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Looking at information with the sociological eye

Introducing the sociology companion document

In January 2022, the ACRL Board of Directors approved the Companion Document to the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education: Sociology.[1] A product of the ACRL Anthropology and Sociology Section's Instruction and Information Literacy Committee, this document employs the *sociological eye* to frame knowledge production and use. In doing so, the Companion Document to the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education: Sociology—which, moving forward, will be referred to as the companion document—invites us to explore how inequities are reproduced (and challenged) through information processes often cast as neutral. The companion document therefore provides tools for educators to incorporate diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) and social justice into their information literacy pedagogy.

This article will introduce the companion document to the higher education information literacy community and share initial ideas for how it might be used in the classroom. It should be noted that while the companion document is disciplinary in nature, its content is relevant to anyone wishing to incorporate an exploration of the social structures that influence the production, dissemination, and use of information into their instruction, regardless of content area.

Sociological information literacy

In thinking through how to best develop a companion document for sociology, the committee looked to the Sociological Literacy Framework,[2] which points to five essential concepts for sociology for undergraduate students:

- sociological eye
- social structure
- socialization
- stratification
- social reproduction

In exploring the ways in which these concepts speak to the ACRL Framework, the committee found it useful to craft a definition that captures these connections, which it calls *sociological information literacy*:

Sociological Information Literacy is an understanding of how information and scholarship are created, published, disseminated, and used by individuals and organizations. It is

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informed by sociological thinking and scholarship, though SIL is not limited to sociological knowledge itself. Instead, it is an application of what Ferguson and Carbonaro (2016) call "sociological eye," a distinctive disciplinary perspective that—like the "sociological imagination" or "sociological perspective"—encourages students "to see sociology in everyday life" (p. 143) with a wide variety of information.[3]

With this definition in mind, the committee then generated a visual conceptual crosswalk that allowed us to illustrate the relationships between the five concepts and the ACRL Framework. The crosswalk consists of tables organized by frame that are accompanied by abbreviated definitions for each sociological concept. Each table contains themes or examples illustrative of these connections.

The sample tables presented below are pulled from the companion document to provide readers a better understanding of what they will find in the disciplinary framework. While these tables are presented in isolation, readers are encouraged to consider the companion document as a whole, as there are themes throughout that speak to and complement one another and could be productively used in tandem. It is also important to note that the ideas presented in the tables are not an all-encompassing or exhaustive representation of how the ACRL Framework or sociological literacy concepts overlap, or of sociological information literacy more broadly. The content contained within the companion document is not meant to be prescriptive and does not necessarily translate into learning objectives (for educators or students). Rather, the companion document is meant to generate further ideas for how to engage the sociological eye when we talk about information with students and to encourage students to think critically about knowledge.

The sociology companion document

Sociological information literacy challenges students to deconstruct processes that often seem natural or apolitical, such as search and search algorithms, peer review and citational practices, architectures of information access, and even disciplinary epistemic norms.

For example, the Socialization column (figure 1, 4c) in the Research as Inquiry table points to how learned research processes are often bounded, marking certain forms of inquiry as irrelevant or unacceptable to a discipline. The Stratification column (figure 1, 4d) further reminds us that certain questions or ways of knowing are often discounted until, perhaps, they are deemed "publishable" or "trendy" to the power players who dictate the boundaries of a discipline (from individuals and professional societies to publishers and funders). We have seen this play out time and time again regarding the knowledge and work of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) scholars, whose research is often exploited yet undercited after white scholars "discover" the problems their BIPOC counterparts have been writing about for years. A classic example from the field: in 1935 W. E. B. Du Bois, a Black sociologist, theorized about what is often today referred to as white privilege, yet this concept is often attributed to Peggy McIntosh, a white scholar whose work was published more than fifty years later.[4]

These themes can be incorporated into information literacy instruction in many ways. For example, in a recent research institute for graduate students, I incorporated a text critiquing what are described as "health equity tourists," or typically white medical researchers who are increasingly receiving funding and publishing in the field without the proper training or background, often at the expense of scholars and communities of color.[5] Elle Lett, a

4. Research as Inquiry

Research is iterative and depends upon asking increasingly complex or new questions whose answers in turn develop additional questions or lines of inquiry in any field.

Sociological Eye (4a) Sociology as a distinctive discipline that investigates the social roots of everyday life, including micro and macro phenomena	**Social Structure (4b)** The impact of social structures on human action	**Socialization (4c)** The relationship between the self and society	**Stratification (4d)** The patterns and effects of social inequality	**Social Change and Social Reproduction (4e)** How social phenomena replicate and change
Sociologists examine the world and ask questions specifically about the nature of social structures' and practices' (e.g. institutions, social groups and interactions, ideologies, social categories) influence on human life experience. Their intellectual inquiries presuppose that social life and social realities matter to understanding and explaining the human experience and why individuals and societies behave in particular ways.	Expert knowledge is shaped by institutional systems such as peer review and established research methodologies and practices are subject to oversight by Institutional Review Boards.	The standard practices of research in a given field are learned from disciplinary authorities, where certain kinds of inquiry are prioritized or bracketed as irrelevant to a given discipline. Scholarly inquiry is a social process, undertaken in interaction with other scholars' ideas (see: Scholarship as Conversation) and/or in interaction with other people (e.g., lab science, interview studies, journal reviewers and editors, etc.).	Patterns and effects of social inequalities determine if certain lines of inquiry are even regarded as valid scholarly pursuits. The opportunity of individuals to pursue academic research is itself influenced by these patterns of social inequality. Paradigms like Collins's "matrix of domination" (1991) and Crenshaw's "intersectionality" (1991) give us analytical tools that address the intersecting and overlapping nature of these social inequalities, including those of race, class, gender, ability, and sexuality.	Every day, scholars encounter phenomena that cannot be explained by existing theories. This drives the production of new scholarly knowledge. These anomalies instigate scientific/scholarly revolutions only when they question the fundamental principles upon which knowledge paradigms are based (Kuhn 1962). Additionally, the practice of critical self-reflexivity (Bourdieu 1992) in knowledge production allows one to identify and analyze how social forces act upon oneself, allowing one to attempt to change in light of this new knowledge.

Figure 1: Research as Inquiry table, Companion Document to the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education: Sociology.

Black trans statistical epidemiologist, describes the anticipated aftermath: "Eventually this interest will wane and we'll go back to a place where resources are scarce. If the science has been polluted, not only will we have to do new work, we'll have to go back and fix all the mistakes."[6] This text was placed alongside other texts detailing the crisis of confidence in the medical literature (p-hacking, publication bias, funder influence, paper factories, etc.), and students were asked to reflect on how the idea of the "purity" of science is flawed as well as the implications for researchers, the public, and patients.

Students might investigate the racial or gendered makeup of research teams doing work in particular areas over time or of the editorial boards who put out calls for DEIA-related submissions. They might interview faculty specializing in DEIA or social justice to learn more about how their work is perceived and received in the field broadly or, more specifically, in tenure considerations. Indeed, the Stratification column of the Research as Inquiry table (figure 1, 4d) directs readers to the importance of calling upon insights of women scholars of color to best situate and understand the intersecting and overlapping nature of social inequalities related to race, class, gender, ability, sexuality, and the like.[7]

In fact, the companion document allows for exploration of the ways librarians and teaching faculty can use information literacy instruction as an opportunity to engage students in changing information structures and practices they deem unjust. It moves beyond simply pointing out how society's injustices are reproduced in the information landscape and incorporates ways seemingly calcified knowledge structures can be challenged and how people can make change toward a more equitable future.

The Scholarship as Conversation table (figure 2), for example, addresses the role of the relationship between self and society, or Socialization (5c). Here, readers see that researchers are taught to master a scholarly discourse in order to contribute to it. The second theme in this column in turn speaks to how communities or individuals can use information (and potentially the very discourse they want to challenge) to influence structures or institutions that produce scholarly knowledge. The open access movement, equitable and transparent

5. Scholarship as Conversation

Communities of scholars, researchers, or professionals engage in sustained discourse with new insights and discoveries occurring over time as a result of varied perspectives and interpretations.

Sociological Eye (5a) Sociology as a distinctive discipline that investigates the social roots of everyday life, including micro and macro phenomena	**Social Structure (5b)** The impact of social structures on human action	**Socialization (5c)** The relationship between the self and society	**Stratification (5d)** The patterns and effects of social inequality	**Social Change and Social Reproduction (5e)** How social phenomena replicate and change
Sociologists are in a unique position to evaluate the social context in which scholarly discourse occurs – including the power structures that determine (a) who is an expert in a field, (b) where the boundaries of a field lie, and (c) what can be said within these boundaries.	Social structures influence where and how scholarly conversation occurs, e.g. predominantly in the context of peer-reviewed journal publications, books published by academic presses, and disciplinary conferences. The material, cultural, and incentive structures of these contexts influence what and who is incorporated into the conversation.	Participants in scholarly discourse are socialized into contributing to those conversations with respect to particular norms, habits, and expectations of the field. Communities or individuals may use information to challenge or influence dominant social structures and institutions that produce scholarly knowledge.	Members of marginalized social categories have historically been excluded from or sidelined within "the scholarly conversation." New forms of scholarship (e.g., feminist epistemology, critical legal studies) aim to include these historically marginalized voices by valuing ways of knowing previously rejected by the academy (e.g., *testimonios* in Chicanx Studies). The opening up of established fields of study to the previously excluded also benefits those fields in the form of novel contributions and analyses. Exclusion from scholarly conversations can lead to lack of understanding and distrust of experts and scientific fact, and to the distortion of what is taken as "objective" knowledge to be biased toward dominant groups' viewpoints and assumptions.	In order for a scientific revolution (i.e. change) to occur, many prominent scholars in a field need to recognize an anomaly for what it is and to view the resolution of this problem as a central one for their discipline. If we think of scholarship as a conversation, the anomaly must come up regularly in this conversation as a key puzzle. If existing theories cannot be adapted to explain the anomaly, scholars must generate new, speculative theories to address it. In the end, this crisis may be resolved with the emergence of a new paradigm–one that treats the anomalous as the expected. This is how knowledge processes change.

Figure 2: Scholarship as Conversation table, Companion Document to the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education: Sociology.

processes behind deciding authorship order, and citational justice efforts are but a few of a growing number of examples librarians can incorporate into information literacy instruction to demonstrate how dysfunctional and inequitable practices can be prodded and changed.[8]

The Stratification column of the Scholarship as Conversation table (5d) points to the value of scholarship that centers ways of knowing traditionally rejected in the academy, such as *testimonios* and feminist epistemologies.[9] In the spring 2021 meeting of the ANSS Sociology Librarians Discussion Group introducing the companion document (then still in development), participants pointed out that, in fact, thinking deeply about where authority and expertise lie is a throughline of the document. They suggested that one might engage the companion document to explore how participatory and community-based research are promising methods that challenge the academy's traditional—at times patronizing—engagement with the public. Again, here we see examples of how, though the information landscape is rife with inequality and exclusion, those in and outside of higher education have been able to push back, making scholarly communication structures and practices more just.

Conclusion

For those interested in continuing or implementing a DEIA- or social justice-oriented pedagogical practice, the Companion Document to the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education: Sociology can be a useful tool. Indeed, the sociological eye not only invites a focus on the construction of knowledge and its attendant inequities, but it also provides space to explore alternatives to the practices and infrastructures that mark oppressive epistemologies. Rather than focusing on de-contextualized platforms or skills that still characterize many information literacy approaches, this companion document asks that educators and students seriously consider the role of the social world in information production, dissemination, and use.

Because of this, those involved in the creation of the companion document recognize that many of the ideas it surfaces are likely already being employed in exciting ways, and we encourage further exploration of how it might be of use to disciplines or in teaching contexts outside of sociology or be put in conversation with other disciplinary companion documents.[10] Finally, while the companion document's core audience is teaching librarians, we imagine it might also prove a productive tool for those in other areas of librarianship, archives, and scholarly communication, as well as for faculty colleagues across campus.

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Notes

1. ACRL/ANSS Instruction & Information Literacy Committee, "Companion Document to the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education: Sociology," January 27, 2022, https://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/standards/framework_companion_sociology.pdf.
2. Susan J. Ferguson and William Carbonaro, "Measuring College Learning in Sociology," in *Improving Quality in American Higher Education: Learning Outcomes and Assessments for the 21st Century*, eds. Richard Arum, Josipa Roksa, and Amanda Cook (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2016), 155.
3. ACRL/ANSS Instruction & Information Literacy Committee, "Companion Document," 3.
4. Du Bois describes a "public and psychological wage . . . [that] had great effect upon [white laborers'] personal treatment and the deference shown them." W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (1935; repr., New York: Touchstone, 1995), 700–701; Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," *Independent School* 49, no. 2 (Winter 1990): 31–32.
5. Usha Lee McFarling, "'Health Equity Tourists': How White Scholars are Colonizing Research on Health Disparities," Stat, September 23, 2021, https://www.statnews.com/2021/09/23/health-equity-tourists-white-scholars-colonizing-health-disparities-research/.
6. McFarling, "'Health Equity Tourists.'"
7. Patricia Hill Collins, "Black Feminist Thought in the Matrix of Domination," in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 221–38; Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–1300.
8. Civic Laboratory for Environmental Action Research (CLEAR), "Equity in Author

Order," 2016, https://civiclaboratory.nl/2016/05/23/equity-in-author-order/; Diana Kwon, "The Rise of Citational Justice: How Scholars are Making References Fairer," *Nature*, April 6, 2022, https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-022-00793-1; Cite Black Women homepage, accessed July 14, 2022, https://www.citeblackwomencollective.org/.

9. For LIS-specific work that "expand[s] what is considered knowledge and establish[es] the significance and worth of BIPOC knowledge and experiential knowledge," see Sofia Y. Leung and Jorge R. López-McKnight, eds., *Knowledge Justice: Disrupting Library and Information Studies through Critical Race Theory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2021), 323.

10. For a list of ACRL companion documents to the Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education, see https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/standardsguidelinestopic.