The Sociology of Public Issues

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Preface

Everyday life is often said to be the laboratory for sociology. This is certainly so, but it takes some direction to *see* the sociology around us. That is the goal of this book—to show beginning students that sociology can distinctly illuminate public issues. News reports of these issues rarely mention sociology, but there *is* conspicuous sociology in the news. Indeed, most public issues directly interest sociologists, and just as they draw our professional attention, public issues can prompt student interest in sociological thinking.

The subject matter of our introductory courses includes much that is familiar to students—crime, the family, politics, religion, and organizations. This familiarity, however, is both a blessing and an obstacle to our efforts as teachers. We can refer to the social world and assume that there is common understanding and interest. Yet students are often so "close" to the subjects of our discussions that they may not recognize their sociological importance or question their own preconceptions. As sociology instructors, then, we need to draw on students' natural curiosity and help them understand their world in a distinctive way.

We hope this book will stimulate in students what C. Wright Mills called a "sociological imagination"—that is, an ability to see private troubles as *public issues* and public issues as *private concerns*. By applying sociological analysis to familiar public issues, we want to show students that a sociological imagination can be valuable, both personally and intellectually. As students engage these issues, we hope that the principles of sociology will become more clear and exciting.

We have often begun and concluded our own introductory sociology courses by telling students to examine newspapers

and magazines for illustrations of sociological principles. We have told them that the course was a "success" if they could interpret these news accounts in a new, more penetrating light. But rather than simply urging students to read about their world in a sociological perspective, we are now convinced that it is useful to do it *with* them. We hope that our examples can help them to develop their own interests and abilities.

In every case, for every issue examined, we reach conclusions. We have tried to balance our presentation with all "sides" of an argument. At the same time, we argue that certain sociological interpretations are better than others. We evaluate. We condemn. We praise. We do so because informed sociologists have opinions. Sociology can rarely lay claim to undisputed "truth," but sociologists should not refrain from expressing an informed opinion. That is our intellectual responsibility.

Students should realize that sociology has the potential to inform debates, but that it cannot remove all ambiguities. Disagree with us! We hope that our interpretations will challenge you and your students' thinking.

Are we biased? Yes, of course. Issues are not inherently interesting or important. What we decided to write about reflects our value judgments—our biases—about what is interesting and what is important. And on the matters we do discuss, we have personal views (sometimes *very* different) on what *should* be done. We are aware that these personal preferences may influence our judgments. No one is immune from these influences. We consciously strive, however, to distinguish empirical from normative statements—that is, statements of "what is" from statements of what "should be." We expect that people of every ideological persuasion will agree with many of our empirical sociological analyses while disagreeing with others. These essays are not intended to advance a particular political agenda.

Public issues are ideal for teaching sociological principles because they are both complex and intriguing. We have chosen some topics because they are particularly contentious, others because they dramatically allow us to develop sociological principles or theories. All topics, however, address important social issues. Reasonable people disagree about them. A sociological analysis may resolve some of that disagreement or, at least, clarify the reasons for disagreement.

The title of this book, *The Sociology of Public Issues*, calls for some explanation. A public issue is a matter of public concern, political debate, or widespread public interest. For our purposes, a precise definition is not needed, and we do not need to explain how some matters become defined as "issues." We simply looked at the news media to see what commands public attention—matters that should be familiar and interesting to students. The full importance of some issues, however, may not be readily apparent to students until they examine them sociologically. And that is one motivation for writing this book.

There is another reason we wanted to write this book. We are both sociologists who trained in the early 1970s. Both of us entered sociology because it promised a rewarding opportunity to study the problems of our society. For us, sociology largely means an analysis of contemporary society. In the issues of the day, we believe, lies the attraction of sociology for students. Students should be able to use sociology to understand *their* contemporary world, something not typically emphasized by sociology textbooks.

Finally, as teachers of introductory sociology courses, we need a book like this one. We use introductory textbooks and expect to continue using them, although we want to add depth and make their content more alive by intensively engaging only a few topics. Our book, then, is primarily intended as a supplement to the textbooks that most instructors use. It elaborates central topics in standard texts and applies general principles to current concerns. *The Sociology of Public Issues* may also be used as a primary source in an introductory course. It does not presuppose a background in sociology, and we provide short explanations of key concepts that may be unfamiliar to students. In any case, we hope to stimulate discussion, questions, and argument by using familiar issues.

After reviewing the leading textbooks, we selected issues that closely related to the concerns and organization of those books. Thus, each chapter of this book complements a chapter in a larger text. We have omitted certain topics as unnecessary or unworkable, but have included chapters for all topics that we view as the core substance of most introductory sociology textbooks.

We have purposefully avoided elaborate references and footnoting because we want these chapters to be read as short essays. Where statistics are necessary, we use them and provide source references. Assertions and arguments that are commonly accepted within the discipline, however, generally are not referenced. The decision to write this way reflects our intentions about how to use this book. Students should read the relevant chapter in their main textbook *before* reading our essay. That text will provide a larger analytical context and needed citations.

We view sociology as an exciting way to examine and understand the social world. We hope these essays will convey the excitement that we, as sociologists, experience when we read the newspaper, listen to the evening news, or deal with our fellow citizens.

Acknowledgments

Our strongest thanks go to Sheryl Fullerton, then Sociology Editor, who initially saw the promise of our idea. Of course, we can't extoll her editorial judgment without obvious bias, but we can draw attention to her record of developing sociological texts that break out of the usual mold. For several years, she relentlessly pursued the project—always encouraging us with a clear understanding of the concept. More personally, we can say that she valuably helped us, at each stage of the way, move from general intentions to a completed volume.

Serina Beauparlant, the current sociology editor, ably and smoothly took up the reins on the project when Sheryl was promoted to Executive Editor. She took the time to learn the history of this project and took care to hear our intentions for it. When we suggested changes in design, she understood and helped us accomplish those changes. We enjoyed a truly collaborative relationship with her.

All authors can truly envy, as well, the friendly, professional and efficient help we received from others at Wadsworth, including Marla Nowick, who kept us apprised of all our tasks, and Robert Kauser, who handled permissions. Cece Munson deserves great credit for her fine work as production manager. She transformed a manuscript into a book that faithfully reflected our understanding of its purpose. Steve Bailey edited our writing with proper respect for clarity and convention and a generous inclination to let our own voices speak. Cynthia Bassett, who designed the book, enabled our material to be presented clearly and beautifully.

Our intellectual debts are many because we necessarily ventured outside of our academic specialties in writing these es-

says. Specially due thanks are the following colleagues at the University of Virginia: Mark Cooney, Thomas Guterbock, James Hunter, Jim Hawdon, Walter Newsome, Daphne Spain, and Gresham Sykes. We also thank Janie Iven (MADD National), John McCarthy (Catholic University), and Craig Reinarman (Northeastern University) for providing materials and advice.

Wadsworth arranged to have reviewers who brought lively minds, seasoned expertise, and good judgment to the task. We certainly can't pretend to have met all of their challenges, but the book is surely better because of the comments of these reviewers: Karen Denton (University of Utah), Paul C. Friday (Western Michigan University), Christopher Hunter (Grinnell College), Martin N. Marger (Michigan State University), John S. Miller (University of Arkansas, Little Rock), James Spates (Hobart and William Smith Colleges), and Theodore C. Wagenaar (Miama University).

We also thank the participants in the roundtable discussion at the American Sociological Association meetings two years ago, in which many very valuable ideas were presented. The participants were Ben Agger (SUNY—Buffalo), Louis Anderson (Kankakee Community College), Richard Peterson (Cornell College), Howard Robbey (Trenton State College), and Beth Ann Shelton (SUNY—Buffalo).

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THE SOCIOLOGY OF PUBLIC ISSUES

CHAPTER 1

Methods

Sociological Research and Public Issues

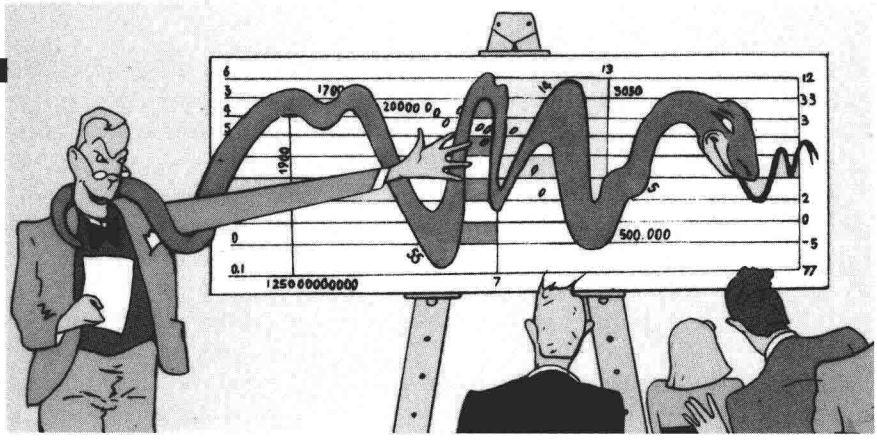
The audience for sociological research routinely extends beyond the academic world. This research affects how the larger public thinks about issues and even what it considers to be an issue.

How many homeless are there? What are their backgrounds and their outlooks? Journalistic accounts feature not only gripping stories of individuals, but also reports of systematic attempts to count the homeless population, to detail their problems (for example, the percentage with drug or alcohol dependency), and to measure the effectiveness of programs to assist them. The widespread expectation that scientific evidence *should* inform public discussions is underscored by the fact that journalists emphasize the need for more good research on the homeless.

Do early education programs such as Head Start improve the academic performances of disadvantaged children? Of course, that is the hope. But policy makers and the citizens who pay for the programs want "proof," seeking it in statistical studies that compare the academic achievement of students who went through the program with those who did not (but who were otherwise similar in background).

Researchers present their findings before governmental committees, legislators cite these studies in position papers, and the popular media summarize the results for common consumption.

Do Americans favor affirmative action programs to improve opportunities for blacks and other minorities?



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Statistics can both inform and distort discussions of public issues. Some analyses are demonstrably better than others, however, because they are based on sound research procedures. Your aim should be to evaluate carefully and accept what meets rigorous methodological standards.

Assessment of public opinion, which is a key force in our democratic system, is not left to the intuition or the guesses of presumed experts ("As a fellow I know said, . . ."). On affirmative action and virtually all public concerns, the media present the results of sample surveys ("*x*% of Americans think . . ."), which scientifically measure our collective mood. And, of course, no group is more attentive to these results than politicians. To some extent, public opinion polls have become modern-day substitutes for town meetings.

In short, discussion of public issues rarely proceeds without some reference to social science research. At the same time, however, this research itself has become an issue, especially when it attempts to quantify what goes on in social life.

There is good reason for skepticism. Informed citizens can diligently follow an issue and read totally opposite but "scientific" conclusions. And it's only a small jump to the conclusion, "People can 'prove' whatever they want to." This hardly suggests that social science has much to offer. With this attitude, people can justify holding on to their unexamined opinions: "Your opinion is no better than mine just because you cite some statistics."

To the contrary, we argue that people can *say* almost whatever they want with a "scientific" gloss. And they often do. Some judgments, however, are demonstrably better than others because they are based on sound research procedures. Research can be systematically evaluated and valuably inform us about public issues.

In the short space of this chapter, we have no pretensions of presenting a minicourse in research methods, but we can raise some basic questions that may help you become a better consumer of much sociological research.

We look first at the critical matter of defining terms in measurable ways—that is, "Who Counts What." Then, because public opinion polls are so prominent, we focus on two concerns that pertain directly to evaluating their meaning: "Who Is Asked" and "What Is Asked."

Who Counts What?

A few years ago, one could not eat breakfast cereal without literally coming face-to-face with a burning social issue: On milk cartons were pictures of missing children. By printing such photographs and "hot-line" numbers, milk producers had joined a national crusade against child abductions.

Americans seemed to be in an epidemic of fear. School and law-enforcement officials recommended that parents create identification files for their children with photographs, dental records, and finger-