

AN INTERVIEW WITH MINDY STOMBLER AND AMANDA JUNGELS ABOUT THEIR NEW SOCIAL PROBLEMS READER

Focus on Social Problems

INTERVIEWED BY ERIN ECHOLS, PHD CANDIDATE IN SOCIOLOGY AT GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY AND AUTHOR OF THE INSTRUCTOR'S MANUAL FOR THE BOOK

Erin Echols: What motivated you to create a new reader for Social Problems courses?

Mindy Stombler: We both prefer to use readers to teach our courses and we had moved away from the current offerings on the market to making our own

" JOURNALISTS AND NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS HAVE VALUABLE CONTRIBUTIONS AS WELL "

"course packs." We have both taught social problems courses for many years, at

institutions with very diverse student bodies, and we wanted an anthology that would work well for our students--one that had an in-depth selection of curated pieces that could work *whether you assigned a textbook or not*. We also both teach our classes from a social constructionist and critical perspective, and we felt that those perspectives weren't as well represented among the available books (or if they were, we found the books were not quite comprehensive enough for our purposes). When Oxford University Press approached me about the possibility of editing a social problems reader, I was very excited about the opportunity. I had successfully co-authored *Sex Matters: The Sexuality and Society Reader* (W.W. Norton) and had experience with the process of creating

a broad anthology. Amanda and I had worked together for a number of years, so the collaboration was a fitting one.

Erin Echols: What were your goals for the book when you were planning it?

Mindy Stombler: First and foremost, we wanted the book to be accessible to introductory-level students who may not have taken any other sociology courses, may not have experience reading scholarly journal articles, or whose sociological imagination is not yet developed. We wanted the material to be relatable and in language they could understand. Accessibility also meant controlling the cost of the book, and we are very proud that we produced a book that is relatively affordable (Oxford

University Press is a not-for-profit press)! We wanted to choose our sources and articles from a broad range of sources, but to ensure that they were empirically-based and sociologically sound. While academic research on social problems is important and contributes a great deal to our knowledge about social problems (and we include many academic pieces), journalists and non-profit organizations have valuable contributions as well. And, because they don't face the constraints of academic publishing, news articles, narrative pieces, sociological blog posts, and investigative journalism often had more timely research and data than articles in academic journals. Finally, we wanted to choose readings that helped to develop empathy among readers. Including activist interviews, as well as readings that we felt develop compassion and understanding, helped us to accomplish that goal.

Erin Echols: The activist interviews that you included are a unique feature. Can you talk more about why you

decided to include those at the opening of every chapter?

Amanda M. Jungels: One of the major complaints we fielded from students—and from graduate students teaching social problems—was that social problems classes are, frankly, depressing. You discuss problem after problem, many of them cumulative in the disadvantages they produce, and few textbooks and readers cover the topic of social change. Students frequently told that as they learned about these problems, they even wanted to be an agent of social change in their communities, but didn't know how--or if--one person could even make a difference. So, when we were designing the book, it was important to us to include the voices of those who are out there on a daily basis, working for social change on a variety of issues. We selected activities to cover every chapter of the book, and our activists range from those working with large national organizations to small,

grass-roots ones, and represent a diverse group of Americans.

Erin Echols: Did you have any particular challenges while working on the book?

Amanda M. Jungels: Oh, there were a lot of challenges! First and probably the greatest: There are innumerable social problems, and despite the breadth in this anthology, we couldn't possibly cover them all! Simply narrowing down the topics, and then finding articles on that topic that might be suitable for inclusion in the book, was a major challenge. We read hundreds of articles on dozens of subjects, sometimes choosing a piece, editing it, and then deciding that it didn't fit with the other selections in the chapter and that it had to be

"INCLUDE THE VOICES OF THOSE WHO ARE OUT THERE ON A DAILY BASIS, WORKING FOR SOCIAL CHANGE ON A VARIETY OF ISSUES"

replaced. Or, we would decide on a piece, and then new research or a new report would come out, and we would have to re-evaluate. It is also challenging finding properly leveled articles. At times we had to recruit academics to write accessible pieces for the book. In the midst of all this, I finished my dissertation, graduated, and moved from Atlanta to Baltimore for a postdoctoral research position with the U.S. Army! So, much of our work was completed electronically over file-sharing websites and email, and then over several trips to Atlanta to compile the final book. And, of course, the book was completed while we were both working full-time in research and teaching jobs, while managing familial and other obligations. It was no easy feat, but we are extremely proud of the final product. And we have great respect for our colleagues who have authored or edited Social Problems texts and anthologies!

Erin Echols: Was there anything that you learned

while working on the book that surprised you? I know when I read it, I learned a lot of new information. Were you surprised by anything you learned?

Amanda M. Jungels: For me, I think this book has really re-iterated the interconnectedness of social problems, and how their effects can be cumulative. This was something I knew and had taught my students, but I now have a fuller appreciation for that aspect of social problems. I also learned a lot about the various social problems that we cover in the book, including ones that I had never had the opportunity to teach in my classes, like issues related to food safety and the food production system. It really changed the way I think about the food we consume—how it is produced, who is involved in its production, and the impact that it has on our health.

Mindy Stomblor: I was most surprised by how difficult it is to get in touch with and get completed interviews

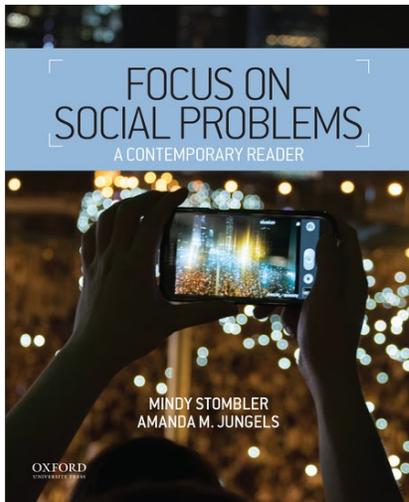
and photographs (headshots) from a wide range of activists! I always think of my academic colleagues as some of the “busiest,” but these activists were shouldering major burdens. The work they were doing to change policy and engage the citizenry was truly inspiring. As much as I love the articles we chose, the activist interviews are my favorite part of the book.

Mindy Stomblor is a Senior Lecturer and Director of Instruction in the Department of Sociology at Georgia State University. She is a co-editor of *Sex Matters: The Sexuality and Society Reader 4e*, and a recipient of the Southern Sociological Society's Distinguished Contributions to Teaching Award.

Amanda M. Jungels is an ORISE Fellow studying social and behavioral health among U.S. Army soldiers. She is a past recipient of the Jacqueline Boles Teaching Fellowship and Teaching Associate Award at Georgia State University.

SSSP MEMBER PUBLICATIONS

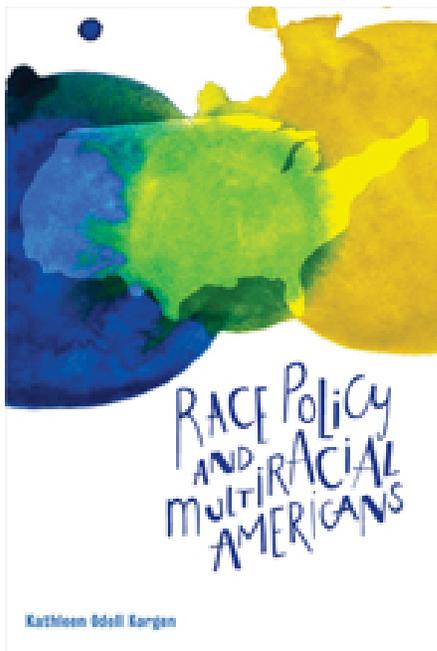
MINDY STOMBLER AND AMANDA JUNGELS



Stombler and Jungels teamed up to publish *Focus on Social Problems: A contemporary reader* with Oxford University Press. *Focus on Social Problems* is a comprehensive reader that exposes students to current issues related to Social Problems. The appropriately-leveled selections in the reader help students understand how social problems are defined and constructed, increase their empirical knowledge about the causes and consequences of social problems, and develop empathy. Working from a critical social constructionist foundation, the readings address a wide variety of social problems. Editors Stombler and Jungels include a combination of research-based articles, sociologically informed popular media pieces, and reports from

non-profits like Pew. Each chapter opens with an interview of a social-change activist doing work related to the chapter's featured social problem, giving students an opportunity to envision themselves as agents of social change.

KATHLEEN KORGEN



This is the first book to offer a closer look at the effects of multiracial citizens on race-related policies. As the number of people who identify as multiracial is growing rapidly, policies that relate to race continue to lag behind, failing to properly account for the ways that a multiracial citizenry complicates programs aimed at mitigating the effects of racism, ameliorating past discrimination, and more. The book takes up key questions relating to the intersection of race-based policies, social welfare, education, and multiracial citizens, while drawing on tools and techniques from a range of fields to present a picture of where we're at today and what possible steps are needed to create more effective and more inclusive policies in the future. It will be essential reading for students and scholars in sociology, political science, public policy, and other fields dealing with race relations and social justice.

This book also features a co-authored chapter by TSP member, [Hephzibah Strmic-Pawl](#)