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Why sociology?– comparing the driving forces behind university degree choice in Norway, Hungary and England

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ABSTRACT

This paper pinpoints the driving forces behind university degree choice in social sciences in three European countries. Using an international comparative design, the paper draws on both administrative secondary data to explore enrolment patterns in Hungary, Norway and England, as well as semi-structured interviews comparing perceptions of Bachelors, Masters and PhD sociology students of their subject choice ($N_{HU} = 17$; $N_{NO} = 12$; $N_{EN} = 9$). Enrolment figures for institutions offering sociology as a subject between 2008 and 2018 show that in England social sciences in general, and sociology in particular seem to be somewhat larger disciplines compared to Hungary or Norway. Based on student interviews the paper provides a typology along the axes of sociology focusing on oneself or others, and it being a generic or specific discipline. The resultant typology for degree choice ranges from an explanation for personal experience; to gaining tools to understand society, politics and broader inequalities; to sociological studies being a general basis for a career; and to hope for changing others' inequalities. The paper demonstrates that these diverse motivations are indeed relevant for curriculum planning and facilitating extracurricular participation, for sociology and also the broader social sciences. Students' motivations are not underpinned by a narrow and individualised understanding of financial returns to a degree: students aim for a meaningful job exploring, analysing and aiming to effect change in their broader or narrower societal context.

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Comparative international design; disciplinary choice at university; enrolment to sociology degrees; sociology university students; identity in university choice

Introduction

The decision-making process regarding university and disciplinary choices is a complex phenomenon influenced by various internal and external factors, including family background, socioeconomic status, cultural influences and personal strategies, values and interests (Kettley & Whitehead, 2012; Le et al., 2020; Mikkonen et al., 2009). In navigating these decisions, individuals' considerations are also influenced by broader structural

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factors (Brannen & Nilsen, 2005). For instance, students' choices within sociology are not solely driven by academic considerations. Empirical studies, such as Muddiman (2018), reveal that students often choose sociology due to a desire for social justice, a passion for understanding societal structures and an interest in exploring the complexities of human interaction. Inspired by Burawoy's notion (2014) that sociology is infused with moral purpose, the paper examines how current sociology students in three countries perceive their disciplinary choices.

The discipline of sociology serves as a useful example to understand how different driving forces behind student choice have a bearing on teaching and learning, curriculum design as well as the link between research and teaching. This paper uses an international comparative design (Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2014; Yin, 2017) to compare both patterns in student enrolment data *and* current students' perceptions of their university choice. We explore the similarities and differences about societal contexts and post-secondary systems of Norway, England and Hungary (Stevens & Shibanova, 2021). First, the paper utilises administrative secondary data to explore patterns in sociology course enrolment over time, contextualising these figures with broader social sciences and university expansion data. Second, semi-structured interviews with a total of 38 students yield a typology of motivations for studying sociology, ranging from a foundation for a career to an interest in society addressing inequalities affecting others, and explaining personal experiences. Providing students with an opportunity to articulate their expectations and aspirations for their chosen field is crucial for assessing potential implications for curriculum development, teaching sociology and the advancement of sociological imagination (McKinney, 2005).

This paper will first, provide an overview of university subject choice more generally, then introduce the broader sociological communities in each of the case-study countries to understand the disciplinary context students might be entering. Once the research design and methods are outlined, the findings are presented to first, contextualise sociological choice with enrolment figures for institutions that offer sociology as a subject, and second, outline how current students explained their main motivations for studying sociology.

Literature review

Disciplinary choice at university

The choice of what subject to study at university is a "free choice with limitations" (Holmegaard et al., 2012, p. 16), part of a broader decision-making process with a key question of whether to go to university at all (Holdsworth, 2009). Students have to balance three different "horizons of choice": their present interest in the subject, their image of what being a student of that subject will be like, and their image of their work-life after graduation (Holmegaard et al., 2012). Since present interest requires some experience of a subject, it is perhaps unsurprising that students are more likely to choose subjects they have studied before (Pinxten et al., 2015) and in particular their best subjects from those studied post-16 (Van De Werfhorst et al., 2003), as well as relying on perceptions of subjects formed throughout their schooling. For example, 10–14-year-olds already see science as "'specialist' and 'clever'" (DeWitt et al., 2012, p. 1455), a view which can

discourage even well-qualified students from choosing to study Science, Technology, Engineering or Mathematics (STEM) subjects at university because of doubts about their own abilities (Rodd et al., 2014). In contrast, imagining broader future horizons requires information outside of the students' experience. Because of the perception that the decision should be made individually, students can be reluctant to seek this information formally (Holmegaard et al., 2012) and rely instead on informal sources ranging from personal acquaintances to chance encounters at university open days (Slack et al., 2014). Similarly, the fact that expected earnings only have a small impact on subject choices (Beffy et al., 2012) might be related to average earnings across disciplines masking potentially large heterogeneity, as well as influences of institutional status and individual socio-economic background (Britton et al., 2022).

The need to find a balance between individual decisions and the wider social context of family resources and interests is a consistent theme across countries, despite differences in the specific country contexts (Peou, 2015). Indeed, inequalities of access to universities in general, and higher-status institutions, in particular, are patterned by socio-economic background (Crawford et al., 2017; Hordósy & Szanyi-F, 2020; Kettley & Whitehead, 2012; Thomsen et al., 2016). As such, the choice of a university degree subject is seen as a major career decision as much as an educational decision, with the high stakes leading students to struggle and doubt their own choices (Pinxten et al., 2015). Rather than taking place at a single, fixed point in time, these subject and career-related decisions continue to be revised and reconstructed throughout university (Hordósy & Clark, 2018a), whilst contemplating further Masters and Doctoral-level studies as well as formulating future plans and professional identities (Holmegaard et al., 2012; Hovdhaugen & Ulriksen, 2023).

Sociology as a discipline

Here we briefly outline the overall public perception of the discipline in each of the case-study countries to establish what understanding students might have as they opt to study sociology (Miskolczi, 2023). Sociology as a discipline has undergone significant transformations shaped by historical, political and social contexts. While the foundational works of Durkheim, Marx and Weber laid the groundwork, the discipline has evolved to incorporate contemporary issues and methodologies. The discipline is diverse and complex, exploring various human practices, ideas and organisational forms across contexts (Collyer & Williams-Veazey, 2023). Different countries have distinct traditions of sociological research and its application, influencing politicians and the public differently (Kalleberg, 2012; Karády & Nagy, 2019). In this paper, we are particularly interested in three European countries and will focus on Norway, Hungary and England.

In Norway, the institutionalisation of sociology was considered successful during the post-World War II period (Birkelund, 2006), marked by improvements in interactions with the outside world. Initially, Norwegian pioneer sociologists focused on international collaborations and networks, however, the Research Councils prioritised research objectives with a national focus, shaping sociology as a more domestic discipline (Birkelund, 2006). Through the establishment of a range of social science research institutes working in applied research, there is a strong policy relevance of sociology (Eckerberg et al., 2018; Kalleberg, 2012). Moreover, present-day Norway serves as an excellent

example of sociological participation in the public sphere (Burawoy, 2005), particularly through the media, wielding significant influence on politics and public attention (Andersson, 2020; Kyvik, 2005). However, Aakvaag (2019) argues that Norwegian sociology at present is institutionally fragmented and characterised by strong sub-disciplinary specialisation.

The transition year of 1990s in Hungary allowed for the adoption of Western sociological ideas while maintaining the discipline's dual institutional structure: research institutions under the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and universities responsible for teaching and learning (Karády & Nagy, 2019). The discipline has become more popular over time through first, institutional changes such as establishing several new sociology departments, designated PhD programmes, as well as private research organisations such as TÁRKI Social Research Institute, and second, massification and the adoption of the Bologna degree structure (Karády & Nagy, 2019). Beyond the historical legacies of the communist system and three decades of its post-communist transformations (Kwiek, 2012), Hungarian sociologists have also to contend with a self-proclaimed illiberal regime that shows hostility towards left-leaning ideas of society (Karády & Nagy, 2019). This has resulted in the high-profile exile of the Central European University, the closing of gender studies courses, and listing of academics as George Soros' "mercenaries" (Kováts & Rónay, 2021; Krekó & Enyedi, 2018; Szigeti, 2018).

In contrast to Norway and Hungary, sociology as an academic discipline in England has a longer history, with the establishment of the first sociology department at the London School of Economics in 1904. Significant expansion in both research and teaching in Sociology occurred in the 1960s, following government encouragement and funding, leading to the establishment of various Sociology departments across the country (Halsey, 2004; Husbands, 2014; Kumar, 2011). Initial steps towards institutionalising social theory and research within university departments, including sociology, social science, social studies and social policy and administration, were taken with some hesitation after the Second World War (Scott, 2020). Despite university funding cutbacks introduced by the Conservative Government in 1981, tertiary education experienced renewed expansion in the 1990s, resulting in a significant increase in the number of sociology students (Halsey, 2004). Cant et al. (2020) argue that the discipline retains a peripheral status both within the school and the university systems, whereas Scott (2020, p. 188) suggests that British sociology operates as a "broad church within which all aspects of contemporary social life can be explored [whilst encompassing] the wide variety of theoretical and methodological approaches that have informed this diversity of research".

In outlining the landscapes of sociology in Norway, Hungary and England, it becomes evident that the discipline's evolution is intricately tied to the unique socio-political contexts and that sociological research often has a "lavish introspective attention on its own deficiencies" exploring various political, paradigmatic, methodological, or financial crises the discipline might face (Némedi, 2008; Savage, 2010, p. 659). However, this self-reflection does not seem to extend to a detailed exploration of current sociology students' voices on disciplinary choice, despite their expectations influencing future prospects, course completion and overall success (Purcell et al., 2008). Therefore, understanding what motivates students to choose sociology can provide insights into how sociology is perceived and what outcomes might be expected upon graduation. Indeed, the discipline allows exploring the tension between the drive for graduate employability

understood as individual monetary outcomes *and* drivers of moral purpose and social justice (Burawoy, 2014; Muddiman, 2018).

Research design and methods

This paper is based on an international comparative research design, using mixed methods (Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2014; Yin, 2017). Three case study countries are selected to achieve a sample of maximum variation across Esping-Andersen's (1996, 2015) European welfare state regimes.[1] The sample includes England as an example of the liberal welfare state from the British Isles, Hungary as an example from post-soviet Eastern Europe, and Norway as the Northern European social democratic region. The differences across the cases in relation to post-secondary expansion as proposed by Stevens and Shibanova (2021) provide further interesting grounding, given Norway is more likely to see higher education as a national asset, England increasingly as a commodity, whereas Hungary as a national asset with growing commodification.

The central comparison in this study revolves around students' motivations for choosing sociology as a degree, analysed within the distinct societal structures, educational systems and disciplinary traditions of Hungary, Norway and England. This comparison is structured around two key dimensions. First, we explore sociology and broader social science enrolment trends in institutions that offer sociology between 2008 and 2018 are presented across the three countries. Second, we present a typology of the various driving forces for disciplinary choice drawing on semi-structured interviews to offer insight into students' motivations for pursuing sociology. These dimensions together establish a comparative framework that connects national contexts to individual motivations, deepening understanding of sociology's role and value across different educational landscapes.

Comparing student record data

Drawing on administrative secondary data in the first instance, the paper provides an overview of how enrolment in sociology courses has changed within the three national contexts between 2008 and 2018, contextualising the changes using overall social sciences and university enrolment figures. The three national datasets are derived from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) through a data purchase for England;[2] from the Educational Authority's Higher Education statistics pages for Hungary, manually combining yearly data available online; and from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) through a bespoke data request.

These secondary datasets consist of student enrolment figures at *all higher education institutions offering a degree in sociology*, either as a standalone subject or as a major or minor within a combined degree, during the period 2008–2018, exploring 120 institutions across the three countries. This represents a smaller subset of universities, with focusing on 15 Hungarian (total institutions 53), 10 Norwegian (total institutions 37), and 95 UK universities (total institutions 135).[3] We chose to focus on institutions that offer a range of disciplines *including* sociology and social sciences for consistency throughout the time period and between the case studies. In line with the European three-cycle system, degrees are classified as being one of three levels: Bachelor's, Master's and PhD. Given the paper's

focus on degree choice, integrated undergraduate/postgraduate Master's degrees are considered to be first degrees and therefore counted in the Bachelor's category. Enrolment numbers include students in any year of a degree course and were chosen over graduation numbers as being better able to show trends over time by smoothing out the data. The English and Norwegian datasets additionally include numbers of students enrolled in any social science degree, as defined by the HESA common aggregation hierarchy "social studies" category (HESA, n.d.). Norwegian data were matched against the HESA categorisation using the Norwegian Standard Classification of Education (Statistics Norway, 2003); however, such data were not available for Hungary.

Bachelor's, Master's and PhD student interviews

To explore current students' perceptions of their subject choice, the paper draws on interviews with sociology Bachelor's, Master's and PhD students. The in-person data collection scheduled between March and June of 2020 was substantially disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic, especially in the English case where departmental gatekeepers were hesitant to give access to students and staff due to the scale of overall disruption to university life. This resulted in a lower response rate in the English case than in the Norwegian or Hungarian cases. In the Hungarian case a small proportion of the interviews were conducted in person, prior to national lockdowns. All English and Norwegian interviews were conducted online, providing flexibility and adaptability when compared to time limits of in-person fieldwork (see for instance Kobakhidze et al., 2021). Presently it is unclear whether and to what extent in-person or online interviews produce different quality data beyond notes of word-count favouring off-line interactions (Lobe et al., 2022). However, given the context to the study, online interviews served as a useful substitute, producing rich data presented in this paper. Students were invited through departmental adverts and gatekeepers for an hour-long, individual, semi-structured interview, resulting in a total of 38 interviews in Hungary ($N_{HU} = 17$), England ($N_{EN} = 9$) and Norway ($N_{NO} = 12$). Table 1 outlines the sample distribution in terms of level of study, gender and ethnicity. The project gained ethical approval from the host institution's departmental ethics board, and all interview excerpts have been anonymised.

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	10	8	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	15	5	6	**26**
Prefer not to say	2	2	4	**8**
Total (per country)	**17**	**9**	**12**	**38**

The interview data were transcribed verbatim either through paid-for transcription services or by combining natural language processing software with subsequent manual checks. The authors used inductive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) facilitated by NVivo. This allowed for the initial areas of research focus, as well as new themes to be pursued. The analysis involved a six-stage process, from familiarisation, initial coding and identification of themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and evidencing those themes using data. Throughout the coding and writing process the first and second authors agreed on initial codes, then discussed and compared key themes, to settle upon the key areas and framing for this work.

This paper places individual students' agency regarding university and career choice within the wider national and international contexts. It explores, first, the broader trends in sociology student numbers studying at Bachelor's, Master's and PhD levels and second, it provides a novel typology over the core motivation students related to their disciplinary choice. The discussion compares student motivation across the three cases.

Findings 1: sociology enrolment in Hungary, England and Norway

To contextualise the interview data in the next section, we first explore the overall trends in sociology student enrolment in the three countries leading up to the time when most of our interviewees embarked on, or decided to continue their university studies. To get a sense of how the discipline fares within each context over time, we compare the ratio of sociology enrolment to that of the broader social sciences within the institutions that consistently offer the subject, a total of 120 institutions across the three countries ($N_{HU} = 15$, $N_{EN} = 95$, $N_{NO} = 10$). However, first, Table 2 provides a snapshot of the scale of higher education in the three countries in the academic year 2018–19 (Eurostat, 1995–2021; European Commission, n.d.; Gov.UK, 2020; HESA, 2020). Hungary and Norway operate on a similar scale in terms of student numbers, although for Norway this represents a greater proportion (37%) of the country's 20–24-year-olds studying in tertiary education, compared to Hungary (26%). Students are also concentrated in a smaller number of Norwegian higher education institutions (HEIs), as Hungarian HEIs tend to have lower average student numbers (on institutional mergers see Kyvik & Stensaker, 2016). The proportion of 20–24-year-olds enrolled in HE in England (43%) is somewhat higher than Norway's 37% and represents over six times as many students due to population differences between the two countries. England also has the largest universities in terms of average student numbers.

Table 2. Participation in Higher Education, academic year 2018–19.

Country	Hungary	Norway	England
Bachelor's	183,509	199,223	1,460,530
Master's	79,929	72,404	389,415
PhD	7,676	8,497	92,590
Total HE students	283,350	288,739	1,942,535
Tertiary education students as % of 20–24 year olds	26%	37.2%	42.5%
Number of HEIs	53	37	135
Average students per HEI	5,346	7,803	14,389

Note: Hungary and Norway data from European Union (1995–2021) and European Commission (n.d.); England data from HESA (2020) and Gov.UK (2020).

We present data on higher education institutions that offer sociology degrees, practically a smaller subset of all HEIs in the three countries to explore sociology student enrolment trends at BA, MA and PhD levels. We show how social sciences within these selected institutions, and sociology enrolment rates in particular changed over time. The social sciences have maintained a reasonably consistent share within these selected institutions in both Norway and England between 2008 and 2018 (Table 3), whereas the share of sociology has varied at different levels and between countries. While in England social sciences have constituted a fairly consistent share of degrees at all levels within these selected institutions across the time period, in Norway the overall trend masks differences between degree levels, specifically a decline in the share of both Bachelor's and Master's degrees in the social sciences, which started in 2010.

Sociology plays a bigger role within the social sciences in England within these selected institutions, with a quarter (25.8%) of social science Bachelor's degrees in 2018, when compared to 12% in Norway. Likewise, sociology BAs made up 2.57% of qualifying degree enrolments in institutions offering sociology in England in 2018, compared to 1.98% in Hungary and 1.59% in Norway. In Norway and England the proportion of sociology degrees at the Bachelor's level within these selected institutions increased between 2008 and 2018.

Findings 2: why do sociology at university?

Choosing a university subject is an important decision point prior to entering higher education, given it has a significant impact on graduates' future through providing the necessary skills and knowledge, as well as the right qualification to achieve their goals. In light of university experiences and the changing future plans university students often re-evaluate their subject choice (Hordósy, 2023); here we explore the views of current sociology students studying in different national contexts. First, we present a new typology of how students discuss their subject choice of sociology in light of their experiences, followed by a more detailed exploration of each ideal-type as well as a cross-case analysis.

Fundamentally, the choice of sociology as a subject can be understood along the two axes of (1) focusing on *oneself or others,* and (2) sociology being seen as a

Table 3. Sociology and Social Sciences as a share of available subjects between 2008–2018 in institutions that offer sociology as a subject.

		Hungary		*Norway*		*England*	
		2008	2018	2008	2018	2008	2018
Social Sciences as a % of available subjects in institutions offering sociology	Bachelor's	-	-	13.78%	11.87%	11.52%	12.05%
	Master's	-	-	20.14%	15.33%	11.20%	11.25%
	PhD	-	-	17.06%	23.69%	10.83%	9.39%
Sociology as a % of social sciences in institutions offering sociology	Bachelor's	-	-	7.97%	12.23%	20.31%	25.80%
	Master's	-	-	10.64%	4.40%	13.16%	14.37%
	PhD	-	-	28.30%	6.18%	22.00%	28.72%
Sociology as a % of available subjects in institutions offering sociology	Bachelor's	2.08%	1.98%	1.06%	1.59%	2.18%	2.57%
	Master's	5.23%	1.21%	2.16%	0.71%	1.27%	1.62%
	PhD	4.95%	3.99%	8.36%	3.10%	1.82%	1.78%

generic or a specific subject. Figure 1 outlines the following four categories: (a) *self-expression through sociology: an explanation for personal experience*; (b) *tools to understand* society, politics and broader inequalities; (c) *sociological studies as a general basis for a career*; (d) *inequalities affecting others and the hope for change*. Figure 1 also links to the work of Brooks et al. (2020), regarding how students in different disciplinary areas and countries understood the *purpose* of (higher) education at societal and individual levels.

These differences in how students see their disciplinary choice are relevant for recruitment, pedagogical approaches and curriculum focus, availability of extracurricular activities, as well as support for exploring their possible futures as sociologists. For instance, students who are aiming to explain their personal experiences through their sociological studies will likely look for more specialised, theoretically focused thematic sociologies, whereas students who think about sociology as a general basis for a career will want a diverse array of applicable skills and competencies. Similarly, students will take on different extracurricular activities intersecting with their financial needs, broader interests and preparation for labour market transition (Hordósy & Clark, 2018b). Those who draw on their sociological knowledge to understand society, politics and broader inequalities tend to look for roles within their university sphere, whereas students who hope to affect change are more likely to volunteer in the third sector beyond the institutional space. We discuss extracurricular activities throughout, given they can become centred within student lives with university studies becoming secondary, either due to deep involvement in volunteering roles in different organisations or pursuing part-time jobs to make ends meet (Hordósy & Clark, 2018b). We now turn to discussing the ideal types summarised in Figure 1; these serve as "unified analytical constructs" in the Weberian sense (1949, p. 90), and as such allow for interlinks between the categories in the individual's experience.

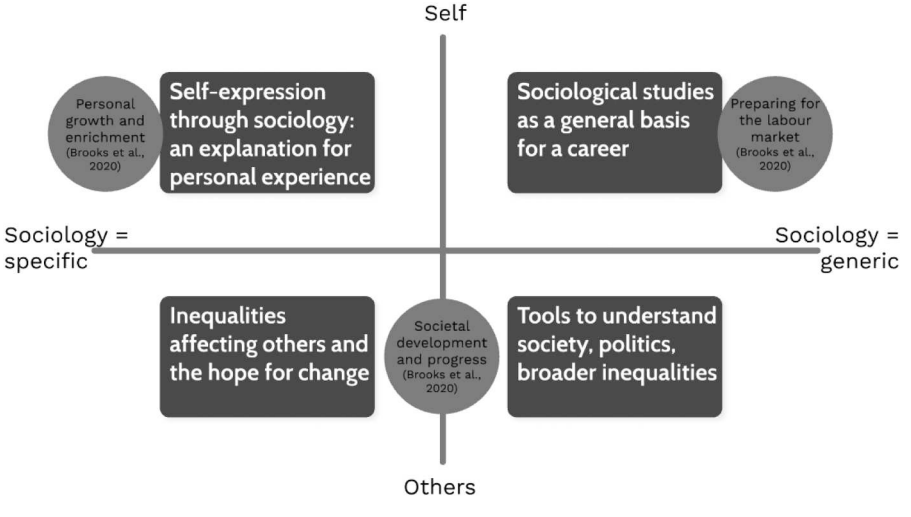

Figure 1. Ideal types of how students discuss their choice of sociology (linked to Brooks et al., 2020).

Self-expression through sociology: an explanation for personal experience

Sociology as disciplinary choice is often (retrospectively) explained as the interplay between personal past, present and possible futures within the biography. Firstly, students link their choice to study sociology to their own *being and broader personal experiences*, such as their gender, race and ethnicity, social class, religion, sexuality, family history of migration, being a first-generation university student, experiencing the impact of geo-political context, or being a member of a subculture. In this context, sociology as a discipline becomes the space and time to understand and contextualise these beings and experiences with structured scientific knowledge. For instance, both Myiah and Lóránt reflected on growing up as ethnic minorities in their respective countries of England and Hungary, connecting their experiences to their ways of thinking about the world, and their broader interests in studying inequalities through the social sciences:

> I'm a woman of colour and I've had to navigate the world from that perspective in my whole life. So naturally I think about inequality. Maybe other women or women of colour don't navigate the world like that, but that's how I would do. Myiah, BA, England

> I grew up in this small gypsy village, which is very decisive in terms of what I see as important social problems in today's Hungary and even on a global level. [My social network helped me find] that I am interested in society and sociology, and not something more person-centred, but rather I want to see the world and its connections in a larger perspective. Lóránt, BA, Hungary

Selma also reflected on her own university degree choice and career plans when reading about how immigrant students to Norway like herself choose their paths differently to middle-class white Norwegians:

> [I read an] article from a Norwegian sociologist, who had studied grades and differences in choices in education between immigrants and Norwegians and that also really made me realise why I chose what I chose. And she found that even if you have the same grades or better grades, you, children of immigrants or from lower social classes end up choosing differently. So that made me really reflect on my choice, if I chose sociology because of who I am, or it's because of my interest, if it's a system that made me chose it, or if it was actually my own choice. Maybe it's a sign of reflexivity, on what's going on and being so caught up in both worlds. Selma, BA, Norway

As proposed above, students who see sociology as a way of explaining and expressing their personal experiences, look for a range of theoretical and methodological approaches in which they can see themselves represented. As such, some of them expressed their dissatisfaction with the sociology curriculum being too focused on Western white male authors and what they perceived as rigid research designs and methods. For instance, Myiah discussed what she perceived as the lack of diversity in sociological thought seen as the "fundamentals" of the discipline:

> [One overview theoretical course module] was about how to have the mind of a sociologist, about the sociological imagination, about some of the central social theory. But, basically the whole thing revolved around the theories of white men. (…) literally every single one of the readings was by a white person. And I think over 90% were men. (…) if you're a woman of colour studying sociology, how are you meant to think sociologically, when only white men think sociologically supposedly on this course? Myiah, BA, England

Students who chose sociology as an explanation for personal experience were likely to be active in some extracurricular research or volunteering activities within or beyond the institutional space. They often saw themselves as aiming for careers in research. For instance, reflecting on her interests in studying other people with similar sexuality to her own, Hilda discussed the power of asking questions and *finding answers* to similar experiences. Her personal concerns were one but a small piece of the larger jigsaw of sociological knowledge:

> So because I've been afraid, like: "who's going to care about my research?" and like "ohh it's so stupid and self-obsessed", to just … you know, hunt down [others with a similar sexuality] and talk to them. But coming here I've realised that there are other people who also do what they love, and they study what they had questions about, because they can, and it's wonderful that I can live my life asking questions that only I would like the answer to. (…) I think many, if not all, sociologists have this kind of burning hope to do something that's going to better society, or be helpful in a smaller or major way and that's my core motivation. I want to do something that's appreciated, that's helpful, not just interesting to me. But if I can combine interesting to me and helpful to society or to a few people, that would be the main goal. Hilda, MA, Norway

The next group of students' concerns related to broader inequalities they saw growing up, however, here they did not make the same strong connections to their personal experiences.

Inequalities affecting others and the hope for change

Several students expressed seeing injustice in the world and wanting to both understand and change the broader context through working in policy and research in the future. As such, the personal concerns were related to their sociological knowledge and research skills being deployed in *understanding and bettering social ills*. Both Lívia and Clare discussed their previous work with refugees, seeing systemic issues and political problems that prompted them to study sociology in the first place. Lívia here discussed the refugee crisis of 2015 when tens of thousands of mainly Syrian refugees crossed into and travelled through Hungary to reach other Western European countries. The Hungarian government used this opportunity to create what Gerő and Sik (2020) called a "moral panic button" over migration, prompting unprecedented levels of xenophobia (Simonovits, 2020). Lívia wanted to understand these issues in a more structured, scientific way. She also reflected on why she opted for sociology as the study of society, rather than psychology working with individuals:

> [Working with refugees throughout the refugee crisis of 2015] started a process in me, that all the fear of people and all the reactions that this situation provokes in people, I somehow wanted to understand, because for me it was incomprehensible. The hatred itself was incomprehensible, because I didn't believe that it could come from the gut, or that it was such an innate quality of a person to be able to hate someone like that. And that's how I came to the social sciences and sociology. However, for me, [psychology's] individualistic interpretation of all these things, (…) was not satisfactory. I knew that I did not want to examine individuals, but rather a society as a whole (…). Lívia, BA, Hungary

Similarly, Clare talked about her frustration over the political and policy context around refugee support. Her volunteering and work experience led her to doing an MA in sociology, from where she hoped to enter roles "to make a difference":

> I've always wanted a meaningful job. (…) And then obviously working in [supporting refugees], and I think seeing how frustrating it was trying to do anything, knowing that there's all this policy, and all these people who are essentially standing in the way (…). I knew that I wanted to go back and study actually, but I was never really sure what I wanted to do and I wanted to do something that I thought would be more practical. (…) It's quite hard to think about a career at the moment. I mean, in an ideal world I would like to maybe work in policy. (…) It sounds a bit naïve, I'd like to make difference, but … Clare, MA, England

In these students' cases sociological knowledge is strongly linked with wanting to achieve societal change. They indeed often took on extracurricular activities and part-time employment that was working towards this goal: volunteering in refugee reception or working with NGOs that support drug-addicts. Botond made a qualification, suggesting that perhaps it was *social policy* that focuses more on bettering society's ills, and sociology focused on predominantly the interpretation of the social:

> If we look at it this way, a sociologist is someone who can somehow interpret society. I would like a sociologist to be the one who not only understands, but also makes things better. But it might be more acceptable if someone thinks otherwise, then I can say that I am a social policy professional, and they can be a sociologist because they like to interpret society. Botond, BA, Hungary

This distinction pointed out by Botond describes well the next group of students in our data.

Tools to understand society, politics, broader inequalities

Several students discussed *seeing others' inequalities*, the injustices within the political / economic context, and a broader interest in the social aspects of everyday life as the key prompts to seek contextual knowledge. Both Grace and Blanka discussed finding sociology as a broad, all-encompassing discipline that equipped them to explore their interests. Grace talked about having a strong interest in the social:

> Everything I seem to study, I was more interested in the social element of it, rather than economic or international, stuff like that. So, when I was looking at courses on UCAS, I just thought … [sociology] was recommended as like other courses. Grace, BA, England

Whereas Blanka wanted to understand the broader context to the largest ethnic minority group, Roma in Hungary, as well as socio-economic issues, such as poverty:

> I realised that it's always something else that in hindsight I think happened, [regarding] why I became so interested in [sociology]. What I can say for sure is that in the last year [of secondary school], we had a class called social studies, and there we actually started to deal with topics that started to interest me. For example, the issues of Roma and poverty, how can these be addressed. And actually, I wanted to learn a little more about this, and I realised that I really didn't understand what was going on in society. Blanka, BA, Hungary

Both prior to arrival, and throughout their sociological studies the disciplinary demarcations were often further explored, including taking steps towards more specialised future selves. A diverse array of disciplinary options as alternatives or futures were discussed, where sociology as a broad, inclusive disciplinary space set them up for what comes next, as Eszter discussed her interests:

> I think it was also at that time that I became interested in the fate of the poorer classes or deviant groups. And not specifically one or the other, but in general the Roma community, psychiatric patients, drug users, children, the homeless, that is, everyone who is involved in this circle. Well, yes, there was a change of government in 2010, and I think that by the time [I started my studies] – maybe I'm only explaining it in hindsight – you could feel the changing legislation against the lower classes, so suddenly everyone was talking a lot about it. Eszter, PhD, Hungary

Sociology was either the disciplinary space *they chose (or ended up in, as Mia did) instead of* other areas (such as politics, international development, economics, psychology, or law) to gain a broad knowledge base about societal issues, or the time period in which they *discovered their affection and interest* in other, more specialised social science areas (such as social history, anthropology, or social work).

> I was actually applying in politics and then I started writing to researchers for supervision and they all told me I think this is a sociological topic and I didn't even realise it, because I never even knew what sociology was: such a vague, broad topic. (…). So that's kind of how I ended up in sociology. Mia, PhD, England

Although the broad, open-ended nature of the discipline could be seen as somewhat daunting, as Eleanor suggested, this indeed allowed for the space and time to explore:

> There's always that kind of thing of: where do you go with sociology like … It's quite broad, so it's kind of like doesn't give you a specific kind of "you do that, and then you go into that". Eleanor, BA, England.

The fourth group of students focused on this openness of the discipline, whilst planning the next steps in their career.

Sociological studies as a general basis for a career

Students who saw their sociological studies as a preparation for the labour market remarked that it should serve as a *broad, general basis for a career* – wherever life took them. For instance, Dóra suggested:

> So I couldn't really decide at the end of high school what exactly I wanted, but this … these types of things have always interested me … this kind of humanities direction, dealing with people (…). If I want to go in a slightly different direction later, I can still go to a lot of places from here, even to a Masters, this is definitely an advantage. Dóra, BA, Hungary

Other students discussed the broad set of knowledges and skills, and especially some of *the theoretical, conceptual and analytical tools* they gained through studying sociology that would help them understand society and broader inequalities. Mona and Annie talked about the specific research and analytical skills they were developing throughout their studies:

> I knew that going forward I'll be working more so in development and international relations, but I knew that choosing those areas of study would be too narrow focused. I chose [sociology] because I wanted to get some sort of foundation and analytical skills, [and] understanding how society works. Mona, BA, Norway

> I think I always kinda thought about things in a sociological way, but I didn't necessarily realise I was. But doing sociology kind of gives you the tools when you're having a discussion with someone to have a bit more of a basis for your opinion rather than just saying this is my

> opinion, because it's my opinion. You have something to actually back it up with which is always useful. It changes your outlook on certain things, for example, someone saying to you "oh crime is a social construct". Annie, BA, England

These analytical skills and thematic sociological knowledges were seen as applicable in a wide range of roles, wherever the future sociology graduate decided to go next.

Discussion: similarity and difference

This paper explored a novel categorisation of why students opt to study sociology: from diverse backgrounds, at different stages of their studies, and living in three different social, political and economic contexts. Given the overall differences in enrolment patterns as well as university systems across the three case-study countries, interesting similarities *and* differences emerge. Note the limitations over sample size: based on just 38 interviews in three national settings it would be problematic to generalise more broadly, or to provide a detailed exploration of patterns by student background. Further research could explore in more detail how diverse student groups in the case study countries understand their disciplinary choice. To explore students' motivations for choosing sociology as their subject, Table 4 looks at each of the case study countries, whereas Table 5 focuses on the level of studies. As Table 4 shows, English interviewees were somewhat more likely to refer to sociology's conceptual, methodological and theoretical tools when discussing their choice, whereas in Norway somewhat more students talked about their personal experiences in opting for the discipline. In Hungary, a higher ratio of interviewees discussed their goal to effect change in society along with understanding it through sociology's tools. These broad similarities across the cases are especially interesting given the divergent approaches to university funding and how policy makers see higher education – as a national asset or a commodity (Stevens & Shibanova, 2021). A larger sample across a broader range of geographical locations would shed light on whether these emergent findings hold beyond the three cases.

As Table 5 shows, it was predominantly BA students who discussed their choice of sociology as a general basis for a future career – this is unsurprising: it is fairly unlikely one would pursue further studies at MA or PHD levels without a stronger interest in the specifics of sociology. As for the other three types of motivations, there is no clear pattern emerging, suggesting that students arrive and move on in the disciplinary space with a variety of complex motivations. Note that a longitudinal design would be necessary to establish the *patterns of change* in relation to why students chose, fall into, stay, leave and return to sociology.

Through a comparative framework based on enrolment patterns in institutions teaching sociology and a typology of motivation, we arrive at three key findings. First, in

Table 4. Why do students choose sociology, explored by country.

	England	Hungary	Norway	Total (type)
Self-expression through sociology	2	2	4	8
The hope for change	1	5	3	9
Tools to understand society	5	7	3	15
General basis for a career	1	3	2	6
Total (level)	**9**	**17**	**12**	**38**

Table 5. Why do students choose sociology, explored by level of studies.

	BA	MA	PhD	Total (type)
Self-expression through sociology	3	2	3	8
The hope for change	3	4	2	9
Tools to understand society	7	2	6	15
General basis for a career	6			6
Total (level)	**19**	**8**	**11**	**38**

relation to trends in sociology enrolment within selected institutions that teach sociology as a subject across 2008–2018, our analysis shows that Hungary bucks the trend of continued expansion of higher education (see also Hordósy & Szanyi-F, 2020; Kováts et al., 2017; Labanino & Dobbins, 2022; Polónyi, 2018). In England, social sciences in general and sociology in particular seem to be somewhat larger disciplines in the selected institutions compared to Hungary or Norway.

Second, this paper proposes a new typology of exploring students' motivations for studying the discipline of sociology, along the axes of self-or-others and sociology as general-or-specialised. Understanding these four ideal-types – explanation of personal experience; hope for change; tools to understand the social; and general basis for a career – is important, as they correspond to student expectations, engagement and participation. Of course, this diversity in student motivation does not make curriculum planning easy (Edling et al., 2018; Miskolczi, 2023; Panayotova, 2019): frontload practical skills to please students concerned with employability, and those who are motivated to bettering social ills are likely to miss subject content on inequalities. Start with complex theoretical approaches to understanding the self within the wider world, and students wanting a broader overview of the social could feel overwhelmed. Although exploring the discipline of sociology specifically, this paper underpins the relevance of students' motivation for learning and teaching, such as: curriculum design (such as balancing theory, method and thematic sociologies with embedded employability elements); the diverse array of integrated work experiences and extracurricular activities students are involved in; and the link between research and teaching to aid the development of a researcher identity and requisite research skills (Harvey, 2005). Further research could explore how sociology curricula embed and make employability content explicit through linkages with the world of work, employer engagement, or student placements (Koseda et al., 2024), facilitating the development of both "generic" employability competencies and discipline-specific skills (Römgens et al., 2020).

Third, taking these diverse motivations together they are certainly not underpinned by a narrow and individualised understanding of graduate outcomes or what university is for (Brannen & Nilsen, 2005; Brooks et al., 2020; Muddiman, 2018). Having a meaningful job exploring, analysing, and aiming to effect change in their broader or narrower societal context was the predominant goal for sociology students in all three settings – to care about the wider world around them (Van Matre et al., 2023) – perhaps that "moral purpose" Burawoy refers to (2014). The issue of future employment outcomes also intersects with whether students feel they need to take part-time jobs to make ends meet, or whether they can afford to look for broader opportunities enhancing their skills and competences. This is a particular concern in Hungary and England (Freeman, 2023; Kocsis, 2020), whereas it is less of an issue in Norway (Hovdhaugen, 2015). Some students

especially in Hungary reflect on their university studies taking secondary importance (or even third place) beyond their paid work and volunteering. It is then key to support students to succeed in their studies through having a broad understanding of the interplay between curricular and extracurricular activities, given the importance to students' personal projects and modus vivendi (Archer, 2012).

Notes

1. Germany was planned to be a fourth case-study; however, in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic and resultant challenges to recruitment, the first author decided to focus on the three cases for which fieldwork was mostly organised. Further studies could establish to what extent the outcomes presented here resonate in other European regions.
2. Neither the Higher Education Statistics Agency Limited nor HESA Services Limited can accept responsibility for any inferences or conclusions derived by third parties from data or other information supplied by the Higher Education Statistics Agency Limited or HESA Services Limited.
3. Hungary and Norway data from European Union (1995–2021) and European Commission (n.d.); England data from HESA (2020) and Gov.UK (2020).

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