A Theme of Sustainability in Sociology
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What is Sustainability?

Sustainability is achieved when all people on Earth can live well without compromising the quality of life for future generations.


The interdependencies of the economic, environmental, and social justice elements of our world require new ways of thinking about things and taking action that will truly create a future where human society and nature coexist with mutual benefit, and where the suffering caused by poverty and natural resource abuse is eliminated.

Sustainable development calls for improving the quality of life for all of the world’s people without increasing the use of our natural resources beyond the earth’s carrying capacity. While sustainable development may require different actions in every region of the world, the efforts to build a truly sustainable way of life require the integration of action in three key areas:

Economic Growth and Equity – Today’s interlinked, global economic systems demand an integrated approach in order to foster responsible long-term growth while ensuring that no nation or community is left behind.

Conserving Natural Resources and the Environment – To conserve our environmental heritage and natural resources for future generations, economically viable solutions must be developed to
reduce resource consumption, stop pollution and conserve natural habitats.

Social Development – Throughout the world, people require jobs, food, education, energy, health care, water and sanitation. While addressing these needs, the world community must also ensure that the rich fabric of cultural and social diversity, and the rights of workers, are respected, and that all members of society are empowered to play a role in determining their futures.

From: World Summit on Sustainable Development brochure, 2002

Why should you be interested in including a theme of sustainability in its textbooks?

All college courses have an opportunity and a role to play in integrating related sustainability concepts and examples into their courses. Most introductory textbooks are basically the same with little product differentiation. Weaving a theme of sustainable development throughout your textbooks would:

- positively differentiate your products from your competitors,
- provide added value for your customers,
- appeal to a growing target market,
- produce free marketing/publicity as part of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Developmenti.

All of the above would increase the sales of your textbooks.

Recent research supports that weaving sustainability education throughout the curriculum engages students more and improves test performance (see http://www.seer.org/).

Including a theme of sustainability in an Introduction to Sociology textbook

Overview
Sociology has a unique role in the social sciences in its emphasis on social behavior and human groups. In a student’s K – 12 and higher education experiences, only sociology courses provide the knowledge in the following essential components of sustainability:

- social inequality
- social institutions
- population and the environment
- societal change

An understanding of these topics is essential to motivate behavior changes to protect the environment and create healthier, more sustainable communities with reduced human suffering. For sustainable development to occur, students need to understand the positive possibilities for the future of our society and develop both the commitment and the skills to build a more positive and sustainable future.

The societal necessity of a paradigm shift from “Man conquers nature” to “Humans learn to live interdependently with nature” requires that the separate sections of the book are interwoven by a theme and integrated vision of sustainable development. The material needs to be woven throughout the textbook so students can learn to apply all the chapter topics to sustainable development. The expansion from separate sections on environmental protection, social inequality and social change to sustainable development and the weaving of sustainability throughout the textbook could be easily accomplished. Sustainability material could be included in the examples used within the chapters as well as in the text boxes.

Most of the topics involved with sustainable development are already covered in an Introduction to Sociology textbook. What is missing is the holistic description of the conceptual paradigm of sustainability (the triple bottom line) and the discussion relating each of the sections in the textbook to an interconnected vision of the possibilities for a sustainable future.

A Few of the Many Possible Examples
(These examples are based on Schaeffer’s book but are applicable to all of the Intro to Sociology textbooks.)
1. It is interesting to note, that at least according to the index, there is no mention of sustainable development in the Schaeffer textbook. The United Nations is mentioned multiple times and the book could easily include information on the United Nations’ upcoming Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. An update on the U.S. involvement in UNESCO would also be valuable.

2. When discussing social institutions, it would be easy to include information on non-governmental organizations working on sustainable development around the world.

3. The section on the environment could easily describe environmental issues as they relate to the context of sustainable development.

4. The special section on unions could focus a bit on international efforts to provide a livable wage and workplace safety to workers and the ongoing conflict over the new international fair trade laws as many corporations have moved from one country to another in search of the lowest wage and the least restrictions on workplace safety and environmental impact. There is a good section on this in the worldwide inequity portion of the book, but it is not tied to the paradigm of sustainable development.

5. In the section on collective behavior and social movements, examples of groups of people working to address these issues, such as the international Natural Step initiative, Businesses for Social Responsibility and the Union of Concerned Scientists could be highlighted. The box on Students Against Sweatshops could be also be placed in the sustainable development context.

6. The textbox in Schaeffer’s book on the New Rural Movement in India about the poor might be replaced with the international movement started in India to prevent the copyrighting of native seed strains with a quick reference to how this is an issue within sustainable development.

7. Many of the social policy sections and examples within the text are already part of the sustainable development paradigm and could be described accordingly.

8. The textbook could include examples of cultural norms that could be changed to create healthier communities, such as
energy conservation that reduces our dependence on foreign oil, reduces pollution and respiratory disease and creates healthier local economies. Explaining research on how to change the behavior of groups and communities regarding energy conservation could be appropriate for the material on behavior change, socialization, social control and obedience theories.

9. The section on social change could also include a mention of social capital as a concept intrinsic to the sustainability perspective (from Putnam, Harvard professor of sociology).

The Disciplinary Associations Network for Sustainability (DANS) is interested in publishers working to pursue this concept for textbooks in all disciplines. DANS and the U.S. Partnership for Education for Sustainable Development can help identify the reviewers.

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\textit{\textbf{I THE UNITED NATIONS RESOLUTION ON THE DECADE OF EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT 2005-2014}}

The United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the ten-year period from 2005 to 2014 as the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. Governments around the world are invited to use the Decade to integrate education for sustainable development into their national educational strategies and action plans at all appropriate levels.