# Reflections on a Decade Long Exercise in Public Sociology: Can We Quantify Ethical Consumption?

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Reflections on a Decade Long Exercise in Public Sociology: Can We Quantify Ethical Consumption?

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Abstract. In order to contribute to the ongoing discussion of the evolving nature of public sociology, this article reflects on a public sociology research project a decade after presenting it as part of the keynote for the 2009 annual conference for the Association for Humanist Sociology. The Better World Shopper project focuses on quantifying 32 years of social and environmental responsibility data on 2204 companies into numerical values that are then translated into A to F grades for the public through a regularly updated book, smartphone app, and website. Rooted in social movements theory and the growing literature on ethical consumerism, the methodology for the project is discussed in detail, including how data is weighted, updated, and an evaluation of how various biases are addressed throughout the analysis. The project is offered up as one example of how humanist sociology and public sociology can overlap in ways that can generate much needed conversations outside of academe.

Keywords: public sociology, humanist sociology, ethical consumerism, social justice, environmental sustainability

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Reflexive Statement

In some ways, I was a public sociologist before I was sociologist. The book, The Better World Handbook, that I co-authored with two other sociology graduate students to help my undergraduates grapple with the overwhelming nature of the problems covered in our Social Problems classrooms, was published six months before my doctoral dissertation. I believe that the sociological perspective offers us a critical framework through which to view the world, and that we are obligated to apply it in some way to help better local or global communities. I have been researching our fraught relationship with corporations via ethical consumerism since the early 2000s, tracking their social and environmental impacts funded largely by our consumer dollars. I have spent much of my time translating this research into data made accessible to the public through The Better World Shopping Guide, in order to help people more effectively hold companies...
accountable for their actions. For the past ten years, I have been a teacher-scholar at College of the Holy Cross, a small liberal arts college in New England.

Introduction

A cursory search using Google Scholar reveals rapidly increasing interest in term “public sociology” over the past 40 years: 18 articles in the 1980s, 101 in the 1990s, 1980 in the 2000s, and 6970 articles published so far in the 2010s. It has been 15 years since Michael Burawoy, 2004 president of the American Sociological Association, put public sociology on the map, so to speak, and over 30 years since Herbert Gans coined the term (Fastis 2014). Burawoy made explicit a tradition as old as some of the earliest sociologists (Weber, DuBois, and Addams) that calls sociology to use its scientific tools to engage public audiences around the important social issues and challenges of the day. It calls for social science with a purpose, if you will, to address the race, class, gender inequalities and environmental degradation it has been so precisely observing and documenting (Burawoy 2005).

Since then, public sociology has sparked sociologists writ large to applaud, debate, engage, and dissect this orientation like little else since, the results of which have spawned books and edited volumes attempting to capture the emerging dialogue (see Adam et al. 2009; Agger 2007; Blau and Smith 2006; Clawson et al. 2007; Dolgon and Chayko 2011; Hanemaayer and Schneider 2014; Nichols 2007; Nyden, Hossfeld, and Nyden 2012). It has even more recently sparked sociologists within certain theoretical traditions, like symbolic interactionists, to begin to map their own relationship to public sociology (see Puddephatt and Taylor 2017). I see this as a fitting time to reflect upon some of the seeds that were planted and to assess how this specific sub-field is evolving.

While I would like to call on other self-identified public sociologists to contribute their reflections at this particular moment in our collective history, I will note that I may be coming late to the table on this count. I am in wholehearted agreement with Jim Pennell and Tim Maher’s (2015) argument for a more integrated, transformative, public-centered approach to public sociology, as well as Emily Kane’s (2016) emphasis on creating a civically-engaged, community-oriented undergraduate infrastructure to encourage critical thinking about sociology’s larger role. Having said that, I’d like to contribute my own lessons to the discussion of how to nurture this important branch of our discipline’s work.

I will start with a reflection on how my own sociological research turned toward this new growing body of public scholarship. I do this in part because the timing aligns well with the emergence of this area (my own public sociology research project on ethical consumerism began in earnest in 2004), and also because essentially ten years ago, I presented an earlier iteration of this project at the keynote presentation for the 2009 Annual Meeting of the Association for Humanist Sociology. As Corey Dolgon (2010) so eloquently pointed out in his AHS presidential address “humanist sociology is public sociology...[and] public sociology is humanist sociology”. The thoughtful feedback I received then from my humanist colleagues contributed significantly to the development of this public sociology project, and a decade later, I would appreciate an even deeper level of feedback to aid in its further evolution.

The research project, which I call Better World Shopper, seeks to synthesize publicly available data on the social and environmental impacts of companies, rating their overall...
responsibility on a scale from A to F, to bring increased transparency and accountability into the corporate sphere where frustratingly little exists. An essentially humanist enterprise, it recognizes the potential of individual agency combined with critical thinking to provide one more tool that may allow people to contribute to a more socially just and environmentally sustainable world. As a sociological project, it recognizes the limitations of individual agency, understands the social and economic privilege of most ethical consumers, acknowledges the cooptation of the consumer empowerment narrative by disingenuous corporate public relations campaigns, and realizes the need for more structurally-oriented solutions in order to bring about significant social change.

Social Movements

The Better World Shopper project initially stemmed from my research interest as a sociologist in the field of social movements. In the mid-1990s, the dominant paradigm in social movements theory was resource mobilization (Gamson, 1990; McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 2001; McCarthy and Zald 1977; Tarrow 1994), which focused its analysis on how movements effectively mobilize their available financial, temporal, and human resources in order to achieve the desired social change. However, in Europe an alternative theoretical paradigm was gaining traction; new social movements (NSM) theory was contesting this dominant theoretical framework by focusing on the shifting nature of social movements in the 1960s. NSM theory posited that the most recent group of social movements shared certain distinctive qualities, generally: 1) more focused on postmaterialist concerns, 2) less centralized, 3) less organized, 4) more culturally focused, 5) making use of individual, in addition to collective forms of action (Buechler, 1995; Habermas, 1981; Melucci 1980; Mertig and Dunlap 1995; Touraine 1985). This group of NSMs includes the: environmental movement, LGBTQ+ movement, peace movement, human rights movement, anti-nuclear movement, and the feminist movement among others.

One of the most successful of these NSMs is the environmental movement, something referred to as a vanguard movement for other NSMs due to both its popularity and to its role as a kind of “gateway” movement for exposure to, and involvement in, other NSMs (Dalton 1994, Mertig and Dunlap 1995, Scott 1990, Turner 1994). The environmental movement was particularly effective at focusing its adherents on economic and lifestyle actions that moved people beyond the realm of political organizing (Haenfler et al. 2012, Lorenzen 2012, McCloskey 1991).

An increasing number of scholars have begun to argue that even more private, culturally-oriented, individually-focused forms of lifestyle actions need to be reconceptualized as movements (Atkinson 2012; Cherry 2015; Kennedy 2011; Lorenzen 2012; Willis and Schor 2012). These lifestyle movements actively promote a lifestyle (forms of speech, consumption patterns, food choices, dress codes, everyday practices) as their primary means to foster social change by confronting predominant cultural norms in order to challenge the status quo (see Haenfler, Johnson and Jones, 2012). While these movements (veganism, straight edge, voluntary simplicity, ethical consumerism) may not be as highly organized as traditional social movements, relying on loosely coordinated
behaviors of individuals, the results still generate collectively significant impacts, sometimes referred to as "collectivized individual action" (Bossy 2014).

**Ethical Consumerism**

Ethical consumerism, consumers seeing their dollars as economic "votes" that can encourage companies to behave more responsibly, exists in a space contested by competing conceptual frameworks. First identified and studied almost exclusively by business scholars examining its relationship to corporate social responsibility (now more commonly referred to as corporate sustainability), this research is largely atheoretical, focusing on describing the attitudes, behaviors, and demographics of this niche in the marketplace (Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Carrigan, Szmigin, and Wright 2004; Doane 2001; Freestone and McGoldrick 2007; Harrison, Newholm, and Shaw 2005; Starr 2009).

A more critical approach is taken by most social scientists as they re-conceptualize ethical consumerism as largely a market-based, corporate self-defense mechanism promoted by companies interested more in ethical branding than actual changes in corporate practice (Budinsky and Bryant 2013; Cock 2011; Foster 2000; Lubbers 2002; Tokar 1997). From this more skeptical perspective, ethical consumers merely reinforce the neo-liberal status quo through apolitical, atomized, and ineffective marketplace choices that distract them from the more necessary, collective structural and political changes needed to bring about actual reform (Carrier 2008; Guthman 2008; Maniates 2002; Smith 1998; Szasz 2007; Thompson 2011).

However, a third group of researchers has more recently emerged calling for a more nuanced understanding of the role of ethical consumers as participants in a lifestyle movement that complements political engagement for some (Adams and Raisborough 2008, 2010; Barnett et al. 2010; Brown 2011; Kennedy and Krogman 2008; Melucci 1989, 1996; Micheletti 2003; Neilson and Paxton 2010; Shorette 2014; Stolle, Hooghe, and Micheletti 2005; Willis and Schor 2012) and serves as a first step for others to more overt, collective action (Barnett et al. 2005; Carfagna et al. 2014; Holzer 2006; Micheletti and Stolle 2007; Moore 2006). There is growing empirical evidence to support this "middle path" framework of the movement, demonstrating a positive correlation between ethical consumerism and political activism (Willis and Schor 2012).

**From Theory to Action**

I focused my doctoral research on understanding why people were choosing to focus on lifestyle actions rather than more overtly political forms of engagement (Jones, 2002). A mixed methods research project, it involved a content analysis of relevant online and print literature, in-depth interviews with leaders advocating for lifestyle actions, and an extensive mail survey of members of the organization, *Green America*. This group is considered the leading US-based nonprofit organization promoting social and environmental responsibility through the economic actions of individuals (now called *ethical consumerism*). In the interview with the founder of *Green America*, Alisa Gravitz discussed how many activists in the 1980s saw more traditional political avenues for
change as being blocked under the Reagan Administration. In response, activists began reorienting some of their efforts to focus on economic pathways to achieve the desired change, something that, in part, contributed to the rise of “green businesses” and ethical consumers.

While pursuing this research, I co-authored a book with two colleagues in an attempt to address the expressed needs of students in social problems classes who would consistently ask what they could do, personally, to help contribute to the solutions to many of the social problems they’d studied over the semester. The resulting book, *The Better World Handbook*, is essentially a cataloguing of the major social and environmental problems humanity faces in the 21st century followed by detailed accounts of 300 or so actions an individual could engage in to become a part of their potential solutions. Of all the material presented, four pages in the chapter on “Shopping” generated more reader feedback than the rest of the book combined. Readers wanted to know more about how companies producing some of the most common consumer products were rated from “poor” to “excellent” on their overall social and environmental records.

Thus, in 2004 I decided to pursue a more in-depth research project focused more specifically on mapping the social and environmental impacts of companies and translating that data for the public. This focus could be subdivided into two major project goals:

1) How can social scientists most accurately map companies’ social and environmental impacts?

2) How can social scientists translate this data for the public in a form that it is understandable, practical, and easily accessed?

To demarcate the scope of this investigation, I chose to let the availability of data to drive the breadth of the issues to include under the operationalized definition of “social and environmental” impacts. This approach essentially adopts grounded theory techniques (Charmaz and Mitchell, 2007; Glaser and Strauss, 1967) whereby emergent themes are constantly compared to the available data until saturation clarifies which patterns best characterize the overall data set. Potential data sources were uncovered using simple Google searches from terms like “transparency”, “responsibility”, “equality”, and “ethical”, combined with terms like “scorecard”, “report card”, “ratings” and “rankings”, generated hundreds of useful hits. After sifting through the results, hat I discovered was that much of the existing data being provided for consumers [albeit in a piecemeal way by ecolabels, nonprofits, investigative journalists, and government agencies] tracked quite clearly with the issues of concern for the NSMs emerging from the activism of the 1960s: environmental sustainability, social justice, human rights, animal welfare, and empowered local communities. This also mirrors the scope of issues included by the other major (US and non-US) ethical consumer rating systems.

**Ecolabels: An Imperfect Solution**
By far the most common way that ethical consumers determine corporate responsibility related to the products or services they are interested in purchasing is by relying on third party seals or certifications often referred to as *ecolabels* (see Jones 2017). The major advantage of these ecolabels lies in their location on the products themselves at the point of purchase. This allows ethical consumers to identify their best choices at the moment they are shopping for the desired item(s). Some of the most recognizable certifications utilized by ethical consumers include: USDA Organic, Fair Trade, Marine Stewardship Council, Bird Friendly, Dolphin-Safe, Rainforest Alliance and Forest Stewardship Council.

Unfortunately, these ecolabels represent only a partial solution for ethical consumers as they suffer from at least five significant weaknesses. First, and perhaps most apparent, is that most products do not contain any certifications and as such consumers are left guessing about the social and environmental responsibility of the majority of products they encounter. While many of the uncertified companies may not meet the certification standards, others may merely lack the savvy, time, or financial resources to garner the seals which codify their good practices (Ponte 2006).

Second, there is growing evidence that many of the most popular ecolabels have watered down the requirements of certification to meet the increasing demand by companies to have their products certified under these systems (Ingenbleek and Meulenberg, 2006; Cohn and O’Rourke 2011). This may have already led to companies with sullied ethical reputations to utilize particular certifications as a way of greenwashing their brand image (Bartley and Smith, 2010).

Third, a growing number of companies and industries have created their own internally-generated certifications that lack the objectivity of independent third party certifications and are likely to be even less rigorous than their more common counterparts (Fransen, 2012; Ingenbleek & Meulenberg, 2006; McDermott, 2013; Hughes et al 2008; Giovannucci and Ponte 2005; Ponte 2004). Many consumers cannot tell the difference between the two types of ecolabels (e.g. Whole Foods produces its own Whole Trade certification ecolabel), and therefore have an even more challenging task in understanding the actual ethical landscape (O’Rourke 2005; Giovannucci and Ponte 2005, Bartley and Smith, 2010).

Fourth, nearly all ecolabels certify products rather than companies allowing consumers to determine the ethical impacts of individual products but not of the company behind the product. This allows companies with more questionable track records to create certified product lines (e.g. Green Works cleaning products by Clorox) that compete directly with the products created by more ethical companies (e.g. cleaning products by Seventh Generation). Additionally, consumers may garner a sense of the ethical impact of a particular product but not gain a broader understanding of which companies/brands deserve (or do not deserve) their support more broadly.

Fifth, the majority of ecolabels cover fairly specific issues and/or product categories, obscuring the picture of the broader ethical impacts these companies are having across the wider spectrum of issues ethical consumers are concerned with. Examples of this include the aforementioned: USDA Organic (environmental), Fair Trade (primarily social), Marine Stewardship Council (sustainable seafood), Bird Friendly (bird welfare), Dolphin-Safe (dolphin welfare), Rainforest Alliance (primarily environmental) and Forest Stewardship Council (sustainable forestry).
Other Ethical Consumer Rating Systems

The following four ethical consumer rating systems are, along with Better World Shopper, the longest-running and most widely recognized in the world. These systems largely overlap in both how they define the major components of ethical consumerism as a combination of social and environmental responsibility (with some consideration for political responsibility and animal welfare) and how they reach consumers with their ratings (Table 1).

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

**Ethical Consumer (UK).** Founded in 1989, Ethical Consumer (EC) is the oldest of the consumer-focused CSR rating systems. Based in Manchester, UK, the organization began producing a subscription-based magazine of the same name released six times a year. In addition to its main website (ethicalconsumer.org), the organization maintains an additional presence online under the title Corporate Critic (corporatecritic.org) that allows consumer to access the data behind their company ratings for a small fee. While they are the only system to presently lack a smartphone app, they are also the only to offer a print and online magazine subscription to ethical consumers.

**Ethical Company Organisation (UK).** Ethical Company Organisation (ECO), founded in 2000, is the only other major consumer-oriented CSR rating system established in the UK. Over the past 16 years, ECO has published 11 editions of The Good Shopping Guide to allow consumers to better understand the ethical records of the companies they’re supporting in the marketplace. While the group has offered online details of the project since its inception (ethical-company-organisation.org), more recently ECO has begun to translate some of their shopping guide’s data into a separate but related website (thegoodshoppingguide.com) that allows consumers to more quickly reference their ratings and the corresponding strong and weak issues areas for each company.

**Shop Ethical (AUS).** In 2004, Shop Ethical (a.k.a. Ethical Consumer Group) established its rating system primarily for concerned consumers in Australia. While originally known as Ethical Consumer Group, soon after self-publishing its pocket-sized shopping guide in 2008, Shop Ethical, it has become more widely recognized by the name of its print publication. In order to minimize confusion between this system and the UK-based Ethical Consumer, this research will refer to the group as Shop Ethical. In addition to the print guide, the group’s efforts include a searchable website (ethical.org.au) and one of the more sophisticated smartphone apps available to consumers.

**GoodGuide (US).** In 2007, GoodGuide, became the most recent of all consumer-oriented CSR rating systems to enter into the field. Originating from efforts by Dara O’Rourke at UC Berkeley, GoodGuide offers both a popular searchable website (goodguide.com) and a smartphone app of the same name that is able to scan an item’s UPC codes to connect them to its product ratings. GoodGuide also holds the distinction of being one of the most
well-funded research efforts in this area, originally raising over $13 million before being acquired by Underwriters Laboratories (UL), the nonprofit product safety certification organization. Unfortunately, as of 2017, GoodGuide removed all company-level environmental and social data from its system in order to focus exclusively on health ratings based on individual product ingredients lists.

The Data Availability Problem

As I argued in my article comparing rating systems across the US, UK and Australia (see Jones 2017), the central problem that plagues this type of research is the lack of available data that offers any significant combination of validity and reliability. There are little to no legal requirements for companies to offer up data on their own record of corporate social responsibility (Sutantoputra, 2009). Without a requirement for transparency, provided by either the marketplace or the government, companies are concerned about data they voluntarily release in the name of transparency (particularly if it reveals any shortcomings in this area) inadvertently: spooking investors (Beatty and Shimshack, 2010), giving an advantage to less transparent competitors (Searcy, 2012), or focusing the ire of an already suspicious public (Lyon and Maxwell, 2011). The data that companies do make available is typically unverifiable, uncomparable to other companies, almost exclusively positive, and for these reasons, usually somewhat suspect (Lyon and Montgomery, 2012; Marquis and Toffel, 2011).

Ratings agencies, working in the socially responsible investing (SRI) sector, collect the most consistent third party data. Containing more than $2 trillion worth of investment portfolios (Guay et al., 2004), these SRI ratings agency determine the potential profitability of a significant amount of investments depending on which companies fall under their definition of “socially responsible”. To remain competitive with the profit returns touted by more mainstream (and less restricted) investment funds, many of these SRI agencies tend to utilize a definition (and data) that support a more laissez-faire approach than most ethical consumers and nonprofit organizations working in this area would be comfortable with (Jones 2017).

Additionally, many of these agencies rely on self-reported data from companies (van den Brink and van der Woerd, 2004; Waddock and Graves, 1997) and often utilize methodologies that are closely guarded as trade secrets. As a result, the CSR data arising from these agencies is considered by a number of scholars to have little or no validity (Chelli and Gendron, 2013) often just mimicking the companies’ own effort to manipulate and positively spin their own reputation in the area (Ramus and Montiel, 2005). This lack of independence and validity from one of the only consistent sources of third party data has motivated many scholars to call for a more accurate, valid, transparent system of CSR measurement that is resistant to the influence of the companies themselves (Carroll, 2000; Chen and Delmas, 2011; Liston-Heyes and Ceton, 2009; Turker, 2009; Zadek et al., 2005).

Building A Robust System of Measurement
It is in the context of this data poor landscape that I constructed a system to more accurately measure the social and environmental responsibility of companies. The database would need to consolidate and organize, and synthesize publicly available sources of data that each measure one or more aspects of companies’ social and/or environmental impacts in order to provide a more comprehensive, and accurate, picture of what companies are doing in this arena. In order to ensure both the validity and integrity of the rating system, I chose to adhere to the following procedures:

**Inclusions**

1. The system focuses on following data streams tracking one or more of these issues:
   a. environmental sustainability
   b. human rights
   c. animal protection
   d. community involvement
   e. social justice

2. The system includes data from independent, third party sources, including primarily:
   a. nonprofit organizations
   b. government agencies
   c. private organizations
   d. investigative journalism

3. The system focuses primarily on company-level data rather than on individual product data or industry-level data

**Exclusions**

4. The system does not include data self-reported by companies
5. The system does not include data generated by SRI ratings agencies

It may be worth noting that while many are familiar with ethical consumerism as an environmentally-focused enterprise, fewer understand how social justice issues are taken into account. As such, I’ve included a table specifically documenting the social justice issues, corresponding data sources, and examples of each (see Table 2).

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

**Constructing The Database**

As of 2019, the ratings database contains 2204 companies, each with its uniquely calculated score and resulting grade, and spans 32 years (1988-2019) of research data. While it remains in its initial form (2004-present) as an extensive Excel spreadsheet,
there are plans to transition the database into a Google Sheet in order to allow for instant ratings updates via the website and smartphone app.

The rating system utilizes a point scale for companies’ overall social and environmental responsibility that falls between -100 and +100 with a starting point of 0 for all companies when they are initially added to the database. Before including any particular data source in the project database, I evaluate each for basic relevance (does it cover one or more of the five issues), conflicts of interest (is it influenced indirectly or directly by the companies themselves), and quantifiability (can it be usefully translated into a point score). Each data source is evaluated to determine whether it tracks exclusively positive or negative social and/or environmental impacts. In some cases, the data source tracks both positive and negative impacts and so a neutral (zero point) is determined (typically employing an appropriate measure of central tendency).

Data are weighted quantitatively giving consideration to a number of factors [see Table 3]:

1. *age* (more recent data are weighed more heavily)
   a. e.g. data from 2019 (higher) vs. 1989 (lower)

2. *reputation* (data from well-regarded [nonpartisan/nonprofit] data sources is weighed more heavily)
   a. e.g. data from US Environmental Protection Agency (higher) vs. Business Ethics Magazine (lower)

3. *rigor* (data collected and analyzed according to scientific norms is weighted more heavily)
   a. e.g. data resulting from Union of Concerned Scientists’ environmental rankings of automakers (higher) vs. Fast Company’s WorldBlu List of most democratic workplaces (lower)

4. *longevity* (data from ongoing research that has a multiyear history is weighted more heavily)
   a. Human Rights Campaign’s Corporate Equality Index project has been calculating company scores on LGBTQ issues for 17 years (higher) vs. World Wildlife Fund scoring the forest-friendly manufacturing of tissue paper for 2 years (lower)

5. *level of significance* (data that represents relatively exceptional achievements, whether positive or negative, are weighted more heavily)
   a. e.g. achieving comprehensive certification as a *benefit corporation*, or a B Corp (higher) vs. being a member of Business for Social Responsibility (lower)

6. *breadth* (data focused on measuring a broad range of social and/or environmental impacts is weighted more heavily)
a. e.g. Political Economy Research Institute’s combined air pollution, water pollution, and greenhouse gas emissions rankings (higher) vs. As You Sow’s recycling score (lower)

[INSERT TABLE 3 HERE]

Once data sources are weighted, individual data points on companies are converted into standardized scores (see example of Responsible Sourcing Network’s data on the use of conflict minerals in company supply chains in Table 3). Data points are tracked and accumulated into data profiles for individual companies (see ExxonMobil example in Table 4). Each of those data points are standardized converted using the calculated weight resulting in a point score within the system. All of the point scores are totaled for each company to construct an overall score. In the case of ExxonMobil, for example, the overall raw score is -63.8 on a scale from -100 to +100.

[INSERT TABLE 4 HERE]

Translating Data for Consumers

Scores from -100 to +100 are then translated into A to F grades for ease of reference in order to give consumers a more practical sense for how to think about the relative social and environmental responsibility of the companies they are considering in the marketplace [see Table 5 with the example of the consumer category of “gasoline”].

[INSERT TABLE 5 HERE]

The data are adjusted three times before their translation into the grades offered to the public. First, when the data source is originally added, the data are weighted according to its own merits (see Constructing the Database). Second, the data may be re-weighted in the overall formula to reflect adjustments that consider the merits of the data relative to the rest of the data sources included. This is particularly important to account for recently updated data and/or new data sources added every other year. Third, the point range for each grade category are adjusted to maintain some consistency in the variation reflected by the A to F scale of grading (e.g. in 2017 edition of the ratings, an “A-“ was assigned to companies falling between +14.00 and +19.99 points - see Table 5). This system of adjustments allows for checks and balances at three levels in the ratings database to account for errors and biases that may be inadvertently occurring at any one level due to unforeseen effects of adjusting the weighting of one or more variables without concurrently readjusting the relative weights of others.

As a part of this process, brands are traced to their company of origin and the corresponding company grade is attached to those brands (e.g. Dasani is a brand of bottled water created by Coca Cola). This allows consumers to hold companies themselves accountable rather than trying to keep track of which companies own what brands. Along similar lines, companies are often traded, sold, and/or spun off to/from larger parent companies. And in those cases, grades must be adjusted accordingly (e.g. 
Burt’s Bees [A-] was purchased by Clorox [F] in 2007). In these cases, again, I allow the data streams to reveal over time if the company has changed under new ownership rather than making a subjective assessment of what is happening outside of public view. This data driven approach provides a clear contrast to the more common, visceral reactions of many ethical consumers to “blacklist” companies when they “sell out” to larger corporations (data analyzed through 2017 had the two companies different but closer: Burt’s Bees at a C+ rating compared to Clorox at a D-).

This part of the research (connecting brands to companies to parent companies) process can take up to a quarter of the overall time involved in the research, as there are few requirements that compel companies to be transparent about which brands they own and who they themselves are owned by.

Updating The Research

While the website and smartphone app are updated whenever it is practical, the printed version of the research (The Better World Shopping Guide) is generally updated on a biennial basis. This updating process involves a combination of three major efforts to maintain the relevance and utility of the ratings.

First, along with a regular group of volunteers scattered across the US, I visit a handful of popular supermarkets to compare the brand/company listings under each category in previous edition with what currently exists on the shelves. I also include a review of a major big box stores (e.g. Target) and a major online retailer (e.g. Amazon). Volunteers jot down notes directly in the previous edition and mail me their annotated books. This allows for the updated ratings tables for each category to better reflect the choices consumers are facing in the current marketplace.

Second, the connections between existing brands and the companies that produce them are reconfirmed as well as the connections between companies and parent companies. This is a necessary step due to the relative frequency of mergers (e.g. American Airlines merging with US Airways), acquisitions (e.g. Unilever acquiring Ben & Jerry’s), separations (e.g. Proctor & Gamble selling off Pringles), etc. New brands and companies are also traced to their company of origin and/or parent company (e.g. Vitamin Water is owned by Glaceau which is part of Coca Cola) in order to accurately connect companies to new products that consumers encounter in the marketplace.

Third, the 76 data sources are checked to determine what updated data has been released by each source, which are in turn added to the ratings database. New sources of data are collected and evaluated for potential inclusion. Once all of the vetted data sources have been included and updated, the ratings formula is recalculated to account for necessary weighting adjustments to reflect any rebalancing needed due to the addition of newer data.

Understanding, Assessing and Addressing Bias in Ethical Rating Systems
Building a rating system for ethical consumers with some modicum of accuracy is, as one might imagine, no small task. While Better World Shopper is not the only system of its kind (there are at least four other similar projects internationally - see Appendix II), there is still little consensus on how to construct a rating system that will minimize the myriad biases that plague the efforts to measure corporate impacts on environmental sustainability and social justice (see Jones 2017). To shed light on how these biases impact ratings systems like this, I have detailed five of the most challenging biases that this system currently grapples with and how each is addressed (some more successfully than others).

1. Sparse Data Bias

Many companies are either too small or too recently founded to have much social and/or environmental impact data being tracked by the data sources investigating these issues. Because all companies are placed with a score of “0” initially, they may essentially “fly under the radar” of the rating system for many years before they grow to a size or age that makes them significant enough in the eyes of the data sources to follow/review/assess. This bias is the is by far the most common in the database. This is in part why the rating system places companies with little or no data at a tentative “C” grade until more data becomes available. Since most companies fall into this range, it is the most prudent assumption to make before having access to more and/or better data. Consumers are also guided to assume a neutral position when confronted with any brand or company not in the system.

2. Double Counting Bias

As with many research projects that rely on meta-analysis or attempt to synthesize data from a wide variety of sources, there is no practical way to determine exactly how data sources overlap in their assessment of companies. As a direct consequence, it is probable that some data on a company from “Data Source A” overlap with other data from “Data Source B”. The result of this is an increased likelihood of “double counting”. This means that some companies with richer data streams may be assessed either more harshly, in the case of double counted critical data, or, alternatively, more sympathetically, in the case of double counted laudatory data. It is also possible the companies have a bit of both in their data stream. This may result in more extreme variation at the top and bottom of the ratings than is justified relative to those companies with sparse data streams.

This type of bias is particularly pernicious and difficult to control for. It may be partially mitigated through adjusting the point ranges for the grades at either end [see Checks & Balances #3], but ultimately a secondary research project is needed to identify data sources that are most vulnerable to double counting and re-weight them accordingly.

3. Firewall Bias

The exclusion of any data coming directly from the companies themselves allows for a kind of firewall to exist between the ratings data and the potential spin/public relations/advertising/greenwashing efforts of the companies themselves (see Jones 2019).
While this is the most prudent approach to a data field rife with self-reporting bias, it also means that companies do not get any credit for legitimate efforts that have no independent, third party verification. This may limit the ability of the system to acknowledge in particular the work of smaller companies that likely have more limited resources to devote to outside certification efforts.

The self-reporting data firewall remains so fundamental to the functioning of the system as a whole, that this potential bias is largely accepted. Until more reliable third party verification systems exist to account for individual efforts legitimately adopted by companies, there is no way to include data that places the integrity of the entire rating system at risk.

4. **Company Size Bias**

While smaller, newer companies may remain relatively unscrutinized, larger, older companies are more likely to be tracked by multiple data sources and this often results in lower, more critical, ratings.

This tendency occurs in most major ethical consumer rating systems almost regardless of the methodological approach (see Jones 2017). While it may be worth monitoring, it may also be the case that this kind of “bias” is not inaccurate as much of the research does point to most of the troubling ethical behavior being linked to larger companies. Survey reliant rating systems (e.g. *GoodGuide*) suffered from the opposite bias as large companies that responded to survey inquiries were rewarded for their “transparency” in self-reporting, while smaller companies with fewer resources that were unable to complete surveys in a timely manner were downgraded for their non-disclosure or “secrecy”. There may be a way to compensate for this bias, but it remains difficult to track at present based on the lack of available data.

5. **Meso Level Bias**

Because this rating system focuses on the (meso level) impacts of companies themselves, it disregards both the (micro level) impacts of individual products and the (macro level) impacts of the industries as a whole (see Jones 2019). While both the available data and the level of consumer engagement both point to company-level ratings as being the most practical to analyze, it does mean that important analyses at the individual product and industry levels need to be undertaken by other researchers in the field if the public is going to have the full picture of the social and environmental implications of their purchases.

It may be possible with enough data to begin to rate whole industries, allowing consumers to garner a more effective macro level understanding of the relative responsibility of industries in a prolonged race to the bottom (e.g. petroleum) compared to those with more positive or mixed dynamics (e.g. outdoor gear, cleaning products). It may even be possible for another research project to adopt a *Consumer Reports* style approach to rating the supply chains behind individual products in order to make recommendations at the product level. However, this research project remains limited to holding individual companies accountable for their overall social and environmental practices.
Concluding Thoughts on Better World Shopper

Better World Shopper is currently the only rating system of its kind in the US (its only competitor, GoodGuide, created originally at UC Berkeley in 2007, abandoned all company-level environmental and social data from its system in 2017 to instead focus exclusively on health ratings based on individual product ingredients lists). As an app, it has been downloaded over 24,000 times; in its book form, it has sold more than 185,000 copies; and the website no longer tracks how many times it is accessed on a daily basis, but it is safe to say that there is a public demand for this kind of information. While all of the other rating systems are now run by nonprofits (Underwriter Laboratories purchased GoodGuide in 2012), I believe that academics are better positioned to take on this kind of work. A comprehensive system of transparency dealing with complex environmental and social issues in an ever-changing economic landscape requires institutions committed to the pursuit of truth.

Yes, ethical consumerism may be, in part, an exercise that caters to the needs of privileged, upper middle class, highly educated, white men and women shopping at Whole Foods in a handful of primarily wealthy, Anglophone nation-states. And yet, tracking the behavior of otherwise unaccountable economic institutions that are rapidly accruing power in a system of unfettered global capitalism may not be a terrible idea either. Returning to Cory Dologon’s (2010) comments on the relationship between public sociology and humanist sociology, I would add that we should strive to have that particular Venn diagram overlap as much as possible. Humanist sociology should be even more publicly-oriented and widely disseminated than it is, and public sociology should consider transformative, civically-engaged, community-oriented projects that help people think more critically about their daily lives and their collective relationship to institutions of power. We cannot afford sociology to become a production-based, utilitarian effort at knowledge accumulation, rather we need to put sociology in people’s pockets, integrate it into their regular routines, embrace it because it provides them with the tools they require to contribute to some small part of the solution to these overwhelming social and environmental problems.

On a good day, I see this particular project as laying the groundwork for efforts to democratize our economic system, allowing not just individuals, but local governments, nonprofits, small businesses, colleges, student groups, and, to my surprise, international networks of nuns, to have their collective economic voice heard in a system that otherwise blindly transforms their consumer dollars into tools for increasing social and environmental exploitation. Perhaps framing the marketplace as a space for potential democracy is just a first step to larger, more important conversations that need to be had about how both dollars need to be extricated from our political democracy for it to function properly, and how some of us having ten or one hundred times the economic “votes” of others may be a form of inequality that should be more seriously addressed if we wish democracy to hold any real meaning. And we need public sociology to help us collectively bring these kinds of conversations to the center of our public discourse.

Notes
1. Two exceptions of note are Green America and B Corp, both of which offer comprehensive certifications for companies. At present, these two ecolabels certify a relatively small (but growing) number of businesses.

2. In this case, I use the traditional research methods definitions of each of these terms: validity referring to whether a research approach is measuring what it is intending to measure and reliability referring to whether data are consistently measuring the same thing when repeated.

3. Many SRI ratings agencies charge not insignificant subscription fees to have access to some of the data being used to determine the ratings for companies being evaluated. The raw data, however, are typically not provided even at this level of access as it would potentially jeopardize their relationship with their data sources (the companies) by making them vulnerable to their competitors. Additionally, the agencies want to avoid the increased scrutiny that often comes with more detailed transparency.

4. Product data is nearly impossible to keep pace with as products are constantly changed, removed, replaced, and replicated with slightly/greatly varied characteristics. Industry level data allows consumers to gain a macro perspective but cannot typically be mobilized as most consumers cannot afford to boycott whole industries (e.g. apparel, petroleum, automobiles).

5. As of 2017, GoodGuide shifted from being an ethical consumer rating system to being focused exclusively on assessing the potential health impacts of product ingredients.

References


**TABLES**

**Table 1. Other Ethical Consumer Rating Systems**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating System</th>
<th>Media Produced</th>
<th>Print Copies Sold</th>
<th>Monthly Website Visitors</th>
<th>Phone App Downloads</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Consumer</td>
<td>magazine, website</td>
<td>30,000/yr</td>
<td>125,000</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Table 2. Incorporated Social Justice Data Sources**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Data Sources</th>
<th>Issues Tracked</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race, Ethnicity</td>
<td>· NAACP</td>
<td>diversity, equal opportunity, respect for cultural identities, migrant labor issues, ethnic group discrimination, indigenous rights, genocide, human trafficking, refugees, environmental justice</td>
<td>NAACP’s Opportunity &amp; Diversity Scorecard: Hotel &amp; Lodging Industry measures racial inclusion and diversity practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>· Fair Trade Federation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>· Global Sullivan Principles</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>· Burma Campaign</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>· War on Want</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>· Free2Work Campaign</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>· Political Economy Research Institute</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>· Human Rights Watch</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>· Amnesty International</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class</td>
<td>· Securities &amp; Exchange Commission</td>
<td>worker health/safety, sweatshops, child labor, labor organizing rights, bribery, corruption, forced labor, living wage, unions, poverty, working hour limits, excessive executive pay, fair labor practices, efforts reducing global inequality/poverty</td>
<td>Clean Clothes Campaign’s Let’s Clean Up Fashion Report measures living wages, codes of conduct, and freedom of association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>· Oxfam International</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>· TransFair USA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>· Fair Labor Association</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>· Clean Clothes Campaign</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>· Labour Behind the Label</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>· AFL-CIO</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>· Jobs with Justice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>· BCorp</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Human Rights Campaign
· Intl Labor Rights Forum
· Ethical Trading Initiative
· Ain’t I A Woman Campaign
· Maquila Solidarity Network
· Corporate Knights
· As You Sow

rights of women in the workplace, gender equity, sexual abuse, LGBTQ+ workplace discrimination, right to childcare, forced overtime, women in leadership roles

Table 3. Data Source Weighting with Example

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>x</th>
<th>Data Source Characteristics</th>
<th>Date Source Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.5 2010s</td>
<td>Responsible Sourcing Network: Conflict Minerals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 2000s</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.5 pre-2000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reputation</td>
<td></td>
<td>1 government data</td>
<td>nonprofit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 nonprofit data</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.5 for-profit data</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rigor</td>
<td></td>
<td>2 science-based</td>
<td>hybrid model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 hybrid model</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.5 non-scientific</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longevity</td>
<td></td>
<td>3 5+ years</td>
<td>2014 - 2016 = 3 yrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 3-4 years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 1-2 years</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4. Example of Data Points Being Tracked: ExxonMobil

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Point Tracked</th>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Data Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Money spent on lobbying</td>
<td>$247 million</td>
<td>-8.3</td>
<td>Center for Public Integrity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global Climate Change Score</td>
<td>35/100</td>
<td>-2.2</td>
<td>CERES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenwashing Award</td>
<td>x1</td>
<td>-1.0</td>
<td>CorpWatch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top companies stopping climate legislation</td>
<td>listed</td>
<td>-2.0</td>
<td>Greenpeace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGBTQ Equality Index Score</td>
<td>14/100</td>
<td>-4.8</td>
<td>Human Rights Campaign</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top 100 Corporate Criminals</td>
<td>#5</td>
<td>-3.0</td>
<td>Multinational Monitor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worst Corporations of the Year</td>
<td>x5</td>
<td>-5.9</td>
<td>Multinational Monitor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money spent on campaign contributions</td>
<td>$19 million</td>
<td>-3.2</td>
<td>Open Secrets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top 100 Toxic Air Polluters</td>
<td>#5</td>
<td>-2.0</td>
<td>Political Economy Research Institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top 100 Toxic Water Polluters</td>
<td>#19</td>
<td>-1.8</td>
<td>Political Economy Research Institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top 100 Toxic Greenhouse Gas Polluters</td>
<td>#4</td>
<td>-2.0</td>
<td>Political Economy Research Institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top 12 Corporate Tax Dodgers</td>
<td>listed</td>
<td>-1.0</td>
<td>Rainforest Action Network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Responsibility</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>-2.0</td>
<td>Responsible Shopper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funders of climate change &quot;junk&quot; science</td>
<td>listed</td>
<td>-3.0</td>
<td>Responsible Shopper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict Minerals Responsibility Score</td>
<td>6.7/100</td>
<td>-2.6</td>
<td>Responsible Sourcing Network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pick Your Poison Petroleum Industry</td>
<td>bottom</td>
<td>-3.0</td>
<td>Sierra Club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Legislative Exchange Council</td>
<td>founding member</td>
<td>-6.0</td>
<td>Source Watch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Climate Accountability Scorecard</td>
<td>poor</td>
<td>-4.0</td>
<td>Union of Concerned Scientists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ongoing Boycotts</td>
<td>x3</td>
<td>-6.0</td>
<td>Corporate Accountability International, Greenpeace, Green America</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 5.** Grade Translation Rubric with Example: Gasoline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Score Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A+</td>
<td>+25.00 or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>+20.00 to +24.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td>+14.00 to +19.99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/has
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Score Range</th>
<th>Companies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td>+9.00 to +13.99</td>
<td>Sunoco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>+4.00 to +8.99</td>
<td>Sunoco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B-</td>
<td>+3.00 to +3.99</td>
<td>Petro Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C+</td>
<td>+1.00 to +2.99</td>
<td>Citgo, Hess, Ultramar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>-0.99 to +0.99</td>
<td>Circle K, Costco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C-</td>
<td>-1.00 to -2.99</td>
<td>Total, Valero, Beacon, Diamond Shamrock, Stop N Go</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D+</td>
<td>-3.00 to -3.99</td>
<td>Marathon, Ashland, Speedway, Pilot, SuperAmerica, Flying J</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>-4.00 to -8.99</td>
<td>Conoco, Phillips 66, Jet, Superclean, Tosco, Union 76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D-</td>
<td>-9.00 to -13.99</td>
<td>Shell, BP, Arco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>-14.00 or less</td>
<td>Exxon, Mobil, Esso, Chevron, Gulf, Texaco, Unocal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>