

# **THESIS SUMMARY**

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**Captivating the Audience**

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## 1 Research rationale and existing literature

The dissertation investigates *the impact that an introductory sociology course makes on students*. The introductory course has long been a topic of scholarly attention in its own right (Ballantine, 2016; Ferguson, 2016), and its importance can be argued for on several accounts.

First, introductory sociology plays a role in *education* by providing the foundational knowledge for students majoring in sociology (Greenwood, 2013) while also contributing to more general learning goals and development of skills (Pike et al., 2017). Second, the introductory course shows a “*public face*” of sociology (Zipp, 2012). For swaths of students, the course is the only “point of contact” with the field, and a well-defined introductory course can improve sociology’s standing and prestige by showing the importance of rigorous *scientific* study of *social* phenomena in an age when individualistic, psychological thinking dominates public discourse (Greenwood, 2013). Beyond those functions, some suggest that introductory sociology courses should showcase the possibility of *civic engagement* or an ethical dimension of not just studying but also changing social realities for the better (Ferguson, 2016).

The points listed above can all be linked to the wider context of the challenges facing higher education currently, as listed by Király and Géring (2021). Introductory sociology’s educational role relates strongest to the external pressure on universities to produce *human value*, most often construed as marketable skills and knowledge. The

issue of sociology's usefulness and prestige, as part of its public face, rhyme with current pressures on higher education to produce outright *economic value*, where humanities and social sciences are often seen as unproductive and of lesser value than other (e.g. STEM) fields. Civic engagement relates to higher education's *social value* and the roles it can play in improving public discourse and bringing about positive real-world outcomes.

The premise of the dissertation is that an introductory sociology course is a legitimate subject to investigate because it already has a history of being studied, and the roles it plays mirror larger issues of higher education. The research aims echo the aspects of introductory courses listed above and can be put as follows:

1. Investigating the *educational* aspect of introductory sociology: short-term learning outcomes of students in relation to a set of independent variables, in the vein of quantitative education research.

2. Looking into the *mental image* that students form about the field of sociology in the wake of the introductory course. The point of that is to learn what kind of 'public face' students see, whether they can see the boundaries of sociology, whether they can make sense of it in a clear way.

3. Investigating the *social role and reputation* of sociology as seen by students. That aspect is important because it adds further layers to the 'public face': whether sociology is regarded as contributing to social change or taking sides in public issues.

Existing literature, along with important gaps in it, was reviewed in the dissertation in connection with all three main strands of the research listed above.

### **1.1 Existing literature on learning in sociology**

The concept of *learning* can be defined along various approaches, one of the most common of which is the *quantitative view*, namely that knowledge consists of “storing a lot of information”. That view underpinned both psychological research into the aspects of learning such as memorization, as well as educational programs at all levels (Dahlgren, 2005).

The dissertation adopted a different theoretical foundation: the *qualitative conception of knowledge* which considers other aspects of cognitive functioning beyond memorization. In order for *meaningful* learning to happen, the individual must be able to form links between their existing knowledge and newly acquired information, to evaluate previously unencountered statements, to apply knowledge to new problems, to tell the difference between the abstract and the concrete, the ability to think inductively and deductively (Dahlgren, 2005).

An influential theoretical framework which helps classify learning outcomes qualitatively is that of *deep and surface learning* developed by Marton and Saljö (1976; 2005). Such learning outcomes depend on the approach and the effort that a student makes. Roughly, a deep learning approach and outcome are characterized by conscious effort to make sense of a learning material in its essence, to form links between new information and existing knowledge, and arrives at what

might be called a holistic understanding. In contrast, the surface approach and outcome are characterized by an attempt to ‘memorize everything’ and often fail to arrive at a good overall understanding (Marton & Saljö, 2005).

Learning outcomes in sociology courses have been investigated for decades. The majority of existing studies belong to the quantitative tradition of education research, where individual and social characteristics, as well as contextual elements of the learning process, play the role of independent variables and learning is the output.

The studies investigating learning in sociology are typically of the cross-sectional or ‘pretest-posttest’ type with sample sizes in the hundreds, and most of them use final course grade as the dependent variable, which is ultimately a quantitative measurement of learning. Over the decades, researchers have investigated the effects of dozens of variables, many of which were ‘run-of-the-mill’ socio-demographic ones or relating to socio-economic/family background, while others pertained to elements of the educational context, e.g. exposure to a newly adopted method or learning tool. Class attendance was very often found to be positively associated with good learning outcomes in introductory sociology classes (Neuman; 1989; Dietz, 2002; Howard, 2005; Kwenda, 2011), and so were conventional measures of academic performance such as the SAT score or university GPA (Szafran, 1986; Neuman, 1989; Wright & Lawson, 2005; Kwenda, 2011; Driscoll et al., 2012), and more senior students typically also performed better (Szafran, 1986; Kwenda, 2011; Howard et al., 2014).

There were also strong indications that some form of cultural capital, e.g. encapsulated in the pretest score (Szafran, 1986; Neuman, 1989; Rickles et al., 2013; Howard et al., 2014), also acted positively on outcomes. Some more surprising results include the fact that gender was virtually never found to be associated with success, and that previous studies of sociology were either insignificant (Szafran, 1986; Neuman, 1989) or a negative influence (Howard et al., 2014).

The body of literature which investigated learning in (introductory) sociology in a *qualitative* way is much leaner. The most significant of those, from the viewpoint of the dissertation, are probably the studies of Ashwin et al. (2014), Howard and Butler (2018), and Medley-Rath (2019). Ashwin et al.'s (2014) longitudinal interview-based study involved sociology students over the course of their studies and showed that respondents' views of sociology developed towards a deeper understanding over time. Howard and Butler (2018) performed a content analysis of summary essays by hundreds of students written at the end of an introductory course and concluded that the topics most often mentioned in them were socialization, stratification, the 'sociological eye' and social structure. Finally, Medley-Rath (2019) did a content analysis of a homework assignment in an introductory course and found that students overwhelmingly relied on broad concepts and were either unable or unwilling to develop a deeper understanding of the material.

The notable *gaps* in the empirical literature about learning in introductory sociology courses are that previous studies have not used

qualitative conceptions of knowledge in the operationalization of the dependent variable, that few inputs related to the effect of peers or identity were investigated, and that longitudinal studies are almost non-existent.

## **1.2 Existing literature on the sociological ‘core’**

Introductory courses in any field are supposed to contain foundational knowledge which is consensual, primary, and supposedly conveys a general image of the discipline as well. Sociologists have been looking for such a ‘core’ of sociology for over a century without definite success (Ballantine et al., 2016).

Why is such a ‘core’ needed at all? Ballantine et al. (2016) provide a number of compelling reasons. First, a definitive core makes it easier to measure student learning, helping educational practice on the one hand, and conforming to external expectations towards higher education (linked to the measurability of its effects) on the other. Second, a well-defined core provides clarity about the boundaries of sociology, strengthening the field and its professional identity (Ballantine et al., 2016). This ‘existential’ importance is strongly emphasized against a background of competition between sociology and other social sciences such as economics and political science (Szelényi, 2016), and fears of loss of autonomy and funding of sociology departments (Greenwood, 2013; Ferguson, 2016). Finally, the ‘core’ should also constitute the ‘public face’ sociology shows towards masses of students taking introductory courses every year,

and is clearly linked to reputation in that way (Zipp, 2012; Ferguson & Carbonaro, 2016).

Past attempts at defining the ‘sociological core’ echoed wider dilemmas about the point of education in general: namely, whether it is about conveying ‘knowledge’ in the form of *information*, or rather aimed at imparting *skills* in students. Several authors, in fact, argued for the latter position by saying that sociology is ultimately only differentiated from other social sciences by its unique approach to phenomena, the ‘sociological imagination’ or ‘sociological eye’ (Collins, 1998), while others have warned that sociology should assert authority over certain topics to hold up against rivals (Huber, 1995).

Empirical literature about the core falls into two broad categories: analysis of existing sources such as textbook or syllabi (e.g. Keith & Ender, 2004; Lowney et al., 2017), or surveys and interviews with experts (e.g. Wagenaar, 2004; Persell et al., 2007). What is most common in the findings is an emphasis on both ‘skills’ such as the sociological way of thinking and methodology, and the importance placed on topics such as stratification, socialization, race/ethnicity, gender, and culture. In the 2010s, discourse has moved on from trying to find a ‘core’ at all costs to defining the introductory sociology course in terms of *learning goals* which still contain both ‘content’ such as theories and concepts as well as ‘skills’ such as applying the sociological imagination.

An empirical *gap* in this area is related to the relative lack of qualitative studies on learning in sociology: while experts have

debated the topic endlessly, not much is known about the ‘core of sociology’ that students of an introductory course form in their minds, and even less about what they retain a few years after studying the subject.

### **1.3 Existing literature on sociology’s social role and reputation**

Probably the most influential contribution to the discussion of sociology’s role beyond academia in our times is Michael Burawoy’s (2005) programmatic call ‘For public sociology’. In it, the author argues for a fourfold ‘division of labor’ within sociology, one of its arms being *public sociology* tasked with engaging sociology and society in a dialogue. Burawoy justifies the need for such an activity with reference to colonizing tendencies on the part of both the state and the market which threaten to suffocate civil society.

Burawoy’s proposed public sociology was labelled *politicized* by several of its critics (e.g. Deflem, 2013), and many also emphasized that sociology should operate by its own *scientific* standards first and foremost, not in the service of any kind of public (Brint, 2005). Hungarian experts, while strongly sharing the latter view, also reminded that sociology should employ strong critical capacities towards itself and all kinds of influence groups (Lengyel, 2006, among others).

A balancing act between *producing knowledge*, being *critical*, and *shaping society* has long been part of the sociological tradition in Central-Eastern Europe and Hungary. The democratic transition in the 1990s opened up new possibilities for all of those. As elsewhere, a

strong scientific foundation for the discipline is typically seen as pivotal. Some have claimed that the ‘failure’ of sociology to predict such a momentous episode of social change, as well as the role individual sociologists played in advising politicians in managing the transition, have tarnished the field’s reputation in the eyes of the public (Boyadijeva, 2009). Nevertheless, some sort of civil or public function of sociology looks to be acceptable to several authors, virtually all of whom warn that sociology as a field and sociologists as individuals should both strive not to get entangled with politics directly (Zaslavskaja, 1997; Lengyel, 2006; Zdravomyslova, 2009).

Social realities in present-day Hungary, however, strongly call the possibility of an apolitical sociology into question. On the one hand, some posit that sociology by its nature is political in a world dominated by market forces because it sheds light on power structures otherwise hidden (Misétics, 2017; Havas & Fáber, 2020). On the other hand, in an illiberal state where social consensus and to a certain extent, even social reality is ‘manufactured’ by holders of power (cf. Batory & Svensson, 2019), the mere discovery of scientific truth will set sociology (and other sciences) on a collision course with politics.

How does the public see sociology? Few empirical studies have been dedicated to answering that question, which is an obvious *gap* in the relevant literature. On the basis of various sources and various ‘audiences’, some typical representations and views have been found, some of which were positive, but negative aspects seemingly received more attention. Those included the idea that sociology was a useless

science with low prestige (Bjorklund, 2001; Hohm, 2008; Conklin, 2009) and that sociologists are leftist or liberal, social reformers, or people who ‘want to help’ (Best, 2003; Mitra & Sarabia, 2005; Howard, 2015).

## **2 Data and methods**

### **2.1 The sample and data gathering**

The dissertation investigates the impact of one introductory sociology course on its students. The course was held in the Fall semester 2015 at Corvinus University of Budapest, attended by 427 students, 402 of whom have been part of data gathering at some point. Students came from five majors (see Table 1), and there were three data gathering waves, making this a longitudinal research effort. The first data gathering wave (T1) took place in the very first week of the Fall 2015 semester, at the beginning of the introductory course. The second wave (T2) was conducted in the last week of the semester, at the conclusion of the course, while the third wave (T3) took place years later, in 2018, at the time of the BA/BSc graduation of the original participants. As seen in Table 1, the samples obtained in the T1 and T2 waves covered a substantial proportion of the 427 original students (93% and 87%, respectively), while at T3, 43% of them was reached.

In each data gathering wave, a questionnaire was administered with participants asking for socio-demographic data (e.g. parental education), as well as for learning approach conceptualized along the deep–surface dichotomy. The most important element of data

gathering was a *mind map* drawn by participants around the central concept of ‘sociology’, following the instruction “What comes to your mind when hearing the word ‘sociology’?”

**Table 1. Composition of the samples in data gathering waves.**

Category	In T1 sample	In T2 sample	In T3 sample
<b>By major</b>			
Sociology	67	61	40
Political science	42	38	27
Media and communication	75	70	36
International studies	99	97	43
Landscape architecture	114	107	38
<b>By gender</b>			
male	138	129	52
female	259	244	132
<b>Total</b>	<b>397</b>	<b>373</b>	<b>184</b>

The use of mind maps as data gathering tools has several advantages. First, because of the instruction being minimal and there being no cues, the researcher exerts no influence on responses. Moreover, since everybody is allowed to express their mental content freely, there is no pressure to use specialized vocabulary. Also, the material is rich in content and lends itself to several ways of analysis. Finally, it has to be noted that the mind map as a diagram made up of text-based nodes

linked by lines is especially amenable to reflect the *relational* nature of knowledge (Umoquit et al., 2011; Wheeldon and Ahlberg, 2011).

## **2.2 Research questions and methods of data analysis**

In light of the gaps identified in the literature, the following research questions were formulated.

### **RQ1. What socio-demographic and academic variables are associated with successful (deep) learning in the introductory sociology course?**

As the wording already indicates, the question is related to the *educational* aspect of the introductory course, and investigates its outcomes in the vein of the *quantitative* tradition. However, an important novelty in its operationalization was that the learning outcome was classified as a dichotomous variable in accordance with the *qualitative conception of learning*: ‘deep’ and ‘surface’ learning outcomes were assigned to students on the basis of comparing their T1 and T2 mind maps, following criteria that have been delineated by Hay (2007). A logistic regression model was put forward which did not include data from landscape architecture students.

### **RQ2. What topics do students associate with sociology before, right after, and years after taking the introductory course?**

The question intends to grasp the ‘mental image’ that students formed around sociology, which in their minds constitute what the field is and what it does. To answer it, a content analysis of mind maps drawn in all three waves was performed.

**RQ3. With regards to the ‘public image’ of sociology, to what extent are certain views or messages present in students’ minds?**

The ‘views and messages’ investigated in RQ3 were identified on the basis of the literature about sociology’s social role and reputation, and included the ideas (a) that sociology deals with social problems; (b) that sociology goes beyond studying the world and also intends to ‘change’ it; (c) that Burawoy (2005) delineated in his program: sociology’s scientific, policy, critical, and public functions; (d) that sociology has low prestige and usefulness; (e) that sociology is committed to certain values. The method of data analysis was once again content analysis, focusing on pre-defined messages in all mind maps in all data gathering waves.

**RQ4. Does the overall image of sociology in students’ minds—along the dimensions listed in RQ3—change over time (i.e. is there a ‘socialization effect’ of university studies in that regard)?**

RQ4 is a corollary of RQ3 and focuses on sociology students. It is justified by an interest to see what kind of *professional socialization* the sociology program they went through provided them with. It is answered via comparing frequencies of certain messages in sociology majors’ mind maps between the T1 and T3 data gathering waves.

### 3 Scientific results

#### 3.1 Variables associated with deep learning outcomes

In response to RQ1, a series of notable results were found. Overall, it can be concluded that *variables relating to the process and context of learning, and possibly to identity, were more important in predicting deep learning than socio-demographic characteristics.*

While the T1 and T2 samples were almost ‘complete’ for the student body of the given course studied, measures of statistical significance were reported and respected in the evaluation of results. The full model, with input variables and log odds ratios, is shown in Table 2. The interpretation of results basically goes in the way that a positive coefficient indicates a positive effect on the likelihood of becoming a deep learner, while a negative value signals the opposite. Keeping that in mind, the following observations can be made:

- *Gender was not significantly related to a deep learning outcome.* That is in line with previous academic literature.
- Parental educational background showed a peculiar pattern in its association deep learning, but roughly it was that *the higher the education of the student’s parents, the less likely the student is to become a ‘deep’ learner.*
- *Extra-curricular activity, namely project work, was not associated with deep learning outcomes.* That is in line with literature indicating that students cannot be motivated to become ‘deeper’ learners if the exercises designed for such a goal also add to their workload (Case & Marshall, 2019).

**Table 2. Results of the logistic regression model for RQ1.**

Variable	Level	log Odds ratio
Major	Sociology	reference
	Political science	-1.879**
	Media and communication	-0.843
	International studies	-0.591
Gender	Male	reference
	Female	0.361
Project work	No	reference
	Group	-0.761
	Individual	-0.088
Family background	neither parent finished high school	reference
	one parent finished high school (the other did not)	-0.653
	both parents have high school degrees at most	-2.314*
	one parent has a university degree (the other does not)	-1.202
	both parents have university degrees	-1.712*
Gender of instructor	Male	reference
	Female	1.083**
University entry score		-0.002
Learning approach		0.108
Ambitious schedulers	No	reference
	Yes	1.639**
MC test score		0.055*
Intercept		-2.959

\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

- Two variables capturing the context of education were found to be associated with deep learning. One was *gender of instructor* (possibly encapsulating several unmeasured or unmeasurable characteristics) and the other was *preferable class time*. The latter was also regarded as a proxy for *student ambition* because it was theorized that ambitious students are more likely to apply for preferable timeslots early.

- The finding that political science students were significantly less likely to be ‘deep’ learners than sociology majors that *identity influenced the way in which students approached the course*. The result is all the more noteworthy because PS students did not perform worse than others in the course when evaluated conventionally. The finding is congruent with the notion that sociology and political science are competing fields (Szelényi 2016). PS students might have been motivated to strengthen their identity by renouncing sociology.

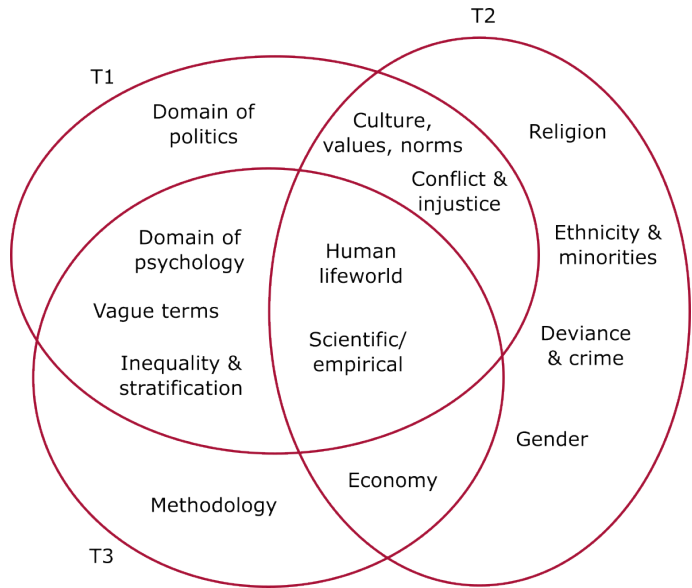
### **3.2 The image of sociology in students’ minds**

RQ2 was answered by performing a content analysis on student mind maps drawn in all three waves. The concepts and messages found on mind maps were organized into 34 themes, and for each data gathering wave, an ‘average mind map’ was constructed which gives a general picture of what students associated with sociology. Figure 1 shows, as a Venn diagram, which themes were present on such ‘average mind maps’ in each wave.

The main finding is that *over the long term, students retain only a basic and vague understanding of sociology*. Although they are

aware, even years after taking the introductory course, that it is a *science* that investigates *human life* where *inequality* is a central concern, an *association with psychology* is something that recurs in the T3 data from initial views (at T1) that students had held even before studying the course. Notably, the result that *vague terms* were often associated with sociology strongly echoes that of Medley-Rath (2019) who found that students relied on unclear concepts and failed to gain deep understanding in their homeworks.

**Figure 1. ‘Average mind maps’ shown as a Venn diagram.**



That points towards the worrying conclusion that even in the eyes of its only ‘captive public’, sociology retains a weakly defined, ‘fuzzy’

image that professionals in the field find existentially threatening (Greenwood, 2013; Ballantine et al., 2016).

On another note, not surprisingly, the greatest number of themes showed up on mind maps in T2, right after students took the course, and several topics corresponded to those which were covered in the second half of the semester.

‘Average mind maps’ calculated separately for each major revealed further patterns. *Landscape architecture students largely failed, even in the short term, to acquire a meaningful mental image of sociology.* Their mind maps reflect only the most basic ideas. That is probably due to the fact that social science holds little personal salience for them, and points towards the conclusion that introductory courses should be tailored to the professional inclinations of the audience for better effectiveness (Greenwood, 2013). *Sociology students* produced mind maps significantly richer in content than those of other majors in almost every wave, and their view about the field changed less over time than that of others.

### **3.3 The reputation of sociology**

RQ3 was investigated with the help of a ‘directed’ content analysis focusing on certain types of messages in mind maps. The overall answer is that *students see sociology’s social role in the way that it is the science that deals with social problems, but they do not see it as value-involved, political, or activist.* That kind of reputation is largely in line with how Hungarian sociology and its practitioners want the field to be: problem-based but keeping its distance from ongoing

everyday social struggles and politicized debates. Some more detailed findings include the following:

- Explicit references to ‘social problems’ in connection with sociology were made by at least 25% of sociology majors in each data gathering wave, and by half that proportion of all other students. However, references to things that were seen as ‘social problems’ by respondents in general (e.g. poverty, injustice, deviance, minorities) were made by at least half of all respondents in all waves.

- Sociology was seen to be ‘engaged with the world’ in specific ways by a sizeable minority of students. Of sociology majors, roughly 20% voiced views of a ‘socially involved sociology’, while the proportion hovered below 10% among all other students (in all waves). The concepts employed most often by students to capture that ‘engagement’ were ‘solutions’, ‘help’, and ‘empathy’.

- Sociology was seen as a scientific enterprise, and out of its other functions proposed by Burawoy (2005), the *policy* aspect was the only one receiving considerable mentions, mostly by sociology students.

- Messages found in the literature, namely that sociology was seen as tied to values (e.g. leftist or liberal) or that it was worthless were found extremely rarely in student mind maps.

### **3.4 The views of sociology students**

RQ4 pertained to a tentative ‘socialization effect’ of the sociology program which could have altered the views of sociology students in comparison with their initial views. Overall the views of sociology

students encapsulated in their mind maps *did not show radical change* over the course of their BA studies. A notable qualitative change was that while initially, they made associations to ‘politics’ and ‘solutions’ much more frequently than by the end, while the salience of messages thematizing ‘help’ or aspects the welfare state increased. Overall, a tendency towards social involvement seems to be part of the ‘habitus of a sociologist’ for a sizeable minority of students.

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