



This is “Conclusion: Understanding and Changing the Social World”, chapter 15 from the book Sociology: Brief Edition ([index.html](#)) (v. 1.0).

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Chapter 15

Conclusion: Understanding and Changing the Social World

We have come to the end of this introduction to sociology. I sincerely hope you enjoyed reading the book and benefited from Unnamed Publisher's innovative model of providing high-quality, affordable college textbooks. I welcome your comments on what you have read here and also on the Unnamed Publisher model; please e-mail me at barkan@maine.edu. Thank you in advance!

There has been a lot to digest in the reading you have done. Accordingly, this brief concluding chapter sums up what you have learned, assuming the text has succeeded in introducing you to sociology. As part of this summary, the chapter draws upon the earlier chapters to review the relevance of sociology for “changing the social world.”

15.1 What Have You Learned From This Book?

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Explain what you have learned about the sociological perspective.
2. Explain how sociology helps you know more about yourself.

Above all, you have learned the *sociological perspective*: the idea that our social backgrounds, broadly defined, profoundly influence our behavior, attitudes, and life chances. We discussed many examples of this in the early chapters, when we examined the effects of social processes such as culture, socialization, and roles and group membership; in the middle chapters, when we examined the consequences of inequalities based on social class, race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, and age; and in the final chapters, when we examined the importance of social institutions such as the family, education, religion, and medicine. In all of these respects, you have learned that people are not just individuals but rather are social beings and also that we can thus fully understand any one individual only by appreciating the influence of the person's social background.

Because of all this learning, you now know more about yourself than you did before you took the course for which you read this book. You know that you are who you are in part because of your gender, social class, race and ethnicity, geographical location, and many other aspects of your social background and also because of socialization by your parents and by friends, teachers, and other “agents of socialization” throughout your life.

You have also learned the importance of social inequality. More than perhaps any other academic discipline, sociology emphasizes the importance of social inequality for understanding both society and the individual. American society and, indeed, the world itself cannot be adequately understood without first understanding the importance of inequality based on social class, race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, and age.

Next, you have learned about the nature and importance of social institutions. The family, economy, and polity are all essential parts of the fabric of social life, as are education, religion, and medicine. Because all of these institutions affect our behavior, attitudes, and life chances, they have long been, and will continue to be, sources of significant social controversies.

Finally, you have learned about sociology and social change. Harkening back to the roots of U.S. sociology in social reform, you have read throughout this book about the relevance of sociological insights for attempts to benefit society. This relevance derives from the *sociological imagination* as conceived by C. Wright Mills. As [Chapter 1 "Sociology and the Sociological Perspective"](#) discussed, the sociological imagination involves the recognition that “private troubles,” as Mills called them, are rooted in the social structure, and especially in social inequality, and are thus better understood as “public issues.”

Mills considered this type of recognition important for two related reasons. First, efforts to benefit society that neglect this recognition—that is, that neglect the structural sources of private troubles and public issues—will ultimately prove ineffective. Second, this type of recognition enables us to better understand our own experiences and life chances as we become aware of the social forces affecting our lives and those of people in similar circumstances. This awareness and self-knowledge empower us to become more effective agents of social change in our immediate social environments and also in the larger society.

If sociological insights help to guide social change, the history of social reform in the United States also shows that social change most often happens when Americans unite in small groups or larger social movements to change some aspect of society. [Chapter 14 "Social Change: Population, Urbanization, and Social Movements"](#) discussed important features of social movements, including their origins and impact. As that discussion highlighted, many of the rights and freedoms Americans now enjoy were won by social movements struggling against great odds. Here an often cited comment by anthropologist Margaret Mead is worth remembering: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Readers of this book learned about the sociological perspective: the influence of social backgrounds and the social environment on attitudes, behavior, and life chances. This knowledge should help readers understand more about themselves.
- Readers also learned about social inequality, social institutions, and social change.
- Acquiring an appreciation of the sociological imagination enables individuals to become more effective agents of social change.

FOR YOUR REVIEW

1. What do you think is the most important thing you learned from this book and the course for which you read it? Explain your answer.
2. Provide one example of how an appreciation of the sociological imagination might help an individual to become a more effective social change agent.

15.2 Public Sociology and Improving Society

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Describe what a sociological perspective suggests for efforts to reduce social inequality, to reduce crime, to help the family and schools, and to improve the nation's health.
2. Describe what a sociological perspective implies for strategies to improve the global society.

The sociological imagination and its underpinnings for social change lie at the heart of the recent emphasis on *public sociology*—the use of sociological insights and findings to address social issues and achieve social change—as discussed in [Chapter 1 "Sociology and the Sociological Perspective"](#). This emphasis was a key theme of sociology as it developed in the United States more than a century ago, and the public sociology movement aims at bringing sociology back to its roots in social reform. This book's many chapters highlighted the importance of a sociological understanding for efforts to improve society. The remaining pages of this chapter summarize the insights these chapters offered for addressing various public issues affecting the United States and the poor nations of the world.

Reducing Social Inequality

We begin with what sociologists probably regard as the most important public issue, social inequality, which is significant for its own sake but also provides the underpinning for so many other social issues. The sociological understanding of social inequality based on social class, race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, and age was presented in [Chapter 6 "Social Stratification"](#) through [Chapter 9 "Aging and the Elderly"](#). These four chapters emphasized that inequality is rooted far more in lack of opportunity from birth and in prejudice and discrimination than in culturally deficient habits or practices of the many people who find themselves at the bottom of society's socioeconomic ladder. In this regard these chapters advocated a “blaming-the-system” argument over a “blaming-the-victim” argument, to recall some terms from [Chapter 1 "Sociology and the Sociological Perspective"](#). Accordingly, efforts to reduce the extent and impact of social inequality must ultimately focus on increasing opportunity and eradicating prejudice and discrimination.

Chapter 6 "Social Stratification" through Chapter 9 "Aging and the Elderly" discussed many examples of such efforts favored by sociologists and other scholars and public policy advocates. The most notable efforts include the following: (a) adopting a national *full employment* policy for the poor, underemployed, and unemployed; this policy would involve federally funded job training and public-works programs and increased federal aid for workers having trouble making ends meet; (b) improving the schools that poor children attend and the schooling they receive; (c) providing better nutrition and health services for poor families, perhaps especially those with young children; (d) strengthening affirmative action programs within the limits imposed by court rulings; (e) strengthening efforts to reduce residential segregation and teenage pregnancies; (f) reducing socialization by parents and other adults of girls and boys into traditional gender roles; (g) increasing public consciousness of rape and sexual assault, sexual harassment, and pornography; (h) increasing enforcement of laws forbidding gender-based employment discrimination and sexual harassment; (i) increasing funding of rape-crisis centers and other services for girls and women who have been raped and/or sexually assaulted; (j) increasing government funding of high-quality day-care options to enable parents, and especially mothers, to work outside the home if they so desire; (k) passing federal and state legislation that bans employment discrimination based on sexual orientation and allows same-sex couples to marry and enjoy all the rights and benefits of heterosexual married couples; (l) expanding Social Security to aid older Americans regardless of their earnings history, which is affected by their gender and race and ethnicity; and (m) expanding educational efforts to reduce stereotyping and prejudicial attitudes based on aging.

Much theory and research strongly suggests that all of these policies and programs, if sufficiently funded and implemented, would greatly help reduce social inequality in the United States. As this book has pointed out from time to time, these strategies are already in place in many of the nations of Western Europe, which rank much higher than the United States on many social indicators. Although the United States has influenced the world in ways too numerous to mention, it ironically could significantly reduce social inequality if it adopted the policies and practices of other Western democracies. This great but flawed nation has much to learn from their example.

Enhancing Public Safety

A sociological perspective on street crime emphasizes that it is rooted in the social and physical characteristics of communities and in structured social inequality along the lines of social class, race and ethnicity, gender, and age. It is no accident and not very surprising that street criminals tend to come from the ranks of the poor or near-poor, even if most poor people do not commit street crime. Poverty weakens social bonds and social institutions, creates frustration and feelings of

relative deprivation, and causes stress and otherwise impairs family functioning and socialization of children. Crime is also ultimately rooted in the socialization of males to be assertive and aggressive, as most street criminals are male.

This sociological understanding, coupled with other knowledge that the “get tough” approach to crime used by the United States has cost tens of billions of dollars with relatively little reduction in crime during the past few decades, suggests several strategies for crime reduction. As outlined in [Chapter 5 "Deviance, Crime, and Social Control"](#), these strategies include the following, among others: (a) establishing good-paying jobs for the poor in urban areas and improving living conditions in these areas in other respects; (b) socializing males from birth to be less assertive and aggressive; (c) establishing early childhood intervention programs to help high-risk families raise their children; and (d) providing better educational, vocational, and drug and alcohol abuse services for offenders while they are in prison and after their release from incarceration. White-collar crime also undermines public safety but certainly does not stem from poverty or family dysfunction. As [Chapter 5 "Deviance, Crime, and Social Control"](#) also discussed, more effective corporate regulation and harsher punishment of corporate criminals are needed to deter such crime.

Helping the Family and Schools

As two of our most important social institutions, the family and education arouse considerable and often heated debate over their status and prospects. Opponents in these debates all care passionately about families and/or schools but often take diametrically opposed views on the causes of these institutions’ problems and possible solutions to the issues they face. As presented in [Chapter 11 "The Family"](#) and [Chapter 12 "Education and Religion"](#), a sociological perspective on the family and education emphasizes the social inequalities that lie at the heart of many of these issues, and it stresses that these two institutions reinforce and contribute to social inequalities.

Accordingly, efforts to address family and education issues should include the following strategies and policies, some of which were included in the previous section on reducing social inequality: (a) increasing financial support, vocational training, and financial aid for schooling for women who wish to return to the labor force or to increase their wages; (b) establishing and strengthening early childhood visitation programs and nutrition and medical care assistance for poor women and their children; (c) reducing the poverty and gender inequality that underlie much family violence; (d) allowing for same-sex marriage; (e) strengthening efforts to help preserve marriage while proceeding cautiously or not at all for marriages that are highly contentious; (f) increasing funding so that schools can be smaller and

better equipped and in decent repair; and (g) strengthening antibullying programs and other efforts to reduce intimidation and violence within the schools.

Improving the Nation's Health

While recognizing that people hurt their health through many bad habits including smoking and overeating, a sociological perspective on health and health care once again emphasizes the impact of social inequality. As discussed in [Chapter 13 "Health and Medicine"](#), this impact stems from the stress and other problems facing the poor and near-poor, people of color, women, and seniors. It also stems from the general lack of access to affordable, high-quality health care. Accordingly, while educational efforts to encourage people to engage in healthy practices are certainly in order, a sociological perspective suggests additional strategies to improve Americans' health. These efforts remain necessary even after the passage of federal health-care reform legislation in early 2010.

As outlined in [Chapter 13 "Health and Medicine"](#), these strategies include the following: (a) reducing social inequalities as discussed in [Chapter 6 "Social Stratification"](#) through [Chapter 9 "Aging and the Elderly"](#) and summarized in the section on social inequality and (b) moving toward the national health-care and health-insurance systems found in other Western nations such as Canada, the United Kingdom, and France.

Improving the Global Society

The issues facing the United States are considerable, but they pale in comparison with those confronting the poor and developing nations in the world today, where hunger, disease, and ethnic violence are rampant. The world is in peril in many ways. That is certainly bad news, but there is also good news. As discussed in [Chapter 14 "Social Change: Population, Urbanization, and Social Movements"](#), the earth actually has more than enough resources to end world hunger, providing that food-distribution systems were improved to provide access to the grain and other food that does exist.

Because of its nature, disease is more difficult to end, but here again there is potentially good news, as the disease found in poor nations is intimately linked with the very fact that these nations are poor. Better management and distribution of the world's natural and economic resources and a more concerted effort by wealthy nations are all needed to end global poverty and the disease that inevitably accompanies it. Such efforts are possible, but until now there has not been the international will to undertake them to the extent they are needed. Much ethnic violence across the globe is also rooted in inequalities of wealth, power, and

influence. Although the history of such violence indicates that it is not about to end in the near future, a sociological perspective suggests that efforts that successfully reduce global poverty and inequality will have the side benefit of also reducing global ethnic violence.

KEY TAKEAWAY

- Sociological insights have important implications for benefitting society in the following areas: reducing social inequality, enhancing public safety, helping the family and schools, improving the nation's health, and improving the global society.

FOR YOUR REVIEW

1. Of the many areas in which sociological insights might benefit society, which one area do you think is most important? Explain your answer.
2. Identify which of the following statements you most agree with: (a) It is most important for sociology as a discipline to provide knowledge for its own sake; (b) It is most important for sociology as a discipline to provide knowledge to benefit society; (c) It is equally important for sociology as a discipline to provide knowledge for its own sake and to benefit society. Explain your answer.

15.3 A Final Word

In addition to presenting the sociological perspective and showing you how our social backgrounds affect our attitudes, behavior, and life chances in so many ways, this book also discussed the many consequences of extensive social inequality in the United States and around the globe. We hoped to stimulate your sociological imagination to recognize the social forces affecting us all and to suggest what needs to be done to have a society where all people have equal opportunity to achieve their dreams. This is a society that, as Americans have heard since childhood, should be filled “with liberty and justice for all.” With your newfound sociological imagination, perhaps you will be better able to help achieve such a society.

C. Wright Mills (1959, p. 5) Mills, C. W. (1959). *The sociological imagination*. London, England: Oxford University Press. wrote that the awareness accompanying the sociological imagination is “in many ways...a terrible lesson; in many ways a magnificent one.” It is terrible because it makes us realize that many powerful social forces affect our fate and underlie public issues. Yet it is also magnificent because it gives us the knowledge we need to begin to change these forces so that we can have a better society.

This book has shown you both the terrible and the magnificent. It has emphasized social inequality and other social forces that affect us in so many ways, but it has also emphasized how knowledge of these forces points to effective strategies for changing society for the better. With such knowledge, we are better able to heed the urging of Horace Mann, 19th-century education reformer and the first president of Antioch College, who told his students, “Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity” (Mann, 1868, p. 575). Mann, M. T. P. (Ed.). (1868). *Life and works of Horace Mann* (Vol. 1). Boston, MA: Walker, Fuller, and Company. Whatever your life’s pursuits, I hope that your new sociological imagination will help you win some victories for humanity in the years ahead.