

How environment and climate change are covered in recent Social Problems textbooks

Andrew Szasz
University of California, Santa Cruz

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Short of downloading many Social Problems syllabi from the internet, one way to get a sense of how these courses are taught is to do a content analysis of recent editions of popular textbooks.

This is an imperfect indicator, to be sure. One cannot know, from this, what fraction of all Social Problems courses are taught out of a textbook, following its content, during the semester, roughly to same sequence one finds in the book's chapters vs. what fraction of such courses the instructor creates their own unique syllabus.

With that caveat in mind, though, here is what a content analysis of recent Social Problems textbooks tell us about how such courses are – probably – taught:

The textbooks (see list, below, # 1 through 19b) are typically laid out as a laundry list of societal “problems” that the discipline of Sociology is said to care about. One “problem” per chapter; most often around 15 to 17 chapters, about one per week for a semester's worth of weeks.

Let's look at one example, Leon-Guerrero, 2019 (# 11):

- Chapter 1 Sociology and the Study of Social Problems
- Chapter 2 Social Class
- Chapter 3 Race and Ethnicity
- Chapter 4 Gender
- Chapter 5 Sexual Orientation
- Chapter 6 Age and Aging
- Chapter 7 Families
- Chapter 8 Education
- Chapter 9 Work and the Economy
- Chapter 10 Health and Medicine
- Chapter 11 The Media
- Chapter 12 Alcohol and Drug Abuse
- Chapter 13 Crime and Criminal Justice
- Chapter 14 Urbanization and Population Growth
- Chapter 15 The Environment
- Chapter 16 War and Terrorism
- Chapter 17 Social Problems and Social Action

Or consider another, Treviño, 2015 (# 19a):

- Chapter 1 Sociology and Social Problems
- Chapter 2 Poverty and Class Inequality
- Chapter 3 Race and Ethnicity

Chapter 4 Gender
 Chapter 5 Sexuality
 Chapter 6 Aging
 Chapter 7 Education
 Chapter 8 Media
 Chapter 9 Family
 Chapter 10 Work and the Economy
 Chapter 11 Crime
 Chapter 12 Alcohol and Other Drugs
 Chapter 13 Health
 Chapter 14 The Environment
 Chapter 15 Science and Technology
 Chapter 16 War and Terrorism
 Chapter 17 Urbanization

And, finally, a third, Macionis, 2015 (# 12):

Chapter 1 Sociology: Studying Social Problems
 Chapter 2 Poverty and Wealth
 Chapter 3 Racial and Ethnic Inequality
 Chapter 4 Gender Inequality
 Chapter 5 Aging and Inequality
 Chapter 6 Crime, Violence, and Criminal Justice
 Chapter 7 Sexuality
 Chapter 8 Alcohol and Other Drugs
 Chapter 9 Physical and Mental Health
 Chapter 10 Economy and Politics
 Chapter 11 Work and the Workplace
 Chapter 12 Family Life
 Chapter 13 Education
 Chapter 14 Urban Life
 Chapter 15 Population and Global Inequality
 Chapter 16 Technology and the Environment
 Chapter 17 War and Terrorism

Of the 21 textbooks whose chapters I have looked at:

- 17 are remarkably similar, with practically identical lists of problems, the environment chapter near the end;
- 2 differ slightly, in that the chapter on environment is located earlier (# 1 and 5);
- 2 are significantly different (# 3 and 17).

What can we say, with some confidence, based on this survey of textbooks?

There is a high degree of similarity or uniformity among these textbooks, although it is hard to know if that reflects a true consensus within the discipline or merely risk aversion on the part of textbook publishers. Probably some of both.

There is a certain “flatness” in the presentation of social problems. Something like a smorgasbord spread or a salad bar, conveying to students, “Here they all are. You can choose which to care about most, or some, or hardly at all; it’s up to you to say.”

Well, that’s not quite right. Order matters. As anyone who has taught college courses knows, commitment and attention flag as the semester reaches its final week(s). Everyone, student and instructor, is exhausted. It matters, then, that a discussion of “environment” as a social problem arrives, almost always, at the end of the textbook, most often in the next to last chapter. That does convey (whether the author intends this or not) that the environment is less important than other problems.

The “Environment” chapter

Taking a closer look at the “Environment” chapters in the three textbooks cited above (Leon-Guerrero, # 11; Macionis, # 12; Treviño, # 19a):

A smorgasbord approach, again: the chapters each offer a list of specific environmental problems. Some problems appear in all the books: air quality, water quality, wastes (solid, hazardous), climate change. Some are mentioned only in one of the books: deforestation, radiation, loss of biodiversity, acid rain, natural disasters. There is no prioritization; the presentations have a sort of “flatness,” laundry lists of issues of concern, each described, in no special order, in a few paragraphs or pages, accurately, yes, but not in any great depth.

The chapters all discuss how several different Sociological approaches would analyze, explain or make sense of environmental problems.

- Leon-Guerrero discusses functionalist, conflict, feminist and interactionist approaches;
- Macionis structural/functionalist and conflict approaches;
- Bell and Legun (environmental sociologists who authored the chapter for Treviño’s textbook) functionalism, conflict theory, symbolic interactionism, then add a couple of more specific theoretical approaches, “risk society” and “ecological dialogue.”

All three books also cover the variety of political responses to environmental problems:

- Leon-Guerrero: land conservation and wilderness protection, federal responses, campaigns by environmental NGOs, activism and social movements;
- Macionis divides responses along political lines, conservative vs liberal vs radical/left approaches.
- Bell and Legun focus on social change/activism.

Climate change

Finally, a closer look at how climate change is discussed in the environment chapters of the three textbooks.

Leon-Guerrero: Climate change is first in her list of environmental problems and the issue gets 1 and ½ pages of text. Discussed: CO₂ and greenhouse gases; impacts on crop yields and on water supplies; the climate justice issue – that poorer people will experience greater impacts. More than half the text is devoted to the vacillation of US climate policy over time, from Bush to Obama to Trump. So the text nicely balances causes, impacts and responses, albeit (as is typical) thinly and late in the book.

Bell and Legun (in Treviño): Two pages, roughly half graphics and half text. Describes increase in temperature and physical impacts such as rising sea levels and reduced snowpack. Greater impacts on poorer nations; refugees. The text is strangely *neutral* in tone and draws to an end without a real conclusion.

Of the three, Macionis has the most powerful discussion. True that the student doesn't get to Environment until the 16th of 17 Chapters, and true that climate gets less than one page of actual text. But the whole chapter starts with a full page graphic of the growth of concentration of CO₂ in the Earth's atmosphere. Much of that one page is devoted to the basic physics of climate change, to extreme weather, to the social impacts of adverse impacts on the food supply. The text affirms the scientific consensus and it does not shy away from climate change's most dire potential consequences: Rising concentrations of CO₂ have "pushed the planet to a dangerous point where the future of our species is threatened." (p. 477) ... But if that's true, if climate change threatens to trigger an existential crisis for humanity, why wait to the end of the book, the end of the semester?

My Conclusions

It has been 43 years since Catton and Dunlap first published their critique of Sociology's "anthropocentrism" ("Environmental Sociology: A New Paradigm," *The American Sociologist*, 13(1):41-49, 1978). That anthropocentrism is still the organizing principle of contemporary Social Problems textbooks and, if that is a good indicator, of Social Problems courses in the U.S. The problem of the environment *is* discussed, and that discussion is given about as many pages as other social problems, but that chapter's placement toward the end of the textbooks can't help but be "read" by students as a statement of relative importance (even if the real causes is, probably, that both authors and publishers are just following a safe, and safely profitable, consensus).

The great ship of textbook publishing changes directions *very* slowly. If colleagues who teach Social Problem wish to foreground the teaching of climate change in their courses, they won't find much help in textbooks, now or in the near future. This teaching tool, [A Climate Change Module for Social Problems Classes](#), offers an immediate – and easy – way to do it.

Social Problems textbooks examined

- 1 Atkinson, Maxine P., Korgen, Kathleen O. and Mary N. Trautner, eds., Social Problems: Sociology in Action, 1st Edition, Sage, 2020.
- 2 Barkan, Steven E., Social Problems: Continuity and Change, Version 2.0, FlatWorld, 2020.
- 3 Best, Joel, Social Problems, Second Edition, W.W. Norton & Co., 2013.
- 4 Crone, James A., How Can We Solve Our Social Problems?, 3rd Edition, Sage, 2015.
- 5 Eitzen, D. Stanley, Maxine Baca Zinn and Kelly Eitzen Smith, Social Problems, 14th Edition, Pearson, 2018.
- 6 Heiner, Robert, Social Problems: An Introduction to Critical Constructionism, 5th Edition, Oxford University Press, 2015.
- 7 Henslin, James M., Social Problems: A Down to Earth Approach, 13th Edition, Pearson, 2019.
- 8 Kendall, Diana, Social Problems in a Diverse Society, 7th Edition, Pearson, 2019.
- 9 Kornblum, William, Karen T. Seccombe and Joseph Julian, Social Problems, 15th Edition, Pearson, 2016.
- 10 Lauer, Robert H. and Jeanette C. Lauer, Social Problems and the Quality of Life, 14th Edition, McGraw-Hill Education, 2018.
- 11 Leon-Guerrero, Anna, Social Problems: Community, Policy, and Social Action, Sixth Edition, Sage, 2019.
- 12 Macionis, John J., Social Problems, Sixth Edition, Pearson, 2015.
- 13 Manza, Jeff, Patrick Sharkey & the NYU Sociology Department, Social Problems: The Sociology Project, 1st Edition, Pearson, 2019.
- 14 McNamara, Robert, Social Problems: Finding Solutions, Taking Action, Oxford University Press, 2021.
- 15a Mooney, Linda A., David Knox and Caroline Schacht, Understanding Social Problems, 10th Edition, Cengage Learning, 2016.
- 15b Mooney, Linda A., Molly Clever and Marieke Van Willigen, Understanding Social Problems 11th Edition , Cengage Learning, 2021.
- 16 Saylor Foundation, Social Problems – Continuity and Change, Saylor Foundation, 2016.

17 Silver, Ira D., Seeing Social Problems: The Hidden Stories Behind Contemporary Issues, 1st Edition, Sage, 2020.

18 Stompler, Mindy and Amanda M. Jungels, eds., Focus on Social Problems, 2nd Edition, Oxford University Press, 2020.

19a Treviño, A. Javier, ed., Investigating Social Problems, 2nd Edition, Sage, 2015.

19b Treviño, A. Javier, ed., Investigating Social Problems, 3rd Edition, Sage, 2021.