

# Life Choices

APPLYING SOCIOLOGY

second edition



Robert E. Kennedy Jr.



**LIFE CHOICES**  
*Applying Sociology*  
Second Edition

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Among those at Holt, Rinehart and Winston who helped bring the second edition to life, I particularly want to thank Susan M. Driscoll, Kirsten Olson, and Robert Tessman for their enthusiasm and encouragement.



an equal amount of material about the noncollege population, however, it would have hampered a straightforward treatment of the college-educated population's life choices and prospects. The book also would have been much longer, and the added pages would have increased its cost to students.

Similarly, my striving for a concise book meant minimizing the duplication of materials commonly included in most sociology textbooks. I would have liked to elaborate on many social patterns described in this book, especially the causes and consequences of class, racial, and gender inequities. But I did not do so because that information is readily available in many standard texts.

*Life Choices* is not a substitute for a comprehensive sociology text, or a course instructor's own lectures and materials. Instead, it can serve as a supplement to both. It can be read straight through either at the start or near the end of a course, or chapters can be assigned to be read with related chapters in a main text. *Life Choices* chapters are linked to general topics in many sociology textbooks in the following way:

<i>LIFE CHOICES Chapter</i>	<i>Main Text Topic</i>
1. Thinking about Your Future	What Is Sociology?, Population, Life Course
2. Life Prospects and Cohort Size	Research Methods, Population, Social Change
3. How Much Formal Education?	Education, Social Stratification, Gender Relations, Race Relations
4. Which Occupation?	Work and Occupations, Gender Relations, Social Change
5. Married or Unmarried?	Family, Sexuality, Gender Relations
6. Childfree or Parent?	Family, Social Change
7. Homeowner or Renter? Mover or Stayer?	Community Life, Urban Life, Social Stratification, Migration, Race Relations, Social Change
8. What Can You Expect in Retirement?	Aging, Population, Social Change, Gender Relations
9. Making Choices in an Age of Uncertainty	Life Course, Social Change, Aging

*Life Choices* can be especially useful to students in introductory classes where the main text attempts an overview of the entire field of sociology. Too often students perceive such a text as overwhelming, giving them answers without first making clear what the questions are. In contrast, most chapters in this book ask specific questions before providing detailed and factual answers. Having seen in this book how the sociological perspective can give clear answers to a limited number of important questions,



readers may be encouraged to apply the same approach to other matters, including decisions made on the job and as citizens.

The purpose of the questionnaires included in this book is simply to help readers make plain their preferences for certain occupations, being married or single, having children or not, and so forth. For the sake of clarity, each questionnaire groups similar values and labels them. Although this approach points up which values are connected with what choices, it does involve an unavoidable tradeoff—answers may be influenced by the fact that value items have been grouped and categorized.

Course instructors can improve the validity of student responses to the value questions, however, by constructing one questionnaire that mixes together all of the items in the different chapters. By administering that combined questionnaire on the first day of class, instructors can provide students with both their individual results, and the class total for each item. If desired, the questionnaire can be readministered near the end of the course. Any differences from the first-day responses can be discussed in light of what students have learned so far in sociology. Debates over conflicting values and ideas can help students (and sociologists) test their theories against reality.

A final word about my own values. . . . Given the emphasis throughout the book on the importance of individual choice in life, it should be apparent that I see people as shapers—and not victims—of society. Certainly, our lives are constrained by social forces. Culture and socialization do limit our goals, preferences, and opinions. Social structure can restrict our alternatives. The narrowing of options gradually imposed on us by the aging process, for example, is a major theme of this book. Another theme, the importance of population processes for our life prospects, also reveals how personal choices are constrained by matters beyond our control.

Nevertheless, in a rapidly changing and fluid society such as the United States, I believe that uncertainty about the future is as common a problem as people having too little freedom to make their own decisions. People in their late teens and early twenties, for example, have a wider range of possible futures, and more uncertainty, than they probably will have thirty or forty years later. Thus, it is particularly important, I believe, for young adults to combine the sociological perspective with sound knowledge of the society in which they live, to judge their own life prospects and make their own life choices.



# INTRODUCTION

□ Since I began teaching sociology in the late 1960s, I have been impressed by the number of college students who take sociology courses to learn more about life. Many want to know how social systems work, how cultural values affect personal choices, and how life prospects are influenced by social forces. The best way I found to meet this student interest was to highlight the age-related aspects of a sociological topic. The focus on age fits in naturally with the life-course perspective, making an easily understood and intriguing combination. Because a brief and clearly written book taking this approach did not exist, I decided to fill that gap.

I hope *Life Choices* will help readers improve their life prospects by showing them how to apply sociological knowledge to their own lives. The book does this in three ways. First, it provides factual information showing how personal decisions are made in a social context. Second, using simple questionnaires, the book asks readers to reflect on the values in which they believe and, by so doing, to consider how important cultural values are in making personal decisions. And third, it uses population projections to show some life situations that can be reasonably expected in the future. On this last point, no attempt is made to forecast what will happen—that is unknowable. Instead, the projections are intended to encourage taking a long-term view about possible consequences of one's decisions.

Given the emphasis on making personal choices, and my desire for a concise book, I wrote it for a specific audience—undergraduate college students from first-term freshmen through seniors, including students who are beyond the customary ages of most college undergraduates. For many people, higher education opens a wider range of opportunities, increases their freedom to make choices, and enhances awareness of the consequences of their decisions. Thus, many of the topics included, and examples used, were selected to show college-educated people the difference that having a college education makes in their lives.

I would have liked to include detailed discussions about the life choices of people who do not go to college. There is no lack of information about their lives. Such statistics are listed in many of the same sources that I use to describe the lives of people with some college education. If I had added



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# THINKING ABOUT YOUR FUTURE

□ You are unique in your personality, capabilities, desires, and experiences. But no one is an island—we all live in social settings. As you go through your life, many problems and opportunities you face as an individual will be similar, though not identical, to those facing thousands, if not millions, of other people your age. You will be sharing your life with your agemates, and their numbers will influence your life chances. This book will use projections of your agemates' prospects to take you on a journey through some major choices you may make during your life, including those about education, occupation, marriage, rearing children, housing, and retirement.

No attempt is made in this book to forecast what will happen either to you or to society at large. Your life will be different from anyone else's. You probably will experience unexpected events, both good and bad. And if you also believe, as I do, that large-scale social, economic, and political events, nationally and internationally, have major consequences for your individual life, then forecasting becomes even more difficult. The farther into the future that predictions of national and international events are made, the less reliable they become. A "long-term" forecast of inflation or unemployment rates may cover only the next six months, while your remaining lifetime could well be more than sixty years.

Even though you cannot predict your future in detail, you can reduce the harmful impact of unexpected events on your life. My basic assumption is that you can better control your life if you understand life events most people experience. You can anticipate some life situations by learning from others who already have been there. You also can ask yourself what may happen to you if certain trends or events materialize. In both cases you are thinking about your future life choices. Your goal is not simply to worry about the future but to improve your life prospects. To act rationally, you need to know what to expect.

The purpose of this book is to increase your knowledge of events, options, and choices during your life. By adding useful ideas and knowledge to the intellectual toolbox you carry with you throughout your life,



you will be able to transform some unexpected crises into anticipated transitions, and perhaps avoid making some major mistakes.

## A SOCIOLOGICAL VIEW OF LIFE

You may sometimes feel that your life is determined too much by the expectations of other people—that you are not leading your life but simply acting out roles already written for you by your parents, friends, teachers or employers, and others. You are taking a sociological view of your life when you feel this way. You are realizing how important social pressures are to you.

Most people go along with the expectations placed on them because they realize they depend on others for what they want in life. But they don't have to. They can free themselves from a particular expectation if they give up the rewards of acting in an expected manner and accept the penalties.

Some people claim that they have little or no choice, that society and social pressures entirely determine their lives. But they are mistaken. They are accepting what sociologist Dennis H. Wrong calls an "over-socialized view of man," and are not giving sufficient weight to individual differences in health, abilities, and emotional makeup. They have a choice, and so do you.

Your power of choice means that although "society" or some mix of "social forces" may constrain your options, they do not entirely determine your life. Social patterns exist; life is not random. Discrimination by age, sex, and race does exist, but not all whites succeed, and not all blacks fail. What the individual chooses to do at certain turning points in life can make a difference—personal actions have consequences. Opportunities can be exploited or squandered; difficulties can be overcome or compounded.

Social pressures are a part of living. How well you deal with them will influence how well you will succeed in handling your life. As sociologist C. Wright Mills emphasized, the first benefits of a sociological view of life are realizations that (1) you can anticipate your life chances only by learning about other persons in your circumstances; and (2) you can gauge your future only by locating yourself in historical time. To handle social pressures well, you must know something about the major social forces around you—values, social institutions, and society-wide processes.

## Major Social Forces

When you willingly conform to the expectations of others, you do so because of values in which you have chosen to believe. In the United States, for example, many widely held values concern material success. One such social value assumes there is a connection between personal worthiness



and the accumulation of material wealth. If you accept this value, you may think it is human nature. But it is not, because it is not found in every society.

Values are principles for thought and action that you share in common with others in the society. Values are the standards by which goals are chosen, and not the goals themselves. Linking personal worthiness with material wealth is a social value. Making a million dollars before turning forty is a specific goal.

The values you believe in may or may not be compatible with your individual psychological needs or motives. You may value the conspicuous consumption of goods, yet feel shy about doing what is needed to earn a high income. You may turn down an opportunity to earn a high income as a salesperson working only for commissions, for example, because the job requires you to deal with strangers. You may value security and physical safety, yet feel bored leading a cautious life centered around avoiding risk. In spite of valuing job security, you may quit a government postal clerk job, for example, simply because you find the work uninteresting.

Based on your values, you expect others to act in certain ways. They will if they share your values. Such shared values lead to mutual expectations of what constitutes appropriate behavior. Mutual expectations held by large groups of people create social institutions, and the various institutions are each concerned with certain aspects of life. Family institutions, for example, are concerned with expected behavior in dealing with such things as sexual relationships and the care of dependent children. Economic institutions involve making a living, distributing material wealth, and dealing with poverty. Through educational institutions, useful skills are taught and cultural philosophies are transferred.

As a member of various groups, you share in your groups' fortunes even though they may be caused by events and processes over which you, as an individual, have little or no control. Such events and processes include—but are not limited to—inflation; unemployment; population growth; international trade patterns; military buildups; environmental change; the spread of mass education; and the widespread use of satellite communications, computers, and robots.

You may have no detailed knowledge of these seemingly abstract and distant matters, but they influence your life nevertheless. Shared values, social institutions through which values are implemented, and the underlying society-wide processes all directly shape your available personal choices throughout your life course. This idea can be expressed graphically:



#### Starting Point

Shared Values



Social  
Institutions



Societal  
Processes



#### Ending Point

Possible  
Personal  
Actions