Have you ever wanted to change society? Do you want to have a voice in how things work throughout your life? If so, you’ve come to the right discipline. Sociology helps you to understand how society operates and, in turn, how to make society better.

As sociologists, we see how individuals both shape and are shaped by larger social forces. By developing what is called a sociological eye (Collins 1998), we are able to look beneath the surface of society and see how it really works. For example, with a sociological eye, we can recognize the tremendous influence of culture on individuals. Imagine how different you might be if you had grown up in Sweden, Ethiopia, or Bangladesh. You would still look about the same (though you’d have different mannerisms, speak a different language, and have a different haircut and clothes), but your values, norms, and beliefs would be different. Your view of the proper roles of men and women, your religious or secular values, career goals, education, and so forth would be shaped by the society in which you grew up.

Look at the differences between your immediate family and some of your relatives who may have much more or much less money. Does social class cause the differences, or do the differences help to determine the social class
to which we will belong.\(^2\) Consider the different perspectives that your male relatives and your female relatives bring to the same questions. They all live in the same world, in close proximity perhaps, but they have had such different experiences of it that some people see men and women as coming from different planets (Gray 1992). By using the sociological eye, sociologists look at the world from a unique angle, notice what is often unobserved, and make connections among the patterns in everyday events that the average person might not notice. In doing so, we can understand how different organizations, institutions, and societies function; how social forces shape individual lives and ideas; and, in turn, how individuals shape organizations and institutions.

By viewing society through the perspective of a social world model, we can study different levels of social units, from small- to large-scale parts of the world that interact with one another. For example, we could study participation in the democratic process through examining interpersonal and local organizations, for example, political activism among students on your campus and your school’s College Democrats and College Republicans clubs; larger organizations and institutions, for example, national Democratic and Republican Parties and state boards of elections; and nations or global communities, for example, the U.S. presidential electoral process, and the UN Millennium Declaration implementation. Depending on the social unit we are interested in studying, we would utilize different levels of analysis. We would use micro for interpersonal and local organizations, meso for larger organizations and institutions, and macro for nations and the global community. At all times, we would notice the connections between the social groups. For example, we would see that individuals are impacted by and can influence their classmates, their political party, their nation, and their global community.

The social world model also enables us to recognize persistent patterns that work to create disadvantages for certain groups in society, resulting in institutional discrimination (intentional or unintentional structural biases). For example, our society functioned in such a way that there were no female Supreme Court Justices before President Ronald Reagan appointed Sandra Day O’Connor in 1981. Sociologists, using the sociological eye, recognize that the long-standing all-male makeup of the Supreme Court was part of a larger pattern of sex discrimination. Some of the discrimination was deliberate and based on people’s ideas about gender. Some of it was political, based on a calculation of how the public would respond to the nomination of a woman to such a post. Some of it even had to do with the fact that our culture tends to use similar language and ideas to describe both “leadership qualities” and “masculinity.” Thus, when people think of “leadership,” they
tend to associate it with the qualities that men often bring to the table (Schein 2001). Social science research on the connections among gender roles, socialization, and sex discrimination, such as Betty Friedan’s book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which shattered the myth that women could only find fulfillment as wives and homemakers, became part of public knowledge and was used to make the case for the women’s movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Ultimately, this movement paved the way for a political environment conducive to the appointment of Sandra Day O’Connor.

Use of the sociological eye also helps efforts to persuade government office holders to initiate social policies addressing social inequities. By looking beneath the surface of government operations, we can answer the following questions: To whom do office holders tend to respond the most? Why? How can we use this information to make sure that they respond to us? What social forces compelled Ronald Reagan, one of our most conservative presidents and not known as a women’s rights advocate, to choose a female Supreme Court Justice?

According to Randall Collins (1998), using the sociological eye is one of two “core commitments” of sociology. The second is social activism. Once we understand how society operates, we are obligated to participate actively in efforts to improve it. The sociological eye and social activism go hand in hand. The sociological eye helps us to become effective, engaged citizens. It is something we gain with training—much as muscles are gained with weight lifting and working out. The more you train yourself as a sociologist, the stronger your sociological eye and ability to practice effective and constructive social activism will become.

**The Sociological Imagination**

To understand how we might influence society, we must first understand how we are affected by it. C. Wright Mills (1967) described this ability as the “sociological imagination.” When we can relate personal troubles to public issues, connecting our individual lives to what’s happening in our society, we are using the sociological imagination.

For instance, both of the authors of this book experienced their parents divorcing. As individuals, this was a personal trouble for each of us. Using the sociological imagination, we see that we were a part of a cohort of American children who lived through the great rise in the divorce rate in the 1970s. If we had been children during the 1870s, our parents would most likely have remained married. However, the changes that our society went through in the 1960s and 1970s (legal rights and protections for women that enabled
more women to exit relationships, cost of living increases that required more women to join the workforce, etc.) resulted in an increase in the divorce rate and, in turn, our own parents’ divorces. Our personal troubles (the divorces of our parents) were directly related to a public issue (the societywide rise in the divorce rate).

Today, one of us is having a difficult time finding clothes for her young daughters that do not resemble those in Paris Hilton’s closet. As a mother, she’s horrified that anyone would expect little girls to wear such skimpy outfits (particularly her little girls!). As a sociologist, she can look at a sample of clothing stores and advertisements in the United States and quickly realize that her experience is part of a societywide pattern of sexualizing girls—even very young girls. She can then start to research why a society like ours, with such a long history of public activism around “standards of moral decency,” is so consistent—almost aggressive—in the sexualizing of girls. One hypothesis she might test is that this social behavior is related to the relative absence of mothers in the highest positions of fashion design and marketing. If she were to discover this to be true, she could use her findings to work for social change, trying to make these workplaces more open and inviting for fashion designers and marketers who are mothers.

One of the functions of sociology, as C. Wright Mills (1967) defined it, “should be the transformation of private troubles into public issues.” Once you start using your sociological imagination and looking at the world through the sociological eye and the social world model, it’s impossible not to notice the connections between ourselves as individuals and societal patterns. Consider the kind of job you hope to get after leaving college. Will you make an annual salary or an hourly wage? Will you have full health care coverage, or will you live without insurance and hope for the best? And if you get a “good” job, will your good fortune depend somehow on the fact that others do not have what you seek? Are the private troubles of sweatshop workers also a public problem?

Sweatshops are production sites where workers receive very low wages, and face near-slavery conditions with few or no protections from unsafe work environments or arbitrary punishments. Sweatshop jobs do not come with insurance, sick days, retirement plans, or protection against arbitrary termination. On the surface, colleges and sweatshops seem to have nothing to do with one another. However, if you look underneath the surface (or, perhaps, at what you or your classmates are wearing), you may see a connection! The students at Duke University did: When they learned of the horrible sweatshop conditions in which most of their Duke-labeled clothes were being manufactured, they mobilized and established a United Students
Against Sweatshops group on campus. Their efforts, and those of several administrators at Duke (particularly the Director of Duke Store Operations), sparked a campuswide discussion about sweatshops and the university’s responsibility to ensure that clothing with a Duke label is “sweat free.” In 1997, Duke was the first institution of higher education in the United States to adopt a code of conduct mandating that the apparel companies with which they do business must submit to independent monitoring of the conditions in their factories. The following year, Duke established an independent Worker Rights Consortium (WRC) to assist in the enforcement of the codes of conduct established between colleges and universities and those who manufacture clothes for them. As of 2008, a total of 181 institutions of higher education have joined the movement sparked by Duke students and have become WRC affiliates.

**Sociology and the Critical Consumption of Information**

In addition to having a sociological eye and making use of the sociological imagination, sociologists are informed and critical consumers of the barrage of information coming at us from all directions. Sociological research methods guide how we conduct research and how we interpret information relayed by others. By understanding how good research is done, we can evaluate the information disseminated throughout society and know what news sources are trustworthy. These skills help us in our efforts to both understand and change society. In Chapter 3, we outline in greater detail how sociological research methods can be used in this way.

**Sociology and Democracy**

Through reading this book and carrying out the exercises within it, you will learn how to look beneath the surface of social events, connect personal troubles to public issues, and know what information sources are trustworthy. You can then use these sociological tools to strengthen our society, make our nation more democratic, and work toward ensuring the rights and well-being of people all around the world. Democracy is defined in different ways by a multitude of scholars. However, all point out that it is a system of governance that instills state power in citizenship rather than in government. This book shows how sociology can enable citizens to become knowledgeable, active, and effective participants in our democratic society.
Exercise 1.1 Walking Billboards

You occupy many “social roles” in your life: You are a student, somebody’s friend, somebody’s child, and maybe you are a parent, sibling, employee, teammate, boss, neighbor, or mentor. To many thousands of companies out there, your main role is that of “consumer.” How do apparel companies market themselves, specifically, to men, women, and different racial/ethnic groups? How do members of each of these groups act as “Walking Billboards” for the apparel companies that make the clothing they wear?

Next time you are in one of your other classes, note the following: (1) How many students are there? How many male and how many female? (2) How many of each sex are wearing visible product or company logos on their clothing? (Include yourself in your answers.) (3) Are there any logos that occur more than once throughout the class? (4) Are there any logos or brands that are considered “in” on your campus? Using your newly trained “sociological eye,” analyze the results you have gathered. What institutional and societal forces might be at work? Do you notice any specific trends along race or gender lines? Do people from certain sex or racial/ethnic groups, teams, or cliques exhibit trends in their dress? How about the faculty? Do you detect any trends among your teachers?

Exercise 1.2 What’s the Connection Between College Students and Sweatshops?


2. Determine if your campus belongs to the Fair Labor Association (FLA). You can find this out at www.fairlabor.org/all/colleges/list.html or the Worker Rights Consortium at www.workersrights.org.

3. If your campus does not belong to FLA, find out what vendors your campus bookstore uses to obtain the clothes they sell.

4. Ask the campus bookstore manager if he or she is aware of the working conditions under which the vendors’ employees work.

5. Do some research to find information about the vendors. The United Students Against Sweatshops’ Sweat Free Campus campaign Web site that you can access through www.studentsagainstsweatshops.org is one useful site. You should also check out the Web sites for the Business & Human Rights Resource Centre at www.business-humanrights.org/Categories/Individualcompanies and Responsible Shopper (Co-op America) at www.responsibleshopper.org.

7. What did you learn from these stories that can help you determine actions you and your college might take regarding the use of sweatshop labor?

8. Write a four-page report on the results of your research. Be sure to make clear the connection between campus consumerism and the workers who make the apparel sold in the campus bookstore.

Extra Credit: Find out where your school’s teams get their jerseys and repeat the exercises above, or find out where your Community Service Office gets their jerseys and repeat the exercises above.

**Exercise 1.3 How Is Higher Education Related to Democracy?**

If you live in a democracy, then you have inherited certain social obligations. What do you think they are? Is voting one of them? How about going to college? Think about the connection between democracy and higher education and answer the following questions:

1. What do you think is the purpose of higher education?

2. Why did you decide to go to college?

3. Do you think your college education will help you become a better citizen? Why or why not?


5. Did your answer to question 1 relate to the presidents’ description of the purpose of public higher education? Why do you think it did or did not?

6. Why is an educated public necessary for a strong democratic society?

7. Is a public higher education attainable for all Americans? Why or why not? If not, what are the ramifications of this situation for our democracy? How can you, using what your sociological eye has uncovered, work to make public higher education more attainable and realizable for more people?
Diane Vaughan, a professor of sociology at Columbia University, has used the sociological eye to see patterns in such varied places as marital breakups and NASA disasters. Her widely acclaimed book, *The Challenger Launch Decision: Risky Technology, Culture, and Deviance at NASA* (1996), led to widespread media attention and to her highly publicized work as a consultant for the commission assigned to investigate what brought about the catastrophic reentry of the space shuttle *Columbia* on February 1, 2003. In the following paragraph, Vaughan (2006) vividly describes how she viewed the *Columbia* accident through a sociological lens.

A few days after the accident, I was riveted by NASA’s televised revelation about the *Columbia* foam strike and the long history of foam debris from the External Tank hitting the Orbiter. O-ring erosion responsible for *Challenger* also had a long problem history prior to that accident. Next day, the Space Shuttle Program Manager, face etched with grief and fatigue, showed a large piece of foam the size of the one that struck *Columbia*. Discounting its importance as a probable cause, he acknowledged repeated foam debris hits to the wings by explaining, “…we were comfortable with it.” I was astonished. The normalization of

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**Exercise 1.4 Worried About the Increasingly High Cost of Tuition?**

You are not alone. According to the College Board (2007), *after adjusting for inflation*, from 1997–1998 and from 2007–2008, tuition and fees increased by 54% at 4-year state colleges and universities, 17% at 2-year colleges, and 33% at 4-year private institutions.

1. How would strategies to deal with the increase in tuition vary depending on whether it is viewed as (a) a personal trouble or (b) a public issue?

2. What are some of the actions you could take to convince state legislators to increase funding for public higher education in your state?

3. Choose one of the actions you’ve listed in question 2 that is a manageable action for you to take. Now, carry out the plan you devised and write a report that describes (a) what you did and (b) the outcome of your actions. Note that you might have to wait a while to complete (b), so you should start (a) right away.
deviance—a key concept from my *Challenger* research explaining how NASA first accepted an O-ring anomaly, then accepted more and more, until flying with damaged O-rings became normal and routine—seemed to fit this second accident scenario. NASA’s former Solid Rocket Booster Manager, who played a major role in the *Challenger* launch decision and with whom I had lost contact, fired me an e-mail with subject head, “Déjà Vu All Over Again!” Media inquiries ballooned.

Defining this as a professional responsibility and teaching opportunity, I tried to respond to every inquiry. What I was teaching was the sociological perspective, using the theory and concepts that explained *Challenger*. In the first few weeks, many reporters were new to the space beat, so knew nothing about the first accident or how NASA worked. Others, because they usually covered NASA, had read my book, and/or had interviewed me when the book was published, knew all too well. Like me, they quickly saw parallels between *Challenger* and *Columbia*.

Vaughan, and the reporters who had read her work, noticed the parallels because they were looking at the two disasters with a sociological eye. In doing so, they were able to see the similarities between the underlying patterns of the two tragedies. Whereas most onlookers could see only that mistakes were made by NASA employees that resulted in two separate tragedies, those who looked at the disasters from a sociological perspective could trace the patterns of both mistakes and see the consistencies. Fulfilling the second core commitment of sociology, social activism, Vaughan publicized her findings and provided useful information for NASA personnel as they attempt to avoid future catastrophes of this nature.

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**Sociologist in Action**

**The Social Justice League at Bridgewater State College**

Joshua Warren, Bria Wilbur, Curtis Holland, and Jillian Micelli are four sociology majors at Bridgewater State College (BSC) who used their sociological eyes to make the connection between their campus and community. Wanting to use the knowledge they learned in their courses to help affect positive social change, they created a student group called the Social Justice League. This group organized many events to educate the campus community about social justice issues, raise funds, and move the college to more just practices.

One of the Social Justice League’s big events in 2007 was the creation of a “Tent City”—students, faculty, and staff slept outside in tents during a cold week in November. Each day, Tent City speakers from area shelters and organizations spoke to the campus...
community, and faculty from all across the campus brought their classes to these lectures. Students sleeping in Tent City were not allowed to use computers or cell phones, ate their meals in a mock “soup kitchen” set up in the cafeteria, and could bathe only by using public showers during set hours. In addition to creating the educational and symbolic components of Tent City, the students also raised several thousand dollars in cash and supplies to support a local homeless shelter.

In 2008, the Social Justice League launched another strategic and powerful education and awareness campaign on campus when they organized a series of educational events and demonstrations about sweatshop labor and the clothes sold at their college bookstore. They showed videos on the topic of sweatshops to the campus, gave talks to classes, and staged a “mock sweatshop.” Through these efforts, the students created a high level of campus awareness about sweatshops.

The Social Justice League also brought the issue of sweatshops to the direct attention of Dr. Dana Mohler-Faria, the president of Bridgewater State College, who worked with the group to form a campus council to research the suppliers of clothing sold at the student bookstore. After carefully examining the issue, the president agreed that BSC should join the Worker Rights Consortium. Bria summed up the campaign by saying, “We worked extremely hard and I never felt more proud of myself than when I got the phone call that our campaign was successful and that BSC was going to join the Workers Rights Consortium! It was through sociology that I learned about these issues.” Thanks to the efforts of the skilled and passionate members of the Social Justice League, BSC joined the growing ranks of colleges committed to ensuring that their campuses are sweat-free.

Jillian described the connection between her sociological training and her actions to work for the betterment of society like this: “Within one year, my life changed dramatically. When I changed my major to sociology the night before classes started, not only did I gain a degree in sociology, I also gained knowledge I would have never gained otherwise. The training and skills I learned from courses on genocide to courses on social inequality truly motivated me to strive for social change not only in the Social Justice League, but beyond. It taught me the connection I have with the global market and how if one pushes for something they believe in, social change will follow.”

Speaking of his work as president of the Social Justice League, Josh says, “By combining what I’ve learned in my studies with my passion for social justice and civic engagement, I am able to not only serve those immediately in need, but also think about the reasons for why there is a need. It enables me to do more than just put a ‘band-aid’ on a problem. I can act proactively to find the source of the issue, and uproot it!”

Curtis made his awareness of the two core commitments of sociology clear when he said, “As I began to realize that I was becoming a burgeoning sociologist, I realized simultaneously that the knowledge I was gaining from sociological inquiry came with a great responsibility.”

As you read the rest of this book, please think about what these sociology students have accomplished and think about how you, too, can use what you learn from this course to become a sociologist in action!
Discussion Questions

1. Before reading this chapter, had you ever recognized a connection between your own life and the lives of people working in sweatshops? Why or why not? Do you now see a connection? Now that you have thought about this, how will you proceed?

2. Are you worried about being able to obtain adequate health care coverage? Why or why not? What are some steps that you can take to work toward ensuring that you and others will have a better chance at adequate health care coverage in your lives?

3. Do you know what the president of the United States, your state senators, and your representatives are doing about (a) sweatshops and (b) adequate health care? If you don’t know, why do you think you are unaware of their positions on these issues? Would (or have) their positions on these issues influenced whether or not you would vote for them? Why or why not?

4. Do you think you could use a sociological eye to do something similar to what the members of the Social Justice League did at Bridgewater State College? Why or why not?

Suggestions For Specific Actions

1. Join an established campus group working against sweatshops. (You may substitute a different issue or campaign if you are already involved or interested in one, with permission of your instructor.)

2. Establish your own campus group to fight sweatshops. Go to the Web sites www.freethechildren.com/we/index.php/makeithappen/startupkit.htm and http://www.studentsagainstsweatshops.org (click on “Sweatfree Campus”) to learn how to form a local group to combat sweatshops.

3. Go to your state representatives’ and senators’ Web sites (you can find them at www.house.gov and www.senate.gov). Send them an e-mail or letter that conveys your thoughts and feelings about the health care coverage crisis.

4. Investigate the kind of health care coverage and the safety of the work/living environment provided for students, faculty, professional, and support staff on your campus. If there are clear deficiencies or inequities, organize a group of students, faculty, and professional and support staff to advocate for improved conditions for all campus workers. For the past few years, sociology students at the University of California at Berkeley have carried out just this type of research and activism. You can find “Berkeley’s Betrayal: Wages and Working Conditions at CAL” at www.upte-cwa.org/UCLA/BKbetrayal.pdf.
5. Please go to our Web site at www.sagepub.com/korgen to find further civic engagement opportunities, resources, peer-reviewed articles, and updated Weblinks related to this chapter.

**Endnotes**

1. If you did grow up in Sweden, Ethiopia, or Bangladesh, then imagine you grew up in New Jersey.
2. It works both ways, of course. And bonus points to you for looking at the endnote!
3. We should note that this view is less prevalent today than it was at the time of Sandra Day O’Connor’s appointment to the Supreme Court.
4. To learn more about the history of the sweat-free campus movement at Duke, go to Paul Baerman’s article at www.dukemagazine.duke.edu/alumni/dm18/sweatshop.html.
5. See the Worker Rights Consortium Web site at www.workersrights.org.

**References**


