

# The Sociological Imagination

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn how the sociological imagination allows us to grasp the interconnectedness of history and biography. This section will introduce you to C. Wright Mills and his concept of the sociological imagination. You will also continue to build your self and social awareness by deepening your understanding of sociology. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

## 1. Thinking Like a Sociologist

Many people believe they understand the world and the events taking place within it. But there's a difference between understanding the world in a colloquial, every-day way, and actually engaging in a systematic attempt to study the social world, as sociologists do. In this section, you'll learn to think like a sociologist, and to bring sociological thinking to your understanding of the world.



### BIG IDEA

Sociologists connect the specific to the general.

The **sociological imagination** is a concept established by sociologist C. Wright Mills (1916-1962), which provides a framework for understanding our social world that far surpasses any common sense notion we might derive from our limited social experiences. Mills was a 20th-century sociologist who brought tremendous insight to the daily life of society.

Mills stated: "Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both." The sociological imagination is the mindset used by sociologists to make the connection between personal challenges and larger social issues.

Mills identified and categorized the challenges in people's lives as "troubles" (or personal challenges and individual background) and "issues" (or larger social challenges and history). Mills' sociological imagination allows individuals to see the relationships between events in their personal lives and events in their society. This mindset provides the ability for individuals to realize the relationship between their personal experiences and the larger social and historical context in which they live their lives.

"Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both."

C. Wright Mills

Sociologists employing Mills' sociological imagination are looking for broad, general patterns in the behavior of individuals and particular groups of people. They seek to recognize broad, general trends and see how these trends apply in the lives of individual people. Similarly, when you recognize how an individual's behavior is affected by patterns in their culture, you're strengthening your **self and social awareness skills**.

For example, many sociologists try to understand why poverty exists. Why are resources distributed unevenly across society? What are the patterns in human behavior around social institutions?

One perspective is that society is stratified to ensure that it functions well for people at all levels of society. The class system is supported by the education system and other social institutions to ensure there are sufficient workers at all levels of society so it can function in its most effective manner. People have a secure place in society. This perspective will look for the symbiosis of society. From a global perspective, a sociologist might see how someone's options can be affected by global events in the supply chain to support the larger world economy.

Another perspective is that people are restricted by social institutions in their neighborhoods and areas of town so that the class system becomes a self-perpetuating system of oppression and subjugation of one class by another. Those who buck the class system in an attempt to move up the ladder are required to overcome obstacles to class movement. This perspective will look for disagreements and discord in society. From a global perspective, a sociologist will look at other societies to see how other individuals are kept in their position in the global economy by the needs of the upper class in society.



#### PEOPLE TO KNOW

##### C. Wright Mills

Famous American sociologist who saw personal problems as related to larger societal issues.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Sociological Imagination

The idea, coined by C. Wright Mills, that each person's individual lives and personal biographies are deeply connected to the larger trends of society and history.

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## 2. Issues and Troubles

According to Mills, **troubles** are the private problems experienced within the character or life of the individual and within the scope of their immediate relationship to others. Your troubles could involve your relationship with your spouse, or your search for a new job, or your decision to get a dog, or the tensions in your group of old high school friends.

Mills identified that we function in our personal lives as actors—that is, as people who are taking actions and performing roles—who make choices about our friends, family, groups, work, school, and other issues within our control. We have a degree of influence on the outcome of matters within this personal level.

➞ **EXAMPLE** If your sibling is struggling with their student loan debt, you could help by loaning them money or helping them think through their options. Your sibling's situation is within the realm of your personal troubles because you know them and have a relationship with them.

According to Mills, **issues** are those larger social and cultural forces and trends that lie beyond one's personal control. These pertain to broader matters of organization and process, which are rooted in society rather than

in the individual. The scope of the issues impacting your life could vary from the common assumptions about marriage in your community, to how the lack of universal health care in the USA impacts your career path, to the effects of climate change on your coastal town.

➔ **EXAMPLE** You can help your sibling make a plan to deal with their debt, but you are not likely to be able to affect the larger situation of the student debt crisis in the United States or the bad loan terms offered by lenders, because these aspects of the problem are social issues, outside the realm of your individual influence.



### Self and Social Awareness: Skill Reflect

Identifying that someone close to you is facing a hardship, such as struggling to pay student loans, shows an understanding at a surface level. However, by digging deeper and examining issues behind the hardship enable you to understand the person's situation in a more meaningful way. Think about how you can examine issues in a sociological manner in order to gain more insight.

You may be able to participate in political advocacy to influence social issues. This is the concept behind activism and many forms of political advocacy, including actions as basic as voting in elections. When a large number of individuals work together to influence social issues, they sometimes succeed.

➔ **EXAMPLE** You can help your sibling manage their debt, but you can't make the lender stop issuing bad loan terms. However, you can ask your elected representative to support efforts to cancel student loan debt, and you can organize many people in your community to do the same.



### THINK ABOUT IT

What is a trouble that you are experiencing in your life right now? Is it connected to a larger social issue in any way? What is the intersection where your own life meets the broader social, political, economic, or cultural trends in your country?

### IN CONTEXT

Some students do not purchase the required textbooks for college classes at both 2-year colleges and 4-year colleges and universities, even though textbooks are important tools for keeping up with coursework. In some cases the student may prefer to save money by using library copies or sharing with a friend, but these options won't always be available. Many students simply do not have the money to purchase textbooks, which can be very expensive.

It might seem like a "choice" to not purchase textbooks, but it is related to many social issues including rising tuition rates, decreasing financial aid, increasing costs of living, and decreasing wages. First generation students often experience "sticker shock" at the additional costs of an education that may not be covered by loans, grants and scholarships. A student who does not purchase the assigned textbook might see this as a private problem, but this student is part of a growing number of college students who are forced to make financial decisions based on structural circumstances.



## TERMS TO KNOW

### Troubles

The private problems experienced within the character or life of the individual and within the scope of their immediate relationship to others.

### Issues

The larger social and cultural forces and trends that lie beyond one's personal control.

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## 3. Intersections of Issues and Troubles

A majority of personal problems are not experienced as exclusively personal issues, but are influenced and affected by social norms, habits, and expectations. Consider issues like homelessness, crime, divorce, and access to healthcare. Are these all caused by personal choices, or by societal problems? Using the sociological imagination, we can view these issues as interconnected, as both personal and public concerns.

### IN CONTEXT

The American Dream is a common myth in the United States that says that each generation has the opportunity to become better educated than their parents and earn more money and enjoy more luxuries than the generations before them. While this concept has never been true for all people in the United States, it used to be true sometimes for some people, particularly for white people and for certain immigrant communities.

One origin of this myth is that capitalism boasts an open class system, in which class status is said to be related to hard work and individual ethic and that upward mobility is well within the control of the individual. However, in recent decades, the ability to out-earn one's parents has declined sharply, even for people with more privilege such as white men. Sociologists could choose to look at relative levels of commitment and work ethic in individuals who do not earn more than previous generations.

But the sociological imagination leads sociologists to also consider the other factors that make upward mobility elusive to many people in the USA, even in an open class system. Some of these factors include declining schools, rising unemployment, the absence of a universal safety net or health care, rising housing costs, declining wages, rising educational costs, and rising rates of mass incarceration, as well as the impacts of racism, sexism, and many other forms of bigotry.

For any given individual who has not out-performed their parents economically and thus has not achieved the myth of the American Dream, any one or multiple of these factors could have had as much of an impact on their life outcomes as any personal choices they made.

C. Wright Mills, who originated the concept of the sociological imagination, explained it this way: "The very structure of opportunities has collapsed. Both the correct statement of the problem and the range of possible solutions require us to consider the economic and political institutions of the society, and not merely the personal situation and character of a scatter of individuals."



We have seen that the myth of the American Dream has never been true for all people, and is true for even fewer people today. What does it mean that people still believe in it at all? What does it mean for class mobility to be a foundational goal of Americans? What does this emphasis on “doing better than your parents did” say about the American national character?

A key premise of the sociological imagination is the concept that the individual and society are inseparable. It is impossible to study one without the other. German sociologist Norbert Elias used the term **figuration** to refer to the process of simultaneously analyzing the behavior of individuals and the society that shapes that behavior. Additionally, analyzing the behavior of individuals and how society shapes their behavior requires strong **self and social awareness skills**.

We can look at this intersection through the example of religion. While people have largely personal and individual experiences with religion, all religion exists in a larger social context. For instance, an individual’s religious practice may be influenced by governmental authority, traditional holidays, educational institutions, places of worship, oppression of religious minorities, well-established rituals, and so on. These influences underscore the important relationship between individual practices of religion and the social pressures that influence that religious experience.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Miriam is Jewish, but her family didn't observe many Jewish holidays or rituals when she was a child. This might be because her parents weren't interested in Jewish practice, or because they had other activities and values that they held in higher priority for their family. But if Miriam grew up in a predominantly Christian town in the USA, her parents' choices might have been more influenced by the social structure around them than by their personal beliefs. It is easy to see how this could happen if Miriam's town had a lot of antisemitism, and the family had to downplay their Judaism for safety reasons. But the influence could be much more subtle than that. If Miriam's mother was given off from work on Christmas but was required to work on Yom Kippur, how would that influence the family's religious practice?

### IN CONTEXT

Many Americans who worked in manufacturing lost their jobs in the 1970s and 1980s when American business leaders decided to move manufacturing overseas, where labor was cheaper and there were fewer legal protections for workers. The workers who lost their jobs in this wave were not laid off because they were bad workers, or because they had done something wrong—they lost their jobs because of the greater economic trend of globalization, and the individual choices of the business leaders who decided to capitalize on this trend. It was cheaper for their manufacturing jobs to be done overseas, and the business leaders sent the jobs there to gain an advantage, regardless of the impact on their existing workforce.

If you were one of these people who lost a manufacturing job, you’d likely feel disgruntled, and worry it was your fault. But in this case, it really wasn’t. Your personal trouble stemmed from the globalization of the economy, something over which you had no control. It didn’t mean that you were a bad person or incapable; it’s simply that these broader social forces and historical trends were moving in a certain direction which caused you to lose your job. The person who had control in this situation was the company owner who decided to move the manufacturing division overseas, not you, the worker who was laid off, nor your manager who relayed the news.

How would someone employing a sociological imagination view this situation? If you use a sociological imagination, you are able to connect the broader social issue—that it's much cheaper for these jobs to be produced overseas—with the personal issue, the loss of jobs.



#### BIG IDEA

The sociological imagination involves being able to connect your personal troubles with broader social forces. This is a skill that takes time for you to refine: connecting the general with the particular, personal problems with historical transcendent trends.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Figuration

The process of simultaneously analyzing the behavior of individuals and the society that shapes that behavior

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## 4. Benefits of a Sociological Imagination

Whether or not you are working as a sociologist, there are many benefits to employing a sociological imagination. Some of these benefits include:

1. It enables you to see and assess the truth of your general background assumptions about people and about society.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Your friend is in recovery from alcoholism. Is their alcoholism the result of their personal choices and genetics alone? A sociological imagination can help you reflect on what other forces may be impacting your friend's recovery, such as the prevalence of alcohol in your shared community's culture and the impact of social stigma around addiction.

2. It enables you to recognize the constraints that affect people's lives.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Your sister is thinking about adopting a baby, but she is worried about how her career might be affected. A sociological imagination can help you identify the trends around bias against mothers in the workplace as well as the ways in which the government supports new mothers, and the ways in which more support is needed, particularly for adoptive parents and single parents.

3. The sociological perspective allows us to be more informed citizens. It enables you to connect your private, personal problems with larger social forces.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Your neighbor is an undocumented immigrant who needs to drive to work, but your state doesn't allow undocumented immigrants to get driver's licenses. Every day's commute is dangerous for your neighbor, who could be pulled over for a minor traffic violation and then, when unable to produce a license, end up in immigration court or even deportation proceedings. As a neighbor, you might help out by giving your neighbor a ride whenever possible. As a citizen employing a sociological imagination, you might work to push your state legislature to offer driver's licenses to everyone.

#### 4. The sociological perspective helps you understand and appreciate diversity.

➞ **EXAMPLE** One's ability to see not just distinct but communal patterns among social groups and organizations enables you to identify unfair or biased practices in the workplace or within other social organizations. As an individual you can personally develop a greater sense of empathy for others, or as a Human Resources professional you will be able to ensure equity among candidates and employees.

It's also important for a sociologist to employ a **global perspective**, which allows you to look at an individual society in the context of the larger global system. Just as we examine the individual in the context of their country and culture, we also examine each country and culture in the context of all of the other countries and cultures found in this world. This is increasingly the norm for sociologists, especially in reference to what we discussed earlier about globalization causing jobs to leave the USA.

➞ **EXAMPLE** A sociologist employing the sociological imagination might investigate the impacts of globalization on former manufacturing workers in the American Midwest. But if that sociologist is also employing a global perspective, they might choose to also research the impact of the arrival of manufacturing jobs on workers in Vietnam. The troubles of a manufacturing worker in Ohio can be closely connected to the issues impacting a worker on the other side of the planet.



#### Self and Social Awareness: Skill Tip

As previously described, having an understanding of other cultures improves your personal and professional life. Consider your career goal. How will studying sociology, and building your self and social awareness, assist you in this career? Also consider other aspects of your life, such as playing a sport or engaging in a hobby. How will studying sociology, and building your self and social awareness, help you be successful in this aspect of your life?



#### BRAINSTORM

How can we understand how American jobs and the American economy are affected without referencing broader global trends? This is an important part of sociological analysis: the global perspective.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Global Perspective

A look at an individual society with respect to the larger global system.



#### SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned how **thinking like a sociologist** means employing the sociological imagination, a concept developed by American sociologist C. Wright Mills. The sociological imagination is the process of connecting **troubles and issues**, and the **intersections of issues and troubles**, in people's lives. You also saw the **benefits of a sociological imagination** even for people who are not sociologists. Finally, you explored how thinking like a sociologist strengthens your self and social awareness skill.

Best of luck in your learning!

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**REFERENCES** Mills, C. W. (1959). *The sociological imagination*. Oxford University Press.



## TERMS TO KNOW

### **Figuration**

The process of simultaneously analyzing the behavior of individuals and the society that shapes that behavior.

### **Global Perspective**

A look at an individual society with respect to the larger global system.

### **Issues**

The larger social and cultural forces and trends that lie beyond one's personal control.

### **Sociological Imagination**

The idea, coined by C. Wright Mills, that each person's individual lives and personal biographies are deeply connected to the larger trends of society and history.

### **Troubles**

The private problems experienced within the character or life of the individual and within the scope of their immediate relationship to others.



## PEOPLE TO KNOW

### **C. Wright Mills**

Famous American sociologist who saw personal problems as related to larger societal issues.