

1 The Sociological Perspective

Chapter Summary

Sociology challenges taken-for-granted or common-sense understandings of the social world by viewing reality as socially constructed. This is not intended as a philosophical position; rather, this view recognizes that to be human is to be a social being and that society emerges out of social groups. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann argue that society is a human product. They also claim that once human activity is repeated, it becomes standardized or made official often to such a degree that most of us do not question the relationship between our individual experiences and larger social structures.

Sociologists question personal beliefs and assumptions, employing what C. Wright Mills referred to as the *sociological imagination*—a perspective adopted to understand human experience in a larger social context. By using our sociological imagination, we can expose unexamined assumptions and affect social change. While sociology is a scientific endeavour, the sociological imagination is not a neutral point of view since sociologists are not interested in seeking universal truth. Neither the natural sciences nor the social sciences can ever achieve total objectivity. This is because underlying our taken-for-granted understandings, there is a complex system of beliefs and values, and our claims to knowledge are constructed on the basis of shared communal meanings—what Husserl referred to as the “lifeworld.” However, this does not pose a problem for sociologists, who embrace a diversity of understandings in the study of society and human interaction.

Consider the conditions of unemployed workers during the Great Depression. Utilizing the sociological imagination helps individual workers, unable to find work, place their solitary experience within wider society. Their own unemployment (personal trouble) was not the result of poor decisions but rather the result of the worldwide stock market crash of 1929 (public issue).

Taken-for-granted views such as individualism, race, and love benefit from the application of a sociological perspective, which recognizes the specific historical and social contexts that shape our understandings. Individualism is a recent state and was not always considered desirable. Despite its controversial beginnings, it is currently accepted as self-evidently true. The same thing can be said for racial prejudice. Regardless of how favourably we consider our current treatment of ethnic and national groups, Canadian history is replete with discriminatory behaviour toward Aboriginal peoples and non-European immigrants. Even romantic love, despite being central to the lives of most Canadians, has a social and cultural history, such as the influence of courtly love and romanticism.

The sociological perspective requires an acceptance of ambiguity, and it can be disturbing to reflect critically on personal beliefs and assumptions. However, it helps us understand how human behaviour is shaped by society and culture, which can in turn lead to the unmasking of prejudices and the transformation of society for the better.

Learning Objectives

In this chapter you will

- learn about the common core knowledge base of sociology;
- become familiar with core sociological concepts, including the sociological imagination, the social construction of reality, and society as the product of human social interaction;
- gain insight into sociology as both a subversive and a conservative undertaking;
- understand that sociologists rely on three interconnected skill sets: (1) thinking skills, (2) research skills, and (3) theorizing skills; and
- learn about several core topics considered important to sociologists.

Key Concepts/Terms

Core sociological knowledge base (p. 4) A set of fundamental concepts, skills, and topics, available to all sociologists, that enables sociologists to think differently about the world.

Individualism (p. 14) A moral stance that stresses the importance of individual self-reliance and independence.

Lifeworld (p. 14) German philosopher Edmund Husserl's term for the entire communal system of meaning that underlies everyday life.

Objective knowledge (p. 13) Knowledge that is purported to be free of bias.

Social construction of reality (p. 6) The belief that the reality experienced by members of any given society is shaped by and shared with other members of the same society.

Sociological imagination (p. 9) As defined by C. Wright Mills, an orientation adopted by a sociologist to recognize and understand the connections between individual experience and larger social structures.

Sociology (p. 6) The study of all human social experience, whether the chance encounter of two human individuals, the outcome of a highly structured social group, or the result of a worldwide social phenomenon.

Value system (p. 13) A set of beliefs about what is important in life and what kinds of conduct or behaviour are appropriate.

Study Questions

Fill-in-the-Blank Questions

1. Humans and their social worlds interact and _____ each other.

2. The quality of mind that allows us to understand the larger historical scene is referred to as the _____.
3. According to C. Wright Mills, the sociological imagination is particularly useful in times of great _____.
4. _____ knowledge is purported to be free of bias.
5. Husserl's term for the entire _____ system of meanings that underlies everyday life is *life-world*.

Short Answer Questions

1. What is the social construction of reality?
2. Why is habitualization the groundwork for institutionalization?
3. According to the text, how can adopting a sociological perspective be disturbing?
4. How could the sociological imagination be used to explain the experience of unemployed workers during the Great Depression?
5. What has led to the rise of dating, which is the focus of the present-day North American courtship system?

Annotated Resources

Readings

- Mills, C. W. (1959). The Promise [of Sociology], In *The Sociological Imagination*. http://sociology.morrisville.edu/readings/SOCI101/Mills-The_Promise_of_Sociology-Chp1.pdf

In “The Promise,” C. Wright Mills introduces the sociological imagination, which argues that individual experiences and larger social structures are connected.

Websites

- Campaign for Social Science
<http://www.campaignforsocialscience.org.uk>

The purpose of the Campaign for Social Science is to raise the profile of social science in the public and media. The website features links to news articles relevant to social scientists, a policy monitor that tracks news items related to the social sciences, and links to the Making the Case for the Social Sciences booklets.

- SocioSite
<http://www.sociosite.net>

Based at the University of Amsterdam, SocioSite provides information and resources on a myriad of topics, including social theorists, sociological institutions and associations, and various approaches to studying the social world.

- Public Sociology
<http://burawoy.berkeley.edu/PS.htm>

Michael Burawoy is based at the Department of Sociology, University of California, Berkeley. His personal website features a collection of articles on public sociology and information on how to bring sociology into dialogue with audiences beyond the academy.

Multimedia

- *Sam Richards: A Radical Experiment in Empathy*. TED.com. 2010.
https://www.ted.com/talks/sam_richards_a_radical_experiment_in_empathy?language=en

Richards introduces students to the discipline of sociology and the practice of the sociological imagination through various real-world examples.

- *Thinking Allowed* Broadcast
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006qy05>

Thinking Allowed, hosted by sociologist Laurie Taylor, is a BBC Radio 4 broadcast and podcast mainly devoted to the social sciences.

- *The Up Series*

The Up Series is a public ethnography that follows the lives of British children since 1964. While the series has been acclaimed for its sociological vision, debates continue among sociologists about its editing style and impact on participants.

- Nitro (Heritage Minutes Collection)
<https://www.historicacanada.ca/content/heritage-minutes/nitro>

Visit the Heritage Minutes Collection website to view the short on Chinese immigrant workers that were responsible for the building of the Canada Pacific Railroad. The website also provides a brief history of the Chinese immigrant movement and the treatment they received in Canada.

- *A Past, Denied: The Invisible History of Slavery in Canada*. Directed by Mike Barber. 2012.

Canada is known for its Underground Railroad, which was used by black slaves to escape the United States. However, this feature-length documentary argues that Canada's 200 years of institutional slavery has been brushed aside in favour of a mythical national narrative.

Study Questions Answer Key

Fill-in-the-Blank Questions

1. co-produce (p. 9)
2. sociological imagination (p. 9)
3. social disruption (p. 10)
4. Objective (p. 13)
5. communal (p. 14)

Short Answer Questions

1. The social construction of reality is a concept that indicates that the different ways we understand reality are shaped by the society in which we live and our socially-mediated experiences. (p. 6)
2. Habitualization is the groundwork for institutionalization because once human patterns of behaviour are adopted across social groups, they take on an objective status and establish predefined patterns of conduct. (pp. 8–9)
3. The sociological perspective can be disturbing because it has the potential to challenge the foundational traditions and values of a given society or culture. (p. 14)
4. Instead of turning to taken-for-granted understandings about job loss and personal responsibility and blaming themselves for not being able to find work, many people came to understand that their own personal troubles were, in fact, part of a public issue affecting many people across the country and not the result of bad choices on their part. (p. 18)
5. The rise of dating has been attributed to a variety of cultural phenomena and events, including the recognition of adolescence as a distinct period in the life cycle, the rise of mass culture, women's emancipation, widespread car ownership, the development of the motion picture industry, and the decline of the community as a means of social control. (p. 22)