

## Connecting the Classroom to the Community

*The Geography of Environmental (In)Justice*

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A few years ago, Clint Smith became something of a sensation for faculty who teach about social inequality when the YouTube video “Place Matters” began to surge in popularity.<sup>1</sup> In the video, he recites a poem describing how *zip codes* help to determine one’s life chances in Washington, D.C., while the viewer quickly develops a better understanding of the profound influence of *space* on our lives. In the video, he makes it abundantly clear that *where you are is not a coincidence*, but is based on many of the intersecting social characteristics that you embody, and how *where you are reproduces the conditions* that others, similar to you, live out generation after generation. In short, *place really does matter*.

With the surge of Internet-based mapping programs that allow for interactive spatial visualization of sociological phenomena, sociology faculty have an unprecedented opportunity in their classrooms to show students that social conditions and social activity are *location-based*.

The dense relationships between the social circumstances of groups and social processes in specific “geospatial areas” can be more fully developed in the classroom, when we speak of “food deserts” or “asthma clusters,” by displaying to students the actual geospatial area within which we find these social conditions. At the very least, the visual impact of maps that show the limited number (if any) of stores with healthy, fresh, quality food in a community, or concentrations/clustering of children of color with asthma diagnoses in a specific neighborhood, is powerful, and one way to bring the *community into the classroom*. At best, complex sociological processes such as migration, immigration, crime clusters, displacement, health disparities, disproportionate environmental burdens, gentrification, lack of jobs, and

transportation inequities, to name a few, are more thoroughly understood as social outcomes that have deep-rooted connections to the geographic environments (historically and contemporarily) within which we find them. In short, sociology can be a more powerful perspective for our majors when coupled with mapping software that is easy to use, accessible, and visually appealing. Moreover, this type of software gives faculty a dynamic and insightful tool to more effectively teach sociology.

One program that my university recently purchased for use is PolicyMap, a geographic information systems (GIS) based program, accessible through the Internet, that allows students to generate maps of their own using a variety of pre-loaded data. Varieties of data that come uploaded to PolicyMap (and also where users can upload their own geocoded data) include demographics (e.g., population density, race, age, sex, disability status, immigration, religion, language); income/socio-economic status (e.g., poverty, food insecurity, minimum wage, affordable housing); quality of life indicators (e.g., crime, commute times, food access, brownfields, superfunds, liquor stores); housing (e.g., home values, vacancies); lending (e.g., loans in the area, types of loans by race/ethnicity); and economy, education, health and other indicators.<sup>2</sup> Sources of data in PolicyMap include the Census, the Environmental Protection Agency, and a host of other well-respected entities.

In addition to creating one-layer maps, tables, and reports of sociological phenomena, one particularly powerful tool in PolicyMap is the “3-layer map,” where you can select a specific geographic area and “layer” up to three indicators, providing a spatial visualization of the geographic relationship between social indicators. For example, one way that I have taught about environmental justice is by using the 3-layer map function to show how race is an important determinant regarding proximity to environmental burdens, such as brownfields<sup>3</sup>, which not only decrease the quality of life in



an area, but may have also have human health consequences.<sup>4</sup> First, I show the class the number of brownfield sites in a particular area, like in the south and east sides of Wilmington, DE, north of the University of Delaware’s main campus. Then, I add a layer to the map, such as the areas within the south and east side of Wilmington that have at least 75% of their population being non-White. Instantly, the students see that the areas with high concentrations of brownfields are also areas where, predominantly, persons of color live. As Logan (2012) said, “The most powerful tool is the simplest-creation of a map that allows visualization of a spatial pattern” (pp.509-510).<sup>5</sup>

With the use of maps, students of sociology can “see” the social and cultural complexities and patterns in specific geographic areas, and can better understand the historical influences on current social and environmental conditions of the groups occupying those spaces. Teaching students how to examine sociological phenomena using a program like PolicyMap allows students to connect any course-specific topics to specific geographic locations, including their local communities, and fully realize the utility of “spatial thinking.” The program is easy to use, requires no GIS background, has a simple interface, and because it is Internet based, it can be used anywhere so that learning can continue when class ends. I have found it a very powerful tool for not only teaching how race and environmental (in)justice are intertwined, but also how working to address the legacy environmental burdens in communities of color is one way to address historical legacies of social (in)justice and environmental racism.

### References

1. “Place Matters,” by Clint Smith. See the video at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=saREW\\_BfxwY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=saREW_BfxwY).
2. See PolicyMap at <http://www.policymap.com>.
3. A brownfield is “a property, the expansion, redevelopment, or reuse of which may be complicated by the presence or potential presence of a hazardous substance,

3. pollutant, or contaminant.” Source: <http://www2.epa.gov/brownfields/brownfield-overview-and-definition>.
4. Morello-Frosch, Rachel, Miriam Zuk, Michael Jerrett, Bhavna Shamasunder, and Amy D. Kyle. 2011. “Understanding the Cumulative Impacts of Inequalities in Environmental Health: Implications for Policy.” *Health Affairs* 30(5): 879-887.
5. Logan, John R. 2012. “Making a Place for Space: Spatial Thinking in Social Science.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 38:507-524.
6. I thank Benjamin Mearns for his input.



### **Ideas For the Classroom**

*Helping Students Read Academic Work*

Scott Grether

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I started graduate school in the fall of 2010. As a first generation college student, I was not prepared for the amount of reading sociology graduate students consume. I thought I needed to read every word to “get” the reading. This was an inefficient use of time because the weekly workload was demanding. I tried several reading tactics to become more efficient, such as taking notes while reading, underling text, highlighting text, using color-coded post-it notes to capture themes, and so on. This didn’t help either because I couldn’t remember why I highlighted or underlined text. If I did remember, I couldn’t complete all of my work because too much time was spent taking notes.

