

Sociology is an academic discipline that examines the nature of society, particularly modern societies, and the relationships between individuals and the societies in which they live. While there are many useful sociological theories and concepts, perhaps the most important attribute for introductory sociology students to acquire is a sociological curiosity. This requires asking about the social contexts in which individual behavior and individual choices are occurring. Introductory-level sociology class reading lists often include Charles Wright Mills' essay entitled "The Sociological Imagination."



sociological curiosity:

Mills outlines several important concepts but, more importantly, urges students to ask questions about how social arrangements create the conditions for individual choices. Developing the routine of asking questions about how social structures affect individual experiences is essential for understanding modern society and our position in it.

This short article updates Mills' essay, closely following Mills' ideas while employing more contemporary language and examples. The goal is to enable students and other readers to pivot directly from Mills' framework to contemporary social issues. In this way, we can begin to locate our personal biographies in the current historical moment.

mills' concepts

Mills delineates two related pairs of conceptual distinctions: personal troubles versus public issues; and situating sociology at the intersection of individual biographies and social history.

We all have personal troubles at some point in our lives. For example, we might be disappointed in the trajectory of a romantic relationship; we might fail an exam; we might mess up



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Saul Landau with the sociologist C. Wright Mills.

during an interview for a job we were really hoping to get; our car might be involved in a traffic accident. Some people prefer to keep very personal troubles, such as suicidal thoughts, traumatic personal experiences or drug use, private and confidential.

Public issues are the same situations viewed from a different vantage point. However personal and private, these life



updating c. wright mills

by jerry a. jacobs

events are often common occurrences that many other people are also experiencing. The sociological observer seeks to connect these personal experiences with structural arrangements in the social system. Mills uses the example of unemployment to develop this contrast.

In these terms, consider unemployment. When, in a city of 100,000, only one [person] (Mills uses the masculine pronouns; I have changed “man” to “person” and use the gender-neutral “they” instead of “he” and “his.”) is unemployed, that is their personal trouble, and for its relief we properly look to the character of the person, their skills and their immediate opportunities. But when in a nation of 50 million employees, 15 million people are unemployed, that is a public issue, and we may not hope to find its solution within the range of opportunities open to any one individual. 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...

It is not hard to identify contemporary examples of public issues that extend beyond the realm of personal troubles:

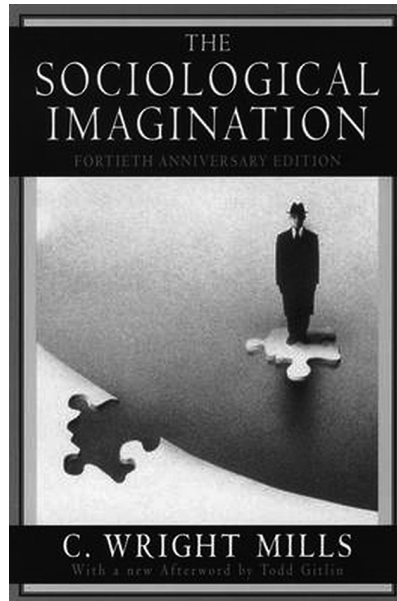
A married couple may seek a divorce for any number of personal reasons, but when nearly half of marriages end in

Public issues personal troubles viewed from a different vantage point.

divorce, we may ask about the social conditions that give rise to these very personal decisions.

A high school student-athlete may experience a sports-related injury and may view the matter as bad luck, but when millions of athletes suffer from injuries, we may be justified in seeking to identify systemic causes.

A middle-aged person who gains weight because of their sedentary job may blame themselves for eating too much or exercising too little, but when millions of people exceed the clinical definition of obesity, weight issues become a



C. Wright Mills is best remembered for *The Sociological Imagination*, where he set forth his views on how social science should be pursued.

public health issue and not just a matter of individual dietary choices.

Why don't people easily grasp the social dimensions of their private lives? After all, we are all social beings, proficient at language, equipped with “social intelligence” that enable us to read even subtle social cues. Mills' answer was that while we are adept at navigating within our own immediate social setting—that is, our school, job, family and neighborhood—we can easily lose our way in the much broader and more complex social world that extends far beyond our personal experience. The economy, culture, political system and complex social institu-

tions are broad and powerful social arrangements that channel and constrain individual choices, but they often remain opaque. As a result, Mills suggested, people are prone to feeling trapped, with an unsettled sense that their lives are being shaped by poorly understood social forces that remain beyond their individual control. Developing a sociological imagination is a way of overcoming these feelings and beginning to learn how to navigate more effectively outside one's immediate surroundings.

How common does a problem have to be before it becomes a social issue? There is no clear line. Some problems are quite rare yet frequently discussed, while other problems are common yet are not recognized. For example, mass shootings receive high visibility coverage in the media yet gun violence that occurs on a daily basis is far more deadly while generally receiving less coverage in the media. Indeed, the journey that issues traverse on their way to becoming established as public issues has itself become an established area of sociological inquiry.

Does a problem stop being a personal trouble once it becomes a public issue? Not at all. In the examples offered above, there is typically a personal as well as a social dimension to the issue. The victims of gun violence and their families experience this type of tragedy in a personal way, and the support they provide and receive in the aftermath of a shooting is unique to each family. A marriage that is on the rocks is due to the unique circumstances of the couple—their problems communicating, their financial concerns, and so on. But it is still the case that broader social conditions contribute to the struggles that individuals face in their own marriages.

Central to Mills' approach is the interplay between the

individual and the social, and between personal and social understandings of the same issue. For example, the overweight man is not entirely wrong when he points to his personal actions and inactions that have contributed to his weight. Indeed, his focus on individual choices may be the most likely to accomplish his particular goals. Mills, however, insisted that individuals are even better off when they put their own circumstances in context—the social and historical context. For example, food choices are influenced by the ability of giant food corporations to profit from food that can be processed at low cost and marketed by a variety of carefully tested strategies. Our food system thus provides a context in which bad choices are inexpensive and readily available. Thus, Mills would urge attention to changing the social context of food in addition to developing a personal diet and exercise regime.

The term “social structure” appears twice in Mills’ essay and is not defined either time. For our purposes, “social structure” points to the constellation of social institutions, economic systems, political arrangements, and cultural values in which individuals find themselves situated. Social structure is the broad social context which Mills contrasts with “personal milieu”—one’s particular residence, circle of friends, immediate family, and so on.

Mills was not satisfied with individual explanations of important social trends, although he is equally wary of attributing all social problems to society. Mills tries to avoid both extremes by focusing on the interplay between the individual and society. His unique way of expressing this interplay is his famous claim that sociology’s domain lies at the intersection of individual biographies and social history.

Mills called on students of society “to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two in society...No social study that does not come back to the problems of biography, of history and of their intersections within a society has completed its intellectual journey.

By history, Mills did not mean listing the presidents in order or remembering which generals were in charge during which wars. Rather what Mills had in mind are the social events that become salient in the lives of individuals. Wars and presidents can be consequential, to be sure, but so too are economic dislocations, cultural trends, social policies, and social movements.

We can understand what Mills had in mind here from three vantage points. In one sense, linking biography and history is representative of Mills’ insistence on making sociology understandable to a broader public. By placing individuals and their

biographies at the center of sociological inquiry, Mills sought to make sociology meaningful and alive for individuals. This is one aspect of what contemporary sociologists call “public sociology.”

Mills also emphasized the individual as a counterbalance to the abstract sociological theory of his day. He viewed the formal sociological theorizing that dominated the field as a problem not only because it was difficult to decipher but also because it exaggerated the role of impersonal social forces and downplayed the agency of individuals. Individuals are influenced by the established social structure, yet individuals acting collectively are able to alter these established institutions.

Finally, Mills’ focus on the intersection of biography and history is another way of placing individuals in their social context. In this way, Mills’ notion of biography and history is an elaboration of his thesis about personal troubles and public issues. Specifying the precise historical context at a particular stage in one’s life enables us to see the role of social influences most clearly. For example, those entering the job market in 2009, in the wake of a global financial crisis, had a hard time, and the effects of their difficult entry into the labor market endured for years afterward. Turning to another case, queer people who came of age during the period during which homosexuality was illegal and almost unspoken had a very different life course

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than those who were born after same-sex marriage had become legal. In a final example, refugees seeking to escape war zones, gang violence or ethnic cleansing now sometimes spend years in makeshift camps, whereas an earlier generation had a better chance to find open doors in destination countries.

The goal of situating individuals in their social context is most fully developed when the specific historical context is specified with precision. From this point of view, historical context situates our experiences and the choices we make as individuals. This approach puts personal troubles in the context of the specific contemporary patterns as experienced by individuals.

A sociological imagination is the ability to switch back and forth between the individual viewpoint and the social viewpoint. Sociological curiosity is the desire to seek out the social context and connections between our own experiences and broader cultural institutional, political and economic arrangements.

Some view a sociological lens as disempowering, leading them to ask, “Doesn’t this mean that I am just another statistic? Doesn’t this reduce my most personal experiences to a routine and common occurrence?” However, seeing our experiences as part of a broader pattern enables us to connect with others who share similar (if ultimately unique) experiences. If there are common social explanations, then perhaps that can form the beginning of an ability to make social changes that will enable people to alleviate their problems.



A sketch of sociologist C. Wright Mills.

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families recently reported that they would not be able to cover an unexpected \$400 expense. Jobs have become less stable and secure, and creating satisfying careers now requires more creativity and improvisation. Perhaps most difficult to justify is the fact that millions of children are growing up in poverty in a country with unprecedented wealth and resources. This not only makes life more hazardous and challenging for children in the present but also diminishes their subsequent prospects for fulfilling their potential—in school, employment, and other settings—throughout the rest

of their lives.

Extreme levels of economic inequality, a long-standing concern among sociologists, can spill over into political and social spheres. Those with economic power seek to rewrite the rules of the game in their own favor, thus protecting their advantages in the future. Without a level playing field, the economic race is engineered to favor those who currently have the most. Whether it is internet platforms such as Uber shifting risks and costs onto their drivers, or landlords pressing to make it easier to evict tenants, the playing field is tilted, and consequently, one side ends up winning most of the time.

For a curious, sociologically minded student, these patterns of inequality raise many questions. Does inequality in American society make it more difficult for some to achieve the American dream? Why is inequality more extreme in the US than in many other developed countries? Why is inequality growing? How does my experience compare with others? How do I personally fit in to this unequal landscape?

Mills would insist that outlining the contours of inequality and injustice is just the beginning. In addition to asking what reforms would be most practical and ben-

eficial, Mills would ask what deeper trends contribute to growing inequality. The tectonic shifts in globalization, technological change, government policies increasingly hostile to workers all contribute to inequality, and serious efforts at change need to address all of these forces.

While he did not examine the civil rights movement in his own studies, Mills’ distinction between personal troubles and public issues can be readily applied to issues of racial justice. For example, the “Black Lives Matters” movement has focused on

mills’ ideas: then and now

American society has evolved in many ways since Mills’ day. Today we face some of the same issues that the U.S. faced in the 1950s, while some new challenges have emerged. Mills would see these as instances of structural change that produce widespread dislocations and raise issues requiring a socially and politically aware citizenship. Mills would have us raise similar questions about today’s pressing social issues as he sought to raise in his time.

Some of Mills’ illustrations of social issues seem remarkably contemporary. For example, Mills wrote that “It is not only information that [we] need—in this Age of Fact, information often

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dominates their attention and overwhelms their capacities to assimilate it.” This concern has only grown with the advent of the 24-7 news cycle and the rise of social media. Mills felt that the accumulation of facts was of limited value unless these facts were situated within a comprehensible framework.

Since Mills’ day, inequality has grown substantially, with elites wielding even more concentrated power than ever. A small set of elite families has amassed more wealth than the bottom half of the country. At the same time, nearly half of

violence and discrimination against African Americans and other people of color in the criminal justice system. Video recordings of encounters between the police and citizens, including cases where police shot unarmed African Americans, have helped to shine a spotlight on these issues. Police encounters with residents are part of a broader pattern of racial disparities in the criminal justice system. Efforts at reform include legislation to reduce mass incarceration, reduce reliance on cash bail, reduce re-incarceration during parole, and restore the voting rights of ex-offenders.

Sociological curiosity could pose many questions here as well. How does the criminal justice system connect to other aspects of racial inequality, such as residential segregation and disparities in education? What factors contribute to racial disparities in behavior by police? Does more diversity in police forces result in significant changes in behavior? Can new technologies such as dashboard cameras and body cameras deter misconduct? What challenges do new techniques like residential surveillance cameras pose for racial profiling? We need to think sociologically not only about social patterns and social causes but also about possible reforms and solutions.

The “Me Too” Movement brought renewed attention to gender-based violence and harassment. This is just one of many aspects of ways that gender has shaped and continues to influence the lives of all people. Personal experiences of trauma—often too difficult to share—are becoming understood as part of a broader pattern of men’s power over women.

In recent years, sociologists have come to view gender, race, and ethnicity through an “intersectional” lens that focuses on how the lived experience of particular groups reflects the combination of class, racial, and gender experiences. An intersectional focus raises many questions regarding how to connect personal experiences and the economic and political context in which particular groups live. Mills would ask whether common solutions can be forged that speak to the experiences of diverse groups.

sociology for diverse publics

The current state of political polarization may make addressing social issues such as those mentioned here seem unlikely if not impossible. Yet even during the 1950s, a time Mills characterized as one of unease, complacency, and malaise, there were also important stirrings that led to social and political movements that flowered in later decades: the civil rights, anti-war, environmentalism, women’s and gay liberation, disability rights, and environmentalism, among others. In other words, the conservative period of the 1950s gave way to a remarkably dynamic period of social change that spanned the 1960s and

1970s. Political impasses do not last forever, in part because new generations with new formative experiences replace older generations.

For Mills, a sociological imagination is not just for sociologists. It is needed for journalism that can put the cacophony of current events in a broader structural perspective. It is needed by scientists and engineers to develop powerful new technologies for good of society rather than endangering the human race by risking unsustainable climate change, nuclear annihilation, comprehensive computer-based surveillance and genetic engineering. It is needed by novelists who can reveal the nature of the contemporary experience thru their fictional characters. Furthermore, as we endeavor to emerge from the pandemic of 2020, a sociological imagination will be needed by political leaders and activists who will try to restore a sense of normalcy while working toward a better, fairer, safer, and more resilient “new normal.”

Mills’ notion of a sociological imagination has intrigued and inspired countless classes of sociology students. His call to connect personal experiences and social institutions and structures continues to lead curious students to explore the most compelling issues of our time. Going beyond simply situating individuals with their social context, Mills constantly endeavored to think in fresh and unconventional ways about the challenges facing our society and to call for action to redress injustice and affronts to human dignity. This is the promise of a sociological perspective as we—as individuals and as a society—face a future full of risks and opportunities.

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