

Third Edition

Understanding SOCIAL ISSUES

Critical Thinking and Analysis

Gai Berlage
William Egelman



This book is printed on
recycled, acid-free paper.

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Understanding Social Issues

Critical Thinking and Analysis

Third Edition

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ALLYN AND BACON
Boston London Toronto Sydney Tokyo Singapore

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Cover Designer: Timothy St. Amour
Manufacturing Buyer: Louise Richardson



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A Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.
160 Gould Street
Needham Heights, MA 02194

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Berlage, Gai.

Understanding social issues : critical thinking and analysis / Gai
Berlage, William Egelman. — 3rd ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-205-13912-4

1. United States—Social conditions—1980—Problems, exercises,
etc. 2. Social problems—Problems, exercises, etc. I. Egelman,

William. II. Title.

HN59.2.B46 1993

301'.072—dc20

92-15468

CIP

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

97 96 95 94 93 92

Understanding Social Issues

Dedicated to Aaron, Jeremy, J.B., and Cari

Preface

THE THIRD EDITION of *Understanding Social Issues*, like the second, is designed to give you an opportunity to examine current social issues. Fourteen social issues are presented, ranging from personal, such as “Where Will You Be Living in Five Years?” to national, such as “Does Equality Exist in America?” to international, such as “Why Worry about the Rest of the World?” The environment, crime, drugs, AIDS, abortion, and war are some of the issues you will analyze. This textbook is different from your other textbooks in that you are given the opportunity to be the researcher and play the role of sociologist. Each module poses a question of social importance that you are asked to analyze and to answer. You will analyze the question by using current national and international statistics, which are contained in each module. In this way, you will learn how to use available statistical data, such as the U.S. Bureau of the Census and the Federal Bureau of Investigation *Uniform Crime Reports*, to analyze social issues. You will learn how to distinguish between objective facts and subjective opinion. You will learn the difference between scientific research and hearsay. We hope that you will get so enthusiastic about the joys of doing social research that you will begin to research other issues on your own. You may begin to see college, community, national, and international issues in a new light. You may even find yourself becoming an active participant in trying to determine social policy. We would appreciate hearing from you, instructor or student, as to your comments and suggestions for topics for future editions. We are grateful to our students and colleagues who commented on the second edition of the book.

We especially want to thank the many people who were important in the production of this book. Allyn and Bacon provided us with excellent editorial assistance. Karen Hanson, our editor, offered us her wisdom and expertise. Laura Lynch, Carlyle Carter and Annette Joseph did an excellent job of coordinating both editorial and production efforts. We also wish to thank the reviewers who offered their ideas and suggestions for improving this and previous editions: Michael Miller, The University of Texas at San Antonio; Ellen Kennedy, College of St. Thomas; James Lindberg, Montgomery

College; Walt Schafer, California State University at Chico; and Richard Senter, Central Michigan University. And of course we wish to thank Iona College and especially Mary Bruno, Director of Secretarial Services, Patti Besen, Nancy Girardi, Terry Martin, and Maureen McSweeney for typing the manuscript.

G.B.

W.E.

Introduction

THERE ARE MANY REASONS why you may have registered for a sociology course. One reason often stated by students is that they are interested in people and in learning more about their society. Sociology is the discipline that allows students to study society using a scientific perspective. Sociology trains students to differentiate between common sense or biased ideas and valid sociological findings. Students are active participants in the society and are constantly engaged in social interaction. However, their personal biases often influence their views of society. The mass media (television, newspapers, and magazines) report daily what is happening in American society. Columnists and others sometimes attempt to predict future changes, such as what the family will be like ten years from now or how many people will be victims of AIDS; or they attempt to interpret why more people are using “pleasure drugs” such as cocaine or crack. Very often these interpretations are also highly subjective and based on the journalist’s own biases or values. Many students may not know the difference between subjective and objective interpretations. Sociologists use methods that are different from those of journalists and people not trained in sociology.

Some students think that sociology is mostly common sense. They are unaware of the methods that sociologists use to arrive at scientifically based observations, and they don’t know how to distinguish between personal beliefs and the social reality as uncovered by scientific investigation. For example, let us say that one day in class there is a discussion on drug abuse. One student states that he or she knows someone who uses crack and then proceeds to discuss the subject as if that acquaintance were representative of all crack users. Obviously, the student is not an expert on the subject. In fact, because of his or her limited range of experience, he or she may have many misconceptions about crack users and the effects of crack.

PERSONAL ISSUES AND SOCIAL ISSUES

Very often when students are asked to think of social issues or problems, they think of a personal problem that affects a friend or a family member: for

example, Uncle Joe is an alcoholic, Cousin Mary suffers from depression, or a friend at school is flunking English. If a significant number of people in the society are affected by these types of problems (alcoholism, mental illness, course failure) and the public considers these issues to be of concern, then these issues are also social problems. But not all personal problems are social problems. For example, society may not be interested in your friend's failure, but if large numbers of college students are unable to pass freshman English, then this may become an issue of public concern.

As another example, consider Uncle Joe's drinking problem. Alcoholism is clearly a social issue since it directly or indirectly affects many people in the society. The problem is not simply an individual or family problem. Alcoholism is associated with spouse and child abuse, drunk driving, disorderly conduct, industrial accidents, and homelessness. The health care system must provide treatment for alcoholics. Communities must establish programs and shelters for indigent alcoholics. The criminal justice system must deal with alcohol-related criminal behavior. Lastly, the public through their taxes must pay for these programs.

In many instances, an individual problem may be part of a larger social phenomenon that is called a *social issue*. Sociologists study these social issues. A scientific study of alcoholism would not be based on personal knowledge of one person, as in the case of the student, or on interviews with several alcoholics, as might be the case in a journalistic interview. The sociologist would collect data on a representative sample of users. *Representative* means that the sample would include the full range of alcoholics, people from all parts of the United States and all walks of life. Based upon the study of this representative sample, the sociologist would then begin to make observations about alcohol abuse. The study of alcoholism is a continuing process. As science progresses, ideas are constantly being challenged, and many new ideas that were once accepted as facts are replaced by new ideas. New research may prove old ideas false, and this motivates the continuing search for more accurate knowledge.

THE STUDY OF SOCIOLOGY

Sociology is the scientific study of human social behavior. It involves the use of scientific methods to arrive at knowledge in a way similar to that of the natural and physical sciences. Sociology, however, is different from the natural and physical sciences in that people are both the researchers and the objects of research. Chemists may investigate the interaction of hydrogen and oxygen molecules, but it is highly unlikely that they will become emotionally involved with either type of molecule.

The subject matter of sociology, on the other hand, may cause subjective problems for the researcher. Specifically, personal bias may enter in since the subject matter of sociology frequently has high emotional content. For example, issues such as crime, drug abuse, abortion, and poverty may all lead to heated arguments and debates. Sociologists are not immune to this emotionality. It is very important for sociologists to become aware of their own personal feelings so that they can be more objective in their research and in their interpretations.

As a sociology student you will become involved in the process of scientific investigation. You will come to look at things that you previously took for granted in new and unexpected ways. Indeed, some ideas and concepts that you have accepted all your life may be challenged. You will gain new insights into the workings of your society and the social issues that face it. In fact, sociology has been called a “debunking” science because it has a tendency to contradict many everyday assumptions that people hold about their society. For example, some people believe that honest or dishonest persons can be spotted just by looking at them. But ask any store owner who has taken a bad check if he or she believes this. Scientific social research has demonstrated that physical characteristics are not related to moral temperament. You cannot “tell just by looking.” Criminal behavior is much more complicated than many people believe. It involves many economic, sociological, and psychological variables. Facial characteristics are of little consequence in determining or predicting criminal behavior.

SOURCES OF DATA

This book offers you the opportunity to examine some of the critical social issues of the day. In so doing, you will be able to compare *your* everyday assumptions of social life with the best available scientific data. The data you will be using in your analysis will be from regularly published statistical sources. The U.S. Bureau of the Census is the major source of nationwide data. Besides publishing statistical reports based upon the decennial census (i.e., the census done every ten years), the bureau also publishes *The Statistical Abstract of the United States* every year. This source provides a wealth of statistical information ranging from the output of American farms to changes in the Consumer Price Index. Other national data sources are also available. For the module on juvenile delinquency, you will make use of data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s *Uniform Crime Reports*. This is the major source for nationwide crime statistics in the United States.

These are some of the sources you will be using in these modules. These and other sources of statistical data are available in most university libraries and in many local public libraries. After completing these modules, we hope that you will feel better equipped to undertake statistical research on your own. We also hope that you will value the contribution that such research can make to an accurate understanding of our social world.

THE FEAR OF STATISTICS

You may already have doubts as to whether or not you really want to work with statistics. One student fear that seems to be almost universal is “math anxiety.” American students appear to have an almost irrational fear of numbers. The mere mention of the word *statistics* can strike fear in the heart of many a student. In this book you will be asked to make use of and analyze statistical information. Do not panic. As you will see, the bark of statistics is worse than its bite. You will come to find that simple statistical analysis is exactly that: simple. At the same time, you will learn why statistics is an extremely useful tool. You will also discover how some of the statistics reported by the mass media are often misinterpreted.

For example, on television you may hear that car theft is a major problem in this country. In order to support this statement, FBI statistics are cited showing that a car is stolen every twenty-four seconds. Does this mean that right now, instead of worrying about the statistics in this book, you should be worrying about your car? These modules will teach you how to interpret statistics of this sort. You will also become better able to determine whether or not other people’s interpretations of statistics are valid. Best of all, the kind of analysis you will be doing will be similar to the kind that is done by professional sociologists.

BASIC STATISTICAL TOOLS

Throughout this book you will be using simple descriptive statistics such as averages, proportions, ratios, percents, and percent change. Let us quickly review some of these statistics.

Averages

You use averages every day. For example, you hear sports fans talking about batting averages of their favorite players or weather forecasters speaking of

the average rainfall in a particular month in your locale. Certainly most college students are concerned with their grade point averages. An average is a useful tool by which to summarize a mass of data. For example, it would be difficult or impossible for people to visualize whether or not April was an exceptionally wet month if weather forecasters did not use averages. In sociological research, three types of averages are often used: mean, median, and mode.

- *Mean*: The mean is the arithmetic average or the sum of a set of numbers divided by the total number of occurrences. In all likelihood you have calculated means since second or third grade. Remember the Friday morning spelling tests. If you wanted to know how well you were doing you would compute your average or mean score. For example, if you had five spelling tests and your grades were 100, 80, 90, 50, 70, you would add all your scores ($100 + 80 + 90 + 50 + 70$) to get the total (390). Then you would divide the total (390) by the number of tests (5) or $390/5 = 78$.
- *Median*: Government agencies often make use of medians when speaking of such things as family income. Simply stated, the median is the middle number in a set of numbers arranged in order of size from largest to smallest or smallest to largest. The median cuts the set of numbers in half, so that half the numbers fall below the median and half above it. If we look again at our spelling test example, to calculate the median we would arrange the scores in order of size as follows: 100, 90, 80, 70, 50. The score in the middle is 80. There are two test scores higher than 80 and two lower than 80.
- *Mode*: The mode is not used very often. The mode is the number in a set of numbers that occurs the most frequently. Again, looking at the spelling example, we see that there is no mode, because no number occurs more than once. However, if instead of a 50 you had scored another 70, then there would be two 70s and 70 would be the mode.

Proportions and Percents

Proportions and percents are useful for making comparisons. Suppose you want to compare the number of females in your sociology class to the number in your history class. Your sociology class has 40 students, and 20 are females. Your history class has 100 students, and 50 are females. If you just

state that your sociology class has 20 females and your history class has 50, it would be very confusing. It might give the impression that history is a subject that attracts more females than sociology. What causes the confusion is that the two class sizes are different. One way to standardize is to use a proportion. In other words, compare one part to the whole: i.e., how many females are there compared to the total number of students? For the sociology class you would have 20/40 or 0.5, and for history you would have 50/100 or 0.5. In this way you would see that both classes have the same proportion of females. To get a percent, multiply the proportion by 100. In this instance, if you multiply 0.5 by 100, you get 50 percent. You are really standardizing the number. Percent means per 100. In other words, if you had 100 people, how many would be females? This is a very useful statistic, because now you can make comparisons between groups of numbers when the sample size or base numbers are different.

Ratios

It is also useful to compare different parts to the whole. For example, if your sociology class has 20 females in a class of 40 students, then 20 of these students must be males. Now you can compare the ratio of females to males. There are 20 females to 20 males or 20/20. Reducing the fraction you get 1/1 or one female for every male. Suppose another sociology class of 40 has 16 females; then the number of males would be 24. The ratio of females to males would be 16/24 or 2/3 or 2 to 3. There are often set conventions for stating ratios. For example, sex ratios are usually given as males to females. In the modules, when you are asked for a ratio make sure you express the ratio in the manner it is asked for.

Percent Change

Often you will want to compute change over time: for example, the percent change in the number of smokers in your college from 1980 to 1992. Suppose your college had 600 smokers in 1980 and in 1992 had 100. In 1992, there are 500 fewer smokers. Let 1980, the initial time, be T_1 and let 1992, the final time, be T_2 . The formula to calculate the percent change is expressed as follows:

$$\frac{T_2 - T_1}{T_1} \times 100 \text{ or}$$

$$\frac{1992 \text{ smokers} - 1980 \text{ smokers}}{1980 \text{ smokers}} \times 100 \text{ or}$$

$$\frac{100 - 600}{600} \times 100 = -83\%$$

This statistic means there was an 83 percent decline (note the minus sign) in the number of smokers between 1980 and 1992.

CONCLUSION

Now you are ready to begin your analysis of some social issues. The issues included for study in this book are all relevant and topical. Almost every day you hear or read about one of the issues discussed in the book. After completing each of the modules, you will be able to analyze more easily what you hear on television and read about in the newspaper. You will also be able to compare what everyone is saying about the issue with what you have discovered to be the objective facts. As an educated adult, you will develop a critical eye, learning not to accept at face value everything you hear and read. In addition, these modules will give you the opportunity to *apply* the concepts and theories you have learned in your sociology class and in assigned readings. We think you will find that doing these modules is not only fun but personally rewarding. You may even get enthusiastic about the endless fascination of “doing” sociology, motivated by the desire to better understand our social world and that most fascinating of all subjects—ourselves.

Contents

Preface	ix
Introduction	xi
1 Where Will You Be Living in Five Years?	1
2 Who's Bringing Up the Children?	11
3 Why Are Teenage Girls Becoming Pregnant and Having Abortions?	21
4 Are Gender Roles Still Sex-Typed?	33
5 Is America a Drug Culture?	45
6 Two-Fisted Jane: Myth or Reality?	55
7 Does It Pay to Go to College?	71
8 Are We Still a Nation of Immigrants?	79
9 Does Equality Exist in America?	89
10 Can You Afford to Get Sick?	99
11 AIDS: The Modern Plague?	111
12 Are We Destroying Our Environment?	121
13 How Many Times Can You Blow Up the World?	131
14 Why Worry about the Rest of the World?	141

MODULE 1

Where Will You Be Living in Five Years?

Push On—Keep Moving—THOMAS MORTON

INTRODUCTION

People seem to be constantly on the move. Think for a moment how often you see moving vans on the road. Are so many people actually changing their addresses? Where is everyone going? Sometimes our general impressions of the world are not validated by the actual data, but this is not one of those cases. People in the United States are indeed on the move. Within any five-year period, about one third of the population moves. Between 1986 and 1987 about one out of six people (18 percent) changed their place of residence.

People move for personal reasons. Some may decide to move because of employment opportunities. Others may wish to live in a warmer or a colder climate. Some may wish to be nearer certain relatives or they may wish to be farther away from certain relatives. Regardless of the specific causes, the amount of movement in this country is substantial.

Although large numbers of people change addresses, many are not changing the types of communities they live in. City dwellers tend to move to other cities. Suburbanites tend to move to other suburbs.

Because so many people move, demographers (social scientists who study population composition and change) have come up with precise definitions regarding the movement of people. A *migrant* is someone who moves from one county to another. In order to be officially listed as a migrant

you must cross a county boundary line (which can also include crossing a state line, of course). Not everyone who moves crosses county lines. Sometimes people move across the street or around the corner. The Census Bureau utilizes the word *mover* to describe such a person. *Immigration* constitutes a move across a national boundary line: that is, from one country to another.

Because large scale migration does occur, a number of different groups in our society may be interested in knowing who is moving where. For example, politicians are very concerned with where people are moving. In the 1988 presidential election, George Bush defeated Michael Dukakis in part because of what was termed his "southern strategy." The strategy involved President Bush winning the electoral college votes in all of the southern states. Florida, Texas, and California are very important in presidential elections because of the size of their populations. They are getting larger due to the migration to the "sunbelt" region of the country. This means that future presidential elections will also hinge on this "southern strategy." In addition, because of the large number of people living in suburban areas, candidates will concentrate a large part of their campaign schedule on these suburban populations.

This movement or migration of people is nothing new. The United States has a long tradition of people migrating from one area of the country to another. What groups of people might be concerned with changes in population size and composition? Think of your own community. Why would the migration of people be of interest to certain types of people in your community?

GOVERNMENT LEADERS

If large numbers of people are moving into a certain area, local officials will have to respond to this change by making important decisions. Questions concerning housing, health care, education, and police and fire protection will begin to emerge in areas of rapid population growth. Some of the questions would be:

- Should we build more schools?
- Do we have enough hospital or health care facilities to serve our growing population?
- Are there adequate public services (police, fire, sanitation) to serve our expanding community?