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Social Justice Poverty Privilege Activism Intersection
Homophobia Global Issues Inspire
Empowered Racism
Health GLBTQ
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SOCIOLOGISTS IN *Action* ON INEQUALITIES

RACE, CLASS, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY

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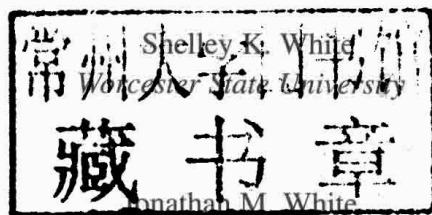


SOCIOLOGISTS

IN *Action*

ON INEQUALITIES

RACE, CLASS, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY



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SOCIOLOGISTS

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ON INEQUALITIES

This book is dedicated with deep love, admiration, and adoration to Jennifer Wollheim. Her life's work stood as testament to the power of individuals to create impactful social change. Though she was taken from us suddenly and far too early, she remains deep in our hearts always. We miss you and love you Jennifer, and we remain ever with deepest respect for all that you stood for and all of the beauty that you left in this world.

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It is always a great pleasure to work with the SAGE team.

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Morrie Schwartz, Karen Hansen, Sue Dargan, Lucille Lawless, Joe Bandy, Terry Arendell, Craig Kielburger, Marc Kielburger, and Fintan Kilbride, for their incredible guidance and support on his journey as a sociologist in action. I am especially grateful to my students and coworkers at Bentley University, Bridgewater State University, Colby College, and Framingham State University and to the Free The Children and Me to We staff and youth, past and present, who have inspired and continue to inspire me with their deep commitment to social change and social justice. I am eternally grateful to my family for their constant support and unconditional love. Especially, I could never express deeply enough how lucky I feel to have my wife Shelley by my side as my best friend and partner in life. Thank you, Shelley, for inspiring me with your passion for social justice and equity and for this incredible journey we are on together!

Kathleen is grateful to have earned her PhD in sociology at Boston College, where she learned that sociology can and should make a positive impact on the world. She thanks her family for their love, support, and patience. Mom, you will always be my #1 editor. Thanks for all you do. Julie and Jessica, the stories in this book will help you to understand more fully why your mom loves being a sociologist. You two make me so very proud to be your mom. Jeff, thanks for being such a wonderful motivator, source of inspiration, and all around incredible partner (and excellent dad).

Finally, we are enormously indebted to our contributors—an incredible array of inspiring *Sociologists in Action* and gifted writers. They make us proud to be sociologists!

Introduction

Sociology is an exciting subject to study! Sociologists have the ability to uncover and analyze the social problems that exist in our world, including those faced by people because of the social norms and values that guide us surrounding race, ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality. But what makes sociology so exciting is that sociologists also possess the skills to create change, to work to make a difference on the very social problems they have identified!

Does this appeal to you? Have you ever . . .

- Wondered how you can make a positive impact on the world?
- Wished you could better understand *why* there remains so much prejudice and discrimination based on race, class, gender, and sexuality while also understanding *what* you can do to change this?
- Wanted to know how sociology can play a key role in giving you the tools to understand and create the change you want to see in the world?
- Wondered why sociologists are some of the most interesting and empowering people you've ever meet?

If so, you have started reading the right book! Throughout this book, you will be treated to dozens of pieces written by sociologists who are using their skills to have a positive social impact on a variety of issues related to diversity in our society and around the globe.

The book is broken into five chapters, closely related to courses on diversity as well as to many introductory sociology and social problems courses taught through the central lens of diversity. At the end of each chapter, you will find thought-provoking discussion questions aimed at challenging you to think more deeply about the issues being raised by the various authors. Each chapter also provides an extensive list of great resources that will help you to learn more about the social problems seen throughout the book and the many inspiring individuals and organizations working to create solutions.

All of the sociologists in this book follow in a long line of tradition, using their sociological tool belt to create solutions to the enduring prejudice and discrimination based on race, class, gender, and sexuality that is wrapped throughout our society. C. Wright Mills (1959) speaks of the responsibility of sociologists to connect personal troubles to public issues and Randall Collins (1998) teaches of the two core commitments of sociologists to (1) use their sociological eye to uncover societal injustices and (2) use their sociological skills to actively work to confront these injustices and to seek solutions. The contributors to this book are each a shining example of what Mills and Collins had in mind, and collectively they provide a powerful story about the unique ability of sociologists to change the world.

The three editors of this book feel honored to be able to bring this book to you, sharing the stories of dozens of our sociology colleagues. Combined with our sister book, *Sociologists in Action: Sociology, Social Change, and Social Justice* (2nd Edition, 2014), we feel more energized than ever about the potential for our discipline to create powerful social change. What a cool professor you must have for choosing to use a book that not only teaches you about the persistent and poignant issues of prejudice and discrimination in our world but also provides real-life examples of how you can become part of the solution. We hope you enjoy the book and that you are inspired yourselves to become sociologists in action, utilizing the tools that your professors are providing for you to create a more socially just world!

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*R*ace is a social construction with profound implications in our social world. While constructions of race vary across time and place, racial inequality remains a social problem throughout U.S. society and the world. Today, sociologists can often be found at the forefront of efforts to uncover patterns of racial inequality and discrimination and to promote racial justice. In this chapter, six sociologists in action describe how they have used sociological tools to better understand and address racial inequality and discrimination.

The chapter begins with, “Amplifying the Youth Voice of the Food Justice Movement with Film: Action Media Projects and Participatory Media Production.” Author Mike Cermak vividly describes his work as a food activist and how he has collaborated with inner city youth of color to promote the food justice movement. Through participatory action research and an action media project, he and the young people have attempted to address “the racial bias in the environmental and food movements,” which privileges the voices and perspectives of whites over others. In this process, Cermak took a back seat, allowing the youth to guide their own learning about patterns of food inequality and to put their knowledge to work educating others and transforming their neighborhoods in the process. In one culminating event of their work, Cermak describes how two of the youth presented their film, *Planting for Peace: Bury Seeds, Not Bodies* (2010), in front of an audience of over 300—and how they shone. Having grown as youth leaders in this movement, these young people gained the skills and confidence to deliver a presentation that moved and motivated their audience. For Cermak, this experience affirmed that “becoming a sociologist in action required that I use any medium at my disposal to amplify the voices that need to be heard.”

Next, in “Place and Race: Cultural Democracy and Reclaiming Public Space,” Diane Grams writes about her work in Chicago protecting and restoring cultural works in a traditionally African American community threatened with gentrification. As new investment flowed into Chicago’s near south side, deemed the “Soul of Black Chicago,” she and fellow activists had to grapple with the question, “how does one preserve yet change local culture?” Bringing her students into her community work, she was able to elucidate how cultural symbols can empower a neighborhood. In describing the research her class undertook, she states, “this process of documenting knowledge from oral histories and personal accounts and assembling them into reports and publications helped to demonstrate how local cultural sites are community assets to build upon, not erase. This kind of cultural work I identify as ‘empowerment’ because it seeks to restore cultural reserves of communities suffering from disinvestment.” Grams’ work shows how sociologists, by bringing attention to the importance of these symbols, can help save them from destruction and move communities toward the ideal of a cultural democracy.

In the third piece in this chapter, “Social Movements in Action: Combating Environmental Racism on a Native American Reservation,” Brandon Hofstedt provides an example of the positive impact students can make. Students in his social movements class learn about these movements, why they matter, under what conditions they are successful, *and* how to create one. From the many impressive social movements students have started, Hofstedt describes the work of one group to address environmental racism in their community. This group effectively used the sociological tools they gained in their class to stall the efforts of a mining company to develop an iron ore mine in the Penoque Mountain range in northern Wisconsin. The mine would have resulted in environmental damage and health risks for the Native American nations in the area. The students’ successful efforts to thwart that plan are an inspiring picture of sociology in action. As Hofstedt describes, “Using their sociological tools and their newly acquired understanding of social movements, students were able to organize a successful Social Movement Campaign and to make a real impact in confronting environmental racism in their own community!”

In “When Resilience Is Not Enough: Recovery, Privilege, and Hurricane Katrina,” Pamela Jenkins shows how race, class, and power intersected in the Hurricane Katrina disaster in New Orleans. Through sharing her own experience living through Katrina and its aftermath, and her training as an activist and sociologist, Jenkins illustrates how issues of race and class can help determine who survives a disaster such as Katrina. She shows how those with higher racial and class statuses tend to have resources to call upon that give them an advantage over others in the same situation. Speaking of

her own relative advantage, she states, "This privilege in the face of disaster placed me in a contradictory position of being 'part of' something yet 'standing apart' as well—the subject and observer of an event." As she observed the disaster and its aftermath unfolding, she reflected on how racism shaped media depictions of the chaos, stating, "The portrayal began to surface as some residents (usually white) were shown as 'taking' from stores and other individuals (usually poor and African American) were viewed as 'looting' from the stores. This stereotype of young African American men as looters did not show those men of color who saved people in neighborhood after neighborhood." Race also became an important factor in shaping the kinds of post-storm settlements families received, and Jenkins describes how groups and allies mobilized to address these inequalities.

Joshua Warren writes about how he used the sociological tools he gained as a sociology major at Bridgewater State University in "Living the DREAM: Race, Privilege, and DREAMs of a Brighter Future." Working with the DREAM program first in Vermont, and then in the Roxbury community in Boston, Warren helped connect children living in subsidized housing developments with college student mentors. Warren used sociological tools to understand why the DREAM program was a successful model in rural Vermont and how it could also be adapted successfully to urban Roxbury. He and the other members of the predominantly white DREAM program had to learn to recognize the lack of diversity on their staff and the issues that are raised when white staff and mentors work in a community of color. As they problem solved and negotiated these issues collaboratively with their partner communities, they also worked to encourage youth to recognize their potential and to achieve their goals. As Warren describes, "Youth who never before had access to college campuses now view higher education as a viable option. Many youth who may have joined gangs have made the decision not to. Instead, the program has created a positive peer group where youth are surrounded by friends and neighbors who are engaged in *constructive* [rather than destructive] risk taking."

In "Bridging the Campus and the Community: Blogging about the Asian American Experience," C. N. Le shares how he began to learn about and embrace his Vietnamese and Asian American heritage after he began to take some sociology courses in college. He decided to use his sociological knowledge to embrace the expectation that he would speak up for other Asian Americans. Through establishing his Asian-nation.org Web site and blog, Le has "portray[ed] Asian Americans as accurately and comprehensively as possible rather than let[ting] . . . other Americans rely on distorted portrayals and ignorant stereotypes about Asian Americans." In the mode of public sociology, he has made sure his postings are as jargon free as possible in order to bridge the campus and community divide. Le points out that, in

addition to educating the public at large, his Web site is “a source of information and learning for young Asian Americans, many of whom grow up [as Le did] isolated from their history, culture, and collective experiences.” His Web site and blog are also a means “to mobilize [the Asian American] community in times of crisis (e.g., responding to a high-profile incident of racism).” Both are excellent examples of the use of sociological tools to combat stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination.

Amplifying the Youth Voice of the Food Justice Movement with Film: Action Media Projects and Participatory Media Production

Michael Cermak
Boston College

Michael Cermak is the founder and director of Environmental Justice Action Media (EJAM), an organization dedicated to producing youth-focused media on urban environmental issues. He is also a sociologist and teacher at Boston College, where he completed his dissertation on the role of hip hop and the arts in urban environmental education. His food activism includes working in Boston-area K–12 schools where he has set up numerous vegetable gardens and integrated them with science curriculum. His most recent work is as cofounder of The Green Dragons, a food and fitness initiative that combines martial arts and gardening education for youth.

There was a crowd of over 300 people filing into the room, and I was starting to doubt my presentation plan. This would be the first test for two urban teenagers who had little experience speaking in front of an audience, even less so in front of 300 potentially restless and half-interested undergraduates. The youth were two of the stars of my film, *Planting for Peace: Bury Seeds, Not Bodies* (2010), and we were to show the 20-minute piece and then hear about their experience helping me make it. I wondered if I was setting them up for failure. Sure, they were used to talking about their unlikely love of urban agriculture to me and their boss, but in front of such a large crowd the prospect was daunting. This would be an extension of a program where I sought youth narratives about food justice and put them

into a film that was co-written, filmed, and edited by teens. The youth were getting paid well for this appearance but even that couldn't stave off the nervousness they felt as they watched the crowd amass.

My sociological research on race, nature, and media directly informed the process that led to my travelling exhibition with the youth. My research questions revolve around the racial bias in the environmental and food movements, what Julie Guthman calls the "unbearable whiteness of alternative food" (2011). As a scholar of color who cares deeply about urban sustainability and youth empowerment, I wanted to do more than just describe the racial bias in yet another progressive movement and intervene by working with a set of teens to create food media that represented more of their perspective. The standard eco-discourse (e.g., global warming, the ozone layer, greenhouse gases) is deeply wrought with scientific and hyper-rational thinking. I had seen this turn off many of the youth with whom I worked. They had tired of hearing about the health content of foods, how everything they like is bad for them, and how organic is the way to go. Whatever the food message, the messengers were usually white scholars and writers (such as Michael Pollan, Frances Moore Lappe, Eric Schlosser, and Barbara Kingsolver) who are great but do not always tap into important justice and race-based frameworks for understanding food and culture. I wanted to engage young people in the production of their own narrative on food problems in their neighborhoods, and what *they* saw as the root of the issue.

The *Planting for Peace* (P4P) film project evolved from a methodology called Participatory Action Research (PAR). PAR is an approach to research and inquiry where the trained experts intentionally take a back-seat to the community with whom they work. Instead of the researchers choosing the topic, they start with a meeting with community members to identify the most salient social problems. Instead of being the sole collector and cruncher of data, the researchers train and include the community in data collection and analysis. Last, PAR researchers make a commitment to help the community use the results of the field research to address the issues they have studied. PAR was born as a response to the nontransparent and noninclusive format taken by many researchers who study marginalized populations. As someone oriented to taking action, I also employ PAR because it gives me a chance to address the social problems I study side by side with the people who are the "subjects of research." This is what I was attempting to do by having the youth from the project present their film at the university.

Making this project into a film also helped me remedy the issue that much good PAR work gets done with such little documentation in popularly accessible media. Like PAR that critiques the standard research process, I extend