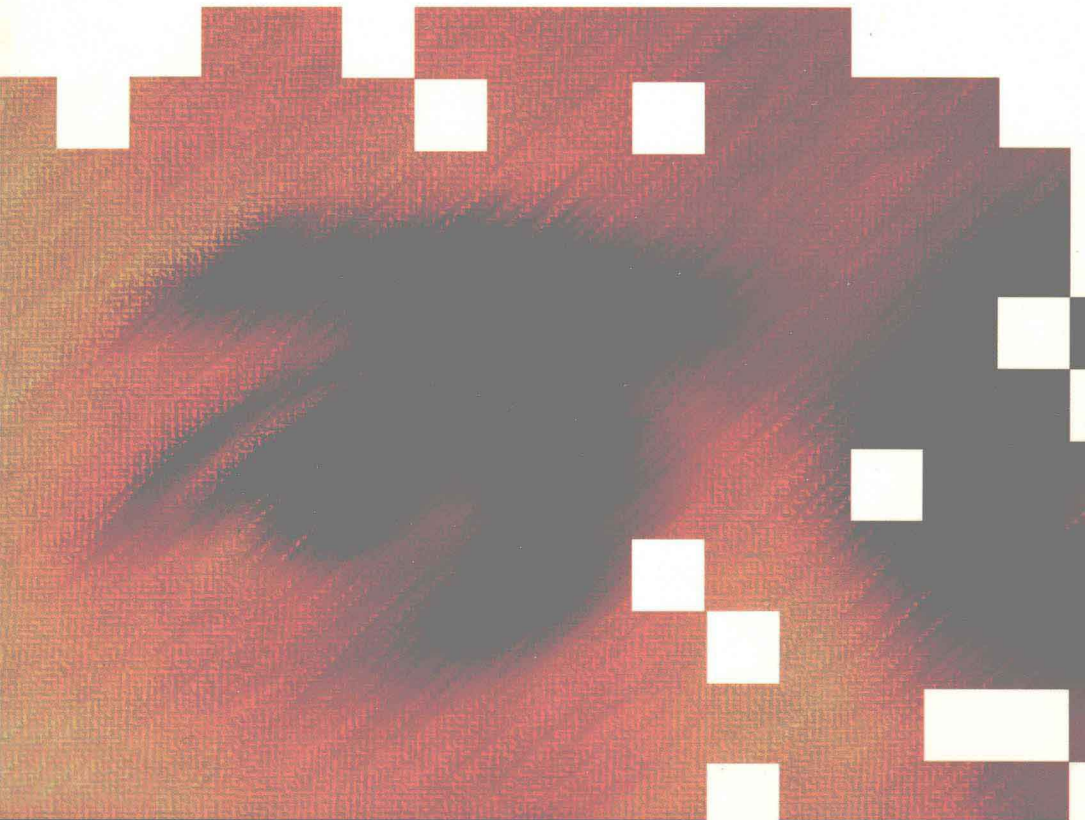


S E C O N D T H O U G H T S

Seeing Conventional Wisdom
Through The **Sociological Eye**



A N E T M . R U A N E

K A R E N A . C E R U L O

SECOND THOUGHTS

**Seeing Conventional Wisdom
Through the Sociological Eye**

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Montclair State University



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*To Mary Agnes, a beloved
source of knowledge*

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PREFACE

It is not uncommon for those assigned to teach entry-level sociology courses to experience some trepidation, even dread, about the teaching task ahead. In many ways, intro to sociology is a “tough sell.” Some students perceive the discipline as nothing more than a “re-hash” of the obvious; it speaks to everyday life, something many students believe they already know and understand. Other students confuse sociology courses with disciplines such as psychology or social work; they take our courses hoping to “figure out the opposite sex,” learn to better “work the system,” or overcome their personal problems with regard to deviant behavior or family relations. To muddy the waters even more, many intro students are likely to be in our courses not because of some desire to learn sociology but because the courses satisfy a general education requirement. Taking all of these factors into account, sociology instructors can face substantial resistance. Getting students to “adjust” their vision of the world so as to incorporate the sociological eye is no small feat.

Despite these challenges, it remains essential to achieve success in entry-level sociology courses. From an instrumental point of view, the discipline recruits future sociologists from these courses, thus mandating a sound foundation. Further, departments may gain significant institutional resources by keeping intro course enrollments up. Intellectual concerns also contribute to the importance of entry-level courses. Many sociology instructors believe that intro courses offer a guaranteed “dividend” for the student: the sociological vision represents an essential tool for understanding and surviving our increasingly complex social world. Thus, intro courses provide instructors with a valuable opportunity to plant and nurture the sociological imagination in each new cohort of college students. Thought of in this way, failing the intro student can carry long-term social costs.

Second Thoughts offers a “tried and true” approach to successfully nurturing sociological thinking in the newcomer. The book provides a vehicle with which to initiate dialogue; it allows instructors to meet their students on “common ground.” Each chapter in this book begins with a shared idea—a conventional wisdom that both instructor and student have encountered by virtue of being consumers of popular culture. Once this common footing is established, *Second Thoughts* introduces relevant sociological concepts and theories that “mesh” with each conventional wisdom. Sociological ideas and perspective are used to explain, qualify, and sometimes debunk conventional wisdom.

At the conclusion of each chapter, we provide a vehicle by which students can apply their new sociological knowledge beyond the classroom. We have incorporated a set of exercises linked to the subject matter covered in the chapter. The exercises, too, are grounded in the familiar. We encourage students to turn to everyday, common resources for some first-hand learning experiences.

Our own classroom experiences prove the “familiar,” a “user-friendly” place to jumpstart discussion, thus laying the foundation for critical thinking and informed analysis. In the classroom, we also have found the “familiar” a useful tool with which to delineate the sociological vision. This book attempts to pass along some of the fruits of our own learning. In pushing beyond the familiar, *Second Thoughts* also exposes students to the sociological advantage. At minimum, readers will accrue the benefits that come from taking time to give conventional ideas some important “second thoughts.”

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are, of course, a number of people who have contributed to this book. First and foremost, we would both like to acknowledge the students encountered in the many sociology courses taught at SUNY Stony Brook, Rutgers University, and Montclair State University. These students challenged us to make the sociological imagination a meaningful and desirable option on students’ learning agendas. Thanks also go to Maureen Gorman, a patient and skilled reference librarian who always met our information needs with a better than excellent effort. We are grateful to several reviewers for their careful readings and productive suggestions on various drafts of the manuscript: Paul Baker, Illinois State University; Gerald Boucher, Temple University; Lisa Brush, University of Pittsburgh; Diane Carmody, Western Washington University; Tad Krauze, Hofstra University; Judith Lawler-Caron, Albertus Magnus College; Judith Richlin-Klonsky, University of California, Los Angeles; Daniel Schubert, Dickenson College; Marshal Shapiro Rose, Florida Atlantic University; Michelle Stone, Youngstown State University; and Shirley Varmette, Southern Connecticut State University. Their efforts were spearheaded and complemented by Steve Rutter’s savvy editorial insight and intellectual acumen. Steve’s input improved this work immeasurably. Thanks also go to the solid support staff at Pine Forge, Strawberry Field Publishing, and Scratchgravel Publishing Services. Finally, we would like to thank several friends and family members (Mary Agnes, Anne, Jay, Sam, Joan, and Jane) for consistently asking about “the book” and/or planning a book celebration, thereby indirectly prodding us to stick with the program.

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In this introduction, we discuss the roots of conventional wisdom. We also contrast such knowledge with that acquired via the sociological perspective. In this way, we introduce students to a sociological mode of thinking.

CONCEPTS DEFINED AND APPLIED

Conventional wisdom; social patterns; social context; cultural value; self-fulfilling prophecy; sociological imagination

CULTURE

ESSAY 1 ■ *Winning Is Everything / 11*

Conventional wisdom suggests that competition and achievement go hand in hand. In this essay, however, we highlight the many studies that show the benefits of cooperation over competition. In so doing, we review American cultural values, strategies of action, and the connection of these elements to both positive and negative outcomes.

CONCEPTS DEFINED AND APPLIED

Cultural value; strategies of action; dialectic; prejudice; culture works against people

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We frequently hear it said: Children are our future. They are our most valuable resource. Here, we present research suggesting otherwise. Children may be the most overlooked, the most neglected segment of the population despite current talk of family values and the future of American youth.

CONCEPTS DEFINED AND APPLIED

Infant mortality rates; social indicators; ideal culture; real culture; cultural inconsistency; conflict theory; power; social policy

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

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In this essay, we explore various social statuses—age, education, gender, income, race, religion—noting the ways in which these factors can guide something as seemingly individualistic as Cupid’s arrow.

CONCEPTS DEFINED AND APPLIED

Social status; norms of homogamy; endogamy; socioeconomic status; self-esteem

ESSAY 4 ■ *Stress Is Bad for Your Well-being / 35*

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CONCEPTS DEFINED AND APPLIED

Social structure; social location; social context; chronic stress; social support network; Gemeinschaft; Gesellschaft; task-oriented stress; role conflict; social strain

ESSAY 5 ■ *The “Golden Years” Are Tarnished Years / 41*

Growing old—no one looks forward to it. Yet, this essay illustrates that our worst fears about growing old may be largely unfounded, simply products of a “master status” for which we have been inadequately prepared.

CONCEPTS DEFINED AND APPLIED

Master status; anticipatory socialization; macro-level analysis; social context; age structure

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men. We also discuss the powerful role physical attractiveness can play in the construction of self-identity.

CONCEPTS DEFINED AND APPLIED

Cultural inconsistency; self-fulfilling prophecy; cultural capital; social status; identity; socialization; appearance norms; primary socialization; rituals; looking-glass self

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CONCEPTS DEFINED AND APPLIED

Income; Davis-Moore thesis; functional analysis; conflict theory; wealth; power; occupational prestige; occupational prestige scale; stratification system

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This essay documents the impact of income on issues of mortality and life chances. Money, with all its alleged downfalls, can still mean the difference between life and death.

CONCEPTS DEFINED AND APPLIED

Mortality rate; socioeconomic status; infant mortality; life expectancy; negative life events; life chances; functional analysis

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CONCEPTS DEFINED AND APPLIED

Gender socialization; gender typing; stereotype; gender segregation; pay gap

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Is the United States an even playing field for all Americans despite race? In this essay, we review the many arenas of continued segregation and racism in the United States. Further, we explore the basis for determining

one's race, noting that with all of the implications the classification holds, categorizing race is, at best, a tenuous process.

CONCEPTS DEFINED AND APPLIED

Race; racism; prejudice; discrimination; social construction of reality; reification; social context; social status; status set; achieved status; ascribed status; master status; identity; life chances; social minority.

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CONCEPTS DEFINED AND APPLIED

Corporate crime; FBI Index crimes; social construction of reality; cultural value; fear of strangers

ESSAY 13 ■ Honesty Is the Best Policy / 113

... except, of course, when reporting your income, revealing your age, sparing the feelings of another—the list can go on and on. In this essay, we explore the conditions under which lying is viewed as normal. In so doing, we use lying as a case study that aptly demonstrates both the pervasiveness and the relative nature of deviance.

CONCEPTS DEFINED AND APPLIED

Norms; deviance; deviant lies; normal lies; techniques of neutralization; social scripts; primary deviance; secondary deviance

SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS: MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

ESSAY 14 ■ The Nuclear Family Is the Backbone of American Society / 121

Mom, Dad, and the kids—is this the unit on which American social life is built? This essay documents the history of family in America, showing that the nuclear family is a relatively recent phenomenon and one that soon may be replaced by other forms of family. In addition, the stability of the nuclear family is explored in light of idyllic stereotypes.

CONCEPTS DEFINED AND APPLIED

Macro-level analysis; nuclear family; extended family

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High divorce rates, couples living together, the need for “space,” fear of commitment—have such trends doomed the institution of marriage? Here, we discuss research suggesting that the practice of marriage is alive and well despite conventional wisdom to the contrary. We also note the historical “popularity” of divorce in America and speculate on why such a trend marks our culture.

CONCEPTS DEFINED AND APPLIED

Marriage; social institution; monogamy; serial monogamy; latent function; manifest dysfunction; family of orientation

SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS: THE ECONOMY**ESSAY 16 ■ Welfare Is Ruining This Country / 137**

A frequently expressed opinion when talk turns to welfare reform is that too many people are on the dole, and too many recipients have other options. In this essay, we review some of the least understood dimensions of welfare and explore exactly where welfare moneys are going.

CONCEPTS DEFINED AND APPLIED

Poverty line; poverty; public assistance programs; social insurance programs; intergenerational upward mobility; out-group; social reproduction theory; structural functionalism; social functions

ESSAY 17 ■ Immigrants Are Ruining This Nation / 144

Why don't you go back where you came from? This angry cry seems to be getting more and more familiar as the United States faces the highest levels of immigration in its history. Is immigration ruining this nation? This essay reviews the historical impact and future trends of immigration in the United States.

CONCEPTS DEFINED AND APPLIED

Prejudice; immigrant groups; cultural value; in-group; out-group; assimilation; multiculturalism; cultural capital

SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS: EDUCATION**ESSAY 18 ■ Education Is the Great Equalizer / 155**

Conventional wisdom tells us that educating the masses will bring equal opportunities to people of all races, ethnicities, and genders. In this essay, we explore the truth of this claim and review the progress we have made in bringing a quality education to all.

CONCEPTS DEFINED AND APPLIED

Intergenerational upward mobility; structural functionalism; functional illiteracy; conflict theory; socialization; tracking; self-fulfilling prophecy.

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Introduction: The Sociological Perspective



IN THIS INTRODUCTION, WE DISCUSS THE ROOTS OF CONVENTIONAL WISDOM. WE ALSO CONTRAST SUCH KNOWLEDGE WITH THAT ACQUIRED VIA THE SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE. IN THIS WAY, WE INTRODUCE STUDENTS TO A SOCIOLOGICAL MODE OF THINKING.



Conventional wisdom is a part of our everyday lives. We are exposed to its lessons from early childhood, and we encounter its teachings until the day we die. Who among us was not taught, for example, to “be fearful of strangers” or that “beauty is only skin deep”? Similarly, we have all learned that “stress is bad for our well-being” and that “adult life is simply incomplete without children.”

Conventional wisdom comes to us in many forms. We encounter it via folk adages, “old wives’ tales,” traditions, and political or religious rhetoric. We find it in advice columns, cultural truisms, and the tenets of “common sense.” **Conventional wisdom** refers to that body of assertions and beliefs that is generally recognized as part of a culture’s “common knowledge.” These cultural lessons are many and they cannot be taken lightly. They are central to American society, and they are frequently the source of our beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors.

To be sure, conventional wisdom often contains elements of truth. As such, it constitutes a starting point for knowledge (Mathisen 1989). Consider, for example, the well-known truism: “Actions speak louder than words.” In laboratory research, results show that those assessing an individual who says one thing but does another are influenced more strongly by the individual’s actions (Amabile and Kabat 1982; Bryan and Walbek 1970). Similarly, many studies support the adage that warns, “Marry in haste, repent at leisure.” When we define *haste* as “marrying too young or marrying too quickly,” we find that those who “marry in haste” report less satisfaction over the course of the marriage than those who make a later or a slower decision (Furstenburg 1979; Glenn and Supancic 1984; Grover et al. 1985; Kitson et al. 1985; Martin and Bumpass 1989; Thornes and Collard 1979).

Complete faith in conventional wisdom, however, can be risky. Social patterns and behaviors frequently contradict the wisdoms we embrace. Many studies show, for instance, that adages encouraging the “fear of strangers” often are misguided; most crimes of personal violence are perpetrated by those we know (see Essay 12). Similarly, research documents that beauty may be merely “skin deep,” but its importance cannot be underestimated. Physically attractive individuals fare better than those of more average appearance in almost all areas of social interaction (see Essay 7). Many studies suggest that stress is not always “bad for one’s well-being”; it can sometimes be productive for human beings (see Essay 4). And, despite all of the accolades to the presence of children in our lives, research shows that many adults report their highest levels of lifetime happiness take place *before* they have children or *after* their children leave home (see Essay 2).

Second Thoughts: Seeing Conventional Wisdom Through the Sociological Eye addresses the gaps that exist between conventional wisdom and social life.