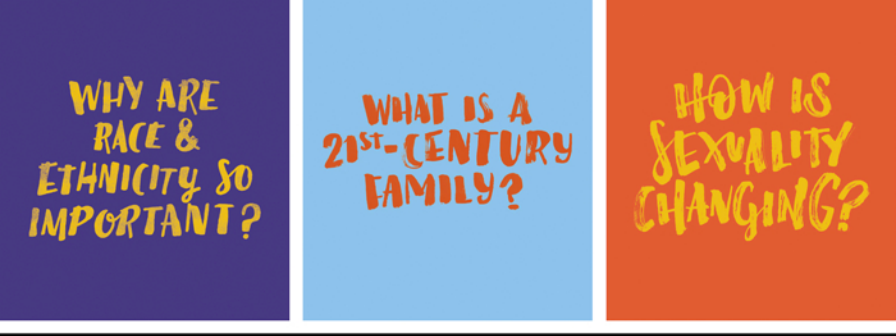

THE SOCIOLOGY PROJECT 2.5

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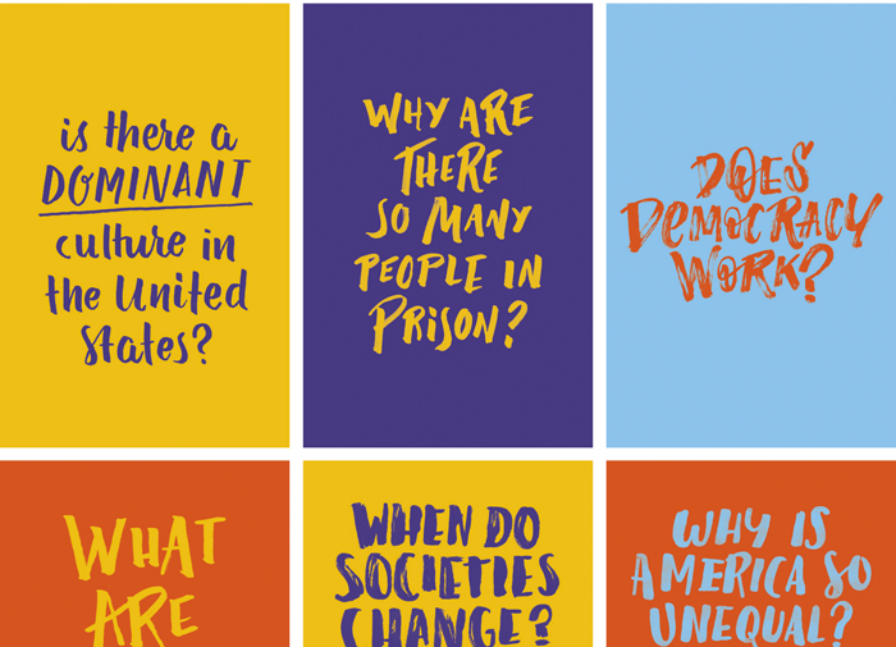

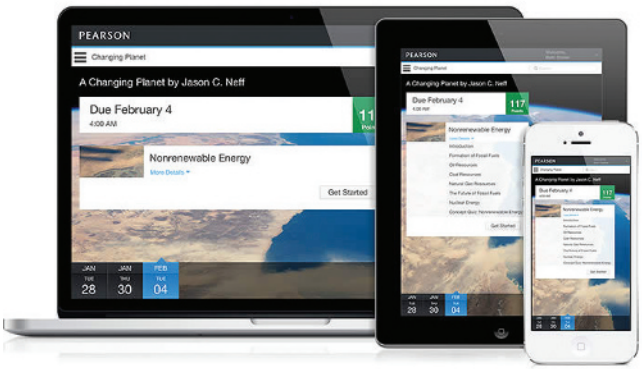

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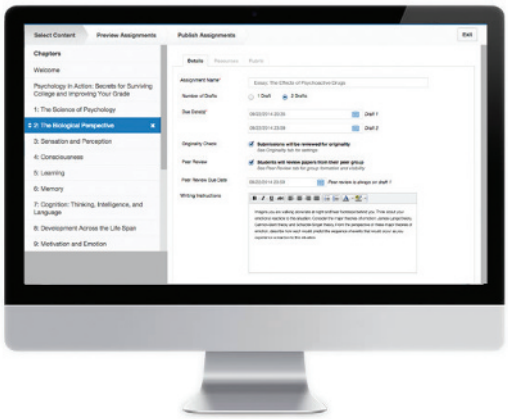

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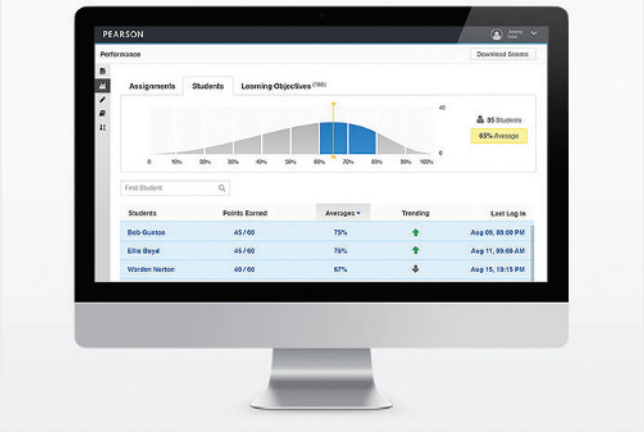

Revel lets educators monitor class assignment completion and individual student achievement. It offers actionable information that helps educators intersect with their students in meaningful ways, such as points earned on quizzes and time on task.

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The Sociology Project 2.5

Introducing the Sociological Imagination

From the New York University Department of Sociology

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Preface

In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, his famous study of the history of science, Thomas Kuhn argued that introductory textbooks are inevitably the most backward part of any scientific field. He suggested that because they seek to appeal to the lowest common denominator to maximize their audience, they reproduce out-of-date ideas and findings far removed from the cutting edge of knowledge. Even worse, Kuhn argued, these texts reinforce popular, but out-of-date, dogmas that stand in the way of progress. Worst of all, they provide beginning students an entirely misleading view of the discipline. When it comes to sociology textbooks, Kuhn's claim is reinforced because of the simple fact that sociology is such a wide-ranging discipline, with many rich subfields with their own bodies of scholarship and knowledge. No one author (or small team of authors), however well-meaning and determined, can possibly attain mastery of the whole discipline and adequately convey that knowledge to students.

We created this introductory text in the hopes of overcoming the problem Kuhn so famously identified. Our aim is nothing less than to reinvent the way we write introductory sociology texts. We envision an entirely new kind of introduction to the discipline, one that draws on the collective wisdom of a large, successful sociology department and its faculty to bring to our students and readers the real excitement of each of the main subfields of sociology. Rather than reproducing what is said in existing textbooks, as so often happens, the chapters in this book are freshly authored by one or more faculty members from the New York University Sociology Department who write and teach in the area. In this way, we seek to bring together the best of sociology as a discipline to meet the challenge of reaching our students.

At the center of this book is a set of tools for learning how to ask hard questions about the world around us. These tools are what we call, following C. Wright Mills, the "sociological imagination." In every chapter, we draw upon contemporary research findings, those of our colleagues and in some cases our own, to puzzle through how individuals are shaped by the contexts in which they live and act. We treat social norms, organizations, institutions, and global dynamics as a linked set of puzzles to explore. Rather than simply giving answers, we identify the kinds of questions that sociological researchers ask and introduce some ways of thinking about how to answer those questions. We do not suggest that all of the answers are at hand, but we show how and in what ways sociologists and other social scientists struggle to answer them. If nothing else, we hope that our readers will take away from this book a new determination to question things.

We have entitled our text *The Sociology Project*, both to reflect our commitment to a collective agenda to understanding all of the different subfields of sociology as an evolving project and, as we move to version 2.5 in both print and digital format, because we want to signal to our readers our intention to continue to develop the book in future editions as sociology itself evolves. New findings, theories, and ideas are constantly being developed. Our book will continue to evolve as research develops in new directions, and we look forward to revising our ideas and questions as the evidence suggests we should. But perhaps most importantly, we think of this updated edition—*The Sociology Project 2.5*—as a dialogue with our readers—including both our students and our colleagues around the country. We invite you to engage and challenge us where we come up short, tell us what we are doing wrong, and share ideas you have for the presentation of sociology as a field.

Jeff Manza for the NYU Sociology Department
New York City
October 2016

New to This Updated Edition

- A new chapter on crime and punishment (Chapter 18) explores the different types of criminal activity, how sociologists think about crime, and how and why we choose to punish criminals, which has become a vitally important topic for social research.
- An expanded chapter on deviance and social control (Chapter 17) examines a series of questions that go right to the heart of how society exerts its force over individuals, and with what consequences.
- Updated research and data throughout, including new research on economic inequality, education, American healthcare, social media use, environmental sustainability, and same-sex marriage and families.
- A brand new 11-part video series focusing on the lives of a diverse group of people, each related to the content of specific chapters. These mini-documentaries tell the personal stories of refugees, families living in poverty, individuals living through a shifting economy, and more.
- Thoroughly updated and revised assessment program in Revel, led by author Jeff Manza.

The Sociology Project 2.5 in Revel™

- Images, videos, and interactive data visualizations are deeply integrated with core content.
- Social Explorer graphs, maps, and activities that allow students to explore data are integrated as part of the core narrative.
- Integrated writing opportunities prompt students to engage their sociological imaginations and think critically about the research and theory presented to them.
- Assessment opportunities following every Big Question section and at the end of the chapter help students measure their understanding of key concepts before moving on.

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Acknowledgments

Writing a textbook takes a village, as they say, and we have been blessed with a strong and committed team of colleagues, friends, graduate students, and editors to pull the book together. Our first and most important debt is to the truly wonderful team at Pearson Education, who have thrown themselves into a new and untested project with conviction and determination. Our image of corporate publishers has been completely transformed by this experience. In particular, Dickson Musslewhite, Vice President of Product Development; Brita Nordin, Vice President–Courseware Content Development; and Billy Grieco, Senior Portfolio Manager at Pearson embraced our project from the beginning, got it off the ground, and stayed in good spirits as we progressed, unevenly, toward completion and now revision. They were wonderfully supportive and helpful at every stage. Our development editor Lisa McLellan has done a masterful job, wrestling 23 different chapters written by different authors into a coherent whole. Often working under considerable time pressure, Lisa kept track of and resolved an endless array of problems and issues as we moved along. At NYU, our extraordinary managing editor Maria Soto and postdoctoral researcher/writer/editor Lester Andrist provided invaluable assistance. The rest of our publishing team also deserves our gratitude: Sharon Geary, Brooke Wilson, Megan Vertucci, Stephanie Laird, Melissa Feimer, Mary O'Sullivan, Amandria Guadalupe, Jeremy Intal, Brittany Pogue-Mohammed-Acosta, Ben Ferrini, Kathryn Foot, Claudine Bellanton, and Rich Barnes. We are also thankful for the help of Patricia Walcott and Alicia Weddle at Integra and Dawn Elwell and her team at Metrodigi.

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The Sociology Project 2.5

Chapter 1

The Sociological Imagination

by Jeff Manza, Lynne Haney, and Richard Arum

Who are we? When asked to describe ourselves, we tend to think in terms of our individuality: our likes and dislikes, our interests and skills, our experiences, our friends and partners. But there is a lot more to each of us than that. What about the time and place in which we live? It wouldn't really be appropriate to answer the question by saying, "I am a person living in the United States in the twenty-first century," but clearly who we are is at least partly the result of where and when we were born and live out our lives. In fact, we are all products of multiple contexts, such as the families we grew up in, the neighborhoods and communities we lived in, the schools we attended, the jobs and work experiences we've had, the groups and organizations we belong to, and so forth. Yes, we are individuals, with our own desires, tastes, talents, and dreams. But we are also *social* beings, connected to other people in a wide variety of ways. What it means to be human is in large part defined by the simple fact that we are constantly interacting with others.

The social nature of our lives is becoming increasingly clear in recent years with the advent of social media. In 2004, a Harvard undergraduate named Mark Zuckerberg created a website originally intended for students at Harvard to make social connections with each other. His idea for this new social website, which he called Facebook, caught on like wildfire, and in its wake, a number of similar sites have emerged. Social media platforms such as Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest, and Tumblr each have unique features which make them distinct, and each site attracts a different demographic. People in their 30s and 40s are far more likely to check in on Facebook than people in their 20s. However, what all these social media sites have in common is that they allow individuals to link to and communicate with "friends" or followers, and more importantly, they provide users with a means of creating or joining communities of users. Through these networks, individuals become linked together. The founders of Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr probably didn't realize that the ideas behind the site they built drew upon some very basic sociological insights about how **social networks** (the ties between people, groups, and organizations) work. The social media sites that most of us sign into on a regular basis draw from a basic sociological insight: that human beings are not simply individuals with a few close friends and family members who otherwise only randomly bump into strangers in the course of their daily lives. Rather, we all are part of normally

My Sociological Imagination

JEFF MANZA

Growing up in the college town of Berkeley, California, my family was neither elite (my parents worked for the local university, but not as professors) nor unprivileged. I experienced the differences between these worlds, and in particular the inequalities they represented, as an endlessly fascinating puzzle. I was also always interested in politics and occasionally participated in political protests and movements. My intellectual interest in sociology began to develop while I was an undergraduate student because it provided a way of connecting my emerging concerns about inequality and injustice with a set of theories and ways of studying how those inequalities persist. Since then, I have been exploring how social inequalities influence political life. More recently, I have become interested in how public opinion does or does not shape government policies and how and when public attitudes can be manipulated or misused by political elites. I hope that my work can contribute, in some small way, to making American democracy more representative and egalitarian than it currently is.

Facebook is controversial in some parts of the world for its ability to allow people of different beliefs to find each other. Why is social media so powerful?

hidden social networks, in which we know people who know other people we don't know but who have much in common with us (interests, backgrounds, and areas of expertise). For instance, information about new job opportunities is something that has always been shared by people in otherwise hidden social networks, but now social media sites like LinkedIn are making those networks visible.

The success of platforms like Facebook and Twitter in connecting networks of like-minded people has been sufficiently powerful that some governments and citizens around the world have attempted to curtail its use out of fear that it can help people create and spread antigovernment ideas or mobilize groups of citizens to protest in the streets. In the last couple of years, for example, Facebook has been blocked in countries such as China, Syria, Pakistan, and Iran. In other less threatening but important ways, social media appears to change the nature of relationships, making it much easier to develop new contacts as well as to keep in touch with old friendships even after people geographically drift apart.

The entire social networking phenomena, of which social media is but one example, highlights some of the ways in which learning sociological ideas can help us better understand and navigate the social worlds around us. Social networks and social media highlight a feature common to all societies: Our existence is always connected to our relationships to others. Hidden in our individual biographies is a story about **society**, a large group of people who live in the same area and participate in a common culture. **Sociology**—the study of societies and the social worlds that individuals inhabit within them—faces the specific challenge of trying to uncover and analyze the patterns that lie beneath the surface of these social worlds for individual lives. Sociology is the study not of individuals, but rather the study of how we live together. To put it another way, sociology is not the study of human beings, but of what it means to be human.

The example of Facebook and other digital technologies that have emerged over the past 20 years or so exemplifies a key point: Societies are always evolving and changing, and in the process these changes raise new puzzles and challenges for understanding the human experience. Sociology provides tools and insights for understanding these changes. Sociologists are asking hard questions, for example, about how social changes like the rise of social media are changing how individuals and societies relate to one another. Some examples include: How has new technology changed the form, content, and the character of friendships and groups? How has online dating changed the nature of intimate relationships? How has technology changed the way work is organized, how employment is found, and what kinds of jobs are likely to be available in the future? New technologies are helping governments to spy on their citizens much more intensively than before, but the ability of whistleblowers to leak information about the measures taken by governments to spy on citizens also appears to be on the rise; what does this mean for democratic rights? And not just governments are acting in this way: Universities and employers are increasingly reading social media produced by prospective students or job applicants to evaluate them beyond traditional means. Today, our "digital footprint" forms a part of who we are in a way that would be completely unimaginable a couple of decades ago. All of these developments concern the relationship between individuals and their social worlds—the subject at the heart of sociology.

The Big Questions

Each chapter identifies a set of questions that have defined the research and teaching puzzles of that topic. These questions organize each chapter and provide a lens for exploring sociological thinking about the topics covered. In starting from questions, not answers, and puzzling together in the search for answers, you will learn to think sociologically. In this first chapter, we will explore the following questions:

1. **What is the sociological imagination, and why is it worth acquiring?** In this section, we introduce the concept of the sociological imagination and explore how it helps us learn to ask hard questions.
2. **What are social contexts, and why do they matter?** Sociology is fundamentally concerned with how we are influenced by society. All of us are situated in an array of social contexts. How do these influence us and our behavior?
3. **Where did sociology come from, and how is it different from other social sciences?** Here, we examine the context in which sociology began to develop and explore the question of how sociology "fits" into and relates to the other social sciences.

BIG QUESTION 1.1 What Is the Sociological Imagination, and Why Is It Worth Acquiring?

THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

Since its inception, sociology has puzzled over how we are connected to each other and the broader societies in which we live. A **sociological imagination** is the capacity to think systematically about how things we experience as *personal* issues—for example, debt from student loans, competing demands from divorced parents, or an inability to form a rewarding romantic relationship—are really *social* issues that are widely shared by others living in a similar time and place as us.

The sociologist C. Wright Mills (1916–1962), who coined the term in 1959, wrote that "the sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society" (Mills 1959:6). To understand the world around us, and to begin to think in a deep way about how it works and how we might improve it, is to recognize the extent to which our individual lives are strongly shaped by where, when, and to whom we were born, and the range of experiences we have had as a child, as an adolescent, and later as an adult. At each stage, we are both individuals and members of social worlds. Our opportunities and potentials are always influenced by the inequalities and injustices we encounter, but understanding these requires that we think about them sociologically. In short, the sociological imagination helps us to ask hard questions and seek answers about the social worlds we inhabit. Used wisely, it will also provide tools to navigate those worlds more effectively in pursuit of the goals we have set for ourselves.

The sociologist C. Wright Mills coined the phrase "the sociological imagination."

Looking Through a Sociological Lens

1.1.1 Discuss how a sociological imagination helps to challenge stereotypes.

A sociological imagination challenges some very basic impulses all of us have. To simplify a complex world, we often take for granted that things around us are somehow inevitable or natural. If we have grown up in a social context where marriage is defined as a lifelong commitment between a man and a woman, we might be quick to conclude that such an arrangement was the way that intimate relationships were meant to be. But if we look at different societies and over time, we will soon see that marriage is only sometimes a lifetime commitment between a man and a woman. In other contexts, as well as our own society, intimate relationships may be between two men, or two women, or among varying romantic partners. A sociological imagination helps us to understand that a diversity of intimate relationships is possible

and to question our assumptions about any particular form as the only "natural" one.

In a similar fashion, we are also often quick to identify differences across groups of people—men and women, rich and poor, whites and other races, people of different religions—as inherent characteristics of the members of these groups. But this assumption—that "group" characteristics apply to all members of the group or to any one individual—is incorrect. Making faulty generalizations about individuals based on what we think we know about the groups they are members of is what is known as a **stereotype**. For instance, some people (and evidently many employers) think that older individuals are not as good workers as younger people. It *is* true that at some point, if we live long enough, we will become too old to perform jobs that we may have done for many years. But that does not mean that a specific person is incapable of doing a job because of age, no matter how old he or she is. In fact, older workers may have wisdom and experience lacking in their younger colleagues.

Some assume that overweight people have caused their own obesity by overeating and under-exercising. But sociologists studying obesity in America have pointed to social factors that contribute to many Americans gaining weight. These factors include increasingly sedentary lifestyles centered on office jobs and leisure activities (such as watching TV or sitting in front of computers), the rise of the fast food industry, the increasing proportion of processed foods in the American diet, suburbanization, and reliance on the automobile to get around instead of walking.

A sociological imagination challenges such assumptions by raising questions about where stereotypes come from, what they are based on, who stands to benefit from them, and why they may be harmful. Sociology gives us tools to understand and think critically and creatively about everyday assumptions (such as stereotyped thinking) that others hold. It shows us that the things we often take for granted are a lot more complicated than they appear. Making the world more complicated is a challenge, but possessed of a sociological imagination we are able to be more active and effective participants in everything we do.

Engaging Our Sociological Imaginations: From Personal Puzzles to Sociological Questions

1.1.2 Explain the process for forming sociological questions.

Everyone possesses some elements of a sociological imagination. Whenever we try to make sense of something in the social worlds around us, we are beginning to think sociologically. But just observing the world around us in a more critical way does not fully engage our sociological imaginations. A sociological imagination instead requires that we start to ask deeper and more meaningful questions about the everday world around us. It does not allow us to settle for simple answers in understanding human beings and the societies they inhabit. *Our ability to ask hard questions, instead of just accepting easily available answers (or stereotypes), is the hallmark of a good sociological imagination.*

Where do sociological questions come from? Most professional sociologists, including many of the authors of *The Sociological Project*, have had experiences in their lives, before they began doing sociological research, that ignited their sociological imaginations. For some it was triggered by a particular event, while for others it may have developed more slowly—a combination of things that inspired them to seek to develop this way of thinking. The short author biographies that appear at the beginning of each chapter give you some idea of the range of these moments. But you don't have to be a professional sociologist to develop your sociological imagination or ask sociological questions! One situation that often triggers our sociological imagination occurs when we see that some kind of widely shared assumption we have long taken for granted is incorrect. That can happen at any moment, but when it does, and as we start to question previously held ideas in a new way, we are taking the first step toward developing a sociological imagination.

Of course, we can also actively engage our sociological imaginations rather than waiting for some surprising puzzles to emerge. One way is to think critically about "common sense." Commonsense ideas are often very useful. There are innumerable pearls of wisdom found in commonsense *aphorisms*, which are short phrases stating

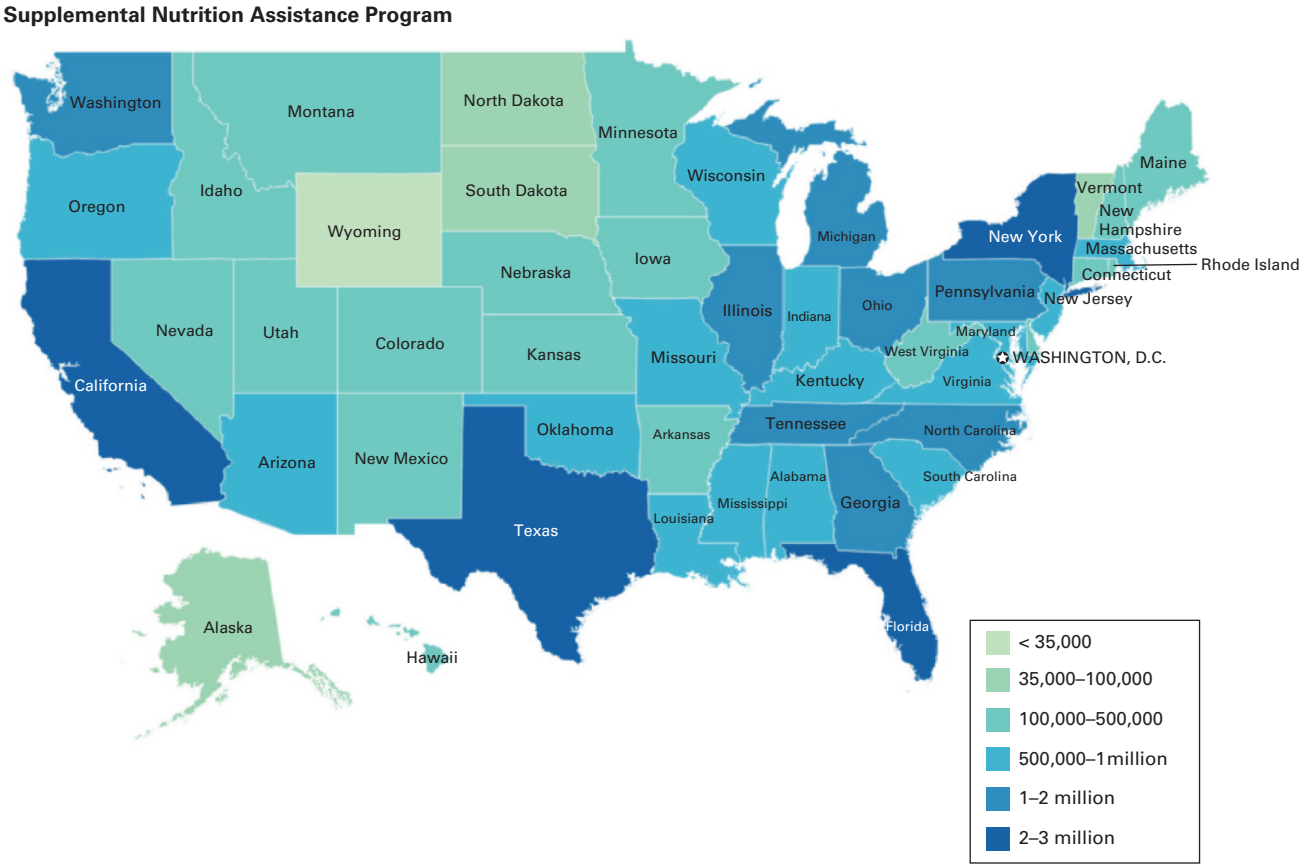
a truth or opinion. Examples of aphorisms include "look before you leap," "a rising tide lifts all boats," "birds of a feather flock together," and so forth. We've all heard some of these phrases, and in many cases it is valuable to follow the wisdom they suggest. Standing at a busy intersection, we *should* look carefully before walking out in front of traffic. It is usually easier to make friends with someone when you have common interests. In such cases, common sense provides a useful guide to being human.

But if we look closely, we quickly notice there is a problem. Almost every commonsense aphorism makes sense only in some contexts, but not others (Watts 2011). In fact, most commonsense aphorisms have an equally attractive but entirely opposite aphorism. For example, compare "look before you leap" to "she who hesitates is lost"! In some situations, it is important to seize opportunities before they disappear, while in other cases care and due diligence are recommended. So which is correct? They cannot both be right all of the time. The answer is that it depends on the context. The minute we recognize this, we are beginning to think like a sociologist. We have to know *which* commonsense rule to apply in which social context if we are to be competent at being human.

Once we learn not to take stereotypes and commonsense knowledge for granted, we can begin to ask questions. And once we learn to start questioning things, we are on the road to developing a sociological imagination. But what are these questions? Reading this book will open up many issues and questions to investigate (see page 4). But for now, here are a few examples. Think about eating at a restaurant or school cafeteria. If you look around, you probably will notice that there are relatively few, if any, groups that include both whites and blacks. Or visit a bunch of churches; you will rarely find large numbers of blacks and whites worshipping together. Why is it that, long after major civil rights legislation has ended legal discrimination, friendship networks and practices of worship so rarely cross the racial divide? Or think about the United States. Why is it that the richest country in the world has so many people living in poverty—far more than many other wealthy countries?

So why are so many people living in poverty? Is it because they are lazy and refuse to work hard (a common stereotype about the poor)? As we will explore in more detail later in the book, many poor people work long hours but make very little money, not enough to lift them and their children out of poverty. The existence of poverty in a very rich country is a puzzle that will not be solved by applying stereotypes about the poor (see Figure 1.1 to see how many families in different parts of the United States are living in poverty and eligible to receive food stamps). Thinking about questions like this or many others, we begin to notice that common sense and stereotypes are not helpful and that deeper understanding requires questioning our assumptions.

Figure 1.1 Food Stamp Usage in the United States



SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau (www.census.gov/did/www/saipe/data/model/info/snap.html).

Asking questions about things we have previously taken for granted is an exciting and creative activity, but it also may upset people around us. Challenging family members at the dinner table about their own stereotypes may lead to puzzled looks or even strong words. Most people do not enjoy being challenged in this way. Similarly, large corporations or other organizations also may not like it when their workers or members start to ask questions rather than simply doing (or believing) what they are told. School authorities often do not like it when students, parents, or outside observers raise questions about the character and quality of student learning or teaching in the school. Governments in particular do not like it when their citizens begin to interrogate topics officials would prefer to keep secret, such as covert military operations or corruption.

Sociological Questions: A Detailed Example

1.1.3 Identify the types of questions that sociologists are particularly well equipped to explore.

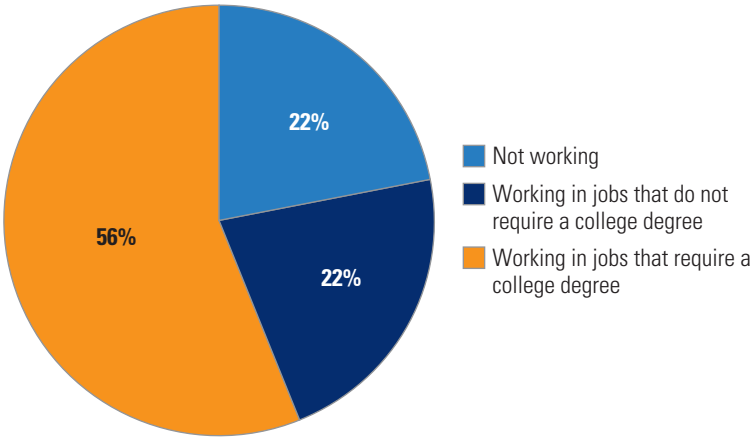
To get a better sense of how sociologists use questions to craft research projects, let's consider in more detail a current research project undertaken by Richard Arum, one of the authors of this chapter, which examines a topic of interest to many of the readers of this book. Arum had taught at several universities around the country and was puzzled by what he perceived to be the relatively modest amount of learning that was actually going on at these universities. We usually take for granted that colleges and universities are places where teaching and learning are prioritized, but Arum began to question this premise. To investigate how much learning is going on in higher education, he and a collaborator have been carrying out a project following more than 2,000 young adults as they progressed through 24 diverse colleges and universities, and then as they left college to work, live with friends, move in with romantic partners, or return to live with their parents (Arum and Roksa 2011, 2014). The students in the study had quite different college experiences and fared very differently in terms of learning outcomes. Some of these students were in college settings where they were exposed to challenging coursework and successfully moved into well-paying jobs immediately following graduation. Yet many more students did not enjoy such fates. In fact, two years out of college, 24 percent of college graduates in the study were back living at home with their parents or relatives.

Consider two of the students tracked in the project: Maria and Robert. Maria attended a highly selective, residential liberal arts college in a small Midwestern town. She had come to college with a high SAT score and three high school Advanced Placement course credits. In college, she quickly decided on becoming a social science major after taking a small freshman seminar with a sociologist who did her research on urban youth culture. She spent a semester of her junior year abroad in Europe, and during her semesters at college she reported that she met frequently with her instructors outside of class to discuss her work and that faculty at the school had high expectations for students like her. She also reported that her classmates—many of whom she had come to know well as the college had integrated her academic program with her residential dorm—were equally encouraging of her focus on academic work. On average, she estimated devoting 20 hours per week preparing for classes, many of which had significant reading and writing requirements in her social science major. When her performance on tasks that required critical thinking, complex reasoning, and written communication was measured, her scores moved up dramatically from freshman to senior year. Two years out of college, she was living with a friend she had met in college and was working at a job where she made slightly more than $38,000 per year. Although she had assumed a great deal of student debt, she was on a path to adult success. See Figure 1.2 to learn how typical Maria's post-college employment was.

Contrast Maria's college experiences with Robert's. Robert attended a high school that was predominantly nonwhite before enrolling in a nonselective, large public university in his state known as something of a "party school." Like many of his classmates, he entered college without any Advanced Placement coursework completed, and he did not score particularly well on the SAT. In college, he reported rarely meeting with his instructors outside of class. When asked about whether faculty had high expectations for

Figure 1.2 Employment Status of Recent College Graduates

What kinds of jobs are recent college graduates getting? Fifty-six percent are working in fields that require a college degree, but 22 percent are working in fields that do not, apparently taking jobs for which they are overqualified. And the bad news is that another 22 percent are out of work altogether.



SOURCE: Data from John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers (2011).

students like him, he reported that they largely did not. He muddled through coursework with passing grades but did not find his coursework either interesting or challenging; he found himself increasingly focused on socializing with his friends and earning spending money to support activities outside of school. Like many of his peers, he only studied about eight hours per week; when he did prepare for his classes, he often found himself doing so with his friends, who ended up often distracting him from really focusing on his work. During his senior year, when we tested his performance on the same tasks that Maria completed, we found no improvement in his performance even after attending college for four years. He was not alone. Arum and Roksa found that slightly more than a third of students in their study demonstrated no meaningful improvement on a test of general skills. And Robert was not rewarded in the labor market when he graduated in 2009. Two years after graduation, he was about $30,000 in debt, unemployed, and living back at home with his parents. About the only thing he had in common with Maria was a heavy debt load and a college degree. (See Figure 1.3 to find out more about the rise of student debt.)

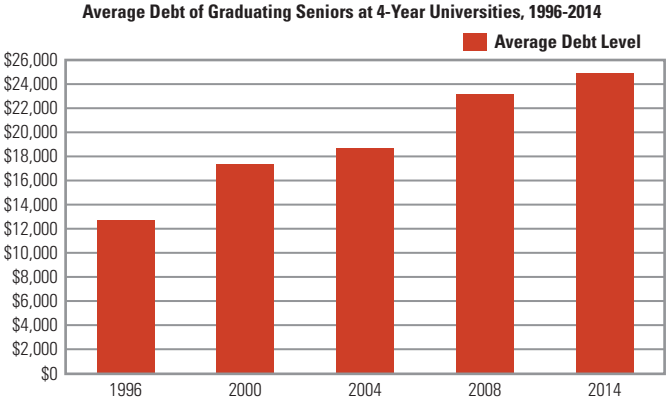
How can we understand why these two students had such different college experiences and ended up on such different postcollege paths? There are many ways in which the ideas and research of sociologists give us the tools to understand how Maria's and Robert's lives are unfolding the way they are. The most obvious commonsense answer is simply that Maria just worked harder than Robert. And there appears to be some truth in that. But that is not likely the entire story. A sociological view of student experiences in college poses a range of questions about how individuals (like Maria and Robert) and institutions interact in complex ways. Some of the questions sociologists might ask include: How did Maria's background help prepare her for college, and how did Robert's handicap him? Why is Robert (and others like him) able to spend less time on his studies now than students did a generation ago, but still earn passing grades? Why are certain colleges more focused on academic learning than others? Why do some schools become known as party schools, and what are the consequences for students attending those schools? How has the nature of campus life changed in the past few decades? Are students more or less likely to join organizations or to interact with each other collectively during their college years than at other points in their life? As the ratio of male to female students on college campuses changes, how have dating and courtship patterns altered? And is the United States alone in these changes in higher education, or are there global shifts underway to change the meaning and experience of college across national borders?

As these examples all suggest, sociological questions are concerned with a broad canvas of the modern world. Sociological questions range widely from the basic units of human life—such as individuals' relationships with others—to the groups and organizations we are a part of, all the way up to a now rapidly changing global economy that is impacting all of our social relationships.

As we move through the book, we will be introducing big questions concerning many of the most important topics sociologists are currently examining. But our first big point is this: Learning how to ask the important questions, and to think hard about how to probe for answers, is the heart of the sociological imagination.

Figure 1.3 The Rise of Student Debt

According to the Project on Student Debt, in 2014 average debt levels for graduating seniors with student loans rose to $24,950, more than double what they were in 1996.



SOURCE: Based on data from The John William Pope Center for Higher Education Policy (2011) and The Project on Student Debt (2015).

The Endless Reach of the Sociological Imagination

1.1.4 Discuss the wide range of topics and areas of life that sociologists study.

Very few areas of life can *not* be studied sociologically. Consider a few of the different areas that some of the sociologists involved with *The Sociology Project* have examined in their own research:

- Harvey Molotch wrote a book about the sociology of the toilet and another book about how other common household products are invented.
- Colin Jerolmack wrote a book about the relationship between humans and pigeons across the world.
- Eric Klinenberg wrote a book on why so many people died in certain neighborhoods in Chicago during a heat wave in 1995.
- Kathleen Gerson wrote a book about the conflicting relationship expectations of young men and women in the twenty-first century.
- Jeff Goodwin wrote a book about how and why revolutions occurred in some places, but not others.
- Steven Lukes wrote a book on how sociological ideas can better inform complex moral debates.