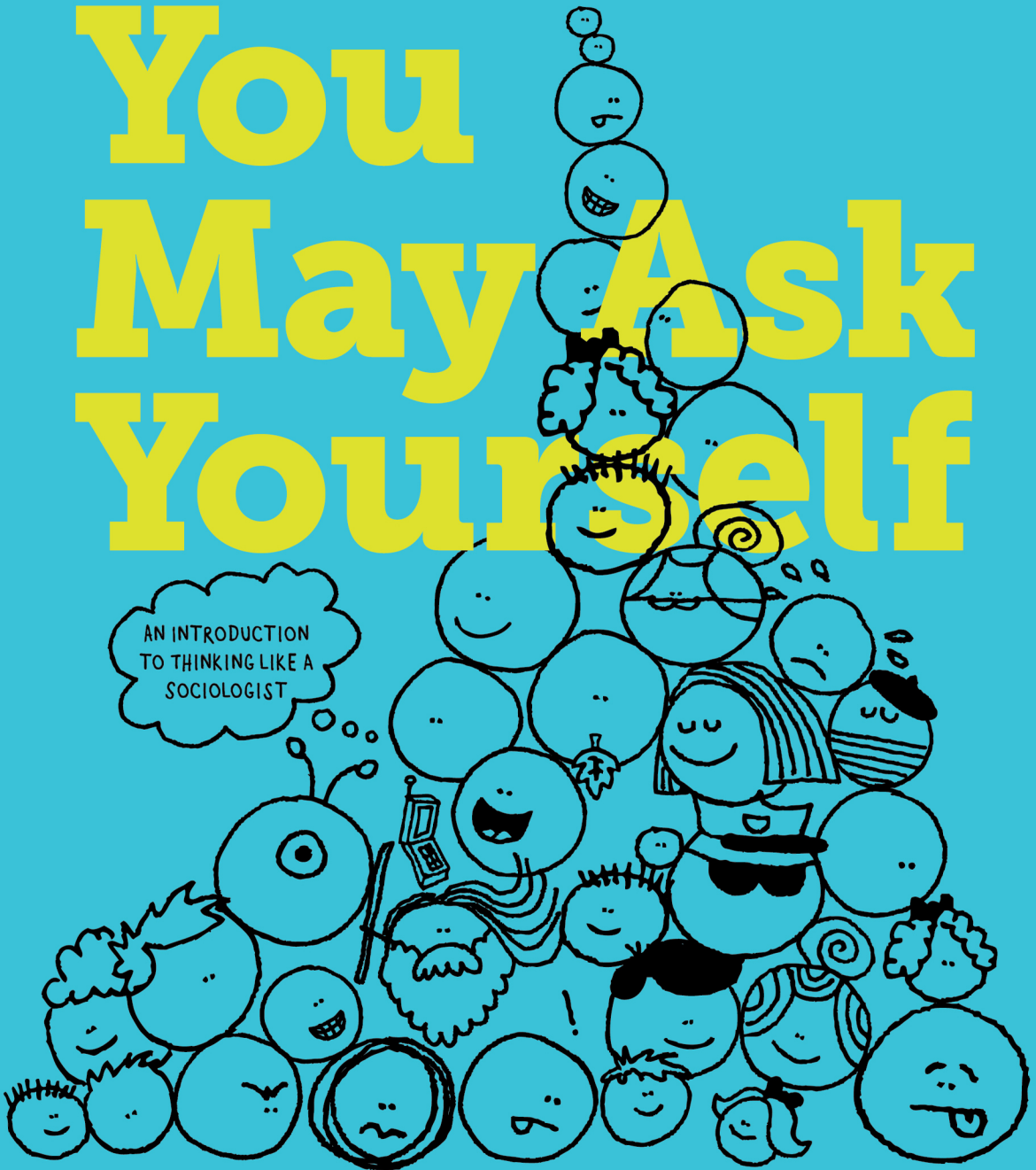


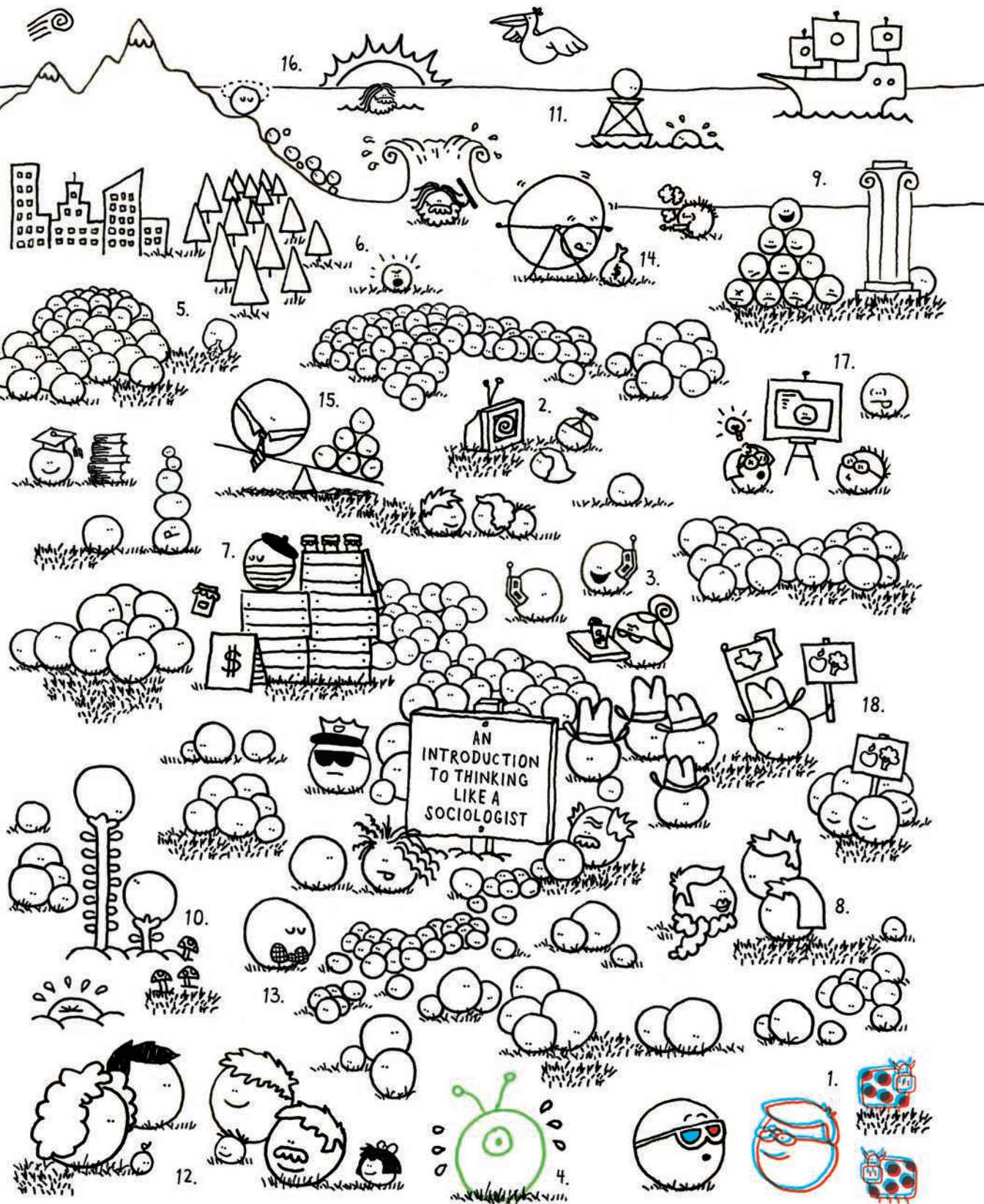
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TO THINKING LIKE A
SOCIOLOGIST



Dalton Conley



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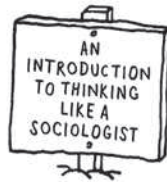
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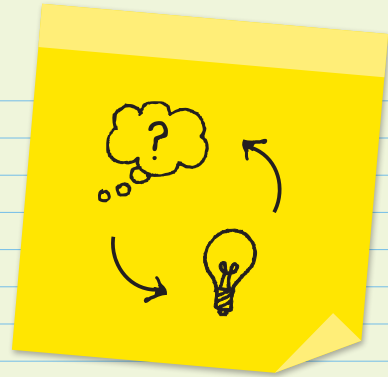
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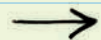
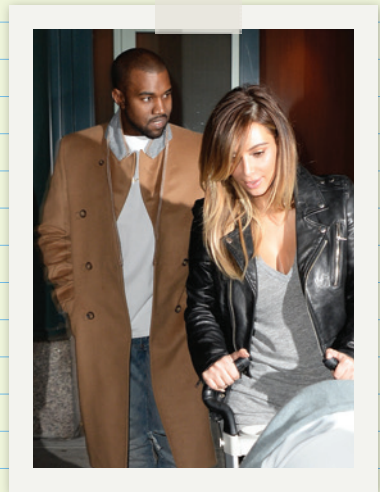
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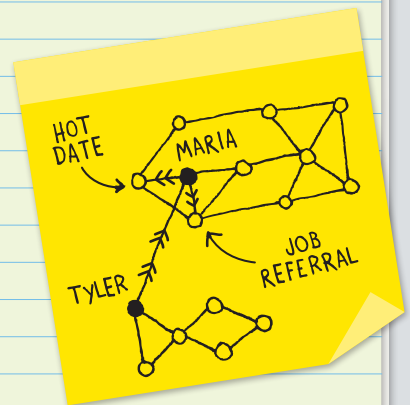
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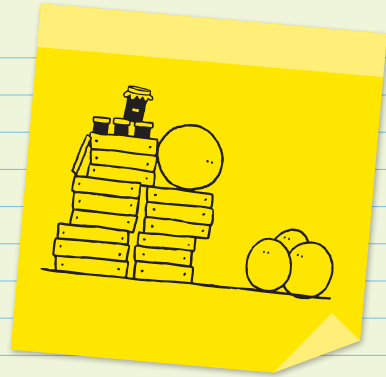
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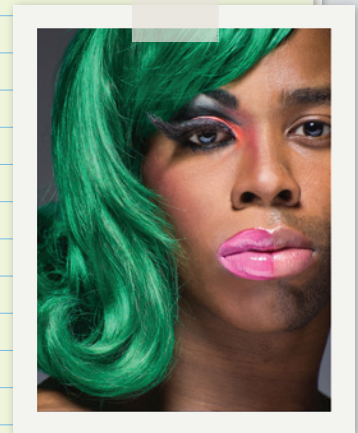
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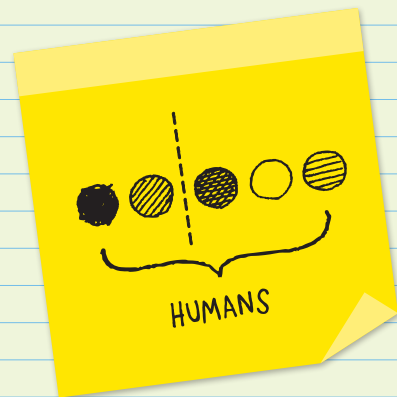
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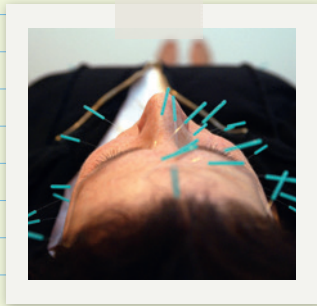
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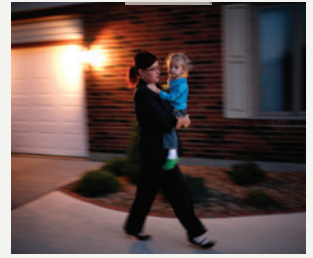
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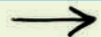
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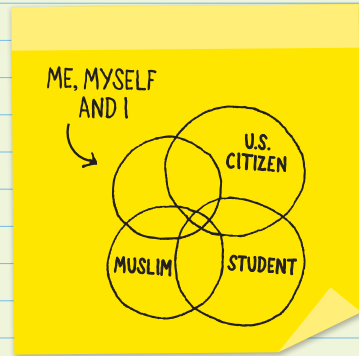
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PREFACE



I came to sociology by accident, so to speak. During the 1980s, there were no sociology courses at the high-school level, so I entered college with only the vaguest notion of what sociology—or even social science—was. Instead, I headed straight for the pre-med courses. But there was no such thing as a pre-med major, so I ended up specializing in the now defunct “humanities field major.” This un-major major was really the result of my becoming a junior and realizing that I was not any closer to a declared field of study than I had been when arriving two years earlier. So I scanned a list of all the electives I had taken until then—philosophy of aesthetics, history of technology, and so on—and marched right into my advisor’s office, declaring that it had always been my lifelong dream to study “art and technology in the twentieth century.” I wrote this up convincingly enough, apparently, because the college allowed me to write a senior thesis about how the evolution of Warner Brothers’ cartoon characters—from the stuttering, insecure Porky Pig to the militant Daffy Duck to the cool, collected, and confident Bugs Bunny—reflected the self-image of the United States on the world stage during the Depression, World War II, and the postwar period, respectively. Little did I know, I was already becoming a sociologist.

After college, I worked as a journalist but then decided that I wanted to continue my schooling. I was drawn to the critical stance and reflexivity that I had learned in my humanities classes, but I knew that I didn’t want to devote my life to arcane texts. What I wanted to do was take those skills—that critical stance—and apply them to everyday life, to the here and now. I also was rather skeptical of the methods that humanists used. What texts they chose to analyze always seemed so arbitrary. I wanted to systematize the inquiry a bit more; I found myself trying to apply the scientific method that I had gotten a taste of in my biology classes. But I didn’t want to do science in a lab. I wanted to be out in the proverbial real world. So when I flipped through a course catalog with these latent preferences somewhere in the back of my head, my finger landed on the sociology courses.

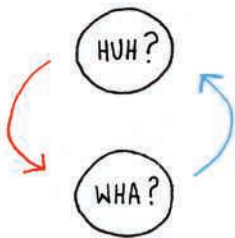
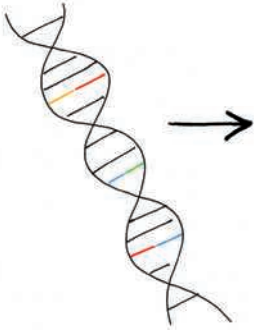
Once I became a card-carrying sociologist, the very first course I taught was Introduction to Sociology. I had big shoes to fill in teaching this course at

Yale. Kai Erikson, the world-renowned author of *Wayward Puritans* and *Everything in Its Path* and the son of psychologist Erik Erikson, was stepping down from his popular course, *The Human Universe*, and I, a first-year assistant professor, was expected to replace him.

I had a lot of sociology to learn. After all, graduate training in sociology is spotty at best. And there is no single theory of society to study in the same way that one might learn, for example, the biochemistry of DNA transcription and translation as the central dogma of molecular biology. We talk about the sociological imagination as an organizing principle. But even that is almost a poetic notion, not so easily articulated. Think of sociology as more like driving a car than learning calculus. You can read the manual all you want, but that isn't going to teach you how to do it. Only by seeing sociology in action and then trying it yourself will you eventually say, "Hey, I've got the hang of this!"

Hence the title of this book. In *You May Ask Yourself*, I show readers how sociologists question what most others take for granted about society, and I give readers opportunities to apply sociological ways of thinking to their own experiences. I've tried to jettison the arcane academic debates that become the guiding light of so many intro books in favor of a series of contemporary empirical (gold) nuggets that show off sociology (and empirical social science more generally) in its finest hour. Most students who take an introductory sociology class in college will not end up being sociology majors, let alone professional sociologists. Yet I aim to speak to both the aspiring major and the student who is merely fulfilling a requirement. So rather than having pages filled with statistics and theories that will go out of date rather quickly, *You May Ask Yourself* tries to instill in the reader a way of thinking—a scientific approach to human affairs that is portable, one that students will find useful when they study anything else, whether history or medicine.

To achieve this ambitious goal, I tried to write a book that was as "un-textbook"-like as possible, while covering all the material that a student in sociology needs to know. In this vein, each chapter is organized around a motivating paradox, meant to serve as the first chilling line of a mystery novel that motivates the reader to read on to find out (or rather, figure out, because this book is not about spoon-feeding facts) the nugget, the debate, the fundamentally new way of looking at the world that illuminates the paradox. Along with a paradox, each chapter begins with a profile of a relevant person who speaks to the core theme of the chapter. These range from myself to Angelina Jolie to a guy who wore a rainbow-colored clown wig to try and get media attention to share his Christian message. In addition, to show the usefulness of sociological knowledge in shaping the world around us, each chapter also culminates in a policy discussion and practice section where the reader gets a chance to show his or her sociological imagination in action (rather than just regurgitate facts).



WHAT'S NEW IN THE FIFTH EDITION

Higher education is in rapid transition, with online instruction expanding in traditional institutions, in the expanding for-profit sector, and in the new open-courseware movement. The industry is still very much in flux, with Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) failing to displace traditional classroom education (yet). With these changes, textbooks must also reinvent and reorient themselves. Students now expect, I believe, an entire multimedia experience when they purchase a textbook.

I was not sure how we were going to top the Third Edition's popular Paradox Animations. Well, for the Fourth Edition the answer turned out to be that, in addition to a new round of interviews with sociologists, we filmed *Sociology on the Street* assignment videos. For the chapter on deviance, for example, we sent students out to perform one of Harold Garfinkel's "breaching experiments," in which they purposely break a social norm and document the responses of those around them. To illustrate this (and other assignments), I went on camera to explain and/or perform them myself. It has been years since I had been as nervous speaking on camera as I was the day I walked—barefoot but dressed in a suit—into W. W. Norton's conference room filled with unsuspecting volunteers and proceeded to clip my toenails while I explained the plan for the day and we surreptitiously filmed their (surprisingly unflinching) response.

In addition to crazy videos like this—which also included me rummaging through a garbage can to discuss the environment chapter assignment—I made in-studio videos to further explain some of the trickier concepts in the book, ranging from *correlation* to *total institution*. Like the expert interviews and the animations, these *Sociology on the Street* videos are a tradition I expect to continue in future editions to further develop the multimedia aspects of the text, with the goal of reaching learners who prefer all sorts of modalities.

In the Fifth Edition, we wanted to continue the "real world" meme that the Fourth Edition introduced. Instead of hitting the streets, this time we brought the streets into the classroom. Along with new Q&A videos with professional sociologists, we added videos (and text) from folks outside the ivory tower, but whom are doing sociology in their work. For instance, I spoke with journalist and author Jennifer Senior, who wrote the best-selling book *All Joy and No Fun: The Paradox of Modern Parenting*—an obviously sociological domain. We also heard from Zephyr Teachout, an insurgent candidate for governor of New York State who ran on an anti-corruption platform. Other guests included a former FBI agent and a Wall Street fund manager, among others.

In addition to the new videos, we revised every chapter in the book to include updated data and examples. Here are some of the highlights:



Chapter 1

In a new interview, Asha Rangappa, the dean of admissions at Yale Law School, discusses credentialism and the returns on a degree from elite universities.

Chapter 2

In the data collection section of the chapter, sociologist Shamus Khan describes how some ethnographers obscure their class background when they conduct their research.

Chapter 3

By popular demand, I've reinstated the chapter opening story of Rockin' Rol-len and his attempts to co-opt the media.

Chapter 4

I interview Fadi Haddad about ADHD medication in schools. Fadi explains that parents and teachers often reach for the medications instead of addressing environmental issues that might be driving the behavior.

Chapter 5

For the end of the chapter, I've written a new policy box about social networks and the right to be forgotten.

Chapter 6

In a new interview, Marc Ramirez, a self-described “nontraditional” law student, talks about the struggles that prisoners face when trying to reenter society.

Chapter 7

I've updated the story of the Tomato Pickers of Immokalae, who are working under slightly better conditions after a boycott by fast food companies. In addition, I have also revised the discussion of the caste system in India.

Chapter 8

Amos Mac, photographer and publisher of *Original Plumbing* magazine, discusses his experiences being a man who was raised as a girl. I have also written a new policy box on gender-fluidity and how it influences policies on university campuses.

Chapter 9

For the end of the chapter, I have written a new policy box on DNA databases and the ways that they reproduce racial inequality.

Chapter 10

I have updated the discussion of the effects of the Moving to Opportunity program to include recent research on the relationship between the age of children who moved out of high-poverty neighborhoods and their social mobility.

Chapter 11

In a new interview, Delores Malaspina, a professor of psychiatry at NYU Medical School, explains how what happens in the environment can impact health long afterward by altering which parts of our genetic code are active.

Chapter 12

I have added a new interview with Jennifer Senior, author of *All Joy and No Fun*, about the changing roles of fathers at home and the expectations about dads doing housework.

Chapter 13

The chapter begins with a new profile of Kari Smith, a mother who auctioned off her forehead to be tattooed in order to pay for her son's college tuition. Smith's and others' strategies for financing college raise questions about whether Americans should be financing education through equity rather than debt.

Chapter 14

I interview Adam Davidson, economist and cofounder of NPR's *Planet Money*, about rent-seeking versus productivity-enhancing corporations. Adeel Qalbani, a former hedge-fund manager and current private equity investor, describes the financialization of the global economy. In addition, I have added a new policy box at the end of the chapter about the "gig economy."

Chapter 15

The chapter begins with a new profile of Jennifer Jacquet, who argues that shaming can be an effective tool for public polity to regulate behavior. I also have included an interview with Zephyr Teachout, a former New York gubernatorial candidate, who describes her campaign for public financing of elections.

Chapter 18

I interview Andy Bichlbaum about his work with the Yes Men to protest police racial profiling. I also have added an interview with Stephen Duncombe about Occupy Wall Street and media activism.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

You May Ask Yourself originated in the Introduction to Sociology course that I have taught on and off since the mid-1990s at New York University, Yale University, and Columbia University. However, the process of writing it made me feel as if I were learning to be a sociologist all over again. For example, I never taught religion, methodology, or the sociology of education. But instructors who reviewed the manuscript requested that these topics be covered, so with the assistance of an army of graduate students who really ought to be recognized as coauthors, I got to work. The experience was invaluable, and in a way, I finally feel like a card-carrying sociologist, having acquired at last a bird's-eye view of my colleagues' work. I consider it a great honor to be able to put my little spin (or filter) on the field in this way, to be able not just to influence the few hundred intro students I teach each year, but to excite (I hope) and instill the enthusiasm I didn't get to experience until graduate school in students who may be just a few months out of high school (if that).

I mentioned that the graduate students who helped me create this book were really more like coauthors, ghost writers, or perhaps law clerks. Law clerks do much of the writing of legal opinions for judges, but only a judge's name graces a decision. I asked Norton to allow more coauthors, but they declined—perhaps understandably, given how long such a list would be—so I will take this opportunity to thank my students and hope that you are still reading this preface.

The original transcription of my lectures that formed the basis of this text was completed by Carse Ramos, who also worked on assembling the glossary and drafted some parts of various chapters, such as sections in the economic sociology chapter, as well as some text in the chapters on authority and deviance. She also served as an all-around editor. Ashley Mears did the heavy lifting on the race, gender, family, and religion chapters. Amy LeClair took the lead on methods, culture, groups and networks, socialization, and health. Jennifer Heerwig cobbled together the chapter on authority and the state and deviance (a nice combo), while her officemate Brian McCabe whipped up the chapter on science, technology, and the environment and the one on social movements. Melissa Velez wrote the first draft of the education chapter (and a fine one at that). Michael McCarthy did the same for the stratification chapter. Devyani Prabhat helped revise the social movements chapter. My administrative assistant, Amelia Branigan, served as fact-checker, editor, and box drafter while running a department, taking the GREs, and writing and submitting her own graduate applications. When Amelia had to decamp for Northwestern University to pursue her own doctorate, Lauren Marten took over the job of chasing down obscure references, fact-checking, and proofreading. Alexandre Frenette drafted the questions and activities in the practice sections at the end of each chapter.

For the Second Edition, much of the work to integrate the interview transcripts and update material based on reviewer feedback fell to a great extent on the shoulders of Laura Norén, a fantastic New York University graduate student who has worked on topics as far ranging as public toilets (with my colleague Harvey Molotch) to how symphonies and designers collaborate (as part of her dissertation). I hope Laura will find her crash-course overview of sociology useful at some point in what promises to be a productive and exciting scholarly career.

When it was time to begin the Third Edition, the updating of all the statistics, fact-checking, and so on that is the bread and butter of a revision fell upon the capable shoulders of Emi Nakazato, who though trained as a social worker in graduate school, adeptly pivoted to that field's cousin, sociology.

For the Fourth and Fifth Editions, Laura Norén returned as the research assistant. With her prior experience she picked up the task ably without dropping a beat.

In addition to the students who have worked with me on the book, I need to give shouts out to all the top-notch scholars who found time in their busy schedules to sit down with me and do on-camera interviews: Julia Adams, Andy Bichlbaum, danah boyd, Andrew Cherlin, Nitsan Chorev, Susan Crawford, Adam Davidson, Matthew Desmond, Stephen Duncombe, Mitchell Duneier, Paula England, John Evans, Michael Gaddis, David Grusky, Fadi Haddad, Michael Hout, Jennifer Jacquet, Shamus Khan, Annette Lareau, Jennifer Lee, Ka Liu, Douglas McAdam, Amos Mac, Ashley Mears, Steven Morgan, Alondra Nelson, Devah Pager, Nathan Palmer, C. J. Pascoe, Frances Fox Piven, Allison Pugh, Adeel Qalbani, Marc Ramirez, Asha Rangappa, Jen'nan Read, Victor Rios, Jeffrey Sachs, Jennifer Senior, Mario Luis Small, Zephyr Teachout, Duncan Watts, and Robb Willer.

The filmmaking, editing, and postproduction were done by Erica Rothman at Nightlight Productions with the assistance of Jim Haverkamp, Kevin Wells, Saul Rouda, Dimitriy Khavin, and Arkadiy Ugorskiy. This was no easy task, because we wanted a bunch of cuts ranging from 30-second sound bites to television-show-length segments of 22 minutes. Although a bunch of interviews with academic social scientists on topics ranging from estimating the effects of Catholic schools on student outcomes to the political economy of global trade to the social contagion of autism are not likely to win any Emmys or rock the Nielsens (with the possible exception of the one on college sex), it was certainly one of the most exciting highlights in my sociological career to host this makeshift talk show on such a wide range of interesting topics. (If only more of our public discourse would dig into issues in the way that we did in these interviews, our society and governance would be in better shape—if I do say so myself!)

I also relied on a number of scholars who generously read chapters of this book and offered valuable feedback, criticisms, and suggestions:

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As you can see, it took a village to raise this child. But that's not all. At Norton, I need to thank, first and foremost, Karl Bakeman, the editor into whose lap this project landed (after having passed through the hands of Steve Dunn and Melea Seward). He deserves great credit for brainstorming with me how to do something novel for the Fifth Edition (hence the new interviews) and then convincing the Norton board to dive headfirst into this multimedia experiment of sorts. In addition, I am grateful to editorial assistant Miranda Schonbrun, project editor Diane Cipollone, and production manager Eric Pier-Hocking, who handled every stage of the manuscript and managed to keep the innumerable pieces of the book moving through production. I also must thank Norton's sociology marketing manager Julia Hall and the social science sales specialists Jonathan Mason, Roy McClymont, and Julie Sindel. Much of *You May Ask Yourself's* success is due to their boundless energy and enthusiasm.

Finally, I owe a special thanks to Eileen Connell, Mary Williams, Grace Tuttle, and Alice Garrard. They are responsible for putting together all of the video and electronic resources that accompany *You May Ask Yourself*. When it comes to developing new digital products to help instructors teach in the classroom or teach online, they are the most creative and resourceful folks working in college publishing today.

CORRELATION WITH PSYCHOLOGICAL, SOCIAL, AND BIOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF BEHAVIOR SECTION OF THE MCAT®

In 2015, the Association of American Medical Colleges revised the Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT) to include fundamental concepts from sociology. To help students preparing for the test, here is a correlation guide for *You May Ask Yourself*, Fifth Edition.

FOUNDATIONAL CONCEPT 7: Biological, psychological, and sociocultural factors influence behavior and behavior change.

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**FOUNDATIONAL
CONCEPT 8:**

Psychological, sociocultural, and biological factors influence the way we think about ourselves and others, as well as how we interact with others.

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FOUNDATIONAL Cultural and social differences influence well-being.
CONCEPT 9:

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FOUNDATIONAL Social stratification and access to
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PART I

USING YOUR
SOCIOLOGICAL
IMAGINATION



1 The Sociological Imagination: An Introduction

PARADOX

A SUCCESSFUL SOCIOLOGIST
MAKES THE FAMILIAR STRANGE.

DIGITALWNNORTON.COM/YOUMAYASK5



If you want to understand sociology, why don't we start with you. Why are you taking this class and reading this textbook? It's as good a place to start as any—after all, **sociology** is the study of human society, and there is the sociology of sports, of religion, of music, of medicine, even a sociology of sociologists. So why not start, by way of example, with the sociology of an introduction to sociology?

For example, why are you bent over this page? Take a moment to write down the reasons. Maybe you have heard of sociology and want to learn about it. Maybe you are merely following the suggestion of a parent, guidance counselor, or academic advisor. The course syllabus probably indicates that for the first week of class, you are required to read this chapter. So there are at least two good reasons to be reading this introduction to sociology text.

Let's take the first response, "I want to educate myself about sociology." That's a fairly good reason, but may I then ask why you are taking the class rather than simply reading the book on your own? Furthermore, assuming that you're paying tuition, why are you doing so? If you really are here for the education, let me suggest an alternative: Grab one of the course schedules at your college, decide which courses to take, and just show up! Most introductory classes are so large that nobody notices if an extra student attends. If it is a smaller, more advanced seminar, ask the professor if you can audit it. I have never known a faculty member who checks that all class attendees are legitimate students at the college—in fact, we're happy when students *do* show up to class. An auditor, someone who is there for the sake

Sociology the study of human society.

of pure learning, and who won't be grade grubbing or submitting papers to be marked, is pure gold to any professor interested in imparting knowledge for learning's sake.

You know the rest of the drill: Do all the reading (you can usually access the required texts for free at the library), do your homework, and participate in class discussion. About the only thing you won't get at the end of the course is a grade. So give yourself one. As a matter of fact, once you have compiled enough credits and written a senior thesis, award yourself a diploma. Why not? You will probably have received a better education than most students—certainly better than I did in college.

But what are you going to do with a homemade diploma? You are not just here to learn; you wish to obtain an actual college degree. Why exactly do you want a college degree? Students typically answer that they have to get one in order to earn more money. Others may say that they need credentials to get the job they want. And some students are in college because they don't know what else to do. Whatever your answer, the fact that you asked yourself a question about something you may have previously taken for granted is the first step in thinking like a sociologist. "Thinking like a sociologist" means applying analytical tools to something you have always done without much conscious thought—like opening this book or taking this class. It requires you to reconsider your assumptions about society and question what you have taken for granted in order to better understand the world around you. In other words, thinking like a sociologist means *making the familiar strange*.

This chapter introduces you to the sociological approach to the world. Specifically, you will learn about the *sociological imagination*, a term coined by C. Wright Mills. We'll return to the question "Why go to college?" and apply our sociological imaginations to it. You will also learn what a social institution is. The chapter concludes by looking at the sociology of sociology—that is, the history of sociology and where it fits within the social sciences.

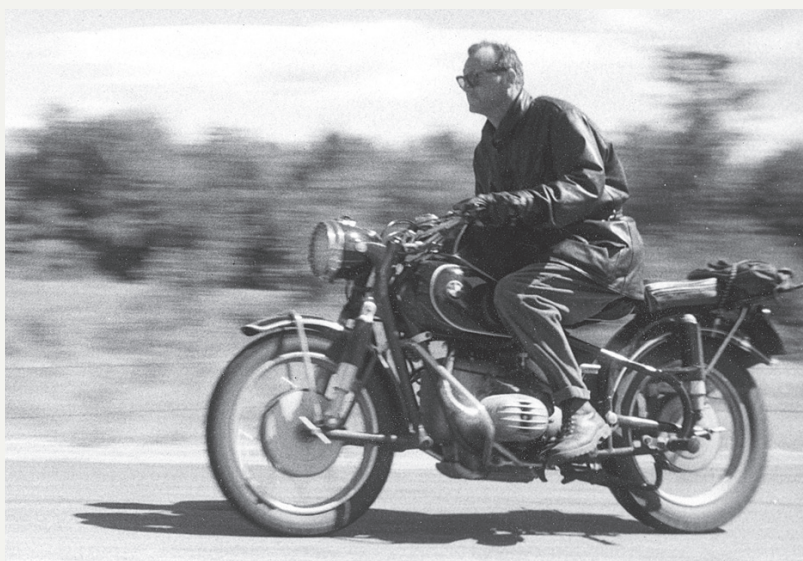


The Sociological Imagination

Sociological imagination the ability to connect the most basic, intimate aspects of an individual's life to seemingly impersonal and remote historical forces.

More than 50 years ago, the sociologist C. Wright Mills argued that in the effort to think critically about the social world around us, we need to use our **sociological imagination**, the ability to see the connections between our personal experience and the larger forces of history. This is just what we are doing when we question this textbook, this course, and college in general. In *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), Mills describes it this way: "The first fruit of this imagination—and the first lesson of the social science that embodies it—is the idea that the individual can understand his own experience and gauge his own fate only by locating himself within his period, that he can know his own chances in life only by becoming aware of those of all

individuals in his circumstances. In many ways it is a terrible lesson; in many ways a magnificent one.” The terrible part of the lesson is to make our own lives ordinary—that is, to see our intensely personal, private experience of life as typical of the period and place in which we live. This can also serve as a source of comfort, however, helping us to realize that we are not alone in our experiences, whether they involve our alienation from the increasingly dog-eat-dog capitalism of modern America, the peculiar combination of intimacy and dissociation that we may experience on the Internet, or the ways that nationality or geography affect our life choices. The sociological imagination does not just leave us hanging with these feelings of recognition, however. Mills writes that it also “enables [us] to take into account how individuals, in the welter of their daily experience, often become falsely conscious of their social positions.” The sociological imagination thus allows us to see the veneer of social life for what it is, and to step outside the “trap” of rapid historical change in order to comprehend what is occurring in our world and the social foundations that may be shifting right under our feet. As Mills wrote after World War II, a time of enormous political, social, and technological change, “The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and its promise. To recognize this task and this promise is the mark of the classic social analyst.”



Sociologist C. Wright Mills commuting to Columbia University on his motorcycle. How does Mills's concept of the sociological imagination help us make the familiar strange?

HOW TO BE A SOCIOLOGIST ACCORDING TO QUENTIN TARANTINO: A SCENE FROM PULP FICTION

Have you ever been to a foreign country, noticed how many little things were different, and wondered why? Have you ever been to a church of a different denomination—or a different religion altogether—from your own? Or have you been a fish out of water in some other way? The only guy attending a social event for women, perhaps? Or the only person from out of state in your dorm? If you have experienced that fish-out-of-water feeling, then you have, however briefly, engaged your sociological imagination. By shifting your social environment enough to be in a position where you are not able to take everything for granted, you are forced to see the connections between particular historical paths taken (and not taken) and how you live your daily life. You may, for instance, wonder why there are bidets in most European bathrooms and not in American ones. Or why people waiting in lines in the Middle East typically stand closer to each other than they do in Europe or America. Or why, in some rural Chinese societies, many generations of a family sleep in the same bed. If you are able to resist your initial impulses toward xenophobia (feelings that may result from the discomfort of facing a different reality), then you are halfway to understanding other people's lifestyles as no more or less sensible than your own. Once you have truly adopted the sociological imagination, you can start questioning the links between your personal experience and the particulars of a given society without ever leaving home.

In the following excerpt of dialogue from Quentin Tarantino's 1994 film *Pulp Fiction*, the character Vincent tells Jules about the "little differences" between life in the United States and life in Europe.

VINCENT: It's the little differences. A lotta the same shit we got here, they got there, but there they're a little different.

JULES: Example?

VINCENT: Well, in Amsterdam, you can buy beer in a movie theater. And I don't mean in a paper cup either. They give you a glass of beer, like in a bar. In Paris, you can buy beer at McDonald's. Also, you know what they call a Quarter Pounder with Cheese in Paris?

JULES: They don't call it a Quarter Pounder with Cheese?

VINCENT: No, they got the metric system there, they wouldn't know what the fuck a Quarter Pounder is.

JULES: What'd they call it?

VINCENT: Royale with Cheese.



Vincent Vega (John Travolta) describes his visit to a McDonald's in Amsterdam to Jules Winnfield (Samuel L. Jackson).

[...]

VINCENT: [Y]ou know what they put on french fries in Holland instead of ketchup?

JULES: What?

VINCENT: Mayonnaise.

[...] And I don't mean a little bit on the side of the plate, they fuckin' drown 'em in it.

JULES: Uuccch!

Your job as a sociologist is to get into the mind-set that mayonnaise on french fries, though it might seem disgusting at first, is not strange after all, certainly no more so than ketchup.

Mills offered his readers a way to stop and take stock of their lives in light of all that had happened in the previous decade. Of course, we almost always feel that social change is fairly rapid and continually getting ahead of us. Think of the 1960s or even today, with the rise of the Internet and global terror threats. In retrospect, we consider the 1950s, the decade when Mills wrote his seminal work, to be a relatively placid time, when Americans experienced some relief from the change and strife of World War II and the Great Depression. But Mills believed the profound sense of alienation experienced by many during the postwar period was a result of the change that had immediately preceded it.

Another way to think about the sociological imagination is to ask ourselves what we take to be natural that actually isn't. For example, let's return to the question "Why go to college?" Sociologists and economists have shown that the financial benefits of education—particularly higher education—appear to be increasing. They refer to this as the "returns to schooling." In today's economy, the median (i.e., typical) annual income for a high-school graduate is \$33,904; for those with a bachelor's degree, it is \$55,432 (2012 data; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014h). That \$21,528 annual advantage seems like a good deal, but is it really? Let's shift gears and do a little math.

What Are the True Costs and Returns of College?

Now that you are thinking like a sociologist, let's compare the true cost of going to college for four or five years to calling the whole thing off and taking a full-time job right after high school. First, there is the tuition to consider. Let's assume for the sake of argument you are paying \$9,400 per year for tuition (College Board, 2016). That's a lot less than what most private four-year colleges cost, but about average for in-state tuition at a state school. (Community colleges, by contrast, are usually much cheaper, especially because they tend to be commuter schools whose students live off-campus, but they typically do not offer a four-year bachelor's degree.)

In making the decision to attend college, you are agreeing to pay \$9,400 this year, about \$9,700 next year, 3.3 percent more the following year, and another 3.3 percent on top of that amount in your senior year to cover tuition hikes and inflation. The \$9,400 you have to pay right now is what hurts the most, because costs in the future are worth less than expenses today. Money in the future is worth less than money in hand for several reasons. The first is inflation. We all know that money is not what it used to be. In fact, taking into account the standard inflation rate—as measured by the government's Consumer Price Index—it took about \$17 in 2015 to equal the buying power of a single dollar back in 1940 (Bureau of

Labor Statistics Consumer Price Index Calculator). The second reason that money today is worth more than money tomorrow is that we could invest the money today to make more tomorrow.

Using a standard formula to adjust for inflation and bring future amounts into current dollars, we can determine that paying out \$9,400 this year and the higher amounts over the next three years is equivalent to paying \$39,500 in one lump sum today; this would be the direct cost of attending college. Indirect costs—so-called opportunity costs—exist as well, such as the costs associated with the amount of time you are devoting to school. Taking into account the typical wage for a high-school graduate, not counting differences by gender, age, or level of experience, we can calculate that if you worked full time instead of going to college, you would make \$30,000 this year. Thus, we find that the present value of the total wages lost over the next four years by choosing full-time school over full-time work is \$120,903. Add these opportunity costs to the direct costs of tuition, and we get \$160,403.

Next we need to calculate the “returns to schooling.” For the sake of simplicity, we will mostly ignore the fact that the differences between high-school graduates and college graduates change over time—given years of experience and the ups and downs of the economy. We will regard the \$55,432 annual earnings figure for recent college graduates as fixed for the first ten years past college graduation. We will use a higher estimate for annual earnings after that, to take into account the fact that mid-career workers make more. But remember, those who start working right out of high school begin earning about five years earlier than those who spend that time in college. The average time it takes to complete a bachelor’s degree at a public university is 4.6 years so we are rounding up to five (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). Assuming that you attend college for five years and retire at 65, you will have worked 42 years (high-school grads will be in the workforce for 47 years because they get a five-year head start). When we compare your college-degree-holding lifetime earnings to the lifetime earnings of someone who has only a high-school education, we find that with a college degree you will make about \$500,000 more than someone who went straight to work after high school (Figure 1.1). (To simplify, we are conveniently ignoring the fact that future money is inherently worth less than present money and that some college degrees, like those in engineering, lead to higher paying jobs than others.) On top of this substantial financial return to schooling, one economist found that those with college degrees were happier, healthier, and less likely to get divorced than their high-school-educated peers, even after controlling for income (Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2009).

But wait a minute: How do we know for sure that college really mattered in the equation? Individuals who finish college might earn more because they actually learned something and obtained a degree, or—a big OR—they might