

Encouraging Engagement and Critical Reflection Among Undergraduate Sociology Students

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Jonathan M. White and Shelley K. White (2020). *The Engaged Sociologist: Connecting the Classroom to the Community* (6th ed.). Sage Publications. 280 pages. ISBN: 978-1579226206

Introductory sociology textbooks face the challenge of being readable for undergraduates while also squeezing in enough sociological findings, concepts, and theories to please faculty. Rarely do they take on more. *The Engaged Sociologist* does. This book satisfies every standard for an introductory text while persuasively arguing that the pursuit of equality is fundamental to sociology as a discipline. At the same time, it seamlessly introduces sociological studies, terms, and analytical frames, and it immerses students in a gorgeous array of choices for exercises, semester projects, and discussion questions—enabling them to practice what the best sociological work promises: transformation aimed at justice.

The Engaged Sociologist opens with a chapter normalizing a concept that academics too often push back against: that activism is a “core commitment” of sociology (Collins, 2000). The second chapter introduces four foundational disciplinary theories: conflict theory, functionalism, symbolic interactionism, and critical race theory. The authors, Jonathan M. White and Shelley K. White, lead students into an understanding of these perspectives by sharing stories of scholars whose lives and works embodied them: Karl Marx, Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, George Herbert Mead, Jane Addams, and W.E.B. Du Bois. Next, readers encounter a chapter on sociological methods in which the authors boil “good methods” down to an easily digestible recipe: (a) choosing a topic, (b) finding previous studies on it, (c) choosing a method, (d) gathering data, (e) relating your findings to other research, and (f) presenting your work for review and critique.

Afterward, White and White present core elements of an introductory course, wedding each to their overall argument that civic engagement, democracy, and activism are central to sociological endeavors. In Chapter 4, for example, they interlace a discussion of culture into a data-driven argument about how societies can either inspire civic engagement or foster people’s willingness to be apathetic. In Chapter 5, they link conversation of how social actors engage with one another to a clear explanation of socialization as a concept and set of

processes. In Chapter 6, the authors connect what is defined as “deviant” to what helps change society for the better: protest and social movements. In Chapter 7, they discuss core tensions of economic stratification while also defining social class, explaining how it impacts modern life, and exploring actions that people have taken to reduce economic inequality. Race, ethnicity, sex, gender, and power are at the forefront of Chapters 8 and 9. Chapters 10 and 11 introduce readers to social institutions such as family, religion, economy, government, and education and examine how they shape human experiences.

In every chapter, the authors share stories of scholars, activists, students, or groups whose lives illustrate the power of human agency to transform the world for the common good. Students can literally see themselves in this text, over and over again—especially in the concluding chapter, which presents clear directions and ideas for conducting their own directly impactful and publicly engaged research. Each chapter is also rich with resources, including a “Sociologist in Action” section that highlights the contributions of an individual or organization, numerous exercises that students can easily execute and are likely to enjoy, great discussion questions, and a list of “Suggestions for Specific Actions” related to what students have learned about in their reading.

The text’s strengths are numerous. The authors uniquely and brilliantly weave together explanations of concepts, recent research findings, interesting narratives, and an overall thesis about social action. Students come to learn that sociology must focus on changing the world to create a better quality of life for the collective. The book therefore stands out from other introductory textbooks. It is also written in a subtly beautiful way that is simultaneously clear and poignant. For example, in the theory chapter, the authors highlight a simple fact that both helps readers see the benefits of using an individual theoretical framework and fosters appreciation for multiple frameworks. In their words, “Looking at the world through a theoretical perspective can help us detect social patterns that we might otherwise overlook and help us figure out where we should

concentrate our focus” (p. 26). They follow this up with clear examples of how using one theory makes a person “more likely to notice” or “be aware of” specific aspects of social life (p. 26). Pointing out how theory impacts how people observe what is around them illuminates how putting together research from a variety of perspectives helps learners, scholars, and citizens see a fuller and more nuanced picture of the world.

Service-learning practitioners will be happy to see the approach’s central reflection questions (“What?”/“Now what?”/“So what?”) framed as questions that social scientists must answer before presenting their work to the public (p. 37). Scholars utilizing any research method are likely to feel good about how the authors explain each approach’s strengths judiciously and with a consistently enthusiastic tone. Philosophers, epistemologists, and critical theorists can appreciate students being directed to document “what [they] think [they] know” prior to studying a topic (what the discipline typically refers to as “reflexivity” or reflexive praxis; p. 246). Teachers seeking multiple great ideas for getting students to examine social life in insightful ways will appreciate the choices for exercises and assignments. Activists working on economic equality; fair-trade practices; immigration; racial justice; disability and access; gender, sex, or sexuality; and many other aspects of social stratification can find what is important to them discussed in this book. The authors also bravely and adeptly introduce subjects that could generate intense debate in philosophically or politically split classrooms, such as “Should students in U.S. public schools be required to pledge allegiance to the flag?” (p. 226). Additionally, the authors should be praised for consistently aiming to apply an intersectional view in their examples and data.

For all of these reasons, I would be excited to use this book in class—and I am not a textbook person. I typically utilize scholarly articles and full-length monographs. That said, one limitation did stand out: The text disproportionately focuses on axes of inequality such as social class and gender and does not integrate race as much as it could. In particular, it fails to discuss anti-Blackness in American culture to the degree that might be expected in an introductory textbook (especially one so unique in its commitment to the pursuit of justice and equity). Overall, race and racism appear late in the book in ways that cannot be explained by the fact that a full chapter is devoted to the topics. Chapters are devoted to gender, sex, and social class, too, but each of these topics also pops up earlier in the book’s examples. In addition, there are

missed opportunities where race, racism, and anti-Blackness could have been covered. For example, a discussion of the Great Recession (pp. 127–130) mentions its effects on retirees and vulnerable workers, but it misses a chance to dialogue with race and gender by exploring the disproportionate impact of unemployment patterns on Black men during that time period. In addition, the section on “social class and political representation” does not mention felon disenfranchisement, which has disproportionately impacted poor Black communities across the United States (pp. 134–135). An even more glaring omission is the fact that the chapter on race and ethnicity begins with a discussion of immigration rather than the emergence of a system of racial slavery in the early United States. The chapter also mentions, but does not dig deep into, the concept of anti-Blackness, which is central to our modern conception of race and to systems of racial inequality in America.

In sum, however, the authors’ consistent effort to present a wide array of examples, current studies, and intersectional glimpses into patterns of inequality still deserves praise and acknowledgment. With revisions to the next edition—especially if a race scholar is invited on as coauthor—it would be the most perfect introductory textbook I have read, and one that exceeds what I imagined an introductory textbook could ever be. It sets a new standard. In fact, as it is in this edition, I would still give the book the highest compliment I think a text of its kind can get: It is not likely to be thrown away or turned in for a measly cashback stipend by students. I see it living on former undergraduate students’ shelves or being shared with their friends and colleagues. Additionally, it carries impact in how it can transform students’ lives by encouraging them to develop a strong sociological imagination united to applied practice. The book carries a deep and rich contribution and legacy. I cannot wait to see the seventh edition.

Reference

Collins, P.H. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

About the Author

Sarah Becker is a sociologist, criminologist, and ethnographer whose work focuses on the processes through which inequalities are enacted and challenged in various structural contexts. Her approach to research involves the tight integration of research and community-based action.