

The “Why” that Made Me Discover Sociology

Doctoral researcher, **Isabell Loeschner**, explains what brought her to Sociology in the second of our series of blog posts on ‘Why Sociology?’.



Sociology does not always have a good reputation in society and we sociologists don't always do a good job at improving this reputation, because we like to keep to ourselves. In fact, many people don't even know what Sociology is. The word resembles the word social, so it must have to do something with social work, many think.

In this post I don't want to judge people for what they know or don't know about Sociology. In fact, coming from a management and business studies background, not too long ago I was one of these people who considered Sociology to be what we Germans call “Brotlose Kunst” (i.e. work that won't pay you enough to buy you your daily bread and butter). Instead I want to tell you the story of what got me interested in Sociology and why I have found fulfilment in a discipline that has the study of society with all its facets at its core.

You could say I was the complete opposite of the typical rather left-wing sociologist. Already back in school I had enjoyed economics and business and felt that I had a deeply ingrained entrepreneurial spirit within me. It then seemed as a natural step for me to study management upon graduation. I was also very lucky to be accepted onto a programme at **Lancaster University** that required a large amount of work placements and practical experience throughout my undergraduate degree.

So it happened that I was able to explore 5 different organizations of varying sizes within the corporate world as an intern and to my surprise I was very quickly faced with a lot of very puzzling questions that I couldn't find an answer for. There was a sheer endless number of “Whys”.

Why are women treated differently in the labour market? Why do people choose to work 16 hour days? Why do the same sort of people always end up in senior management roles? Why do some people choose insecure but autonomous self-employment over a more stable, possibly more secure corporate job? Why do we have ever better technology to help us get our work done but don't seem to be able to enjoy more leisure time?

These and many more questions made me seriously reflect on my own motivations, morals and life goals and made me develop a curiosity that I just couldn't seem to be able to satisfy through work in a corporate job as e.g. a banker, financial auditor or marketing specialist. I soon realized I didn't want to spend my efforts on maintaining and optimizing the existing system. Instead I

wanted to step out of it in order to study it, understand it and criticize it. This realization was like a revelation to me. I had discovered Sociology.

Once I had realized this there was no way back. I applied for a PhD in Sociology at the London School of Economics, hoping for the very best. Yet, on my first day in the Sociology department at LSE I was in panic. What am I doing here? I don't know enough about Sociology to complete a PhD in it! This is not my peer group! I don't know what they are talking about! These are only a few thoughts that crossed my mind before and on that very first day; but in fact the more I heard about my fellow PhD students and their work, the more I realized what Sociology was and did.

The sheer breadth and depth of the topics I was surrounded with was breath-taking and my own interest in every single one of them showed me that I would be able to answer and discover “Whys” for a lifetime.

When I got home on that very first day at LSE I was excited and motivated and I felt that I had truly found my peer group. The coming weeks and months did not change this first impression. These people all went through the world with their eyes wide open, discovering “Whys” everywhere and they all had found their first “Why” that they sought to answer in their PhD.

The longer I was part of this community the more I was sensitized to the inequalities existent within our society, be they related to gender, race, age, wealth, education or many others and I realized the value of developing an awareness for these in my own life and for society more generally. Studying our society in its many facets gives me a deep sense of purpose that I hadn't yet found in the corporate world.

It was at this point that I decided to stop searching and instead embrace my new identity as a sociologist. I asked myself can I see me working as a social scientist in 10, 15, 20 years time and the answer was a clear YES, TOTALLY. The thought of being able to answer some of the “Whys” and to discover new “Whys” provides me with an immense sense of fulfilment and it gives me deep satisfaction to see how my research can be applied to the real world and make a difference in our society.

So with all this talk about “Whys” and my personal sense of fulfilment through the study of our society what does Sociology actually do for us? It helps us sharpen our eyes for issues such as inequalities, social and technological change, and exploitation. It helps us see structural forces that constitute the society we live in and opens up spaces to change these structures and with it, society. The “Whys” can have impact. Knowing answers to these may not completely change the world but it can influence and shape society as we know it.

I think the value this can bring is so obvious that we sociologists should really stop keeping the answers we find to ourselves and our peer group. We would quickly find that our findings have greater effects when we share them with the world.

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