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Published online: 22 Nov 2024.

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What does a sociologist do? Norwegian, English, and Hungarian university students' possible future selves

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how sociology undergraduate and postgraduate students understand and discuss their possible (sociological) futures in three national contexts of Norway, England, and Hungary. Using an international comparative design based on a total of 38 semi-structured interviews from the three case-study countries, it explores first, current university students' perceptions of roles and activities, goals and outputs, as well as organisational settings one needs to work in to be considered a *sociologist*. Second, drawing on the possible selves model outlined by Markus and Nurius and further conceptualised by Harrison this paper explores students' allusions to probable, like-to-be, and like-to-avoid selves, providing a brief window into their imagined sociological futures. Students' perceptions of their future sociological selves and the influence of role models in shaping their sociological identities reveal intricate decision-making processes, undertaken while navigating their sociological futures.

Introduction

With a strong policy focus on individual employability, the benefits of a highly educated workforce or a more equitable share of university opportunities are rarely considered. However, research has shown that university students do not necessarily subscribe to a marketised view of higher education (Budd 2017; Tomlinson 2017). Indeed, graduate futures are complex, divergent, and changeable (e.g. Ingram et al. 2023; Naess 2020), with Williams et al. (2016, 897) pointing to the important 'effect of demographic, economic organisational, and technological' changes. Using the debate of employability as a point of departure, this paper draws on Markus and Nurius (1986) conceptualisation of possible future selves to detail current students' understandings of their potential future pathways. We explore how current Bachelor's, Master's, and PhD students in Norway, Hungary, and England see the roles sociologists take on *and* relate these to their own future career plans. This is key, given the complex interlinks across the whole student lifecycle between university subject choice, student experiences, success, and retention, as well as future career plans (Bennett 2021; Souto-Otero, García-Álvarez, and Santos Rego 2023). Sociology as a

disciplinary area presents an interesting terrain to explore how current students think about their discipline (Ashwin, Abbas, and McLean 2014) and their possible futures: it might be seen as 'infused' with moral purpose (Burawoy 2005), with Muddiman (2018) finding that students pursue it in search for social justice. However, given the increasing focus on the monetary outcomes and of university education especially in England, as well as political attacks on the broader social sciences in Hungary (Karády and Nagy 2019; Krekó and Enyedi 2018) make choosing, staying on, and charting a career in sociology not straight-forward. Indeed, using an internationally comparative research design allows for an exploration of similarities and differences between how students conceptualise and understand their possible next steps beyond a sociology degree dependent on the local context (Tholen 2014). This paper first looks at the recent literature on employability in the three case-study countries and introduces the conceptual model of possible future selves. Then, it turns to outlining the research design and methods, before presenting the results on how students see the roles sociologists play in society, along their own possible (sociological) futures. Lastly, the paper closes with a discussion of key findings and take-away points.

Literature review

Graduate outcomes in Norway, England, and Hungary

Using an internationally comparative research design helps broadening the horizon from the national, system level view to see a wider picture when exploring similarities and differences of educational systems (Phillips and Schweisfurth 2014). First, to contextualise this study we briefly introduce what universities and social sciences are seen to be for in the three national contexts. Traditionally, universities have been considered and have served as a hub of knowledge exchange, intended mainly to nurture a small group of 'elites' as future clerical and administrative officials before the nineteenth century (Collini 2012). The roles of universities have changed and expanded since the nineteenth century as industrialisation transformed the societal structure locally and globally (Collini 2012; Denman 2005), to arrive at what Marginson (2016) calls high-participation systems. Universities are to respond to the needs of local or regional societies (Arthur 2006; Collini 2012; Denman 2005), often seen as businesses that cater to students as customers (Denman 2005; Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion 2009). However, research has shown that students do not necessarily subscribe to a marketised view of higher education (Budd 2017; Muddiman 2018; Tomlinson 2017). 'Graduate outcomes' are often understood in a narrow sense as higher earnings and preparing students to become more employable has become one important purpose of higher education (Arthur 2006; Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion 2009). As Green and Henseke (2021) show, the graduate premium relative to workers with upper secondary education stayed stagnant in most of Europe, grew in the Nordic countries, and declined in some Southern as well as Eastern European states, including Hungary. Not all 'outcomes' of university education, however, can be explicitly measured. For example, students' identities, such as perceptions of their own discipline and their academic confidence change as students progress with their studies, having an impact on personal and professional development and transitions into future careers (Teichler 1998; Tett, Cree, and Christie 2017).

The progression to higher education varied in different contexts: in 2022, 48% of 25–64 year-olds had higher education attainment in Norway and 51% in the UK, but this was only true for 29% in Hungary (OECD 2023a). While the percentage of 25–64 year-olds with higher education attainment in the three countries generally increased over time (OECD 2023a), Hungary reached its highest level in 2012, fluctuating around 30% subsequently. Kandiko and Mawer (2013, 9) suggest that students in the UK primarily see higher education as 'a pathway for career enhancement' and seek for career support from their university (Money et al. 2017). Similarly, in Norway, higher education participation and attainment is very high (OECD 2023a, 2023b), coupled with low unemployment rate (Arthur 2006; Damşa et al. 2015). Aamodt, Hovdhaugen, and Bielfeldt (2010) argue that employability is a core purpose of higher education in Norway; the higher rate of graduate education after the first degree and lower rate of employment in relevant sectors can be partly accounted for by the devaluation of first degree qualifications. The Hungarian case has seen a large scale cut to funded university places that marked a stark departure from higher education policies of the European Union (Fehérvári et al. 2016; Hordósy and Szanyi 2020), with a focus on employability through strengthening science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects, away from arts and humanities as well as social sciences (Derényi 2018).

We do not intend to suggest that there are one or a couple of core purposes of higher education in each of the three national contexts, nor to debate whether the primary role of higher education should be the development of discipline and thinkers within discipline, rather than employability (Tight 2023). However, in this section, we aim to use, for example, the concept of employability, to put the three national cases into context, discussing variations and pointing to the overarching discourse around graduate futures.

Possible (sociological) futures

The divergence and diversity in the perception of employability reflect a nuanced relationship between higher education and future career prospects in different national settings. Drawing upon the possible selves framework developed by Markus and Nurius (1986), we explore sociology students' perspectives on their future employability, understood here as *possible (sociological) futures*. By juxtaposing the broader context of higher education and employability with the psychological framework of possible selves, a comprehensive understanding of sociology students' perspectives on their potential futures emerges, bridging the macro-level dynamics of education systems across three countries with the micro-level intricacies of individual motivation and goal-setting.

The possible selves represent people's ideas about what they might become, what they would like to become (hoped-for selves), and what they would like to avoid becoming (feared selves) (Markus and Nurius 1986). The theory suggests that individuals are motivated to work towards their ideal selves and/or avoid certain possible selves, which then influence their attitudes, behaviours, and decision-making mechanisms in relation to the future goals. Thus, we argue that one's ideas about their future selves can motivate present actions, with individuals who have well-defined ideas and goals about what they want to be more likely investing the required effort needed to attain these hoped-for ideas.

Markus and Nurius state that (1986, 955): '*Individuals' self-knowledge of what is possible for them to achieve is motivation as it is particularized and individualized; it serves to frame behavior, and to guide its course*'. Based on this, possible future selves can provide insights

into students' mental representations of potential future identities, their motivations, actions, and behaviours related to their future careers (Hock, Deshler, and Schumaker 2006; Leondari 2007; Markus and Nurius 1986; Markus and Ruvolo 1989). Therefore, it is useful to use this framework to gain a detailed understanding of higher education students' ideas about their like-to-be and like-to avoid-selves, particularly in relation to their academic courses (Harrison 2018). Exploring the mental representations of resultant probable selves, as conceptualised by Harrison (2018), of what they are likely to become in the future could provide relevant career guidance and curriculum recommendations.

Primarily, the field of psychology has utilised this model in research related to identity development (Hamman et al. 2010), adult development (Frazier and Hooker 2006), career counselling (Meara et al. 1995), and more. Recently, it has gained attention among researchers working in education. For instance, Hock, Deshler, and Schumaker (2006) used the model to explore student motivation and possible selves; Stevenson and Clegg (2011) looked at future selves through extracurricular activity in higher education; whilst Oyserman, Bybee, and Terry (2006) explored academic possible selves, emphasising the utilisation of the framework in understanding individuals' motivation (e.g. teachers, students) whilst linking it to educational contexts. A book edited by Henderson, Stevenson, and Bathmaker (2018) provides further theoretical insights into possible selves from a sociological standpoint. Whilst drawing on empirical studies on the application of this concept in higher education, they introduce a fresh viewpoint and encourage future researchers to investigate this concept further within educational settings. Harrison (2018) suggested that possible selves could underpin interventions supporting university participation from disadvantaged groups, proposing a new policy and research agenda. Similarly, Jones et al. (2022) explored the views of young people transitioning from college to university. Particularly, they were interested in, first, the future selves of students who are more likely to self-exclude from higher education and second, key decision-making moments whilst exploring emerging selves during this process. Their findings showed that the possible selves model acted as an efficient tool through illustrating the complex ideas when young individuals are elaborating their future selves (Jones et al. 2022).

Another important aspect of possible selves is that they are not always individual but are influenced by an individual's environment, shaped by social, cultural, and historical contexts (Leondari 2007; Markus and Nurius 1986; Unemori, Omoregie, and Markus 2004). This aspect has not been extensively empirically examined in the literature. To start to address this gap, in this article, we focus on exploring the possible future selves of sociology students from three countries: Hungary, England, and Norway. Asking students who they hope to become when they graduate from their courses led to an assessment of their possible future selves as sociologists within the broader social, cultural, and political structure. Through this approach we explored more than students' dreams alone, shedding light on their motivations, goals, and potential actions within their broader contexts to achieve these goals. Ultimately, curricular innovation and career support strategies through motivation and guidance can aim to broaden the image of possible future selves for these students, encouraging them to reach their potential and take control of their own futures (Harrison 2018).

Research design and methods

This paper presents data from a larger international comparative research project, focusing on students' perceptions of the role of sociologists in wider society. The overarching project

used mixed-methods to compare three national settings (Phillips and Schweisfurth 2014; Yin 2017). The data were collected from three European nations[1] as case-studies to achieve maximum variation regarding welfare state regimes in the European Economic Area in 2019 (Esping-Andersen 1996), with *Hungary* as an example of post-soviet Eastern European state, *England* as an example of liberal welfare state from the British Isles, and *Norway* as Northern European state. Comparing and contrasting these three national contexts allows for a reflection on several key and often taken-for-granted dimensions, namely the broader economic and political context, marketisation in higher education, as well as staff and student relations.

This paper draws on semi-structured interviews (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2011) with undergraduate and postgraduate sociology students, concerning their perceptions over possible (sociological) futures. The first author interviewed a total of 38 sociology Bachelor's, Master's, and PhD students individually as outlined in Table 1, selected from two institutions in Hungary and Norway, and only one in England.[2] Regarding the choice of institutional contexts, although McLean et al. (2015) argue that the acquisition of sociological knowledge and capabilities are not necessarily patterned by university status and thus the comparison of different types of universities can prove fruitful, in this study we decided to recruit students from two research-focused and highly ranked institutions in each country. This was to (a) cut down variation across the sample; (b) aid manageable recruitment and data collection; and (c) make comparisons more feasible between the case study locations.

The sample size reflects the scope of the study, in which students' perceptions of sociology and sociologists are explored in depth through interviews to identify similarities and variations (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2011). Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the interviews were conducted mostly online, between March and June 2020. The participants were recruited through departmental gatekeepers and adverts. This also means that the study likely reached students who were more invested in their sociology degrees in general and participating in university life in particular. As such, more representative data collection would be necessary to explore how the patterns of future sociological selves are seen in the wider student population. The project gained ethical approval through the host institution (UON School of Education, 2019/55).

Lasting about an hour, the interviews explored students' experience and understanding of becoming a sociology student and their possible future careers, focusing on these key areas:

Table 1. Interview participants by case-study country, university level, gender, and ethnicity.

	Hungary	England	Norway	Total (level)
Study level				
Bachelor's	10	5	4	19
Master's	1	2	5	8
PhD	6	2	3	11
Gender				
Female	8	10	7	25
Male		7	5	12
Prefer not to say	1			1
Ethnicity				
Ethnic minority in country of study	2		2	4
Majority ethnicity in country of study	5	15	6	26
Prefer not to say	2	2	4	8
Total (per country)	17	9	12	38

- **About the discipline**: disciplinary and institutional choice; how they see sociological research;
- **People in the discipline**: who is a sociologist and how does someone become one; experience of sociologists;
- **Your sociological research:** main areas of interest; experience of conducting research; future career plans.

The interviews in England and in Norway were conducted in English, whereas the Hungarian language interviews were all conducted and analysed in the original language, before translating extracts for this paper. All interviews were first fully transcribed in the original interview language through secured university transcription services or natural language processing software with manual checks. The authors then applied inductive thematic analysis, outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), through the data analysis software NVivo. The analysis involved six phases: familiarisation, initial coding, identifying themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and evidencing the themes using data.

This paper places individual students' agency regarding university and career choice within the wider national and international contexts. An open question allowed students to discuss a wide range of issues relating to professional standing and disciplinary belonging. These related to the training and career elements they deemed necessary for someone to be classed a sociologist; the skills, attitudes, and the sociological imagination one needs to exhibit; as well as the purpose of those actors within the field. First, we discuss how students posited who a sociologist was and what they did, in relation to different audiences, outputs, and organisational settings. Then, we discuss how the students talked about their imagined possible career(s) in sociology; here we explore students' allusions to probable, like-to-be, and like-to-avoid (sociological) selves (Harrison 2018).

Future sociologists, the future of sociology?

The following two sections explore first, how students saw the roles and activities, goals and outputs, as well as organisational settings sociologists operate in. This indeed helps to clarify the professional—as well as social, economic, and political—contexts that existed in students' mental representations, as potential spaces for sociology graduates. The second section will turn to how students connected these roles to their own future (sociological) selves. Throughout the two sections, the similarities and differences between the case study countries and degree levels are pointed to.

What does a sociologist do?

The interviews gave us an opportunity to explore how the diverse possible futures were perceived by students and shaped their understanding of sociology. This is crucial in regards to visibility and clarity of possible future employment outcomes. Sociology is seen as a broad, inclusive disciplinary space, meaning a wealth of potential futures can be imagined. Indeed, when prompted to think about *who a sociologist* is, students most often mentioned simply *a person who explores social issues*. Others demarcated this with having to use appropriate research techniques and theoretical grounding, or having to have a strong critical disposition to think sociologically, as Hilda suggested:

The way I see it is (…) that there are two types of sociologists. There's the accidental sociologists who were like, "oh, this seems interesting, I'll take some courses", and they kind of end up doing the whole run and just getting a job. And the blood sociologist or the… it sounds better in Norwegian, 'cause then you could put blood in front of anything and it means strong or very enthusiastic. You know, they could have done any other… or taken any other path in life, but they would still be a sociologist, in mind and body, because of their way of thinking and being critical. Hilda, MA, Norway

A more restrictive definition had time and structural markers, such as being a sociologist only whilst studying sociology or having to reach different qualifications in sociology. Regarding what levels of education one needs to be considered a sociologist, Grace talked about her view that an MA and/or a PhD are needed, given their focus on what she called 'proper research', referencing qualification inflation as a key issue:

I suppose, anyone who does sociology is a sociologist. 'Cause all my lectures are like 'you guys are sociologists, haha'. [Nowadays] pretty much everyone has bachelor's degree, so it's not that specialised anymore. But then, if you do a master's and definitely if you're in a doctorate, then I would say you're a sociologist. (…) I would say the point at which you start doing proper research… is more approaching being a sociologist. Grace, BA, England

Malcolm remarked similarly that first and foremost it was a 'sociological' gaze that is needed, however, he felt a Master's degree would be necessary too to become a sociologist:

So I think maybe people who study sociology have a sociological gaze, they see things through that lens. So in that sense, I'm a sociologist but… I wouldn't introduce myself as a sociologist at this point. (…) I think it's more after you're done your Master's, that's when you're a sociologist. Malcolm, BA, Norway

Further, students mentioned the roles and activities, goals and outputs, audience as well as organisational settings one needs to work in to qualify as a *sociologist*. The diverse views of students are summarised in Table 2. The roles are cross-referenced with Mills' (1959) sociological imagination, Burawoy's (2005) public, professional, policy, and critical sociologies, and Kalleberg's (2012) four basic roles for a sociologist, that of a researcher, teacher, public intellectual, and expert.

When discussing the roles, activities, goals, outputs, and organisational settings outlined in Table 2, students often implicitly connected themselves into those activities 'we' as sociologist do or should do. Students more explicit discussion of their own like-to-be or like-to-avoid selves are presented in detail in the second subsection.

Although most of these activities were mentioned in all three case-study countries, some were emphasised more than others. For instance, Eleanor, one of the English BA students highlighted critical approaches to understanding social issues that allow working towards a more just society through research outcomes and policies:

Pointing out injustices fundamentally, inequalities that shaped how society is structured. So maybe someone wants to perhaps renegotiate society's kind of dispositions, or who governs society in a broader sense… Perhaps someone that notices at the world isn't clear cut as it is perceived to be and sees that we actually could benefit from some sort of change, structurally to actually go forward with a more reflexive society. Eleanor, BA, England

However, it was the Norwegian case where sociological research informing policies was mentioned more. For instance, Maartje talked about the interlinks between sociologists as

Table 2. What does a sociologist do? Student views of roles, audiences, outputs, and organisational settings.

	Role	Audience	Output	Organisational setting	Mills 1959 Burawoy 2005 Kalleberg 2012
Thinking about social issues	Diverse societal roles	Public	Critical understanding of social issues	Diverse array of societal settings	Sociological imagination
Activism	Bettering social ills, agent of change	Public/local community	Change on smaller scale/localized	Non-governmental organisations, civil societies	Public/policy sociology Public intellectual
Commentate	Provide (media) commentary; public intellectual role	Public/media/policy	Shaping public opinion	Media/researcher outside of academic organisations	Public/policy sociology Public intellectual
Set/inform public policy	Advise on policy, work in social policy	Policy/academic/public	Applied research and policy recommendation	Researcher in government/academic in university	Policy sociology Expert
Do market research	Researching (profit-making) organisations, their markets and goods	Business/policy	Research reports that are not public	Private corporation, or working as a contractor	Professional sociology
Teach sociology	Teaching sociological methods, theory and specialisms	Academic/public	Next generation of sociologists	Academic in university Teacher in school	Professional and critical sociology Teacher
Research	Researching societal issues	Academic	Academic papers conferences	Academic in university/research institute	Professional and critical sociology Researcher
Theorise	Theorise societal issues	Academic	Theoretical work	Academic in research institute/university	Professional and critical sociology

researchers working in public policy areas for local or national government, especially across the wide and diverse research 'institute sector' (see, e.g. Eckerberg et al. 2018; Kalleberg 2012):

Sociologists have been important in Norway in writing reports for the government, so it's had a very strong position in sort of describing society, and maybe also coming with, what's it called, policy recommendations. Maartje, MA, Norway

Public-facing or policy work was perceived predominantly positive by students and seen as bettering social ills. For instance, Botond talked about the pride he felt over his lecturers being active in Hungarian activist circles, as well as commentating on social issues in the media. Indeed, there was a strong tradition of the public intellectual role in Hungarian sociology, with 'young first-class professionals sacrifice[ing] their careers in social studies—for many years, at least—on the altar of politics', especially throughout the years of transitions after 1989, but also since (Karády and Nagy 2019, 129). In embracing 'decidedly ideological criteria' for research funding distribution, successive Hungarian governments since 2010 often excluded 'known members of the opposition—a clear majority among sociologists' (Karády and Nagy 2019, 137). As such, sociologists often took on activist roles related to university education and a wide variety of issues:

(…) there were so many demonstrations, and then you could even see [the lecturers] on the street, and then you are even more proud to study with them. A bunch of my university professors used to be interviewed for [independent[3] media outlets]. So I think that throughout university I was proud of the fact that the people from whom I had the opportunity to learn, so to speak, not only interpret society here within the walls of the university, but also try to be a more progressive and proactive user of their own knowledge. Botond, BA, Hungary

Activism was looked at favourably by students elsewhere too, and indeed, was linked to the students' motivation for subject and institutional choice—for instance, Mia, an English PhD student suggested that her university choice was swayed by a broader approach to public sociology in the department she studied at, as well as seeing some potential role models embodying a commitment to bettering social ills and working with the local community:

I think I was quite aware that they had a lot of… and they had a lot of female professors, that was something I liked, and the fact that a lot of them are very much focused on advocacy, so it's… it's not just the academic bubble, we don't work with communities, but really, a very connecting to [city/town] and very much connecting to how they are working here. Mia, PhD, England

Throughout the last decades of the socialist era in Hungary and into the transition years, several market research agencies were launched (Karády and Nagy 2019; Szabari 2020). A particular concern given the underfunding of universities and related low wages is that academics take on several roles or externally paid projects—often in these research organisations (Alpár et al. 2019; Hordósy and Norris 2022). Working for for-profit research organisations were only mentioned by a few Hungarian students, often in negative light, as indeed like-to-avoid selves—explained in more detail in the next section. The emphasis on skills useable in market-research were perceived somewhat cynically by interviewees in our sample, seeing the emphasis as pandering to an internalised employability narrative of *other* students:

How do you lure them [to study sociology], how do you maintain motivation after a year, after two years, when they see that they won't be able to use [their degree] on the market? [The sociology department] try to organise [events] by inviting old sociologists from other fields. Csaba, BA, HU

The more traditional activities of sociologists working at universities—such as conducting research, and teaching the discipline were often implied in the discussions. Students of course saw their lecturers' role in teaching sociology most often, more immediately upon starting their course, and in more depth—research as an activity was often seen as more distant with less bearing on their studies. The following excerpts from Noémi (Hungary) and Mona (Norway) encapsulate key questions of the literature on the link between research and teaching (see for instance Buckley 2011; Clark and Hordósy 2019; Elken and Wollscheid 2016; Healey et al. 2010). Noémi talked about the issues of identifying a lecturer's research area if they were not clearly weaving this into their teaching:

> There are people who teach just general sociology, or general sociological subjects, unfortunately it has not been clear to me what their main [research] focus is. (…) I feel much closer to [those with whom] we sometimes discuss more personal things like [their research area]. But then there are others who don't mention examples from their [research] life, and I only know from social media sites that they [work at another research organisation]… But what do they do there? Noémi, BA, Hungary

On the other hand, Mona talked about what she perceived as an important link between the research areas of her lecturers, and how they indeed brought this into conversation with the lecture material:

> Maybe because usually [academics] say it, that they have been researching in this field, or that they have been working on this study. And I personally believe that it is quite a bit beneficial, for instance if I have a professor that is researching within the field that he is teaching, or she is teaching I think that also helps, and it sort of also shows that they are really interested in this, to make the class more engaging. Mona, BA, Norway

Finally, there was a larger disconnect between students themselves and those who might provide theoretical tools to understand the world. For instance, Blanka mentioned the work of 'dead white men' of sociology's core, whilst referring to a thinker role,[4] when talking about sociologists:

> A sociologist (…) are the big names for me. Durkheim and Bourdieu and such. So these are the names that come to mind for "the sociologist". I still remember what I heard when I was in first year, that a sociologist is the one who drinks coffee in the cáfe and smokes. It's a very weird picture, but if, say, I'm going to have coffee, I always remember that it's a shame I don't smoke, because I'll never be a real sociologist. Blanka, BA, Hungary

On the other hand, Daniel talked about theorising as an embodied practice, that he himself did as a *sociologist*:

> Because we in our mind some way develop certain theories about how the world works, how the society is, and how human behaviour functions. Daniel, PhD, Norway

Indeed, the requisite theories, concepts, research methods, and thematic foci of sociology underpinned how students discussed the diverse and, crucially, interlinked roles of a sociologist. The following section looks at how these link to discussions of students' own possible future selves.

Imagining possible (sociological) futures

Drawing on Harrison's (2018) conceptualisation of possible selves, we explore students' allusions to *probable*, *like-to-be*, and *like-to-avoid selves*, providing a brief window into their imagined (sociological) futures. The first part of this discussion can be understood along the interlinked motivators of *values, practise and impact*: students discuss (a) the principal values that guide them in planning their future; (b) the importance of enjoyment of their future (sociological) activities and practices; and (c) their aim for a positive societal impact of their work. The second part of this section explores the broader relational aspect of possible (sociological) futures, focusing on role models.

Students' discussion of like-to-be selves included the activities of researching and teaching. For instance, Selma suggested that upon completing her Bachelor's at a Norwegian university, she was considering a route into a research *or* a teaching role. Here this distinction related to her school experiences, rather than university. She talked about wanting to 'normalise' teachers from diverse backgrounds becoming role models in schools, attaching value to her own experiences of 'good teachers':

> **Rita**: *Do you see yourself going into a research role, a research career at some point?*
>
> **Selma**: *I'd really like that, I think. I haven't really decided if I only go for that route or (…) I have also noticed teachers have been really impacting my decisions and they've just made a difference in my life, good teachers. (…) At school there was never a teacher who looked like me or who kind of had the same [ethnic minority/migrant] background. So… I want to be in that area too. I don't know, normalise [difference]. Selma, BA, Norway*

Regarding a probable self, Ella talked about her aim to have more direct impact—in her case through policy research, working more directly with those having influence on the social context. She juxtaposed this with academic careers that she saw as more solitary and more removed from changing social issues as something to be avoided. She sees her like-to-be self as someone connecting practice and policy, although by keeping a 'research-touch' in her role:

> *I've been looking at some jobs where you for instance, work with… it's also public sector and with racism and discrimination, and you're [in] an advisory role in between the people working in the field, maybe municipalities, and you're also in contact with kind of politicians or more… this policy development. I think that would be ideal for me. And I've been considering if I wanted to do a PhD, but I think at this point, I'm more interested in doing other kinds of jobs. It's always something I could come back too. I want to keep this kind of… a little bit of the research-touch to the job, but something that's maybe a bit more hands on. And I like to work with other people or in teams, and in academia, I feel like you're often a bit…, you are alone with your work. Ella, MA, Norway*

Lilly experienced some major problems throughout her Master's at one of the English universities; she felt especially unsupported in the context of the emergent Covid-19 pandemic with the 'dissolution' of university campuses (Raaper and Brown 2020). She was disappointed in feeling that her like-to-be self of a job where she used her research skills felt out of reach. However, given her deep interest in Marxist theory, she thought she would apply critical understandings in her everyday work, wherever her probable-self would be employed:

Sociology (…) shouldn't just be academic, it should be about doing something and resolving social inequalities and marginalisation, and it's a practical discipline, so it be great to do that, but if nothing else, I can do that in the way that I lived my life, … I know, I don't know… [this might be] idealistic. But I do use it, and I apply it every day when I'm going to work, and I see things, and I go, "oh my God, that applies to such and such's theory". Lilly, MA, England

The importance of values in possible (sociological) futures were especially prevalent when students demarcated their like-to-avoid selves. For instance, as already suggested above, some Hungarian students discussed using their research skills in the pursuit of profit in market research. Csaba elaborated on why he would want to use his in-demand quantitative analytical skills for a few years but move on to pursue a more highly valued (albeit worse paid) career in academic research (Szabó 2021). He conceptualised having those skills as a temporary safety-net, helpful for him from as someone without the family tradition of attending university, or broader networks, or requisite familial funds:

Perhaps due to my little rural[5] family background, being a first-generation university student, if the existential crisis comes, I might have marketable knowledge. However, I would try to become independent from it as soon as possible, because I am interested in statistical theory and not its application itself. I would also like to see the beauty of its application [through market research], for one year, but no longer. You have to put up with it for one or two years, but after that let's move on into a researcher role. Csaba, BA, Hungary

Similarly, Daniel discussed what he saw as a problematic stance of avoiding deeper political and social critique, amounting to potential exclusionary practices. In this Norwegian case, he raised the issue that racism and marginalisation not being discussed at a societal level (Bangstad 2015; Gullestad 2004; Kyllingstad 2017). A major concern for him if taking a values-based stand as a researcher working with marginalised communities was that this might *implicitly* amount to a critique of the prevailing thought within the broader sociological community:

(…) there are certain themes and issues related to the society, where the main sociologists who are renowned and have a name in the field, have taken this approach of just taking the middle ground and not taking a particular stand to what the solutions to the problems are. So for instance, let's say the policies that are developed with regards to the issue of marginalisation or minorities, are in line with, to my understanding, in line with the focus of the majority, and particularly the party who have who are in power at that particular time. (…) [Some are] more concerned with not defaming those who marginalise, rather than speak up for those who are being marginalised. (…) However, if I'm writing [about my research outcomes on marginalisation], I think I'm already taking a stand. But the problem is that, I know at the same time that it may create some difficulties in the future. Daniel, PhD, Norway

We close the discussion with the relational aspect of imagining sociological (graduate) futures, focusing on the links to role models. Through such role models, possible selves can be shaped and contribute to the process of forming the mental representations of like-to-be, or indeed like-to-avoid selves. Thus, students can define who they do or do not want to become, providing a sense of continuity and a coherence in their personal narrative (Dunkel 2000; Dunkel and Anthis 2001; Markus and Nurius 1986; Oyserman and James 2011). For example, Lóránt emphasised the significance of personal connections and observing sociologist role models 'in the flesh', which can, in turn, offer motivation and focus to help shape possible future selves:

For me, what is so important is that there are lecturers who are so direct and we have a per-sonal relationship. This is very, very important, and for example we were doing research [in field settings] with [a number of lecturers]. [They] were so direct, we saw them function as people, and we did research in the process. And somehow it showed that the university doesn't have to be an alienating thing, because here, through personal relationships, you can find motivation and focus, which then provide much more than [title of research methods module].
Lóránt, BA, Hungary

The guiding principles of personal values, enjoyment of activities in a future job role, and hope for positive societal impact were all shaped by seeing positive but also negative role models of possible (sociological) futures, mixing and matching the roles of sociologists outlined in the previous section in Table 2.

Discussion

In this paper we explored how sociology students in England, Hungary, and Norway saw sociologists, and along this, their own possible future selves. We drew on, first, seminal sociological texts by Burawoy (2005) and Kalleberg's (2012), and second, related these to students' possible future selves, using the model outlined by Markus and Nurius (1986) and further elaborated by Harrison (2018).

This paper contributes to the literature in three key ways. First, it shows how membership of the sociological profession is seen as fluid: sociology students' understandings are often expressed very broadly—*someone who explores social issues*. However, this may be qualified by 'when' and 'where' one can be part of the sociological profession, demarcating levels of education or job roles.

Second, the paper provides an account of the different roles and activities students see sociologists taking on, such as *thinking about social issues; activism; commentating on social issues; setting/informing public policy; doing market research; teaching sociology; researching and theorising*. We set out how these roles correspond to diverse audiences, outputs, and organisational settings, linking to existing accounts of sociological roles (Burawoy 2005; Kalleberg 2012). These roles are not seen as exclusive, but as different sides to a sociologist more or less visible to students. The international comparative design this paper used pointed to interesting differences, but fundamentally, striking similarities between the three contexts. When looking at the diverse possible sociological roles, activism/activist was more likely to be mentioned in England, where income inequalities were higher (Esping-Andersen 2015; OECD 2024), and in Hungary where the government took a radical neoliberal approach to state welfare provision (Lendvai-Bainton and Szelewa 2021). Policy sociology on the other hand was discussed more in Norway where 'sociology grew up with the welfare state, which conferred a strong policy orientation' (Burawoy 2005, 21). Drawing on these results further research could explore in more detail how diverse student groups might understand and orient towards these roles and activities. Given the limitations of a small sample in this research, a detailed exploration of patterns by student background was not feasible.

Third, the results presented here point to possible futures being guided by the interlinked motivators of individual values, enjoyment of a future (sociological) job roles and commu-nities, as well as a strong desire to have positive societal impact—these can be seen as *layers* explicating their like-to-be as well as like-to-avoid selves. Importantly, these results reflect a sense of morally infused thinking of possible (sociological) futures (Burawoy 2005);

indeed, like-to-avoid selves were mostly linked to the perceived instrumentality of (for profit) professional sociology. As such, there is some resistance amongst students to see their futures predominantly through the lens of employability outcomes.

In terms of the conceptual contribution of this paper, using the possible selves framework offered a nuanced understanding of how students envision their sociological futures. The results showed the importance of values students arrived with and elaborated throughout their university time to fit with their imagined (sociological) future selves, involving a careful evaluation of practical considerations, societal expectations, and sociocultural context (Harrison 2018; Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997; Markus and Nurius 1986; Prince 2014). Further, the paper outlined how the disciplinary space allowed for experimentation with, and practice of different like-to-be and like-to avoid roles and activities to arrive at some desired positive societal impact. The multifaceted nature of these considerations shed light on the complex decision-making processes that students engaged in as they navigated their sociological futures.

The data presented here also indicated the importance of the broader scholarly and practice community as an example setting throughout the formation of possible (sociological) selves: to be able to observe and practice sociological research from a close proximity. The examples set by these personal links, role models 'in the flesh' were mostly seen as positive, rather than negative, charting like-to-be or, less often, like-to-avoid selves. Notably, positive personal connections seemed to contribute to a sense of motivation and focus, aiding students in navigating their academic and professional journeys (Gibson 2003; Ibarra 1999; Markus and Nurius 1986; Oyserman and James 2011). By considering possible selves and identifying positive role models in their chosen field, students gained insights into the skills, experiences, and paths that may lead to desired sociological futures. This understanding and mental representation could then reinforce and contribute to the formation of one's desired identity (Dunkel 2000; Dunkel and Anthis 2001; Oyserman and James 2011), situated within the broader structure, influencing the ongoing process of self-discovery, development, and the pursuit of personal goals. We believe that further understanding of the connections between these concepts among university students *and graduates* is crucial to assist students in aligning their goals with their desired future identities, making informed decisions, setting meaningful goals, and fostering personal and professional growth—ultimately contributing to a more fulfilling and purposeful educational experience (Harrison 2018). Some of these outcomes suggest that a reinforced link between an academic's teaching and research profile becomes key when thinking about the role of research and researchers in the sociology curriculum specifically, and employability and sociological futures more generally (Buckley 2011; Elken and Wollscheid 2016; Healey et al. 2010).

Notes

1. The original study planned to include Germany as well. However, in the face of recruitment challenges throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, the first author decided to instead focus on the three cases where links established prior to the first lockdowns meant the data-collection could proceed with comparative ease.
2. The case selection and response rate was impacted especially in the English case, given gatekeepers in sociology departments were hesitant to give access to interviewing students due to the scale of disruption of the pandemic.

3. One important and ongoing transformation of the current ruling party in Hungary has been to build its own media empire, with independent news outlets constantly under threat (Bajomi-Lázár 2021).
4. Relevant to contextualising Blanka's words is that the Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán once talked about the 'unemployed [arts and humanities] graduates brooding in the dim light of ruined pubs' (HVG 2012), related to the emphasis on STEM subjects away from arts and humanities, as well as social sciences.
5. Csaba here alludes to the urban–rural division that runs through the history of Hungarian sociology (Karády and Nagy 2019).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

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