

# The Engaged Sociologist

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## The Sociological Perspective and the Connections Among Sociology, Democracy, and Civic Engagement

**H**ave you ever wanted to help change society? Do you want to have a voice in how things work throughout your life? If so, you've come to the right discipline. Sociology helps you to understand how society operates and, in turn, how to make society better.

Sociology is the scientific study of society. As sociologists, we see how individuals both shape and are shaped by larger social forces. By developing what is called a *sociological eye* (Collins, 1998; Hughes, 1971), we are able to look beneath the surface of society and see how it really works. For example, with a sociological eye, we can recognize the tremendous influence of culture on individuals. Imagine how different you might be if you had grown up in Sweden, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, or another country with a culture very different from your own.<sup>1</sup> You would still look about the same (though you'd have different mannerisms, speak a different language, and have a different haircut and clothes), but your values, norms, and beliefs would be different. Your view of the proper roles of men and women, your religious or secular values, your career goals, your education, and so forth are shaped by the society in which you grew up.

Look at the differences between your immediate family and some of your relatives who may have much more or much less money. Does social class cause the differences, or do the differences help determine the social class to which we will belong?<sup>2</sup> Consider the varying perspectives that your male relatives and your female relatives bring to the same questions. They all live in the same world, in close proximity perhaps, but they have had such different experiences of it that some people even joke that men and women come from different planets (Gray, 2004). By using the sociological eye, we can look at the world from a unique angle, notice what is often unobserved, and make connections among the patterns in everyday events that the average person might not notice. In doing so, we can understand how different organizations, institutions, and societies function; how social forces shape individual lives and ideas; and, in turn, how individuals shape organizations and institutions.

By viewing society through the perspective of a *social world model*, we can study different levels of social units—from small- to large-scale parts of the world—that interact with one another. For example, we can study participation in the democratic process through examining *interpersonal and local organizations* (e.g., political activism among students on your campus and your school's College Democrats and College Republicans clubs), *larger organizations and institutions* (e.g., national Democratic and Republican Parties and state boards of elections), and *nations or global communities* (e.g., the U.S. presidential electoral process and the UN Millennium Declaration implementation). No matter which of these we might choose to study, however, we would always be particularly concerned with the connections between the varying social groups. For example, using the social world model would help us see that individuals are influenced by and can influence their classmates, their political party, their nation, and their global community.

The social world model and a sociological eye also enable us to recognize persistent patterns that work to create disadvantages for certain groups in society, resulting in institutional discrimination (intentional or unintentional structural biases). For example, U.S. society functioned in such a way for over 200 years that there were no female Supreme Court justices before President Ronald Reagan appointed Sandra Day O'Connor in 1981. Sociologists, using the sociological eye, recognize that the long-standing all-male makeup of the Supreme Court was part of a larger pattern of sex discrimination. Some of the discrimination was deliberate and based on people's ideas about gender. Some of it was political, based on a calculation of how the public would respond to the nomination of a woman to such a post. Some of it even had to do with the fact that our culture tends to use similar language and ideas to describe both *leadership*

*qualities* and *masculinity*. Thus, when people think of leadership, they tend to associate it with the qualities that men often bring to the table (Schein, 2001).<sup>3</sup> Social science research on the connections among gender roles, socialization, and sex discrimination, such as Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which shattered the myth that women could find fulfillment only as wives and homemakers, became part of public knowledge and was used to make the case for the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Ultimately, with many other feminist scholars contributing research, this movement paved the way for a political environment conducive to the appointment of Sandra Day O'Connor and, eventually, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Sonia Sotomayor, and Elena Kagan.

Use of the sociological eye also helps efforts to persuade governmental officeholders to initiate social policies that address social inequities. By looking beneath the surface of governmental operations, we can answer the following questions: To whom do office holders tend to respond the most? Why? How can we use this information to make sure that they respond to us? What social forces compelled Ronald Reagan, one of our most conservative presidents and not known as a women's rights advocate, to become the first president to choose a female Supreme Court justice?

## The Two Core Commitments of Sociology

According to Randall Collins (1998), using the sociological eye is one of two "core commitments" of sociology. The second is *social activism*. Once we understand how society operates, we are obligated to participate actively in efforts to improve it.

The sociological eye and social activism go hand in hand. The sociological eye helps us to uncover social patterns in society, and our use of those findings leads us to become effective, engaged citizens. Once you start seeing the world through a sociological eye, you will see social patterns all around. You can also learn how to discover more social patterns, through using sociological research methods. The more you train yourself as a sociologist, the stronger your sociological eye and ability to practice effective and constructive social activism will become.

You will see throughout this book how sociology can be used to make a positive impact on society. Each chapter contains examples of *sociologists in action*, those who have honed their sociological eye and use their sociological skills to create social change. In doing so, they fulfill the two commitments of sociology.

## The Sociological Imagination

To understand how we might influence society, we must first understand how we are affected by it. C. Wright Mills (1959/2000) described this ability as the “sociological imagination.” When we begin to relate personal troubles to public issues, connecting our individual lives to what’s happening in our society, we are using the sociological imagination.

For instance, both of us experienced our parents divorcing. As individuals, this was a personal trouble for each of us. Using the sociological imagination, we see that we were a part of a cohort of American children who lived through the great rise in the divorce rate in the 1970s. If we had been children during the 1870s, our parents would most likely have remained married. However, the changes that our society went through in the 1960s and 1970s (legal rights and protections for women, which enabled more women to exit relationships; the decline of religiosity; cost of living increases, which required more women to join the workforce, etc.) resulted in an increase in the divorce rate and, in turn, our own parents’ divorces. Our personal troubles (the divorces of our parents) were directly related to a public issue (the society-wide rise in the divorce rate).

Today, one of us is having a difficult time finding clothes for her young daughters that do not resemble those of the women on *The Real Housewives* and *Pretty Little Liars* shows. As a mother, she’s horrified that anyone would expect little girls to wear such skimpy outfits (particularly *her* little girls!). As a sociologist, she can look at a sample of clothing stores and advertisements in the United States and quickly realize that her experience is part of a society-wide pattern of sexualizing girls—even very young girls (Healy, 2012). She can then start to research why a society like ours, with such a long history of public activism around “standards of moral decency,” is so consistent—almost aggressive—in the sexualizing of girls. One hypothesis she might test is that this social behavior is related to the relative absence of mothers in the highest positions of fashion design and marketing. If she were to discover this to be true, she could use her findings to work for social change, trying to make these workplaces more open and inviting for fashion designers and marketers who are mothers.

One of the functions of sociology, as Mills (1959/2000) defined it, should be to “translate personal troubles into public issues” (p. 187). Once you start using your sociological imagination and looking at the world through the sociological eye and the social world model, it’s impossible not to notice the connections between yourself as an individual and larger societal patterns. Consider the kind of job you hope to get after leaving college. Will you make

an annual salary or an hourly wage? Will you be able to support a family? Will your job help you make a meaningful life for yourself? Will you have job security? Will your position lead to movement up or down the social class ladder? How will your job compare with those in the corner office of a major corporation or those found on the floor of a sweatshop?

Sweatshops are production sites where workers face near-slavery conditions, with few or no protections from unsafe work environments or arbitrary punishments, and where they work for below-living wage pay. Sweatshop jobs do not come with insurance, sick days, retirement plans, or protection against arbitrary termination. These sites may seem very distant from your life and from the lives of most college students. On the surface, colleges and sweatshops seemingly have nothing to do with each other. However, if you look underneath the surface (or, perhaps, at what you or your classmates are wearing), you may see a connection. The students at Duke University did: When they learned of the horrible sweatshop conditions in which most of their Duke-labeled clothes were being manufactured, they mobilized and established a United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) group on campus. Their efforts, and those of several administrators at Duke (particularly the director of Duke Store Operations), sparked a campus-wide discussion about sweatshops and the university's responsibility to ensure that clothing with a Duke label is "sweat-free." In 1997, Duke was the first institution of higher education in the United States to adopt a code of conduct for mandating that the apparel companies with which they do business must submit to independent monitoring of the conditions in their factories. In 1999, Duke helped establish the Fair Labor Association (FLA), a collaboration of companies, civic organizations, and universities that began monitoring factories to root out abuses of workers. As of 2014, nearly 200 colleges and universities were affiliated with the FLA (FLA, 2014).

In 2000, another group of students, experts on labor rights, and university administrators established the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC) to assist in the enforcement of the codes of conduct established between colleges and universities and the companies that manufacture clothes for them. By 2014, 180 institutions of higher education and six high schools were WRC affiliates (WRC, 2014).<sup>4</sup> Today, students in universities around the country are creating Fair Trade Universities, working with their schools' administrators to "embed Fair Trade practices and principles into policy, as well as the social and intellectual foundations of their communities" (<http://fairtradecampaigns.org/about/>; go to <http://fairtradecampaigns.org/campaign-type/universities> to find out more about the Fair Trade Universities movement).

## Sociology and the Critical Consumption of Information

In addition to having a trained sociological eye and making use of the sociological imagination, sociologists are informed and critical consumers of the barrage of information coming at us from all directions. Sociological research methods guide how we conduct research and how we interpret the information relayed by others. By understanding how “good” research is done, we can evaluate the information disseminated throughout society and know what news sources are trustworthy. These skills help us in our efforts to both understand and change society. In Chapter 3, we will outline in greater detail how sociological research methods can be used in this way.

## Sociology and Democracy

Through reading this book and carrying out the exercises within it, you will learn how to look beneath the surface of social events, connect personal troubles to public issues, and know what information sources are trustworthy. You can then use these sociological tools to strengthen our society, make our nation more democratic, and work toward ensuring the rights and well-being of people all around the world. Although democracy is defined in different ways by a multitude of scholars, all point out that it is a system of governance that instills state power in citizenship rather than in government. This book shows how sociology can enable citizens (like you!) to become knowledgeable, active, and effective participants in our democratic society.

As you read the rest of this book, please think about what these sociology students have accomplished and how you, too, can use what you learn from this course to become a *sociologist in action!*

### Sociologist in Action: The Social Justice League at Bridgewater State University

Joshua Warren, Bria Wilbur, Curtis Holland, and Jillian Micelli were four sociology majors at Bridgewater State University (BSU) who used their sociological eyes to make the connection between their campus and the community. Wanting to use the knowledge they learned in their courses to help effect positive social change, they created a student group called the Social Justice League. This group organized many events to educate the campus community about social justice issues, raise funds, and move the college toward more just practices.

One of the Social Justice League's big events was the creation of a "Tent City"—students, faculty, and staff slept outside in tents during a cold week in November. Each day, Tent City speakers from area shelters and organizations spoke to the campus community, and faculty from all across the campus brought their classes to these lectures. Students sleeping in Tent City were not allowed to use computers or cell phones, ate their meals in a "mock soup kitchen" set up in the cafeteria, and could bathe only by using public showers during set hours. In addition to creating the educational and symbolic components of Tent City, the students also raised several thousand dollars in cash and supplies to support a local homeless shelter.

The Social Justice League launched another strategic and powerful education and awareness campaign on campus when its members organized a series of educational events and demonstrations about sweatshop labor and the clothes sold at their college bookstore. They showed videos on the topic of sweatshops to the campus community, gave talks to classes, and staged a "mock sweatshop." Through these efforts, the students created a high level of campus awareness about sweatshops.

The Social Justice League also brought the issue of sweatshops to the direct attention of Dr. Dana Mohler-Faria, the president of BSU, who worked with the group to form a campus council to research the suppliers of the clothing sold at the student bookstore. After carefully examining the issue, the president agreed that BSU should join the WRC. Bria summed up the campaign by saying, "We worked extremely hard and I never felt more proud of myself than when I got the phone call that our campaign was successful and that BSU was going to join the Worker Rights Consortium! It was through sociology that I learned about these issues." Thanks to the efforts of the skilled and passionate members of the Social Justice League, BSU joined the growing ranks of colleges committed to ensuring that their campuses are sweat-free.

Jillian described the connection between her sociological training and her actions to work for the betterment of society like this: "Within one year, my life changed dramatically. [By changing] my major to sociology the night before classes started, not only did I gain a degree in sociology, I also gained knowledge I would have never gained otherwise. The training and skills I learned from courses on genocide to courses on social inequality truly motivated me to strive for social change not only in the Social Justice League, but beyond. It taught me the connection I have with the global market and how if one pushes for something they believe in, social change will follow."

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Speaking of his work as president of the Social Justice League, Joshua said, "By combining what I've learned in my studies with my passion for social justice and civic engagement, I am able to not only serve those immediately in need but also think about the reasons for why there is a need. It enables me to do more than just put a 'band-aid' on a problem. I can act proactively to find the source of the issue and uproot it!"

Curtis made his awareness of the two core commitments of sociology clear when he said, "As I began to realize that I was becoming a burgeoning sociologist, I realized simultaneously that the knowledge I was gaining from sociological inquiry came with a great responsibility."

Recently, the students of the Social Justice League joined forces with students from the Free The Children Bridgewater State University chapter to work with administrators across the campus and help BSU become one of the first universities in the country to gain Fair Trade University status.

### EXERCISE 1.1

### How Is Higher Education Related to Democracy?

If you live in a democracy, then you have inherited certain social obligations. What do you think they are? Is voting one of them? How about going to college? Think about the connection between democracy and higher education, and answer the following questions:

1. What do you think is the purpose of higher education?
2. Why did you decide to go to college?
3. Do you think your college education will help you become a better citizen? Why or why not?
4. Now go to the Campus Compact webpage at [www.compact.org/resources-for-presidents/presidents-declaration-on-the-civic-responsibility-of-higher-education](http://www.compact.org/resources-for-presidents/presidents-declaration-on-the-civic-responsibility-of-higher-education), and read the "Presidents' Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education."
5. Did your answer to Question 1 relate to the presidents' description of the purpose of public higher education? Why do you think it did or did not?

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6. Why is an educated public necessary for a strong democratic society?
7. Is a public higher education attainable for all Americans? (Be sure to look at the information in Exercise 1.4 before you answer this question.) Why or why not? If not, what are the ramifications of this situation for our democracy? How can you, using what your sociological eye has uncovered, work to make public higher education more attainable and realizable for more people?

### EXERCISE 1.2 **Walking Billboards**

You occupy many social roles in your life: You are a student, somebody's friend, somebody's child, and perhaps a parent, sibling, employee, teammate, boss, neighbor, girlfriend or boyfriend, or mentor. To many thousands of companies out there, your main role is that of consumer. How do apparel companies market themselves, specifically, to men, women, and different racial and ethnic groups? How do members of each of these groups act as "walking billboards" for the apparel companies that make the clothing they wear?

Next time you are in one of your other classes, note the following:

1. How many students are there? How many are male, and how many are female?
2. How many of each sex are wearing visible product or company logos on their clothing, including footwear, baseball caps, and so on? (Include yourself in your answers.)
3. Are there any logos that occur more than once throughout the class?
4. Are there any logos or brands that are considered "in" on your campus?
5. Using your newly trained "sociological eye," analyze the results you have gathered. What institutional and societal forces might be at work here? Do you notice any specific trends along race or gender lines? Do people from certain sex or racial or ethnic groups, teams, or cliques exhibit trends in their dress? How about the faculty? Do you detect any trends among your teachers? What does all of this tell you about consumerism, values, norms, and the culture of your campus?

**EXERCISE 1.3****What's the Connection Between College Students and Sweatshops?**

1. Watch *Outside the Lines: Cowboys Clothing Controversy* at [http://espn.go.com/espn/otl/story/\\_/id/7435424/dallas-cowboys-dip-sports-apparel-business-comes-allegations-sweatshop-labor](http://espn.go.com/espn/otl/story/_/id/7435424/dallas-cowboys-dip-sports-apparel-business-comes-allegations-sweatshop-labor).
2. Determine if your campus belongs to the FLA or the WRC. You can find out if your campus belongs to the FLA at <http://www.fairlabor.org> and the WRC at <http://www.workersrights.org/>.
3. Ask the manager of your campus bookstore what vendors they use to obtain the clothes sold on campus. If your campus does belong to the FLA or WRC, contact that organization, and ask about its findings on the vendors your campus bookstore uses.
4. If your school is not an FLA or WRC affiliate, do some research on your own to find information about the vendors. The USAS's Sweatfree Campus Campaign website, which you can access through <http://usas.org/>, is one useful site. You should also check out the websites for the Business & Human Rights Resource Centre at [www.business-humanrights.org/Categories/Individualcompanies](http://www.business-humanrights.org/Categories/Individualcompanies) and Green America's Responsible Shopper at <http://www.greenamericatoday.org/programs/responsibleshopper>.
5. Ask the campus bookstore manager if he or she is aware of the conditions under which the vendors' employees work.
6. Write a two- to three-page paper that describes your findings and why you believe your campus should or should not be affiliated with the FLA or WRC. If it is not (and you think it should be), describe which organization you think it should join and how you could help create a movement on campus to bring about such an affiliation.

**EXERCISE 1.4****Worried About the Increasingly High Cost of Tuition?**

You are not alone. According to the College Board (2011), after adjusting for inflation, from 2001–2002 through 2011–2012, in-state tuition and fees increased by 56% at 4-year state colleges and universities, 38% at 2-year colleges, and 26% at 4-year private institutions. During the same decade (between 2001–2002 and 2011–2012), state funding per full-time college student declined by 23%.

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In 2013–2014, the average cost of tuition and fees was \$30,094 at private nonprofit 4-year colleges, \$8,893 (up 4.4% from 2010–2011) at 4-year (in-state) public institutions, and \$3,264 (up 8.7% from 2010–2011) at public (in-state) 2-year institutions. Keep in mind that these figures do not include room and board costs (College Board, 2014).

1. How would strategies to deal with the increase in tuition vary depending on whether it is viewed as (a) a personal trouble or (b) a public issue?
2. Go to the website "Higher Ed Not Debt" at <http://higherednotdebt.org>. What are some of the actions suggested on that website, or that you have thought of yourself, that you could take to convince state legislators to increase funding for public higher education in your state?
3. Choose one of the actions you've listed under Question 2 that is a manageable action for you to take. Now, carry out the plan you devised, and write a report that describes (a) what you did and (b) the outcome of your actions. Note that you might have to wait a while to complete (b), so you should start on (a) right away.

### EXERCISE 1.5

### Are Campus Workers Paid Enough to Be Able to Support Themselves?

Are workers on your campus paid enough to be self-sufficient?

1. Conduct research on the wages paid to cafeteria and custodial staff on your campus. You can gather this information through interviews, or if you are able to access the campus financial reports, you can use them.
2. Once you have gathered your data, read the "Self-Sufficiency Standard" at <http://www.selfsufficiencystandard.org/standard.html>, and look at the Self-Sufficiency wage data for your state. If your state is not listed there, you can use the Living Wage Calculator at <http://www.livingwage.geog.psu.edu>.
3. Based on what you have read, determine whether or not the cafeteria and custodial workers on your campus are making "living or self-sufficient" wages.

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4. Read "Living Wage Overview" at <http://laborcenter.berkeley.edu/living-wage/overview.shtml>, and look at the USAS overview of campaigns for Campus Worker Justice at <http://usas.org/campaigns/campus-worker-justice/>.
5. Write a two-page paper that describes the findings for your campus and how students can help raise the salaries of low-wage campus workers.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Before reading this chapter, had you ever recognized a connection between your own life and the lives of people working in sweatshops? Why or why not? Do you now see a connection? Now that you have thought about this, how will you proceed?
2. Think of one personal trouble in your life (e.g., struggling to pay for college or to find a job that pays well, a time when you were discriminated against, etc.). Now, use your sociological imagination, and relate it to a public issue. How would your attempts to deal with the problem differ depending on whether you view it as (a) an individual problem or (b) a societal issue?
3. Do you know what the president of the United States, your state senators, and your representative are doing about (a) sweatshops and (b) funding for higher education? If you don't know, why do you think you are unaware of their positions on these issues? Would their positions on these issues influence whether or not you would vote for them (or have they influenced your decision)? Why or why not?
4. Do you think you could use your sociological eye to do something similar to what the members of the Social Justice League did at BSU? Why or why not? What are some of the ideas you have?
5. Explain why the second core commitment of sociology (social activism) must be preceded by the first (use of the sociological eye). Provide an example of how you might fulfill both core commitments.

### SUGGESTIONS FOR SPECIFIC ACTIONS

1. Join an already established campus group working against sweatshops. (You may substitute a different issue or campaign if you are already involved or interested in one, with the permission of your instructor.)

2. Establish your own campus group to fight sweatshops. Go to <http://www.freethechildren.com/get-involved/> and the anti-sweatshop movement's USAS website (<http://usas.org>) to learn how to form a local group to combat sweatshops.
3. Go to your representative's and senators' websites (you can find them at <http://www.house.gov> and [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov)). Send them an e-mail or letter that conveys your thoughts and feelings about a public issue of concern to you.
4. Investigate the safety of the work and living environments provided for students, faculty, professional staff, and support staff on your campus. If there are clear deficiencies or inequities, organize a group of students, faculty, and professional and support staff to advocate for improved conditions for all campus workers. For the past few years, sociology students at the University of Virginia, the University of California at Berkeley, and many other colleges across the nation have carried out just this type of research and activism. You can find information on recent campaigns at <http://usas.org/> and in *Berkeley's Betrayal: Wages and Working Conditions at CAL* (<http://publicsociology.berkeley.edu/publications/betrayal/betrayal.pdf>).

Please go to our website at <http://study.sagepub.com/korgen5e> to find further civic engagement opportunities, resources, peer-reviewed articles, and updated web links related to this chapter.

## NOTES

1. If you did grow up in Sweden, Ethiopia, or Bangladesh, then imagine that you grew up in New Jersey.
2. It works both ways, of course. And bonus points to you for looking at the endnote.
3. We should note that this view is less prevalent today than it was at the time of Sandra Day O'Connor's appointment to the Supreme Court.
4. To learn more about the history of the sweat-free campus movement read "The Future of the Student Anti-Sweatshop Movement: Providing Access to U.S. Courts for Garment Workers Worldwide" at <http://digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1058&context=lclb>. See also the WRC website at <http://www.workersrights.org>.

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