



---

Throwing the Sociological Imagination into the Garbage: Using Students' Waste Disposal Habits to Illustrate C. Wright Mills's Concept

Author(s): William Dowell

Source: *Teaching Sociology*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Apr., 2006), pp. 150-155

Published by: [American Sociological Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20058470>

Accessed: 24/11/2010 09:16

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=asa>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



*American Sociological Association* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Teaching Sociology*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

# THROWING THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION INTO THE GARBAGE: USING STUDENTS' WASTE DISPOSAL HABITS TO ILLUSTRATE C. WRIGHT MILLS'S CONCEPT\*

WILLIAM DOWELL  
*Heartland Community College*

SOCIOLOGISTS AGREE THAT the sociological imagination fosters students' critical thinking skills (Eckstein, Schoenike, and Delaney 1995; Haddad and Lieberman 2002; Logan 1976; Mayer 1986; Misra 2000). The challenge lies in motivating students to develop their sociological imaginations. Convincing them of its importance and practical value takes creativity beyond requiring readings, class discussions, and papers describing its theoretical importance. Students need to see the relevancy of C. Wright Mills's (1959) work applied to everyday living. McKinney, Saxe, and Cobb (1998) note that as educators we are ethically bound to develop active, responsible learners. In this paper I outline an interactive technique using garbage to teach the relevancy of Mills's sociological imagination.

Through sociology courses, students are introduced to global diversity and should begin to recognize that culture shapes their awareness of the real world. Textbooks and lecture may highlight the inequities in social structure and global environments but they do not allow students to experience such issues and fully develop a sense of understanding. Students need to gain a realistic context of social issues locally, nationally and/or globally. Creating assignments that make students critically evaluate their own local world and the local world of others is essential, especially in an age when global-

ization is becoming the norm (Renzulli 2000).

In what Hardin (1968) termed the "tragedy of the commons," human beings exhibit a strong propensity to overuse natural resources by pursuing their own individual or group short-term self interest rather than acting in the long-term common interest of the world. Because these excesses are all caused by human behavior, they can all be reversed by changes in human behavior (Oskamp 2000). We need to consider how they may be imbedded in feelings, norms, attitudes, and values and/or institutionalized within cultural systems and social institutions. Analyzing the current environmental issues in our world allows students to see the societal patterns that influence individuals and groups of individuals, reveals how the context of society shapes our lives, highlights the importance of social and historical awareness, and can illustrate the importance of the sociological imagination.

[The sociological imagination] is a quality of mind that seems most dramatically to promise an understanding of the intimate realities of ourselves in connection with larger social realities. It is not merely one quality of mind among the contemporary range of cultural sensibilities—it is *the* quality whose wider and more adroit use offers the promise that all such sensibilities—and in fact human reason itself—will come to play a greater role in human affairs. (Mills 1959:15)

---

\*Please address all correspondence to the author at Heartland Community College, 1500 West Raab Road, Normal, IL 61761; e-mail: dougd@hcc.cc.il.us.

Editor's note: The reviewers were, in alphabetical order, Howard E. Aldrich and Linda Renzulli.

In our everyday lives we contribute to the shaping of society, and through its ebbs and flows society in return shapes us. Showing students this reciprocal procedure is a daily challenge. How can social issues and personal troubles develop our understanding? I

argue that experiential assignments like the collection and monitoring of garbage can assist in our explanation of, and the students' learning of, the sociological imagination.

### EXERCISE

In the spring of 2000, I introduced an assignment that allowed Introduction to Sociology students to analyze their own and their classmates' waste disposal habits. This assignment was inspired by Rathje and Murphy's (1992) book *Rubbish!*, which outlines Rathje's "Garbage Project." According to Rathje and Murphy, the Garbage Project was designed to teach principles of archaeological methodology. I decided to revise Rathje's Garbage Project in connection with the students' textbook and turn it into a sociological investigation. The assignment I created is composed of three basic components: (1) the collection of garbage, (2) classroom analysis of the garbage, and (3) written responses outlining students' implementation of their sociological imagination and the implications of garbage from a local, national, and global perspective.

I most recently introduced this assignment to three sections of Introduction to Sociology at a public community college. The assignment took place in the last quarter of the semester and lasted one full week. The three class sections each enrolled 30 to 35 students—two met three times a week for 50 minutes each and one section met twice a week for 75 minutes each.

#### *Collecting Garbage*

During the class period prior to covering the material on the environment, I provide students with a plastic bag (or two) and instruct them to collect their garbage over a twenty-four hour period and bring it to the next class session. I allow them to discard waste that may pose a health concern, but I require them to document the material. I do not tell students why they are collecting their garbage, just that it is necessary in order to complete the next assignment.

#### *Analyzing the Garbage*

The next class period begins by weighing each person's garbage and, with the help of a volunteer, recording the weight on the board. We tally everyone's garbage and calculate a total of the garbage produced. Actually seeing the garbage and the collective weight provides students with a sense of the "scope" or "size" of the issue. Because of the student diversity at a community college, we get a wide range in the amount of garbage produced. While younger students typically carry in one small plastic bag it is not uncommon for older married students with children to carry in two and even three garbage bags full.

The remainder of the class period is a debriefing exercise focusing on their experiences starting with the question: What is your reaction to the material you collected? This open-ended question allows students to address any component of the exercise they like and leads to the follow-up questions: What is your garbage? When do you produce garbage? Where do you produce your garbage? And why do you produce garbage? This debriefing offers the opportunity to value the students' participation and compare student behavior.

One goal of the debriefing is to give students a clearer picture of their accomplishment and to help them see the purpose of the exercise and tie it to the broader goals of the class (Billson 1986; Millis 1997; Woodberry and Aldrich 2000). Through class discussion students begin to acknowledge how time, place, status, and social influence and economy create waste material. As the class period comes to an end, I ask students to record all the items in their bag(s) and then sort the waste into recyclables and garbage and place everything in the appropriate containers that I ask our physical plant staff to place in the room prior to class.

While students are presenting their opinions and reactions to the exercise, I use their comments to generate the class notes for the day. The notes help fuel discussion

but also help students better understand their relationship with society. A major goal with the class notes is to show students the current ecological conditions and to help them understand both their relationship to current trends and the historical process that led to the situation today.

For example, after weighing the garbage I point out that the average American discards four and a half pounds of waste each day (Environmental Protection Agency [EPA] 2002). In the make-up of their garbage, paper use is one item students tend to have in common in this exercise. I inform them that although it is the most recycled item, paper is also the number one contributor to landfills (EPA 2002).

During the discussion we also note the uses of paper, recycling rates of other products like glass, metal and plastic, landfill usage, and international consumption rates of various products including commercial energy and future energy needs. I also take care to show the students that measures can be and have been taken to remedy problems in these areas. According to the EPA (2002) the United States recycled 30 percent of its 232 million tons of municipal solid waste in 2000, which is significantly higher than the 16 percent rate of 1990 and even the 28 percent recycling rate of 1999.

I also point out that the problem of garbage has not always been an issue but has been added to the public agenda fairly recently. Shortages during World War II led to our first significant efforts to recycle, and beginning in the late 1960s preservationist concerns blossomed into a movement of political protest demanding action by federal government (Naar 1990). During the 1970s, grass-roots activism produced landmark environmental protection legislation including the first Earth Day (1970), the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency (1970), the enactment of the Clean Air Act (1972), and the Safe Drinking Water Act (1974). Prior to these legislative movements, environmental protection was left to the market economy and a few scattered municipal ordinances. Factors in our society

encouraged and enhanced collective action which led to the construction of a new social issue—the environment.

### *Written Requirements*

The third aspect of the project is the students' written responses to the following questions: 1) What is your initial reaction to the material you collected in the past 24 hours? 2) How would you relate your garbage collecting experience to Mills's discussion of the sociological imagination? 3) What are the future concerns for the United States in regards to garbage production? Think of such questions as: How does one produce waste? What type of material is produced? Why do we produce the type of waste material we do? Where is the material going? These questions are structured so that students must apply specific sociological concepts and terms, but are also open ended so that students can express their interpretations of the sociological imagination and their experience.

The first question allows students to internalize the class session and analyze the exercise again. It permits the less vocal students the opportunity to share their insights. The second question asks students to illustrate the importance and significance of their sociological imaginations. Each semester many students relate their experience to Mills's (1959) discussion of troubles and issues, noting the difference between private matters and public issues.

Finally I ask students to analyze this exercise from a national perspective. I am often impressed with comments on the importance of monetary power, military dominance, or educational abilities. Many students write about important environmental concepts like thermal pollution, ecological footprint, and environmental classism.

## STUDENT COMMENTS

### *Verbal Responses*

The most common initial response from students is: "I thought I would have more garbage than this." The frequent comment

“You can tell I don’t recycle” is often met with laughter and concurrence.

While some marvel at the amount of garbage that some people collect others are quick to identify various issues surrounding their consumption. The following comments from the spring of 2002 highlight initial student reactions. “I, probably like everyone else in here, never really gave much thought to how much stuff I throw away or where it went once it left my house.” One student noted, “This experience brought me to the understanding that I as a consumer have bought into the quick fixes for meals and all the time saving packaged goods that these multi-million dollar companies are providing to accommodate busy lifestyles.” Another student also acknowledged new insight into dietary habits: “I’m amazed at how much junk food I eat. But now that I think about it, I’m always on the go and the only food available, or at least convenient, is junk food.”

As the debriefing proceeds, students begin to discuss variables—such as race, age, marital status, sex, parental status, employment, and location—that affect consumption and waste production. As an older student noted, “My status as a wife and as a mother of three pre-teen girls has me responsible for more than the average college student. This little exercise showed me just how much garbage passes by me before it makes it to the waste basket and unfortunately how little we actually recycle.”

### *Written Responses*

The following comments are from students’ papers. “My initial reaction is that my family and I waste a lot of food and I estimate that approximately 75% of my garbage could be recycled, but for some reason we don’t do it.” A quiet student noted her apprehension about participating in class discussion: “I did limit my garbage because I did not want the class to realize my personal habits, such as purchasing three cups of coffee each day.” Another student wrote:

As I looked at the garbage, I thought that gar-

bage really is not a problem or a trouble for me or my family, it really doesn’t affect us. But at the same time millions of people, including big companies are generating vast amounts of waste and that is an issue. This issue then becomes a personal trouble because it affects my life. It will all be dumped in the landfill five miles from my house.

Another insightful student displayed our society’s penchant for waste production by showing the relationship between fitting into corporate America, maintaining the traditional family, living a healthy lifestyle, and adhering to President Bush’s push for consumerism after the September 11 tragedy. This student realized that individual goals are constructed and directed by larger social forces and issues, a key point in Mills’s (1959) work:

Why can’t I wear a shirt with a slightly frayed collar to work? Why can’t I ask Dell to ship my computer without Styrofoam protection and tell them, just be careful? And, why do I use disposable diapers, and what do I do with them after they are used? The answer: I conform to the expectations of society and allow my life to be heavily influenced by various institutions and social mores.

Each semester several students outline the connection between social expectations and perceived personal freedom.

### EVALUATION OF THE EXERCISE

After I initially implemented the garbage exercise in 2000 I sought voluntary feedback from students using three open-ended questions. Although I did not pressure students to reply, 87 of the 95 enrolled students responded. Eighty-one of the respondents provided highly favorable comments, while six respondents rated the exercise unfavorably. Among the six unfavorable comments were four that cited the “hassle” or “nuisance” of keeping track of garbage all day.

I used the garbage exercise again in the same manner with the same courses in the fall of 2003 and I devised a more formal

evaluation to better gauge students' perceptions of the value of the exercise. This evaluation instrument relied on Angelo and Cross's (1993: 330) technique for teacher-designed feedback forms and the results confirmed the qualitative feedback gathered the previous semesters.

I asked students to complete the survey on the final day of the garbage exercise in order to assess their perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the exercise as an approach to understanding environmental concerns, their application of the sociological imagination, and their general receptivity to the exercise. Students responded to a series of statements relating to the previous themes on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The final question on the survey asked students to rate the overall effectiveness of the garbage exercise. Out of 94 students present in three sections on the final day of the exercise, I received 93 completed responses.

I was pleased to find that 95.7 percent of the respondents either "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that, "The garbage exercise raised my awareness of environmental issues and concerns". More importantly, 89.2 percent of the students agreed with the statement: "The garbage exercise enhanced my understanding and implementation of the Sociological Imagination". When students rated the overall effectiveness of the exercise, 93.5 percent rated it satisfactory or better, with 15.1 percent rating it outstanding. Nearly 80 percent of the students indicated they retained more information from the exercise than they usually do at the conclusion of a chapter. Finally, 96.8 percent of the students agreed that the material covered was relevant to their personal life.

Students' open-ended comments at the end of the survey support the responses to the closed-ended questions. One student commented: "The relaxed atmosphere and personal interaction made the topic more appealing and was a nice break from notes and lecture." Another student was impressed by an important fact: "I'll never forget the average American throws away

4.5 pounds of garbage." Many students reported that the garbage exercise helped them use sociological approaches to understand the environment. One noted the importance of seeing the garbage first-hand: "Seeing all the garbage in the class made something click for me. Being able to 'touch' the issue helped clear up Mills's sociological imagination." Another student commented:

Before I had understood troubles and issues well enough to answer questions on the exam, the same with the connection between society and the individual. But what this assignment allowed me to do was experience the sociological imagination first hand. I actually see how society encourages garbage and we in turn create more.

The negatives of the exercise were also reinforced as several students indicated their displeasure at having to carry their garbage over a 24-hour period.

A potential difficulty with this exercise is that some students bring in only part of their garbage in an attempt to conceal what they consider their bad habits or embarrassing material. To combat this I require students to address their initial reaction to the experience in their papers as well as in the classroom. While I cannot know how many actually limit their garbage, I do know that several mention doing so in their written responses. Their response to the second chance to describe their personal garbage shows that students are analyzing their own behavior privately.

## CONCLUSIONS

By engaging in collection, analysis, reflection, and reporting, students are practicing sociology rather than just reading about it in a text. The assignment tends to eliminate the abstraction of the material and provides a more tangible product that allows students a greater sense of direct connection to the issue under discussion. Being involved provides hands-on experience with the sociological enterprise.

The garbage exercise is a useful tool to help students apply their newly acquired sociological knowledge and critically evaluate their personal behavior and the behavior of their community. Although initially reluctant, students appear to enjoy the physical aspect of the exercise and take an active role in understanding the discipline. Students begin to see why sociologists are so interested in such topics and more importantly how the profession approaches and applies sociological concepts.

These interactive, hands-on assignments illustrate how sociology works and further enhance conceptual understanding. Student responses show that the garbage exercise leaves a lasting impression and may pique interest in viewing the world through a sociological lens.

#### REFERENCES

- Angelo, Thomas A. and Patricia Cross. 1993. *Classroom Assessment Techniques*. 2d ed. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Billson, Janet Mancini. 1986. "The College Classroom as a Small Group: Some Implications for Teaching and Learning." *Teaching Sociology* 14:143-51.
- Eckstein, Rick, Rebecca Schoenike, and Kevin Delaney. 1995. "The Voice of Sociology: Obstacles to Teaching and Learning Sociological Imagination." *Teaching Sociology* 23:353-63.
- Environmental Protection Agency. 2002. "Municipal Solid Waste in the United States: 2000 Facts and Figures." *U.S. Environmental Protection Agency*. Retrieved April 17, 2002 (<http://www.epa.gov/epaoswer/non-hw/muncpl/report-00/report-00.pdf>).
- Haddad, T. Angela and Leonard Lieberman. 2002. "From Student Resistance to Embracing the Sociological Imagination: Unmasking Privilege, Social Conventions, and Racism." *Teaching Sociology* 30:328-41.
- Hardin, Garrett. 1968. "The Tragedy of Commons." *Science* 162:1243-8.
- Logan, Charles H. 1976. "Do Sociologists Teach Students to Think More Critically?" *Teaching Sociology* 4:29-48.
- Mayer, Jan. 1986. "Teaching Critical Awareness in an Introductory Course." *Teaching Sociology* 14:249-56.
- McKinney, Kathleen, David Saxe, and Laura Cobb. 1998. "Are We Really Doing All We Can for Our Undergraduates: Professionalization Via Out-Of-Class Experiences." *Teaching Sociology* 26:1-13.
- Millis, Barbara. 1997. "Bringing Closure: Some Rapid Report-Out Methods." *Cooperative Learning and College Teaching* 7:2-4.
- Mills, C. Wright. 1959. *The Sociological Imagination*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Misra, Joya. 2000. "Integrating 'The Real World' into Introduction to Sociology: Making Sociological Concepts Real." *Teaching Sociology* 28:346-63.
- Naar, Jon. 1990. *Design For a Livable Planet*. New York: Harper and Row Publishers Inc.
- Oskamp, Stuart. 2000. "A Sustainable Future for Humanity." *American Psychologist* 55:496-508.
- Rathje, William and Cullen Murphy. 1992. *Rubbish!: The Archeology of Garbage*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Renzulli, Linda. 2000. "Connecting the Classroom to County Characteristics." *Teaching Sociology* 28:249-60.
- Woodberry, Robert D. and Howard E. Aldrich. 2000. "Planning and Running Effective Classroom-Based Exercises." *Teaching Sociology* 28:241-8.

**William Dowell** is an assistant professor of sociology at Heartland Community College in Normal, Illinois. His research and teaching areas include introductory sociology, marriages and families, and deviant behavior.