuchâtel, proposed a contribution entitled “What engagement for me as a future sociologist?”. He discusses the role sociology can take in changing society thanks to the knowledge produced by our discipline. At the same time, he reflects on the blurred line between research and engagement, and on the challenges encountered by sociologists

when they put into practice the conclusions of their analyses and engage in societal debates.

The text entitled “From situated knowledge to openly politicized research: reflections from apprentice sociologists” written by Lucas Duquesnoy, Manuel Gobet, and Annabella Zamora at the University of Geneva also calls for engagement, with the aim to improve the conditions of those who are traditionally excluded in society. The authors are well aware of the power dynamics in which sociologists are embedded and which can restrict their role in society. They mention the development of participative research as a possible response to these dynamics while emphasizing its shortcomings. Overall, they consider necessary for sociologists to adopt a politicized position since producing research should not be considered as a neutral activity.

We want to thank the students who responded to our call for sharing their thoughts and experiences in a rich and nuanced way. Their texts reflect their capacity to be reflexive while providing critical insights on the current state of the world. They confirm the crucial role of our discipline in the academic landscape, and they show that conviction and enthusiasm for sociology are actually transmitted across generations.

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Showing what we do. Making sociological research visible

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Introduction

In this article, we take an individual approach to make sociological research visible and in doing so, we aim to shed some light on why students choose to study sociology. Therefore, we first look into our own decisions on why we chose to study sociology. Our impression hereby is that the interest in this discipline emerges indirectly from very different starting points and cannot be linked to a direct conscious decision. In the face of uncertainty of what to do with it afterward, the indirect decision to study sociology does not explain why someone would continue to study sociology. While the discipline's relevance reveals itself to students, explaining its usefulness to surrounding areas remains a challenge. Therefore, we secondly explore some mechanisms by which sociology can be made more visible. Here, we believe there is a need for more clarity about how we do sociological research. Instead of explaining to others what sociology and sociologists are good for, showing what we do brings more understanding of our work and role as sociologists to others. In this paper, we present two research projects that attempt to make sociology more visible and evaluate its value. With this, the article aims to explore the reasons for studying sociology and how to shape the role of sociologists in society.

Why did we decide to study sociology?

This question seems simple to answer only at first glance. Was it because the study description seemed interesting? Were the career prospects motivating? Or did one decide to study sociology because sociology deals with "important" social topics? The answers to all these questions, whatever they may

be, are *prima facie* answers that first came to all of our minds but they are also answers that we give to others – be they family members, friends, or strangers we meet in a bar somewhere. However, if one thinks longer about the question, all these answers seem to be only the tip of the iceberg. When searching for the motivation to study sociology, we rather have the impression that the interest in this discipline arises indirectly from very different starting points. Thus, there is no direct conscious decision to study sociology.

For some of us, the interest in sociology arose only after having completed another degree program. For example, for one of us, through an introductory course in legal sociology during legal studies, and for others through sociology courses in communication studies. Another approach to sociology is to get in touch with sociological thoughts by means of other subjects e. g. legal sociology. This is a way to develop a better understanding of what sociology is, which in turn can lead to an interest and decision to continue one's studies in sociology.

An involvement with sociology can also be initiated by being confronted with sociological questions in professional life, as it is the case with one of the authors, who came to the study of sociology via the second educational path. These are questions about problems or tensions that arose during work, the normal idle talk in the team, for example, about why on a certain day the workload was higher than on another day – without being aware at the very beginning that these are sociological questions or that something like "sociology" even exists. The second educational path from practicing a profession to studying a course at university is not directly possible in Switzerland.

The author came into contact with sociology first by completing the federal vocational baccalaureate (in the field of health and social affairs). This first encounter, even if only in a mundane way, led to the insight that this wonderment that arose during professional life – the problems and tensions that concerned all involved to a greater or lesser extent – had something to do with sociology.

In the experiences of the authors, the relevance and fascination of sociological topics and eventually the decision to study sociology arose at a second step. The choice of sociology happened out of interest and out of conviction; the conviction that sociologists can play an important role in society.

Showing the relevance of sociology through different forms of communication of research results

This leads to the question of the relevance of sociology. While in university courses the usefulness of sociology regularly reveals itself, it is usually still necessary to explain in one's wider surroundings what sociology does, what topics it deals with, and why sociology is important and useful. This by itself can lead to challenges and struggles we face in our role as sociologists: there is some resistance to researching because if decision-makers do not understand what you do as a sociologist, it is harder to get access to necessary data or other resources, e. g. financial means. Such challenges are an indication that the communication of our needs to our societal counterparts is a central factor to endorse our role as sociologists. More attention and knowledge about sociological research fields can promote the work as well as the legitimization of sociologists.

Therefore, we present two examples of sociological research in the following part. These are research projects carried out during sociology seminars at the University of Lucerne, which are

examples that show how sociological research works and what concrete role sociologists have in society.

The first example is a project realized during the autumn semester of 2018 and spring semester of 2019 which addressed the social problem of Food Waste. During a two-semester research seminar, students dedicated themselves to Food Waste-relevant issues and questions. The project offered the possibility for students to go through an entire research cycle, which included the reading of topic-based literature and the application of supportive qualitative methods (different forms of qualitative interviews and observations), as well as the raising of funds and the communication of the research results (cf. Arnold & Winterberger, 2020). At the end of any sociological analysis, the communication of the research results is of particular relevance in bringing clarity to others concerning the work and role of sociology in society. For the communication of the Food Waste project's research results, financial means were raised via competitive proceedings from various sources (foundations, university teaching committees, and student committees). Eventually, the communication of the project's results took place in two different ways. The first form of communication included the exhibition of scientific posters. The Food Waste research project became visible because the posters were publicly displayed three times 1) at the University of Lucerne, 2) during the Sustainability Week at the neighbouring Hochschule Luzern and 3) in the public nature museum in Lucerne. Only the exhibition at the University of Lucerne was planned in advance. The other two exhibitions came about thanks to requests from guests who visited the first exhibition. The exhibition was reported in the local press (Fischer, 2021; Huesler, 2021), on social media channels, and on the website of the University of Lucerne.

The second form of communication included the writing of a collected volume about how society dealing with Food Waste becomes visible and organized in our daily life, for example through the distribution via Food Banks or digital platforms, and the refreshing of bread by recycling-bakeries. The collected volume «Wenn Food Waste sichtbar wird» was published by a scientific publisher under the editorship of the course lecturer (Arnold, 2021). In contrast to the scientific posters, the collaboration on the collected volume was voluntary for the students and took place after the completion of the research seminar. Ten of the twelve students who attended the research seminar decided to write a chapter and delivered one for publication. In general, publications are one of the most visible outputs of sociological research (Bozkurt et al., 2017). As it happened in this project, presenting posters and the publication in the form of a collected volume gave interested outsiders the possibility to learn more about how sociological research is done and what role sociologists play in the context of observing and analyzing the contemporary social topic of Food Waste. This project is an example of finishing a whole research cycle, which is critical to show a wider audience how sociologists work and what constitutes their role.

Pointing out conventionalities, creating alternatives

The second example of a project showing a particular role that sociologists can take in society is “Greetings from Lucerne. Alternative Stadtansichten im Postkartenformat”. Together with lecturer Sebastian W. Hoggenmüller and professional photographer Felix Amsel, students of a sociology master’s seminar at the University of Lucerne designed a postcard box with different pictures of the city of Lucerne. Thereby, the goal was to question established visual

habits and challenge the familiar image of Lucerne by offering alternative sociologically trained views of Lucerne. The project resulted in a set of 30 postcards that are now available in various shops in the city and were exhibited during a public presentation, according to the programmatic idea, that sociology should not only study society but also be socially visible. In this way, the results of the project became accessible to a broad public.

The starting point for the seminar was a simple observation: if one searches for contemporary photographs of the city of Lucerne in analog and digital media, one constantly encounters similar images: Lucerne is shown as a tourist motif, as an idyllic city on a lake with a mountain panorama. In the seminar, the students started to systematically question those established, almost taken-for-granted photographic practices and habits of seeing. After becoming aware that these familiar views in no way reflect the “real Lucerne”, but are only the result of a social – and visual – convention, the students set out into the city equipped with their own cameras. On various field trips, the goal of the students was to consciously break through the existing patterns and create pictures with alternative perspectives of the city.

The project fostered in a particular setting two skills that are, as we would argue, provided as general tools in any sociological study: first, the ability to recognize that something seemingly self-evident is often only based on a social convention; and second, the capability to then point out – or even create – alternative possibilities. By doing so, sociologists build a strong aptitude for distancing themselves from everyday routines of acting and approaching problem-solving more experimentally. Sociology, therefore, is an excellent education for change, for adaptation and flexibility, for breaking existing conventions and implementing new pat-

terns. Sociologists are in this sense society's experts for innovation, for change management – as they would say in the business world –, and bring last but not least valuable competencies for the economy, for example when it comes to implementing new solutions with regard to sustainability issues or to circular economy. Especially in current times, when western society has to notice the hard way that much taken for granted is not as fixed as we think – and perhaps as we wish –, there seems to be a need for experts on flexible and changeable structures. As such, sociologists are not only able to explain social happenings, but also create new solutions to the major challenges society is facing.

Conclusion

By looking into the different experiences of the authors, we tried to show some reasons for choosing sociology. For some of us, an involvement with sociology began only after having completed another degree program and for one of us, an interest in sociology was sparked through the confrontation with sociological questions in professional life. In our experience, the relevance and fascination of sociological topics and the decision to study sociology occurs indirectly, in a second step, or even accidentally.

The two presented research projects about Food Waste and the photographs of the city of Lucerne uncover some aspects that need to be considered when thinking about the role of sociology for society. We tried to show by these examples how the role of sociology can be shaped by the means of sociology – by involving a wider audience, our research can shape the role of our profession and therefore legitimize it.

We come to the conclusion that more attention and knowledge about what sociology does

could make it easier for aspiring students to decide to study sociology – including the promotion of sociologists' work and legitimation. Therefore, we reason that more sociological research needs to be highlighted in public outlets to awaken the spark of sociological wonderment.

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Sociology through the eyes of a student. Why study it, what roles and challenges as a sociologist?

Carine Meyer (Bachelor student), University of Neuchâtel

Introduction

This text is not an exhaustive and objective presentation of the reasons for studying (or not studying) sociology, nor of its roles and challenges. It is also by no means an argument to convince people at all costs to study sociology by presenting it as something absolutely sensational and infallible. It simply stands as a statement of my personal background and vision of the topic. Do bear in mind that my statements are not necessarily representative of the majority of student and professional sociologists. That said, I do try to look at the topic critically through the lens of my own experience, the knowledge I have already acquired, as well as the exchanges I have had with other people. I start by presenting how I discovered sociology throughout my personal experiences, as well as why I chose to study it and what it brings me. I then broaden my scope by presenting what I see as the main ways of applying sociology, whether at a professional level in research or in creatively applying theoretical and transferable knowledge, but also at a more micro level, in everyday life. In other words, I present the different roles that I believe sociologists can have in society. I then conclude with a discussion of the challenges I see in sociology today: legitimacy, growing complexity and the need to clarify its role as well as professional openings in the field. This allows me to give some outreaching thoughts to invite further reflection.

Personal journey and discovery of sociology

For a long time, I did not really know what I wanted to do in life. I only knew that I would probably

study at university; I was good at studying and enjoyed developing complex thoughts. Many fields were of interest to me, but not any in particular. Then one day, during one of my countless research sessions, I had the opportunity to attend a presentation on sociology at the University of Lausanne's open house. At first glance, I was not that interested. I did not even really know what it was... a bit too vague and abstract. But if I'm going to find my way, I might as well be interested in as many fields as possible, if only out of curiosity. So, I went to this information session. Sociology was presented as the questioning and search for understanding of society, going beyond the obvious and commonly presented [mis]conceptions.

Personal resonance

It spoke to me a lot, because I like to understand in depth, to question what seems to be taken for granted as well as norms and differences. In sociological terms, as I later learned, we talk about breaking down preconceptions or common sense, about reflexivity, or about detaching oneself from normative and prescriptive judgements. It was obvious that this was what corresponded to me, what I liked to do, and what I was already doing. I wanted to further develop my thoughts, and sociology suddenly seemed to me the ideal place for that. I found myself comfortable in the way of doing things and in the aim of this discipline. So, I chose sociology first of all because I felt it would be a good fit for me, and out of personal interest. I hoped and still hope to acquire keys to understanding the world around me, perhaps to finally understand myself better, to live better in society, and even to make

a positive contribution to it, taking into account sociological research and knowledge.

A rich and relevant background

In the end, I also chose sociology because I think it gives a good baseline knowledge-set and a number of transferable skills, useful in many fields and situations. Therefore, it can be used to question and possibly advise the people around me, to answer big questions, to work in a team in a flexible and conciliatory way, to analyse and manage social phenomena, to be creative, critical, etc. More concretely, being aware of the power dynamics that can be exercised within a group, even unconsciously, will allow me to denounce them, to make the people I work with aware of them and to try to correct them together. Or again, in everyday relationships, having in mind the processes of socialisation allows me to put into perspective the behaviour of people around me and to understand them better. I can indeed say to myself that someone who has been brought up in a certain environment, with a certain way of seeing and doing things, will have difficulty conceiving of doing things differently, understanding other ways of doing things, but that this is not insulting or against the person itself.

Furthermore, sociology already helps me to look at things in a way that is as non-judgmental as possible, that tries above all to understand. I was already doing this before I started my studies, but having addressed this attitude in class has strengthened my conviction of the relevance of this approach; not only in my eyes, since I have now stronger arguments to defend it in front of the people I meet, who are sometimes a bit sceptical. In short, sociology encourages one to question oneself. To do good sociology, I think it is essential to be aware of oneself: where we come from, how we function, what our convictions are, etc. And in par-

ticular, it is crucially important to be aware of the way we are and the way we work. At a higher level, it is important to be aware of the way in which this can impact our outlook and our scientific research. On a more global level, it is also important to be aware of how the discipline is presented and developed in the Western countries, and the impacts of this on a wider scale. I am thinking in particular of issues of ethnocentrism and feminism: what do we make of the conceptions of sociology in other countries? How do we choose the reference authors of the discipline? This amounts to doing some sort of a sociology of sociology, and I very much appreciate this reflexivity, which is particularly developed within the discipline.

Roles of sociologists Research

It is still very unclear what my role in society as a sociologist in future could be. The main professional outlet related to sociology seems to me to be scientific research: to continue to understand societal phenomena and to adapt to developments, both on a methodological and theoretical level. This is what I consider the most direct application of sociology. Sociology remains for me a rather abstract field; I do not necessarily see any other way to practice it as such.

Creative mobilisation of sociological knowledge and transferable skills

Before I go further, I would like to make it clear that I do not have a definite professional perspective yet, and that I am not sure whether or not I will go into sociology (I am also studying geography, psychology, and education). But if that were to be the case, I think that doing purely research would not suit me: I imagine myself working alone, reading a lot of things, thinking ... after a while,

I need to do concrete things which impact that can be perceptible in the short term. Therefore, I would rather imagine a job in advising organisations, municipalities, companies, including conducting short studies on demand, if necessary, or mobilising some theoretical sociological knowledge acquired during personal studies and research. This requires creativity and reflexivity: which elements are relevant to take up? How can they be applied to a specific situation? How can the sociological perspective help? This is by no means an obvious approach. It also seems to me that some theoretical and transferable skills can be useful in a more implicit way, in many other professions. For example, for a manager, an educator, or a teacher, knowing how to discern group dynamics, the influences of society on behaviour, or behaviour that can influence society, can be very useful. Or why not mobilise knowledge of mechanisms that could have a leverage effect on the ecological transition? Once again, this approach requires a certain amount of effort but can be very rewarding.

Developing a sociological attitude on a daily basis: a long-term and behind the scene impact

More generally, I think that all sociologists start by raising the awareness of those around them of the need to question norms, differences, mechanisms, and influences that society has on individuals and that these individuals have on society. This can contribute to sensitizing, people and perhaps society for being more open and critical. Or not... it all depends on the aim of the sociologist, who, let's remember, is not necessarily a friend of humankind, there to favour a benevolent and ideal development. All in all, it seems to me that the role of the sociologist is rather discreet, perhaps even in the background and long term, but very important.

Challenges for sociologists

Legitimacy

I think that one of the main challenges for sociologists is, and will be for some time to come, the claim to legitimacy, just like psychologists and people with a background in the humanities and social sciences. Indeed, in these disciplines and in sociology in particular, it is fallible humans who study fallible humans. This includes a certain uncertainty in studies and sociological work in general. We can make mistakes, whether in methodology, ethics, or results. We are well aware of this and put in place a number of measures to ensure that our work is as reliable as possible. However, the challenge lies in being able to communicate this to people who are not in this field, especially those who have never been to university. How do we explain that there is always a certain amount of uncertainty and hindsight, but that our proposals and results are still reliable enough to be used? How can we simply explain that we are aware of these uncertainties, and what strategies are put in place in sociology to respond to them in the best possible way (distance with preconceptions, criteria of scientificness, methodology, etc.)? And more generally, how can sociology and its role be presented in a clear and tangible way to the general public? But also, how can we ensure that we remain open to criticism from people outside the discipline, who can make relevant remarks, having more distance than us?

Growing complexity

In addition, a challenge that seems to be emerging more and more is the growing complexity of research. As technologies develop, new fields and new research techniques emerge: Big Data, netnography, virtual space, etc. This requires new skills, sometimes very specialised in one or more fields. However, the rapid evolution of these technologies

and the globalisation that they allow or even require do not make things any easier. Although they offer new opportunities, the quantity of variables to be taken into account and the amount of data to be processed is enormous. Societal changes can occur more rapidly, on a larger scale ... and become somewhat elusive!? The need to quickly develop new complex approaches, and moreover to teach them quickly as well, is a real challenge I find. In view of this, I think it is essential to ensure that the teaching of sociology leads students to develop great flexibility. This should enable them to adapt to changes in society and to propose developments in the discipline and its research methods quickly enough to be consistent with current issues. Thus, it would also be beneficial to continue to update and renew the courses, to present not only the foundations of the discipline, but also its most recent developments and methods.

Clarification of professional role and perspectives

In addition, it could be truly relevant to address the question of professional perspectives and the role of sociology in society more. Indeed, these elements remain unclear to me, to many students, and to society in general I feel, revealing a clear need for clarification. Perhaps this is the nature of sociology, as it tends to understand and question societal mechanisms and institutions ... but in any case, it would be good to be able to think more about these issues, whether in courses, lectures, workshops, or otherwise. As a student of psychology and geography as well, I observe that more tools, arguments, and reflections are presented to students in these branches, and it seems to me that this is the case

in many other academic branches. Or at least the perspectives are clearer, as they are presented for example at conferences by external professional speakers in the field, outside the university, or just better known in general. The need for this knowledge seems to me all the more important in sociology. Indeed, it can seem quite abstract, like an intellectual reflection that is sometimes even unreliable and non-essential in our fast-paced times, when the need for knowledge and action is more pressing than ever (global warming, social injustices, crises of all kinds). So, how can we justify this time taken to study, reflect, understand perhaps in the longer term? Is it really profitable and necessary? I am convinced that it is, but it remains an interesting question to discuss, if only to develop arguments to present to the general public to justify the investments in our activity.

Conclusion

There are many challenges to providing advice, exercising research or simply a sociological perspective on a daily basis. These include the constant updating of methods, theories, their teaching, but also the defence of the legitimacy of sociology, its study, and practice as a professional. Thus, I believe that flexibility, curiosity, and reflexivity are important values to pass on to students – and I must say with pleasure that this is already being done well. The very fact that I was able to write this text, that the students' perception of the sector is being examined, is to me a very good sign of reflexivity. It is an honour for me to have been able to contribute – albeit modestly – to perhaps guide current sociologists to lead sociology together in the best possible directions.

Finding identity and responsibility in choosing sociology: Students' motivations and projections

Fanny Klaffke (Master student), University of Basel

Introduction

When a child is asked about her or his career ambitions, the first answer will not be “sociologist”. It will not be the second answer either. In fact, a child most likely will not know what sociology is – judging from first-hand experience, most adults are not always sure either. At least not to the extent of knowledge they might have of other professions.

Even though sociology remains a mystery degree to most people, it is still a rather popular subject chosen at the start of a university career, at least among the field of the social sciences. This text aims at exploring the question as to why students choose sociology, how they structure their studies, and what they plan to do with their degree, regarding their professional future. On a larger perspective, this paper also seeks to understand how the role of sociology and its impact on society is judged by its current students. It represents a synergy of thoughts about said themes, which were submitted by students in sociology at the University of Basel. While the submitted answers are not representative, the text aims at giving an overview of the motivations of sociology students to choose this discipline, as well as considerations about professional (self-) perceptions of the role of sociologists.

Motivations of sociology students – The why

Why does one choose to study sociology? In order to find answers to this question, a questionnaire was created, in which sociology students were asked with open questions to elaborate on how they found out about sociology before starting their degree and why they ultimately decided to choose it. Furthermore, the questionnaire enquired students'

considerations about the structure of their studies: how they decide which seminars to choose, if by doing so, they take any thoughts of future career choices into consideration and how the study of sociology strengthens their identity as sociologists. Lastly, they were asked about the professional perspectives they hope to get through their sociology degree. Their perceived tasks and roles as future sociologists were also enquired.

The questionnaire was sent out to fellow students in two of the author's seminars, notably to fourteen students. A disappointing number of four students submitted a filled-out questionnaire. This small rate of return might have been caused by the fact that the students were asked to fill out the questionnaire over the summer time. This point in time probably led to the neglect of this voluntary task. The submitted answers, including the author's own considerations, were therefore used to create the following theses.

When asked why the students chose sociology, they tended to give various answers: Ranging from a rather accidental choice to a clear imagination of the course of their studies, from the very start of a sociology degree. However, at the core of the motivation for a sociology degree, which appeared as a common characteristic among the answers, seems to be the ability of sociology to ask the right questions. Students seem to be drawn in by the fact that sociological theory can pinpoint societal phenomena and structures, that sociology students themselves have come across in their lifetime. Discrimination, poverty or educational inequality are phenomena of society that students of sociology have had to face or at least have come into contact within their social environment. One

of the uniting elements that the questioned sociology students defined as a motivational element is the characteristic of sociology to address these daily occurrences and structures and to ask: What are we seeing here? What is this phenomenon, who are its primary actors and what leads them to act in this way?

I knew from a very early age that I was interested in social phenomena. (...) Growing up in a very conservative region with left-leaning parents, I came into contact with social inequalities and racism towards children at a very early age, which was often talked about at home. Therefore, I would argue, the interest in the social system and power dynamics came up very early. (BA-student)

Aspiring sociologists are therefore fascinated by the very basic idea that the circumstances of society are not simply a given structure, but it can be explained, understood, and criticised. Influenced by socialisation and their environments, sociology students are motivated to pursue their studies in the face of understanding the world around them. While this reason for picking a subject can be applied to numerous other fields, there is a certain particularity to a sociology degree. This differentiates sociology from other degrees such as history, mechanical engineering, or dental medicine. Sociology puts its focus on the very foundational questions that lead to problems or dynamics that occur in society.

Some students report that the disappointment in other subjects has led them to switching to sociology. Not only the questions asked by the disciplines, but also the answers were unsatisfying to them:

Through political science, which increasingly frustrated me with its focus on quantitative research, I came to a seminar in sociology. (...) Not only did sociology finally give me answers to my questions, it also raised questions I didn't even know I had. The approach – or at least how it is understood at this [University] chair – of understanding social reality as a totality; in other words, of doing social theory, which, unlike in political science, was also allowed to be critical – indeed, must be critical – captivated me. (MA student)

Sociology seems to not seldomly act as a subject of reorientation, for seeking out new questions that were not asked in the first place. Sociologists are entangled into social structures as much as everyone else. The chance of detangling these structures and understanding them, by asking the right questions, gives students of sociology the motivation to pursue their studies.

Structuring a sociology degree – The how

While the motivations for a sociology degree might sound somewhat idealistic, students of the field are confronted with organising their degree under the circumstances of the Bologna reform, as much as any other university student. However, at the University of Basel, the students do enjoy a certain freedom when structuring their path through the bachelor and master's programs. The individual seminars can be chosen freely within the predefined modules.

I attend courses mostly out of interest. Of course, the compulsory courses have to be taken, but it is usually possible to take those courses that fit my interests. (MA student)

A sociology student can therefore organise her way through her studies, mostly according to her interests. It is of interest how sociology students choose their seminars and more importantly, if their choices are related to future career path considerations. Does this freedom of choice contribute to an identification with the description “sociologist” or is the vagueness a factor in limiting the intensity of identification, compared to that of future graduates in other disciplines?

The questioned students reported that they do enjoy the broad insights into the sociological field, especially during the bachelor’s program. During these first years of sociological studies, they are met with a wide range of sociological perspectives and topic areas. This broadness helps them to discover an interest, which they might be inclined to pursue further into their career.

However, the questioned sociology students tend to criticise the economisation tendencies regarding the structure of their studies. The demand for quantification of student’s performances plays a big role in the reproduction of the tension between individual acquisition of knowledge and institutional success. This ambivalence is embedded into the implementation of the Bologna reform. At the basic root of the problem, students are supposed to collect a certain number of credit points over a specific number of semesters. The reality of collecting this high number of ECTS results in a rather big pile of knowledge that one must attain in a short amount of time. Students therefore often find themselves confronted with the need to compromise two very different approaches to structuring their degree.

There is either the possibility to take the time to fully immerse oneself in the study of sociological theory, and maybe even specialising in one’s field

of interests. This can only be done by limiting the amount of ECTS one collects per semester and therefore lengthening the overall duration of the studies. In addition, the majority of the students who responded have a part-time job besides attending university, which extends the length of the studies as well. It was deemed impossible by the students to accomplish all the reading goals and prepare all the seminar lessons, by giving full attention to it, while fulfilling the expectations of a work place at the same time.

The other route that can be taken is collecting the predefined number of ECTS per semester and therefore finishing the bachelors or master’s degree within three or two years respectively. It is however questionable if the concept of a sociologist’s identity can be acquired within that time span. While it is difficult to answer that question without an empirical examination of graduate’s professional identity, I want to draw the attention to a concept of the so-called sociological lens. Inspired by Kai Erikson’s term of “the sociologist’s eye” (2017), this concept shall be highlighted in order to give insight into what the concept of a “successful sociology graduate” entails and what factors play into a collective understanding of sociological practice, especially when portraying the perception of young sociologists.

Studying sociology, in terms of structuring one’s degree, is never just an individualistic choice. It is also embedded within a wider context of a social and institutional settings. It is therefore important to explore the general conditions, hurdles, and structures that track this university program. The following section therefore aims at highlighting the ambivalent relationship between system assimilation and identity building as a future sociologist.

The sociologist's lens – The what

An acquired sociology degree does not lead to a professional self-perception as a sociologist per se:

I do not consider myself a professional sociologist, and probably never will. Because the professional title of sociologist only exists in scientific research, but not in the general professional world. But it also offers many opportunities, because social scientists are in many industries, corners, and behind various other job titles. On the one hand, it is difficult to identify yourself professionally as a sociologist, but on the other hand, there are many paths open to you in which you can realise your interests. (BA student)

Other programs such as law, medicine, or mechanical engineering offer a rather clear imagination of future occupations – and therefore solidify an identity in those profession; as in “I study medicine, I am becoming a doctor”.

Sociology (or social sciences in general) takes a rather different approach in defining a graduate of sociology. The momentum of creating identity rather lies in the individual acquisition of the sociologist's lens. The constant confrontation with sociological theory, the methods of sociology, or the structures and dynamics of society itself leads to the development of perceiving the surrounding environment through a sociological perspective. The ability to recognise, describe, and explain social phenomena and structures, as well as learning to take a critical point of view seems to be a collective learning of a sociology degree. It is this critical and reflexive ability to take a sociological point of view, when coming across social phenomena that constitutes a sociologist's identity.

Intertwined with this sort of identity building is the recognition of the self-embeddedness as a sociologist into a larger social context. In other

words, the realisation that just because sociologists are often taking a rather distanced approach of perceiving society, they are still very much a part of it. This tension between scientific distance and self-embeddedness into social contexts must be given great consideration. This can be done through the recognition that the access to a university degree is something, that is denied to a large part of society, caused by education inequalities. On a larger scale, this means that the access to the resources of understanding social circumstances and relations – and therefore to the access to its criticism – is granted to a comparatively small group. This privilege of having been granted access to the methods and devices of understanding society's dynamics, as a result of social inequalities, does impose a certain responsibility on sociology graduates. The sociological education entails a commitment, to at least recognise this aspect of one's own education, if not changing the circumstances, that have led to this social context. As one student puts it:

In this society it is a privilege and result of social exclusion procedures to accumulate so much knowledge [as a student of sociology at University]. We need to change this society, not because we are better than others, but because access and resources to the knowledge that can be acquired during sociology studies is systematically denied to people and only very few who would not need it anyway are granted it.

This must be taken into consideration, when thinking about the role of sociology, as it is judged by its students. The question of a “successful graduation in sociology” therefore has certain nuances to it, which can be generally answered on two levels.

Firstly, one's educational degree must always be viewed through the sociological lens of the wider educational context that it was acquired in. When

considering the value of a sociology degree, it is important to recognise that different actors assign or deny certain values to it and that different logics and perceptions of usability are being attributed to it. The individual role as a sociologist can therefore never be only judged from an individual point of view – the responsibility of sociology is the result of constant conversation with society.

Secondly, because the sociologist's lens is a crucial factor in truly being able to perform sociological practice, it is of utmost importance to take the time to acquire the sociological lens. However, in many cases the general conditions of the study are an obstacle, be it external factors, which require the completion of the study in regular study time, or be it university-specific structures, which complicate this process, as mentioned before.

Conclusion

This paper certainly does not represent the opinion of all sociology students and is only a small contribution to a larger conversation about the role of social sciences in society. What it does offer is an invitation to think about how the motivations of sociology students and their projections of their professional future are linked: A sociology degree

offers a paradoxical position within a social context. On the one hand, it offers the tools, theories, and methods to, in a sociological meaning, understand the social contexts that students find themselves in. It is this aforementioned acquisition of the sociological lens that enables graduates to recognise the *faits sociaux*, in a Durkheimian way. At the same time, going through a sociology degree subverts this scientific distance to the knowledge of said social facts, by pointing out the context and therefore the limits of knowledge that it was acquired in.

Becoming a sociologist is therefore not about calling oneself a “sociologist”. It is about how the self-perception is turned into real sociological practice, be it in an academic context, or outside of it. What this sociological practice entails and therefore requires is dependent on the current challenges and phenomena in society. This interdependence of theory and practice once again highlights the ambivalent relationship between proximity and distance in a sociological context.

Reference

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Reasons for studying sociology from an inequality perspective. A case study at the University of Zurich

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Introduction

Every year thousands of young adults go through the transition from school-to-university and need to decide on a subject when entering the latter. There are a lot of influences which lead to their final decision on choosing a major (and a minor). Social science discovered that there are several effects on careers in adolescents derived by socioeconomic status, which can lead to inequality (Lörz, 2017; Müller & Pollak, 2007). Bourdieu showed that surroundings and cultural embeddedness can influence a person so that they become a part of the individual (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), leading to an impact of environment on actions, reasoning, and decisions. For some groups like ethnic minorities, an academic career for a respectable profession may seem unreachable, because reasons such as of social structures, stereotypes, and missing role models (Ellemers, 2018; Schroeder, 2019). Contemporary studies have shown that there are several effects which play a role when choosing a subject as a major, such as gender or familial background (Ayalon, 2003; Dickson, 2010; Hewapathirana & Almasri, 2022; Mullen, 2014; Van Mol, 2022).

Additionally, a structuralist approach (cf. Blau, 1994) to this topic proposes a theory of hindered social mobility which in conjunction with symbolic boundaries (cf. Lamont et al., 2015) would enhance social inequality by reproduction of separate structures and clear boundaries to the extent where social mobility seems almost impossible and/or undesirable. Thus, differently embed-

ded individuals could differ in their life goals and educational aspiration.

The first impacts already develop in early stages of life, when children get introduced to stereotypes permeating society as well as to role models (e.g. teachers and parents) (van Tuijl & van der Molen, 2016). Cook et al. (1996) disclosed that lower-class children feel higher barriers and have lower expectations of their career success than their middle-class peers. Several studies showed that the family environment has a major impact on the career of young adults (Huang, 1999; Lustig et al., 2017; Rani & Khandelwal, 1992). This includes factors like expectations and values in children (Moskvicheva et al., 2016).

Not only the choice to enter academia, but also the motivation on what to study therefore depends on their social origin. Children orientate themselves on their parents' habitus such as learning similar skills as well as growing up in a specific culture, characterised by their parents' education and occupations. In addition, a child lives in a social environment in which different occupations can be discovered and ideals are made (Jonsson et al., 2009). This shows that family surroundings influence a child's choice on what to study. Secondary socialisation (cf. Berger & Luckmann, 2016) among peers takes over once a certain age is reached and the child is fully socialised by the primary group, and who oversees this secondary socialisation is highly dependent on the opportunities of the social position of both parents and child (Blau, 1994). Although there are studies showing social origin accounting for inequality of educational opportunities resulting in varying educational

1 By alphabetical order.

attainment mostly in accordance to social class of the parents (Erikson, 2019; Hadjar & Gross, 2016; Passaretta et al., 2018; van de Werfhorst & Luijkx, 2010; Wells et al., 2011), there is no literature quantifying the actual motivations on why people decide to study sociology specifically – thus providing a research gap.

Beyond social origin, gender may also influence study choice. Whereas men are told it is more important to earn money, have a good social standing and power, women are seen responsible for childcare. They are assigned the social role of caring and supporting (Weisgram et al., 2010). Even though the number of female students in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) related fields increased over the last years, there is still a gender imbalance in these fields (*Fakultäten [Tab.]*, 2021). This may be explained by role models, stereotypes, and expected roles for women (such as care work). These factors can be classified as extrinsic motivation, which results from external factors like receiving money, a material reward (e.g. from parents), having a good reputation in one's job or fearing punishment, and play an important role when choosing a field of study (Heckhausen, 1989). However, there seems to be a lack of literature in conceptualising gender and gender stereotypical role models as a causal effect on specifically choosing sociology.

To contribute to the closing of this gap, the reasons of sociology students at the University of Zurich for choosing sociology as their subject are analysed in a perspective of inequality. This is done through an explorative case study guided by two explorative-descriptive research questions: (i) “Which motivations to study sociology are decisive?” and capturing social inequality among students by asking (ii) “do motivations of already

enrolled students for studying sociology vary by social origin and gender?”

Case study data: UZH

As outlined above, the aim of this contribution is to investigate how ascriptive factors such as gender and social origin influence the type of motivation of Sociology students. For this we use data gathered as part of the “System Evaluation” (SYSE) from the Department of Sociology at the University of Zurich (UZH). The system evaluation consists of an online survey which was sent to all students enrolled in Sociology, including major and minor as well as bachelor's and master's students. Its aim is to collect the students' opinions on various topics concerning their studies in general but also specifically about studying sociology at the UZH. It was co-developed by the director of the department, members of the faculty mid-level and a representative of the student body. The data was gathered during the fall semester of 2021 with 221 participants from the population of the student body. For this case study, a sample size of $N = 123$ was drawn, extracting items about gender and social origin, as well as the reason to study Sociology. The loss of 98 observations is due to item-nonresponse on either extracted item.

While there are many ways to operationalise social origin, this approach uses parental education, since it was the only available variable in this regard. Participants were able to provide the highest educational degree of both their parents. The possible answers were all educational degrees attainable in Switzerland (12 levels, ranking from “No degree” to “Having a PhD”). In order to make it viable for analysis, the information on parental education was condensed in two steps; firstly, when the parents had differing educational attainment, only the higher degree was considered, while in a

second step the possible attainment was grouped into three different categories to facilitate interpretation. The three condensed categories as well as their components are as follows:

- › No Degree (3.3 %, n = 4)
- › Secondary Education (35.8 %, n = 44): Secondary Education, Vocational Baccalaureate, Baccalaureate, Fachmaturität
- › Tertiary Education (61.0 %, n = 75): Höhere Fachprüfung, University of Applied Sciences, University, PhD

Within the survey students were presented different reasons for studying sociology. Out of those items we chose the five categories which we deemed most relevant regarding our research question. Concretely, students agreed or disagreed with the following statements:

1. Change society: “I decided to study sociology, because I want to change society.”
2. Better understand society: “I decided to study sociology, because I want to better understand society.”
3. Interested in sociology: “I decided to study sociology, because I find sociology interesting.”
4. Secure career outlook: “I decided to study sociology, because that way I expect to have a secure career outlook.”
5. Interested in methods: “I decided to study sociology, because I am interested in methods used to research social phenomena.”

For a more detailed distribution of student motivation as well as gender and parental education see Table 1.

Table 1 Distribution of student motivations, gender, and parental education

	Overall (N = 123)	
Change Society		
No	87	(70.7 %)
Yes	36	(29.3 %)
Better understand society		
No	34	(27.6 %)
Yes	89	(72.4 %)
Interested in Sociology		
No	29	(23.6 %)
Yes	94	(76.4 %)
Good career outlook		
No	113	(91.9 %)
Yes	10	(8.1 %)
Interested in methods		
No	70	(56.9 %)
Yes	53	(43.1 %)
Gender		
Female	85	(69.1 %)
Male	38	(30.9 %)
Highest parental degree		
No Degree	4	(3.3 %)
Secondary Education	44	(35.8 %)
Tertiary Education	75	(61.0 %)

Systemevaluation-survey at the Department of Sociology at the University of Zurich (SYSE), F521, Data collected in 2021.

Method

As a first measure, the distribution data was inspected visually to account for apparent differences in reasons to study Sociology according to gender, and to assess overall motivation in comparing all given reasons. In a second phase, as the dependent variable (consisting of different reasons) is non-continuous, Kruskal-Wallis tests were performed to test for statistical significance in differences between the groups of social origin which was further investigated with a Dunn-Test (Dinno, 2015), while a Wilcox test was performed to test for gender differences.

Findings

Overall, “interested in sociology” was the most prevalent reason for studying sociology with 76.4%, while a “secure career outlook” was the least frequent motivation with only 8.1%. It is highly intriguing that students do not study sociology because of an anticipated good career outlook or an urge to change established systems, but rather because of their inherent interest in the subject of sociology – society itself.

Gender

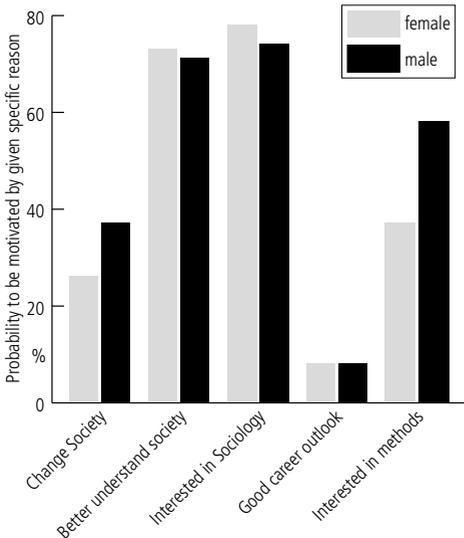
We find women and men being motivated mostly by the same reasons (Figure 1). The Wilcoxon tests suggest there is no significant difference between female and male students when it comes to the reasons of choosing sociology because of wanting to “change society” ($p > 0.22$) or “better understand society” ($p > 0.83$), and neither do the genders differ

in being “interested in sociology” ($p > 0.63$) or expecting a “safe career outlook” ($p > 0.9$). However, we do find a significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between female and male students concerning “interest in methods” with males being more likely to choose sociology because of their interest in methods used within.

Social Origin

The Kruskal-Wallis tests showed no significant difference (between the three groups of parental education) in projected likelihood to be motivated by the will to “change society” ($p\text{-Value} > 0.1$), by the “interest in sociology” itself ($p > 0.3$), “in the methods” used ($p > 0.46$) or by the “career outlooks” ($p > 0.81$). A Dunn-test (Dinno, 2015), which was conducted to more accurately test the relationship between parental education and the motivation to “better understand society”, revealed an unadjusted $p\text{-Value}$ of 0.02 for an coefficient of 2.21 between “No Degree” and “Tertiary Education” but an adjusted $p\text{-Value}$ of 0.08 rendering all findings on effects of social origin statistically insignificant.²

Figure 1 Distribution of student motivations, grouped by gender



Systemevaluation-survey at the Department of Sociology at the University of Zurich (SYSE), FS21, Data collected in 2021.

Discussion

Our results show that the student body is quite homogenous in terms of motivation on “choosing sociology”; students show an inherent interest in society and the study thereof, regardless of gender and social origin. Whether this homogeneity is derived from self-selection, intrinsic or extrinsic motivation, or deliberate decision making may not be answered based on this data. However, this was not the aim of this explorative study. The first research

2 The Dunn-test was conducted as preliminary findings in a linear model suggested a significant correlation. It classifies them, however, as a type I error, as the adjusted $p\text{-Value}$ implies no significance in this relationship.

question of decisive reasons for studying sociology can therefore be answered as followed: The urge to understand society as well as the interest in the study thereof are the prevalent motivations. Considering social inequality by incorporating gender and social origin, there are two cases where these categories differ. Namely, in interest in methods, where male students show a higher interest in, and students of high social origin being more interested in understanding society as a whole than students with low social origin. However, after adjusting for categorical data analysis, only the gender difference remains significant. Yet, the effect is not marginal, hinting at a practical significance as well. With these results, the second research question of varying motivations among enrolled students can be answered by stating that the motivations of already enrolled students do in fact vary by gender, but not by social origin. This contradicts perceived reality, as the department of Sociology at the UZH is heavily focused on (quantitative) methods, yet there are still far more women studying sociology than men. The fact that they nevertheless chose to study sociology in Zurich is highly intriguing, and shows that there is most likely a reason which was not captured or asked for in the SYSE study, and consequently could therefore not be incorporated in this analysis.

On the other hand, the results that show differences between genders concerning interest for methods to conduct social scientific research is congruent with already existing theory and studies, where women are (i) concentrating on humanities and social sciences (Ayalon, 2003), (ii) choose a major according to their preliminary tests which show a tendency to avoid method-heavy subjects (Dickson, 2010) and (iii) attended college for a broader rather than specific learning objective (Mullen, 2014).

On the topic of social origin, our results show that there is no difference. However, we are conscious about the fact that this is mostly due to the approaches and methods chosen, as well as the rather small sample size. Furthermore, we did not adjust or weight the groups; at the UZH, there are far more women studying sociology than men, as 87% of total sociology students are female (K. Rost, personal communication, September 19, 2022). So in the dataset of the SYSE men are still overrepresented, which may lead to a distorted result in gender differences. It is also questionable to split social origin into only three categories but given the low turnout and prevalence of item-non-response, it was the only option to operationalise this research interest. The very low $n = 4$ in the “No Degree” parental education category in itself also poses statistic challenges, as tests and results have a high error margin.

To sum up, the confirmation of gender discrepancies in motivation and the homogeneity thereof dependent on (simplified) social origin can be considered a starting point for (i) further and more sophisticated research/analysis and (ii) as a basis in policymaking concerning gender equality and diversity.

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From “hard” sciences to “soft” sciences: three different trajectories towards sociology

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Introduction

When the three of us first met at the Department of Sociology, one of the main subjects of discussion amongst us was what we did before becoming social science students. We were surprised to find out that we all had a background in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). Annabella Zamora came from computer science, Tina Latifi from pharmaceutical science and Jimmy Clerc from physics. During our conversations, revolving around our reorientation, we identified a lot of similarities between our individual experiences. One of the reasons we decided to turn to social sciences was our will to understand and analyse society. What was missing in our previous specialities was critical thinking; being able to reevaluate everything we had taken for granted.

Furthermore, we also came to realise that people around us were mystified by this choice. Their main question was: “Why move from science to a specialty that is not considered by many as a real science?”. This concern raises the issue of sociology, not only as a science, as well as its perception by others. By becoming sociologists, we realised that sociology was just as much of a science as our previous fields of specialty.

The terminology used to describe sciences can be a source of debate, therefore, we need to clarify our approach. A distinction is sometimes made between “hard” sciences – corresponding to STEM – and “soft” sciences – which includes social sciences and humanities. This perception of “soft” sciences being easier and not considered scientific is persistent (Feldman, 2001). We will use the term STEM and “hard sciences” as we

encountered them, amongst authentic discourses between students. Nevertheless, we emphasise our opposition about comparing these sciences by using the level of easiness as a factor.

In regards to our similarities, we wanted to understand the reasons behind students choosing to change fields and becoming sociologists. In other words, what motivates students from other fields to study sociology? In this article, we will first mention our personal experiences of changing paths from “hard science” to sociology. Secondly, we will explore more widely what changing path means and what it implies, in the way of understanding the world.

Three experiences in “hard” sciences: starting from pharmaceutical science, physics, and computer science

From pharmaceutical science

Throughout my undergraduate scholarship, I majored in natural science. Naturally, it made sense for me to continue this journey, by choosing a profession in this field. There was no other option for me. So, I persevered for 3 years, studying a science that did not feed my hunger for social knowledge, aiming for a job that I would not find particularly interesting. Furthermore, the underlying pressure from my family did not allow me to consider reevaluating my path. At last, I decided to take a break and find a science that could fulfil my desire to understand the world surrounding me and that would also develop my critical thinking. That is when I found sociology.

From physics

When I was in high school, sociology was not a major that you could study. I only had a vague idea of what sociology was and I did not plan to study this discipline later on. Instead, I developed a keen interest in the “hard sciences” (namely in physics and mathematics) and it therefore seemed natural to me to study physics at university. I discovered a wide range of theories about the world, while learning to develop rigorous scientific methods. Being deeply shaped by this way of thinking, I felt the need to step back in order to be able to understand our world from a different perspective. Sociology then appeared to me as a way to understand through a more critical approach. This choice was obviously not easy to make at the beginning, given the low level of support from people around me for changing from a “hard” science to social science.

From computer science

I chose a scientific training path in high school to be able to keep my options open for my professional future. However, I was frustrated by the absence of social sciences. When I started to show interest in this field, I was quickly redirected to more “useful” career options by the school counsellor. I therefore pursued my studies in computer science, attracted by artificial intelligence and robotics. Only after studying it for two years, in two different universities, I realised that my interests did not lie in computing but in understanding its social implications. Studying at university, I was looking for more independence, more literature and material, and more critical thinking. Sociology became an obvious choice for me.

Changing path

Choosing social sciences over STEM is not a mere reorientation but rather a profound change of per-

spective in understanding the world around us. This change of our individual paths reflects a wider choice for an ever-growing number of students for the past few years in Switzerland and in particular at the University of Geneva.

The context of two faculties at the University of Geneva

Changing from one field of study to another is not uncommon for university students. The path the three of us have experienced, illustrates this trend and highlights in particular the growing interest of students in sociology and social sciences, at university level.

In the context of the University of Geneva, the statistics produced by the statistical information office emphasise a comparable trend between 2015 and 2021 (UNIGE, 2021). Indeed, the number of students enrolled in social sciences has increased from 1142 to 1533 (+ 34%), while the number of students in the “hard” sciences has only increased from 2640 to 2934 (+ 11%). The number of graduate students during the same period similarly reflects this trend, although the difference is less significant. Thus, the number of graduated students in social sciences increased from 338 to 462 (+ 37%), while it only increased from 521 to 675 (+ 30%) in STEM. Moreover, the proportion of students who graduated compared to the total number of student in each faculty is striking: between 2015 and 2021, a smaller proportion of students in the faculty of sciences graduated (19.7% in 2015; 23% in 2021) compared to students in the faculty of social sciences (29.6% in 2015; 30.1% in 2021). Although these statistics do not provide us with insight into the number of students that dropped out of university during this period, a survey conducted by the statistics office at UNIGE in 2017 (Observatoire de la vie étudiante, 2017) indicates that 28% of sci-

ence students would change path and/or university if they had to restart their studies, compared to a lower 19% coming from social science students. While these statistics reflect a growing interest in the social sciences, it is nevertheless relevant to address the question of the motivations for changing from STEM to the social sciences, based on our personal experience towards sociology.

Why choosing sociology?

A choice is formed by various factors, one of which is motivation. Therefore, choosing a field of study implies different motives that need to be outlined. We will first define the concept of motivation. According to Pintrich et al. (2006) in Corrales et al. (2021):

Motivation is the process that tries to explain how the set of thoughts, beliefs and emotions are transformed into a specific action to achieve a goal. It is the process by which the activity that is directed to an objective is instigated and maintained. (Pintrich et al., 2006, 2)¹

The concept of motivation has been the topic of many research by scholars. While Lambert (2015) describes the choice of orientation formed by students and their families based on the content of the studies and their professional outcomes, Corrales et al. (2021) make a distinction between internal motivations (vocation and preferences) and external motivations (reward such as salary and social position). In their research, they actually showed that internal motivations played a higher role amongst Spanish students, when it came to making choices. This result echoes with the work of Notter & Arnold (2003) in Switzerland, who demonstrated that personal interest, values, and abilities were the most

important variables when deciding which type of studies to follow.

The diminishing importance of external motivations could explain why Jary & Lebeau (2009) in the UK describe students in sociology as intellectually engaged while not having a clear trajectory, neither for their studies nor for their professional life. Corrales et al. (2021) suggest that students in social sciences were not considering employability as a priority, when making their choice. For them, the most prevalent factors were the idea of pursuing happiness and being able to meaningfully contribute to society.

These two elements can also be found in the work of Feldman (2001) who, after being a physicist decided to study social sciences. She valued reflexivity, critical thinking, and epistemological concepts. The change amongst students from one field to another has also been documented by Notter & Arnold (2003). They found that failing or being overwhelmed with assignments were not the most important reasons for changing fields. It was actually other reasons, such as disappointment in their current studies or a new interest in another field.

Nowadays, students' academic field choices are less affected by family pressures and economical restrictions (Poglia & Molo, 2007). Indeed, the choice for their speciality, is predominantly guided by their interest in the field. Poglia & Molo (2007) show how motivations regarding the choice of major, differs between STEM and social sciences. Indeed, students in STEM are motivated by the prospect of having a potentially interesting and recognised career; hence prestige is an important factor they consider when they are making a choice. Furthermore, the potential job prospects after completing a curriculum in STEM are particularly important for students in this field.

1 Translated from Spanish by Corrales et al. (2021).

With regard to social science students, they are more motivated by the idea of personal gain and enrichment. The prestige of their studies is less important to them, and they value more the ethical and human aspects of their field. Whereas for STEM students, they report a will of fulfilling their dreams with their studies (Poglia & Molo, 2007).

Furthermore, having a part time job is also a criterion for the choice of specialty (Poglia & Molo, 2007). They showed that it is more difficult to have a part time job while studying STEM than when studying social science. Statistics deriving from the Federal Statistical Office reinforce this idea. They measured that in Swiss Universities in 2020, nearly 40% of students in the social sciences and humanities had a part-time job, while only 20% of STEM students did. In addition, students in social sciences and humanities spent on average 10 hours per week on a paid part-time job while students in STEM spend on average 4,5 hours per week on a paid part time job (OFS, 2020).

What also distinguishes students in social sciences from students in STEM is the sometimes narrow nature of their fields (Feldman, 2001). Indeed, social sciences have objects that can widely vary and can also be tackled by different perspectives, whereas STEM studies have objects that are well defined.

Based on our experiences and the previously mentioned literature, we can draw a hypothesis on the process of changing from STEM to sociology. We suggest that students coming from STEM mostly followed external motivations such as clear professional and financial outcomes, as well as surrounding pressures. Afterwards, the ones disappointed by their studies could decide to follow their internal motivations such as their personal interests and therefore join sociology.

Conclusion

With this contribution, we discussed what motivates students from other fields, and especially from “hard” sciences to study sociology. We reflected on our experiences and drew from the studies of other social scientists, regarding the factor of choice when it comes to studies. We described the context of Switzerland and the University of Geneva, emphasising the constant increase of new students. We defined the type of motivations involved in the choice of studies, particularly the differences between STEM and social sciences. However, we identified a lack of research when exploring the reasons of changing from a field to another. Hence, we propose a hypothesis which could be further investigated. As we discussed earlier, students in STEM are more affected by the professional prospects for their future, when it comes to choosing their field. We could argue that these students in exact sciences that initially favour a rational approach could turn to social sciences, in order to search for a feeling of self-improvement that was previously lacking. Therefore, studies in STEM could evolve by taking this need into account and proposing closer collaborations between sciences and society.

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What engagement for me as a future sociologist?

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Introduction

In this paper I will consider my future as a sociologist, as well as the role I might play in society. In our society, which is affected by numerous crises – climatic, political, and economic –, I can have an important power of action, either by shedding light on realities that are often unknown, or by publicly engaging within society to make things happen. First, I will talk about how I foresee my possibilities for action as a sociologist, in my personal context. Then I will analyse the general challenges and difficulties of the sociologist's – i. e. a social scientist's – modes of engagement in society, depending on the mode of engagement chosen. Finally, I will conclude by synthesising my remarks and making some comments on the usefulness of the social scientist's engagement with the social realm.

My role as sociologist

To begin with, I will briefly describe the context in which I live and study sociology so that the reader will have a better understanding of the means of action that seem reasonable for a sociologist to use in the society. I am 22 years old and I come from a working-class household in which my father is a retired bricklayer and my mother works as a cleaner. I live in a rural commune and I started my bachelor's degree in sociology in Neuchâtel in September 2021. Furthermore, I have been involved in a left-wing political party since 2018, and therefore I have a political affinity.

As a future sociologist, I consider it my duty to use my skills and social standing to participate in trying to improve the world we live in. To achieve this goal, there are several possibilities. First of all, it is possible to “simply” get involved in one's university to optimise its functioning and make it

more egalitarian. To do this, I have my knowledge of discrimination and inequality – class, gender, etc. – in the social world. Furthermore, I have the weight and credibility as a researcher to support measures to enable everyone to complete their studies. In concrete terms, I could support the continuation of the recording of lectures and their remote broadcasting, which was introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic, so that socially anxious or mentally disturbed people are not disadvantaged in their academic pursuits. These steps reduce the need for these people to go out and see people, which would reduce their anxiety.

Another possibility, of course, would be for me to choose a broader level of institutional involvement, whatever it may be – communal, cantonal, or federal. What can possibly change my commitment now is that I am no longer in the ivory tower that the university can sometimes be. Indeed, I am now confronted with other social fields and visions of the world than the one that research leads me to have. Here I can mobilise my knowledge of the social world as it functions, with its relationships of power and collaboration between agents and various structures. Moreover, the profession of researcher enjoys a certain prestige that allows it to publicise issues that are sometimes ignored and unknown to civil society and political decision-makers. For example, I could highlight the elements discovered during research on a little-studied subject that sheds light on certain practices and would make it possible to bring about a legislative change to improve the situation. For example, one could imagine a study to analyse certain practices of carers towards patients in psychiatric hospitals that could be used to improve patient care. To sum up, I can say that my commitment as a future sociologist is to make

the world we live in more equitable and just, and that my commitment can take place on several levels, simultaneously or not.

There are a few points I can make about what I have just said. First of all, my involvement in society can in fact take many forms – political activism, involvement in associations, taking a stand on social debates, and so on. I have chosen here to talk mainly about the militant aspect of the sociologist's commitment to society, because of my fairly strong political socialisation, I see my role as a future producer of knowledge in the social body as a weapon to fight against oppression.

Secondly, I have only mentioned the knowledge that the sociologist produces and the cultural capital that he or she possesses as tools. Nevertheless, it is perfectly possible to play the role of researcher without necessarily valuing or producing knowledge. Thus, the simple fact of supporting a project or ostensibly showing – by demonstrating, for example – that one rejects a particular reform can give an important impetus to one's cause. In this case, it is the prestige of my status as a sociologist and the symbolic capital that goes with it that allows me to do this. A famous illustration of what I have just said was Pierre Bourdieu's commitment against the reforms of the Juppé government in 1995, as well as the media coverage that followed, and Bourdieu became a public figure. The aim of this reform was to adapt the functioning of civil servants' pensions to those of private sector employees, which provoked massive strikes, which Bourdieu openly supported (Duval n. d.).

Finally, I must be careful about the way I engage with society and the causes I can support or even give credibility to because of my status. Indeed, the fact that I am a researcher and that I have done long studies – by projecting myself – does not prevent me from promoting false or even dangerous ideas.

A recent example is the case of the French sociologist Laurent Mucchielli, who promoted conspiracy theories about the effectiveness of the Covid-19 (Deszpot 2021). I think this shows that one should always keep a certain modesty and a sharp critical mind when engaging in society. We should not be blinded by our opinions when we weigh up our status as researchers. It is also important to be aware that when I engage in a cause as a sociologist, I am putting the credibility of my discipline as a whole, and that I must be careful not to tarnish it by supporting struggles that are close to my heart.

Challenges and difficulties of the sociologist in society

I will now turn to the challenges that the sociologist's engagement with society creates. First of all, it should be noted that we have been living in a world of crisis for a number of years. Between climate change, pandemics, and the various economic difficulties of the last few decades, our societies are being put to the test. In this complicated context, it is necessary for the sociologist to think long and hard about how he or she intends to invest in the community. This concerns all researchers in the academic world, who must also find out how to manage their involvement – or not – in society.

For the sociologist, the difficulties depend in part on the mode of engagement chosen, if there is any engagement at all. Nevertheless, it is always a question of the researcher delimiting and negotiating a role that allows him or her to maintain a certain independence in relation to his or her profession. Moreover, he or she must delimit at least what is an engagement and what is research. This being said, it is necessary for the researcher to be involved in society, given that he or she is part of it and has things to contribute to improving the state of the world.

The main difficulty for the sociologist is to put into practice a committed knowledge, to use Bourdieu's notion (Bourdieu, 2002). The answer to this will often depend on the researcher's vision of science and its relationship to the community, and perhaps on the sociological tradition of the researcher. I will now take a practical example. Let's say a sociologist is active in an LGBT+ political group, and has done some work on these issues. He will have to promote the results of his research to his group according to the usefulness that they can have, while not imposing himself as the sole knower nor taking advantage of his position to impose his point of view on the strategy that the said group must follow.

It is in this tension between the contribution of the knowledge produced and the risk of imposing one's opinions through one's social status and the prestige that the sociologist possesses that the success of the sociologist's commitment is at stake. However, today there are new issues which redefine the researcher's investment. Thus, the interdisciplinarity within the academic field makes it complicated for the sociologist to think of an activist commitment by including only his or her discipline. It is perhaps necessary to consider coordinating his or her role in society with other fields and other researchers.

In addition, militant movements – of the left – have evolved and now readily appropriate concepts forged by the social sciences – typically the notion of intersectionality – which requires the researcher to reflect on how to react to this phenomenon: Should we welcome this diffusion or on the contrary worry about possible misuses?

Finally, the development of social networks means that the researcher's investment in society can also take place via new modalities, for example, being anonymous. Moreover, these new forms of

commitment make it possible to be a researcher and an activist at the same time. For example, there are a number of Twitter accounts maintained by sociologists who alternately share or create activist content and then describe their work or sociological concepts. This raises the question of the potential risk of confusion between the role of researcher and the role of activist. It also raises the question of how effective the engagement of sociologists on social networks really is compared to the off-line.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have first described my personal view of the role of sociologist in society, focusing on my personal situation before explaining my conception of the researcher's investment, which consists – whatever the site and the level of commitment – in fighting against oppressions while not taking advantage of his or her status to exercise symbolic violence on others. I then emitted some considerations on what my role as a researcher can imply and on some attitudes to have.

Secondly, I analysed some old and recent global difficulties inherent to the engagement of the researcher in society. With the traditional problem of how to put an engaged knowledge in the society, I also evoked the novelties brought by social networks in the sharing of knowledge. In addition, I have briefly described the conceptual reuse of social science notions made by some members of left-wing movements.

I would like to raise a few more points in this conclusion. On a personal note, I believe it to be a good thing that researchers are engaging on social networks. Indeed, their status of sociologist does not give them a particular power, they remain ordinary human. As long as the researcher does not seek to mislead the public, does not use his or her status to humiliate people, and does not use his or

her knowledge to invalidate statements from personal experience, I see no problem with a sociologist engaging in network activism. Finally, I consider that it is more harmful to adopt a scientific attitude aiming at subordinating society to science than to put scientific knowledge into play, even if it is sometimes challenged by other social fields.

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From situated knowledge to openly politicised research: reflections from apprentice sociologists

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Introduction

As social sciences students, we learn about defining our place in the social world. Most of us probably experienced the strange feeling of attending a course that made us feel uncomfortable. For example, we became aware of our various privileges, unknown to a lot of us until that day. For us, this turning point happened during a course about the concept of whiteness. We came to understand the extent to which whiteness comes with a set of privileges and benefits. As Molinier (2020) puts it “becoming white simply means assuming a non-universal position, accepting « decentering » as an opportunity for everyone” (p. 51). Indeed, it was somehow on that day that we became white, even though we had been since we were born.

Our place, between the outside world and academics, and among academics themselves, is a constant negotiation between a constellation of positions: being perceived as academics and a dominant group by the outside world, while being a student and a dominated group within the academic world. This could perhaps enlighten us on what the specific status of the “apprentice sociologist” is, a researcher trying to find legitimacy in a conflicted and competitive field during his or her studies in academia and beyond.

While sociologists are required to adopt a neutral and objective point of view to conduct their research (Simmel & Levine, 1972), our objectivity is challenged by the biases induced by our position. For example, the way by which we perceive reality is distorted by the blindness of whiteness (Collins, 1986; Harding, 1992; hooks, 2015).

In this paper, we will explore how as apprentice sociologists we understand the specificities of our position, relying on the works of experienced sociologists. We are aware that this specific position highlights the potential biases of our scientific activity. We will therefore defend an openly politicised practice of research, one that fully acknowledges the researcher’s position and the induced effects on the production of scientific knowledge.

Becoming situated apprentice sociologists Joining the world of sociology

Sociology is not a widely taught discipline at the secondary level in Switzerland, and most students only become familiar with the discipline once they start university. What is it then, that draws students towards such an academia-bound discipline?

While there is an abundant body of literature on students’ motivations to obtain university degrees (Corrales Serrano et al., 2021) and the balance between internal and external factors, little is known on the specific motivations towards social sciences, let alone sociology. We know that representations of the professional outcome of social sciences are rather unclear and vague (Poglia & Molo, 2007), in a context where there are strong demands for highly specialized skills. However, around 18 % of enrolled students in 2021 in Switzerland were in social sciences¹. Without going into the specifics,

1 Étudiants des hautes écoles universitaires selon l’année, le domaine d’étude, le niveau d’études, le lieu de scolarisation et la haute école, OFS, <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/fr/home/statistiques/education-science/personnes-formation/degre-tertiaire->

this number shows an underlying tension between the common representations of the discipline and its attractiveness on prospective students.

Research in Switzerland has nevertheless shown a gender bias in the selection of such academic courses, women being more likely to enrol in social sciences than men (Poglia et Molo, 2007, 132). Research has also shown that students in social sciences were more often influenced by their personal values and the idea of a personal gain than their “hard sciences” colleagues (Poglia et Molo, 2007, 133). This over-representation of women and the importance of personal values lead us into thinking that social sciences are a field deeply shaped by the identity of its apprentices.

However, being a field of study that does not necessarily prepare one for a specific job, students who benefit from sufficient resources might be more likely to choose this path. These students would have time to “find themselves” and figure out what to do next, without needing to worry about their financial situation. A class analysis would also remind us that university has been an elitist privilege for a long time. Despite a recent democratisation, it remains relatively unattainable to people lacking specific capitals. Although we know that 47% of students come from a family where at least one person holds a university degree, that 33% are of migrant descent and that 43% benefit from a loan or a scholarship², more specific numbers on class, race, and sexual orientation among social sciences students are lacking and would help to complete this analysis. We reckon that we as individuals were drawn to sociology because of our personal identi-

hautes-ecoles/universitaires.assetdetail.21884398.html.

2 Les étudiant.es dans les hautes écoles, OFS, <https://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/fr/home/actualites/quoi-de-neuf.assetdetail.15864832.html>.

ties. Despite coming from different backgrounds, sociology represented for us, a tool for emancipation and to gain a new voice. “Doing” sociology meant, at our beginnings, being able to identify patterns of domination and offer solutions designed within the margins of hegemonic social structures.

Using sociology to question our position

Learning sociology transforms our vision of the world. We came to realise that things were not always as they currently are, and that societies are constantly evolving. During *ex cathedra* lectures, we were introduced for the first time to the history and foundations of sociology (Delas & Milly, 2015). Understanding sociology’s evolution reinforced our knowledge of social transformations and taught us the permanent construction of our scientific methods to grasp society.

This knowledge quickly became a tool to situate ourselves in the social world. We explored fields through thematic courses in which teachers were specialised in. For example, we learned about the evolution of concepts used to describe social distribution: class, ethnicity, gender, age, and disability (Law, 1991). Having these categories in mind lets us analyse, consciously or not, our own social position. Our social spaces become our observation fields, and even small details around us are analysed. Eribon (2018) even calls these categories reading grids of ourselves, in his autobiographical essay where he reflects on his own experiences.

We could draw several conclusions from these observations and analysis. With a deterministic approach, we could understand whether we were predestined, or not, to this vocation, from indicators like the number of books at home (Eribon, 2018). With another approach, we could see that our reflexive capacity drives us to analyse our experiences and to correct our paths depending

on discoveries, events, and what we are becoming. In doing so, we “combine our story with History, what we are with who we are asked to be.” (Alter, 2022, 295)³.

However, being situated does not give all the answers to how to act as sociologists. Situating ourselves can make us wonder about our legitimacy to produce knowledge, either because of who we are, or because of who we are producing it about.

Conducting situated politicised research Being reflexive over our scientific practice

The relationship between social scientists and their object of research, especially when the latter is associated to a dominated group, can be theorised by a feminist Marxist/materialist analysis. This social analysis focuses on the exploitation by a class (capitalists, men) of another class (proletarians, women and gender minorities), where exploitation is defined as the capture of the excess value created by the work of the dominated class (Clochec, 2021; Koechlin, 2019).

As apprentice sociologists, we are situated in dynamics of domination, and we can take into consideration our way of producing science from a Marxist/materialist perspective. Sociologists can create situations of domination. The widely used method of interviewing is a good example in which the researcher can dominate, from its social capital and title, the people interviewed. Another example would be when the analysed population is considered a dominated group. This situation gives the researcher the power to produce knowledge on a group that may have less access to university and, because of that, to positions of power. It is because of this inequality that we can theorise that this

3 All quotes from sources in French are our own translation.

relation is an exploitation. It is the condition that enables the scholar to capitalise on its research.

In her book about food contamination after the Fukushima disaster, Kimura (2016) briefly reflects on her position as a Japanese “expatriate researcher”. Unlike people who live in Japan, she “has the privilege of leaving the place and the people whenever she wishes” (p. 12). The use of that privilege can be a type of exploitation by researchers of the people they analyse. The scholars create a value – financially and symbolically – by their research, with the work and time – broadly unpaid – of the investigated people, without having to face the problems/dangers the people they analyse face. Beyond acknowledging our position, how can we act in order to get away from this example of disaster capitalism (Kimura, 2016)?

Trying to act differently: critical analysis of existing methods

Through our studies, we were trained in specific methods for which we could not ignore the deep connections between sociological and anthropological methods. Like anthropologists before us, we aim to understand given groups that are of particular interest to us by going deeper into their culture and their shared set of norms and representations. In our case, when we use qualitative methods, and even more ethnographic research, we insert ourselves within a group, while making it very clear that we are not insiders, but outsiders. This distinction creates a certain remoteness that is deemed necessary to ensure the scientificity of our data collection.

However, we also cannot ignore the critics formulated against anthropology, even in its current use. It is often characterised as a colonial discipline, “based on a method of data collection that effectively imposes a power relationship through the ex-

ploitation of the testimony of informants” (Musso, 2008, 13). Although sociology was not designed to legitimise colonial ideologies, it has often taken a similar path, relying heavily on disconnected data collection with no expectation of accountability from the researcher’s part (Musso, 2008).

There are methods specifically designed to reduce the gap between researchers and their participants and therefore to act on the known domination dynamics. Participative research could be an approach to counterbalance this gap (English et al., 2018). It relies on the idea that participants would take part in research beyond being a source of data but being part of the broader process.

However, during the last decades, it took several different forms and received criticism. Originally perceived with “romanticism and idealism” (Einsiedel, 2021, 125) social scientists became sceptical as the terminology of participative projects became more fluid and norms were reshaped. Aside from the image of empowering people, Sato (2021) showed that many Japanese see this kind of initiative as the “laziness and negligence of experts and officials, rather than democratic opportunities for future-making”.⁴

Choosing openly politicised research

A certain way to do sociology advocates for neutrality as researchers. Heinich (2002), who is well known for her criticism of activism in research and her controversial positions that are rejected by fellow sociologists, promotes what she calls “engaged neutrality”. She considers sociologists should go “beyond oppositions” (p. 126) to engage with “acceptable compromise” leading to social change.

However, this neutrality is questionable. The way science is done has been thoroughly studied (Collins, 1986; Latour et al., 2013; Vinck, 2007) from the point of view that science is after all, a social practice (Merton, 1938). These works demonstrate how science is embedded in social, economic, and political matters. This analysis can be done about sociology too. As the sociologist and philosopher Geoffroy de Lagasnerie affirms: “politics is still here, in every word pronounced” (2017, 24). He means that the knowledge one produces necessarily has effects on the world; it “contributes to shape the path of the world” (de Lagasnerie 2017, 12), and it is something one cannot ignore. If everything produces an effect on the world, neutrality does not exist, as you either contribute to reducing violence, or let it happen – if not increase it.

Sociologists usually produce science so that others outside the research field can use it to either to defend their interest or to try to make the world less unequal. Producing sociological knowledge with the idea of reducing the effects of domination, can participate in the dismantling of oppressions, not as a second step but as a goal of their research.

As apprentice sociologists, we are embedded in domination dynamics and our concerns lie in decreasing the consequences of these dominations in our practices. This openly politicized practice of research does not come without threats to one’s career. As Taylor and Raeburn (1995) emphasise it on the case of queer scientists, “coming out to colleagues and students, teaching and publishing on gay and lesbian topics, and promoting equality for lesbians, gays, and bisexuals in the academic workplace can have significant professional and personal costs” (Taylor & Raeburn, 1995, 268). As students, we already express concerns on the potential risks we face by being “too engaged” on certain topics, especially one that would be too controversial to

⁴ Excerpt from Sato’s presentation during the conference Science&You, 2021, <http://www.science-and-you.com/fr/keynotes2021> [7.12.2022].

obtain approbation from a supervisor or funding for the pursuit of our research trajectory.

In our opinion, this vision does not imply abandoning rigorous methods and still ensures its scientificity. In fact, embracing this openly politicised perspective on research means having “a practice of social science that is at the same time a practice of knowledge and a practice of destabilization” (Lagasnerie, 2017, 51). In our social context, it seems more needed than ever to work on these two practices. Working on them shifts the way we understand the role of sociologists as not only “data collectors”, but bridge builders between the data they collect, the community’s knowledge and the solutions they can advocate for.

Conclusion

We have, throughout this paper, explored the necessity to gain access to a more openly politicised view of research in social sciences but also to a more reflexive approach that disempowers us as members of a dominant group. This necessity is, for us, deeply connected to how we see our role as future sociologists. Whether our future lies in academia or in other spheres of society, we do not identify with a neutral sociology that would simply be about collecting data and analysing them. We believe in a sociology that aims at proposing more sustainable solutions to contribute to brighter futures on the side of people traditionally excluded. This vision means that we are not neutral, that we have to be aware of our position on the topics we study and be reflexive by communicating and acting upon it. This also means that we must be able to step back when others could be telling their own stories. With recent controversies around the role of climate scientists ringing the bell and breaking the neutrality rules of their institutions, we witness that change is around the corner. As we now enter

new stages of our sociological path, we reckon that we too want to be part of that change.

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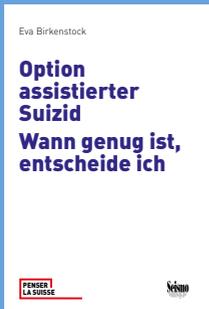


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