

## Climate Change is Largely Missing from Best Selling Intro to Sociology Textbooks

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Each year 800,000 or more undergraduates take an “Introduction to Sociology” course in one of the U.S.’s roughly 4600 colleges and universities. That is far greater than the number undergraduates who *major* in Sociology per year, in recent years somewhere between 32,000 and 37,000 (<http://www.asanet.org/research-and-publications/research-sociology/trends/bachelors-degrees-awarded-sociology>; <https://datausa.io/profile/cip/451101/>).

Introduction to Sociology courses are, then, one of the potentially most important sites where American undergraduates *could* begin to learn about climate change, its causes, its likely societal and ecological impacts, how the public and how political systems have dealt (or have failed to deal) with the threat.

How do Introduction to Sociology courses actually treat the climate crisis? In how much detail? When, in the semester or the quarter?

Since so many such courses use textbooks (approximately 800,000 Intro textbooks are sold or rented each year), and if we assume that an instructor’s lectures will tend to follow the sequence of topics in their assigned textbook’s chapters, one way to begin to answer those questions is to do a content analysis of best selling textbooks.

Therefore I collected best selling Introduction to Sociology textbooks and analyzed how they treat the issues of “environment” and “climate change.” I arbitrarily set the number at the top 10 because, well, it is rather conventional to pick the top 10. I decided to include the # 11 best seller (Giddens, *et al*, 2016), because, unlike the better selling ten, it is a textbook authored by some of Sociology’s biggest names, authors widely recognized as leaders in our field, and because its first – and most famous – coauthor, Anthony Giddens, has written a whole book about climate change (Giddens, 2011).<sup>1</sup>

In each case, I inspected the most recent edition of the textbook, those mostly published in 2016 or 2017. For 9 of our 11, I also located earlier editions of the same textbooks, editions that were published as much as nine or ten years earlier, so that I could ask and answer the question: has the discussion of climate change improved, deepened, changed in any significant way in the intervening years, given that the science of climate change and our understanding of its potential impacts, had continued to improve over the past decade.

	<u>Most recent</u>	<u>Earlier</u>
#1 Conley	2015	2008
#2 Manza, et al	2017	2013
#3 Benokraitis	2017 ?	
#4 Macionis	2017	2008
#5 Ritzer	2016	2013

#6 Tischler	2014	
#7 Thompson	2017 ?	2005
#8 Ferris and Stein	2016	
#9 Henslin	2017	2006
#10 Schaefer	2014	2007
#11 Giddens, et al	2016	2005

I start with some observations about how these textbooks discuss what Sociology has to say about societies' relationship with the environment, as a whole. I then hone in on what these books have to say, specifically, about "climate change" or "global warming."

### Discussions of the Environment suggest that it's not *all* that important

All our textbooks follow essentially the same basic format; the sequence of subjects covered is pretty much the same from book to book. Early chapters are devoted to the Sociological imagination and a discussion of various methods/ways of knowing. Then come chapters on specific topics, race/ethnicity, gender and sexuality, family, media and culture. The general trend is to go from early chapters devoted primarily to the "micro" facets of sociological inquiry to later chapters on more "macro" facets, social-structural subjects such as the economy, politics and power, globalization, social movements and social change.

I don't wish to take the time or to use valuable word count allotments to analyze the general organization of these textbooks, or to speculate about the reason(s) why authors and publishers so faithfully follow the same template. The points that I DO wish to make are that (1) discussion of the environment is always relegated to or near the end of the textbook, (2) with one exception, environment does not get its own chapter but is relegated to sharing a chapter with other topics, (3) in that late, shared chapter, environment always comes last, and (4) it doesn't get more than a few pages.

Location in the book. No textbook has its discussion of the environment anywhere close to its early, or even its middle chapters. Four books have it two positions from the final chapter (for example, chapter 18 when there are 20 in the book). Five others put it in the next to last chapter. One has it dead last. (One, Tischler, # 6 best seller, has no discussion of environment at all.)

I don't question that the subjects that come before "environment," subjects such as deviance, aging, sexuality, etc., are important. They certainly are and they are core issues in the history of sociological inquiry, so they obviously deserve to be prominent in any intro, survey course. All I wish to point out is that sequence – what is brought up first, second, third, or much later, toward the end of the book / end of the course – conveys, implicitly or preconsciously, relative importance.

Environment does not get its own chapter. The implicit message that environment is not that important is further reinforced by the fact that it almost never gets its own chapter. Most frequently, by far, one sees some permutation of the triad "population, urbanization, environment." There are single instances of some other combinations, "science, environment

and society,” and “technology, social movements, and environment.” In our sample, there was only one, Haney/Manza, the # 2 best seller, where Environment was given its own chapter.

Always last; few pages. In the books in which “environment” shares a chapter with other subjects, it comes last. Always. First population; then urbanization; then environment. And when the textbook finally gets to discussing it, it doesn’t get much space. The environment chapter in Haney/Manza gets a respectable 30 pages. That’s an outlier. A couple of books give it about 10 pages. Half the books less than 8 pages; some a page or less.

The implied message: Modest amount of space. Relegated to the back of the book. Even there, not getting its own chapter but combined with other (though not unrelated) topics. What message does this send to undergraduates who are assigned these textbooks in their Intro courses? We think the message is clear.

To think like a sociologist, to see the world the way sociologists see it, the environment is not *that* important. Everything we have pointed to – the amount of space devoted to the discussion; the placement toward the end – sends that message. Implicitly, of course. When we listen to someone, we tend to believe that the first things the speaker says and/or the topics s/he spends the most time on are the topics they consider most important. We assume that they consider less important the topics that get a mere mention, toward the end of the conversation.

Lecture classes, and the readings assigned in those classes, work the same way. Relegate a topic to the end of the quarter or the semester? Students are getting ready for the end of the term. Work is piling up. Many are tired; some are bored. And a class’s timetable often slips a week or two; an instructor may never get to the final lectures or assign the last readings as s/he runs out of time.

And it’s a bigger issue than just “what is Sociology?” Sociology claims not just to teach its concepts or its particular way of thinking about the world. Sociology claims, at its best, to deepen students’ understandings about their social world. It offers a vision of what students should care about, which issues or troubles or challenges they should think about, worry about, the most. Introduction to Sociology textbooks that leave environmental issues to the last convey, whether they want to or not, that the student, who, one hopes, is also being taught to become an active and engaged citizen, is being told that *other* things, *other* problems in their world are far more important.

### Climate change

We now turn to our primary concern – how bestselling Intro to Sociology textbooks discuss climate change. Examining each text, we asked:

- How much space is devoted to climate change?
- Is climate change depicted as real? Is it serious?
- What causes climate change? What are the impacts? How has society responded to the threat?

- Where we have earlier editions, is there some difference in how climate change is discussed now, compared to how it was discussed in the earlier edition?

#### How much space is devoted to climate change?

The short answer is: very little. Five of the books give less than one page to the subject; some of these only a single paragraph or even less. Only one gives it more than two pages.

#### Is climate change real? Is it serious?

As I write, in 2017, the United States seems to be the sole important exception to the world-wide consensus, articulated by governments, by national and international scientific bodies, and by public opinion, that climate change is real and is serious, possibly an existential threat to the future of human societies. In the U.S., in contrast, climate change denial is organized, well funded, highly vocal. The party that controls the White House and both chambers of Congress embraces climate denial. Some important segments of the American public, political conservatives, evangelicals and other conservative Christians, agree. That is why how Introduction to Sociology textbooks treat very basic questions about climate change – is it real? is it serious? – are so important.

Is it real? Almost unanimously, the answer is “yes.” Almost all the books briefly describe the basic physics, the buildup of greenhouse gases, mostly CO<sub>2</sub>, keeping solar energy from being radiated back into space, thereby throwing the planet’s energy balance out of whack. Some of the books mention that there are skeptics but they make sure to emphasize that the science is unequivocal.

There are only two exceptions to this overall pattern. Thompson (# 7) does not deny the existence of climate change but conflates it with depletion of atmospheric ozone, an entirely different issue. Henslin (# 9) does worse. Back in 2006, he wrote that “the consequences [of climate change] are likely to be catastrophic” (2006:424). In 2017 that phrase is gone. In its stead, we read that “climate change is producing many problems” (2017:499), but given “the limited space we have” (ibid), Henslin chooses to focus on the “controversy” that CO<sub>2</sub> emissions have recently risen fast while the “rate of warming slowed” (ibid:500-501). The existence of this purported slowing has been refuted but it is – still – a popular denialist talking point, supported by widely disseminated graphs that, by strategically choosing the starting and ending dates, create a false impression of temperature trends. Henslin treats this denialist trope as if it were a real problem for belief in the reality of climate change, and then urges students to debate the “controversy.”

OK, those two exceptions are a bit shocking. One would expect that a Sociology textbook author, although obviously not a practicing physical scientist, would have learned enough about environmental issues not to confuse the problem of greenhouse gases with the problem of chemicals that deplete atmospheric ozone. One would expect a textbook author not to give credence to an easily disproven denialist claim and then challenge college frosh to figure out what’s real and what’s not. But the good news, here, is that these are outliers; 8 of the 10

textbooks that address environment/climate change (again, Tischler does not) do not express any real doubt about the reality of climate change.

Is it serious? Most say “yes, serious” and worse. Here is a selection of quotes:

- “drastic consequences” – Conley, 2015:672
- “the single greatest hazard to both our ecosystem and humanity” – Manza, 2017:465
- “... our planet is ailing. Can people slow some of earth’s devastation?” – Benokraitis, 2017:310
- “a serious problem that threatens the future of all of us” – Macionis, 2017:584
- “a climate change of a few degrees can cause catastrophic consequences for the world and its inhabitants” – Ferris/Stein, 2016:454
- “devastating consequences” – Giddens, *et al*, 2016:529.

At the same time, though, those dire assessments are undercut in a number of ways: Climate change or global warming is discussed, reasonably enough, in the chapter on “environment,” a topic that, as I have already pointed out, is tacitly treated as relatively unimportant. Within those chapters, and then within the short, final sections of those chapters, climate change finds itself as just one among a list of several other environmental issues such as species extinction, resource depletion, various forms of waste and pollution, all treated as if they are of equal concern, no issue more pressing or more important than any other. And, finally, climate change typically gets only a bit of space, as I have already noted, above.

On the one hand, then, climate change is described as potentially a civilization-ending event. On the other hand, climate change gets only a bit of attention, always near the end of the book. That “too little, too late” treatment can only serve to send the message, intended or not, that the issue isn’t all that important or urgent.

#### Causes, Impacts, Societies’ Responses

A comprehensive sociological analysis of climate change would need to address three facets of the issue. First, it would need to offer a *sociological* – not just physical – explanation of the cause(s) of climate change. Second, it would need to describe in detail the impacts of climate change, both impacts already observed and the future, predicted impacts that are said to be very likely to occur, especially in “business as usual” greenhouse gas emission scenarios. Third, such an analysis would need to describe how the world’s peoples, institutions, governments have responded, so far, to scientists’ and activists’ warnings about the threat. That would constitute a full sociological analysis. With that in mind, let’s consider what these bestselling textbooks actually say about causes, about impacts and about responses.

Causes: For the most part, the textbooks get the *physics* right (though there are glaring exceptions): Huge increase in the burning of fossil fuels; buildup of greenhouse gases, especially CO<sub>2</sub>; keeping incoming solar energy from being radiated back out into space; global warming and climate change.

But what are the *sociological* causes? Some books have nothing. That's surprising; supposedly these books are meant to teach students how Sociologists look at the world. Some begin to identify societal actors that are responsible for increased CO2 emissions, but the treatment is quite terse: "corporations and consumers" (#2); "factories and automobiles" (#4). Others are a bit better, naming drivers that begin to sound more clearly sociological, "consumption in wealthy countries" (#10), "capitalist economic development" (#9). Such explanations are more promising, but they are still quite terse and the causal chain that connects, say, "capitalism" to the burning of fossil fuels is not spelled out.

The space devoted to climate change makes up only a fraction of the space allotted to the "environment" as a whole, however. Do those longer discussions have better sociological analyses of the causes of environmental trouble?

I saw no clear trends. Some attributed environmental problems to one or two primary causes, population, consumption, a capitalist economy's imperative for growth. Some give the reader a choice of sociological explanations, harkening back to Intro textbooks' canonical division of social theory into the triad of functionalism, conflict theory and symbolic interactionism [here cite that Madza article on Intro textbooks and theory]. Some settle for listing some of the more familiar ideas in Environmental Sociology, Garrett Hardin's "tragedy of the commons," Alan Schnaiberg's "treadmill of production," or the IPAT (Impact = Population x Affluence x Technology) formula first proposed by Paul Ehrlich and John Holdren. And some offer no overarching social theory of environmental crisis at all, just lists of serious environmental problems.

Impacts: The textbook writers do pretty well on this facet of the analysis. They list many of the geophysical changes that will affect human wellbeing, more extreme temperatures (especially heat waves), more intense and more frequent storms, more rain here and less rain (drought) elsewhere, glaciers melting, sea levels rising. The worrying implications are spelled out: More hunger as changing conditions undermine societies' ability to grow enough food. Less access to safe, potable water. Diseases spreading to new places, new populations. Coastal communities drowned. Mass migration. Not all the books have such a full list, but a majority do. Some also distinguish between impacts already observed and impacts likely to occur if emissions of greenhouse gases continue to grow. Some emphasize the inequality/social justice dimension – that these impacts are going to disproportionately affect the poorer peoples and poor nations.

Hunger, thirst, disease, drowned coastal cities, mass migration. Add it all up and the prospects are grim. No wonder several of the books offer words such as "devastating" and "catastrophic."

Those dark predictions are moderated, however, in some of the books, when the author says or implies that, although one cannot underestimate the challenges, we human beings are smart, inventive, and can, with difficulty, adapt.

Responses: Climate has been in the news since James Hansen's famous 1987 testimony in front of a Congressional Committee. Since then we have seen claims by scientists and activists and counterclaims by climate deniers. Media attention has waxed and waned. Public opinion has

risen, fallen and risen again. There have been repeated attempts to forge international treaties, national policy, policy at the regional, state and local levels.

No textbook offers anything close to a comprehensive review of the rich variety of individuals', organized interests', media's, many governments' responses to the climate threat. A couple of books mention troubles coming to agree on and implement the Kyoto Protocols. Others talk about the role of activism and the environmental movement. Still others focus on impediments, that the public finds other concerns more important, or why the world's nations have had such difficulties forging a treaty that every nation can agree to. Several books describe how carbon markets could be a solution and they cite some corporations' efforts to go green. Others speak hopefully about the idea of sustainability or sustainable development.

#### Are recent editions better than earlier ones?

Much has happened in the past decade. Climate science has steadily improved. Predictions of future impacts have grown ever more grim. Al Gore's Oscar winning documentary in 2007, and the accompanying jump in media coverage, raised public awareness and concern. Then that concern was overshadowed by the Great Recession of 2008. The environmental movement made climate change a top priority. Climate denial continued to be well funded by fossil fuel interests and continued to be championed by conservative think tanks and conservative politicians. Climate change was caught up in and became one more front in America's "culture wars." Climate policy at the national level stalled. Attempts to forge an international agreement also floundered, but eventually made real progress. Meanwhile, the technologies that could deliver reliable, cost effective renewable energy improved.

Was any of this reflected in the textbooks' discussions of climate change? For eight of ten textbooks, I compared the most recent editions with earlier ones (I didn't feel the need to do a comparison for Tischler, the textbook that has no environmental content in its most recent edition). In five of the eight there was no change, or only a very minor change, such as the substitution of one photo or one graph for another. Giddens, *et al*, added a fairly sturdy summary of the 2014 report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the world's leading body tasked with periodic updates of the scientific consensus. Schaefer's 2014 edition has a section on climate that wasn't there in 2006. Going in the other direction, Madza, *et al*, moved its environment chapter one slot closer to the end of the book. And one, Henslin, regressed from affirming the reality of climate change, in 2006, to uncritically repeating a key denialist talking point in 2017.

#### In summary, the good, the bad and the average

Let's summarize what we have learned.

There are certainly differences among these eleven books. If we limit the discussion to a "within" comparison, just considering each against the other ten, some are clearly far better than others. In our opinion, Jerolmack's chapter in Manza (#2) and Giddens, et al (#11) are the best; Conley (#1) and Ritzer (#5) are a cut above the average. At the other extreme we find Tischler

(#6), who leaves environment completely out of the sociological project, Thompson (#7), who gets the science wrong, conflating climate change with ozone depletion, and Henslin (#9), whose most recent edition takes a big step back from his much better discussion in 2006.

But even the best have real issues. Even the best shares basic features with all the others, features that do not do justice to climate change, either as an issue that looms large in the future lives of all undergraduates or as a subject that can demonstrate the power of sociological ideas. Let's quickly review the main trends I found in today's most popular Introductory textbooks:

- The environment
  - Is always toward the back of the book
  - Does not get its own chapter but is combined with other topics
  - Is located at the end of that chapter
  - Is short
- Climate change
  - Gets too little coverage
  - Acknowledged to be real
  - Said to be serious
    - Maybe even catastrophic
    - But that message is undercut in several ways
  - Causes of climate change
    - Geophysical causes are summarized reasonably well
    - Sociological causes are not
  - Impacts of climate change
    - Geophysical impacts are summarized reasonably well
    - Some of the major sociological impacts are listed
    - Some of the most dire potential impacts are not
  - Responses to the threat
    - The typical text falls far short of a reasonable full discussion
  - Newer editions show little change or improvement over earlier editions

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<sup>1</sup> This work is part of a joint project with Professor John Liu, Occidental College. Professor Liu identified and acquire copies of the books analyzed. I did the content analysis and authored this paper. A longer, joined authored paper is currently under review.