IMAGINING SOCIOLOGY

AN INTRODUCTION WITH READINGS

Catherine Corrigall-Brown

Second Edition

OXFORD

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Catherine Corrigall-Brown

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Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
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Oxford University Press in the UK and in certain other countries.

Published in Canada by
Oxford University Press
8 Sampson Mews, Suite 204,
Don Mills, Ontario M3C 0H5 Canada

www.oupcanada.com

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First Edition published in 2016

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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: Imagining sociology : an introduction with readings / Catherine Corrigall-Brown.
Names: Corrigall-Brown, Catherine, author.
Description: Second edition. | Includes index.
Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20190096659 | Canadiana (ebook) 20190096667 | ISBN 9780199031085
(softcover) | ISBN 9780199031139 (EPUB)
Subjects: LCSH: Sociology—Textbooks. | LCSH: Canada—Social conditions—Textbooks. | LCGFT: Textbooks.
Classification: LCC HM586 C68 2019 | DDC 301—dc23

Cover image: © iStock/olaser
Cover and interior design: Laurie McGregor

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Wherever possible, our books are printed on paper which comes from
responsible sources.

Printed and bound in Canada

1 2 3 4 — 23 22 21 20

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Publisher's Preface

Oxford University Press is delighted to present the second edition of Catherine Corrigall-Brown's *Imagining Sociology: An Introduction with Readings*. This exciting new edition brings sociology to life through a fresh, lively treatment of core topics that incorporates important readings in the field and ample opportunities for applied learning. This innovative approach empowers students to see how sociology can help them make sense of the world—and is sure to spark their sociological imaginations!

Key Features

Integrated Readings

The *only* introductory sociology text to integrate readings, this book allows students to engage directly with classic and contemporary sociological works. With **thirteen new integrated readings**, the second edition of *Imagining Sociology* combines both classic and contemporary readings to illuminate concepts and theories under discussion and highlight the discipline's roots as well as its current findings.

READINGS

C. Wright Mills, From *The Sociological Imagination*, 5
Susan O'Donell and David Perley, "Toward a Sociology of the Reconciliation of Conflicting Desires," 27
Émile Durkheim, "Review of *Albert Schaeffle, Bau und Leben des Sozialen Körpers: Erster Band*," 36
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Robert D. Putnam, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," 381
Alison Dahl Crossley, "Facebook Feminism: Social Media, Blogs, and New Technologies of Contemporary U.S. Feminism," 394
Angela Semple, "On Idle No More," 413

Critical reading questions draw out key points and encourage students to develop their own conclusions about sociological ideas and issues.

CRITICAL READING QUESTIONS

1. How is this article an example of labelling theory? How did the diagnosis of "insane" lead to the symptoms observed by the staff?
2. Why does a false positive diagnosis of mental illness generally have more serious repercussions than a false positive diagnosis of physical illness?
3. What is the significance of the fact that many patients, but none of the staff, managed to detect pseudopatients?
4. What can this study teach us about why people engage in deviant acts and/or crime? How can it help us to better deal with people labelled deviant?

Thought-provoking activities in each chapter facilitate applied learning and help readers connect sociological concepts to everyday life.

ACTIVITY

The History and Biography of Higher Education in Canada 10
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Highlight boxes are updated throughout the book and discuss relevant topics such as social determinants of health, racial and gender inequality, social media, and automation in the workplace, providing students with deeper insight into the issues, themes, and theories explored in each chapter.

HIGHLIGHT

When Social Patterns Are Broken—Harold Garfinkel and Breaching Experiments 11
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Are Canadians Bowling Alone? Civic Engagement in Canada 385
Taking a Knee as Protest 403

Contemporary and Canadian coverage—including examples from recent events and popular culture, the latest research in the field, and Canadian cases and data—gives students a current and relevant overview of the discipline.

emka74/istockphoto

PHOTO 1.4 The Coexist image shows a more inclusive way of thinking about religion in the modern age, highlighting how people from different religions, and those who are not religious, can share values and live together peacefully. Clearly, this message is important, but is it convincing and effective?

Social Change

Social change is the third core area of sociology. Sociologists examine how, as we have just seen, social institutions can perpetuate inequality or create social change. If society is based on interactions among people, it can change just as people do.

One major institution in modern Canadian society that has changed greatly is religion. **Secularization**—the process of a religion losing its authority over individuals and social life in general—is a frequently discussed social change. Core founders of sociology, such as Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Émile Durkheim, all argued that the modernization of society would inevitably coincide with a decline in religiosity. Karl Marx was quite happy about this shift because he thought that religion was an "opiate" of the masses, something that just dulled our pain and senses so that we would not resist the great social inequality that we experienced in our lives. Durkheim was more likely to lament this decline; he thought religion was an important part of the glue that holds individuals together in society. Weber looked at how new rational systems, such as science and bureaucracies, would make religious answers to our questions less relevant (Collins 1994). These perspectives illustrate how sociologists have always been interested in religion's role in society. (We will learn much more about these three sociologists in the following chapters.)

The study of secularization seeks to explain how and why religious values, practices, and institutions are losing their power in modern society. It is certainly true that religion is currently less integral to many functions of Canadian society than it was in the past. For example, traditionally, many schools were run by religious institutions. You can still attend a religious school, but most schools in Canada are now operated by the state and are non-religious. Religious institutions were also once the main provider of charitable and welfare services, running orphanages, soup kitchens, and hospitals. Now the government primarily performs such functions. Many religious institutions are still involved in these activities and raise money for these causes; however, the control of these services rests mostly in the hands of the state.

Institutions are important because they generally help society to run smoothly. They do so in part by socializing us and thereby teaching us the rules of our society. When you first go to school, you learn that you must sit quietly in class and raise your hand when you want to speak. These rules are important and help later schooling and other social interactions to function. Imagine if everyone just wandered around the room during your university classes—the result would certainly be a chaotic environment.

However, institutions can also serve a negative function by maintaining and reinforcing inequality. In fact, one of the main reasons that inequality tends to persist is the role of social institutions. Because standardized methods become routine, they can reinforce some of the differences between people. For example, if your university or college has very high tuition, students of lower social classes might not be able to attend the school. In this way, the institution is partly responsible for people from lower social classes being less likely to get the degrees that would allow them to increase their social standing.

Institutions can also be an avenue for social change. We know that individuals from lower social classes are much less likely to get a university or college degree than those from higher social classes. Many social programs instituted by the Government of Canada have tried to address this imbalance. The Veterans Rehabilitation Act (VRA), passed in 1944, included a program that helped World War II veterans receive a post-secondary education by paying their full tuition and living expenses for up to four years. The idea was that helping soldiers to get an education would help them to return to civilian life. More than 120,000 veterans—mostly men—received this support. Research estimates that as a result of the program, men of the postwar period had an average of 0.2 to 0.4 more years of education and had higher wages over the course of their lives than they otherwise would have had (Lemieux and Card 1998).

Adam Scott/Prime Minister's Office

PHOTO 1.3 Prime Minister Justin Trudeau meets with the File Hills Qu'Apelle Tribal Council. This meeting between a governing body (the Tribal Council) and the head of another governing body (the prime minister of Canada) highlights the complexity and multifaceted nature of institutions such as governments.

The TRC worked for six years, collecting documents and more than 6000 accounts from those who funded the schools, officials of the institutions that operated the schools, survivors, their families, communities, and anyone else personally affected by the residential school experience. The TRC's final report, released on 2 June 2015, includes 94 recommendations, such as legislation for education, child welfare, and Aboriginal languages and the implementation of the UN's Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (Watters 2015).

In the following reading, we will learn about the important work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Canada. How is this commission an example of reparations, and how is it being implemented in Canada?

READING

TRC Principles of Reconciliation and "The Canadian Reconciliation Landscape: Current Perspectives of Indigenous Peoples and Non-Indigenous Canadians"

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Principles of Reconciliation

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada believes that in order for Canada to flourish in the twenty-first century, reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canada must be based on the following principles.

1. The *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* is the framework for reconciliation at all levels and across all sectors of Canadian society.
2. First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples, as the original peoples of this country and as self-determining peoples, have Treaty, constitutional, and human rights that must be recognized and respected.
3. Reconciliation is a process of healing of relationships that requires public truth sharing, apology, and commemoration that acknowledge and redress past harms.
4. Reconciliation requires constructive action on addressing the ongoing legacies of colonialism that have had destructive impacts on Aboriginal peoples' education, culture and languages, health, child welfare, the administration of justice, and economic opportunities and prosperity.
5. Reconciliation must create a more equitable and inclusive society by closing the gaps in social, health, and economic outcomes that exist between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians.
6. All Canadians, as Treaty peoples, share responsibility for establishing and maintaining mutually respectful relationships.
7. The perspectives and understandings of Aboriginal Elders and Traditional Knowledge Keepers of the ethics, concepts, and practices of reconciliation are vital to long-term reconciliation.
8. Supporting Aboriginal peoples' cultural revitalization and integrating Indigenous knowledge systems, oral histories, laws, protocols, and connections to the land into the reconciliation process are essential.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. 2015. *What We Have Learned: Principles of Truth and Reconciliation, pp. 3–4. Reconciliation* Canada. The Canadian Reconciliation Landscape, 2017.

Reconciliation Canada. 2017. The Canadian Reconciliation Landscape. http://reconciliationcanada.ca/staging/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/NationalNarrativeReport-ReconciliationCanada-ReleasedMay2017_2.pdf.

Indigenous content discusses recent events related to Indigenous relations in Canada, including integrated readings on reconciliation.

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and political rights. Instead, it tends to work in cultural arenas—for example, challenging gender depictions in the media, sexist language, and gendered norms around sexuality.

Intersectionality

The concept of **intersectionality**—the study of how various dimensions of inequality can combine—is one product of feminism's third wave. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw coined the term in 1989 and explains it with the following metaphor:

> Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in an intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination. But it is not always easy to reconstruct an accident. Sometimes the skid marks and the injuries simply indicate that they occurred simultaneously, frustrating efforts to determine which driver caused the harm. (149)

The theory came out of Crenshaw's research on work and discrimination in the 1980s. Crenshaw (1989) studied a group of black women in the United States who had filed a workplace discrimination lawsuit. A round of layoffs at their workplace had resulted in all the black women being fired. The trial judge ruled against these women—he said that there was no gender discrimination because white women were not fired and there was no racial discrimination because black men were not fired. As the law saw only two types of discrimination (discrimination against women based on their sex or discrimination against racial minorities based on their race), there was no discrimination in this case.

These black women and Crenshaw understood that the former's experience was rendered invisible by intersectionality. The fact that they were both black and women made

FEMINIST

Photo by Jason LaVeris/FilmMagic/Getty Images

PHOTO 6.6 At the 2014 MTV Video Music Awards, Beyoncé performed in front of a large sign that said "Feminist." Some praised her performance as a political statement and argued that it raised feminism's profile among young women. Others were more critical of the word being used by a performer who often uses her sexuality to sell her music. Do you think that Beyoncé is a feminist? How does this performance fit into (or challenge) our ideas of what a feminist is?

Theory integrated throughout the text helps students easily relate theoretical concepts to the various sociological issues discussed in each chapter.

A lively and accessible writing style grabs students' attention and helps them easily understand concepts under discussion.

4 PART I Understanding Society

Katherine McGuire - katherine@quirkbooks.com

PHOTO 1.1 *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* is an example of the merging of high and popular culture.

what to wear, or which stocks to buy or sell. These stories are based on the values of the dominant culture—that it is important to look attractive and fashionable, own an impressive home, and make a lot of money. There are many people who disagree with these foci in our culture. A **counterculture** is a group that rejects certain elements of the dominant culture. For example, anti-consumerist groups are countercultural. They reject our society's dominant focus on the importance of acquiring and consuming mass amounts of products in order to show our status and worth.

Subcultures also differ from the dominant culture, but they do not necessarily oppose it in the way that countercultures do. For example, minor differences in occupational groups can create subcultures. Lawyers' daily routines, values, and style of dress might differ significantly from those of plumbers. Students involved in fraternities or sororities, those on sports teams, or those in fine arts programs might also be quite different from each other in their behaviours and dress.

Culture is often divided into high and popular culture. When people say that someone is "cultured," they tend to mean that the person participates in **high culture**, the culture of a society's elite. In general, this type of culture may be difficult to appreciate unless one has been taught to enjoy and understand it. **Popular** (or **low**) **culture** is the culture of the majority. In the world of music, opera and classical music are high culture, while rap and pop are popular culture. In literature, classic novels and plays (think Austen or Shakespeare) are high culture; science fiction or romance novels are popular culture (*The Hunger Games*, *Twilight*, or John Green's novels).

The photo below shows the humorous intersection of high and popular culture. The novel *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* is an obvious play on the high-culture works of Jane Austen and the popular culture interest in zombies. This cultural product juxtaposes the two types of culture to illustrate the disjuncture between them. Austen would certainly be surprised to see her heroines interacting with zombies!

The Sociological Imagination

In Canadian society, most people believe that individuals shape their own destiny. To a certain extent, this is true—we, as individuals, make decisions every day that shape the kind of life we lead. For example, you made decisions about whether to attend university or college, how hard to work in your classes, where to live when attending school, and what type of summer job you want. But, of course, many factors influence these decisions.

Let's examine your decision about a summer job. If your parents are willing and able to help pay for your education, you might not have to work in the summer, or you might choose to take an unpaid internship, which would be impossible if you needed to pay your own tuition. In this way, your individual choice of whether you work and what type of job you get is, to some degree, structured by the wealth and support of your parents. The reason we might be interested in how your individual choices are constrained is that it might shape later outcomes for you. For example, students who have completed an unpaid internship might find it easier to get a good job after graduation because

22 PART I Understanding Society

Suicide rates and religiosity by country

Country	Religiosity	Suicide Rate
Philippines	79	3.4
India	76	15.7
Guatemala	75	2.5
Brazil	69	6.3
Ireland	63	11.7
United States	61	14.3
Chile	54	9.9
Canada	49	12.3
Israel	44	5.5
France	30	16.9
Japan	29	19.7
Russia	28	20.1

Sources: Adapted from Brett Pelham and Zsolt Nyiri, 2008, "In More Religious Countries, Lower Suicide Rates: Lower Suicide Rates Not a Matter of National Income," *Gallup* 3 July, www.gallup.com/poll/108625/more-religious-countries-lower-suiciderates.aspx; and World Health Organization, 2017, "Suicide Rates per (100,000 population)," *Global Health Observatory (GHO) Data*, http://www.who.int/gho/mental_health/suicide_rates_crude/e

1. How do gender and family type relate to suicide? How does Durkheim's theory about certain social conditions leading to suicide explain the suicide rates among Canadian men and women in different family situations?
2. How is religiosity related to suicide rates across countries? Would Durkheim be surprised that more religious countries tend to have lower levels of suicide? Why or why not? How would he explain this relationship?
3. In general, countries that are very religious have low levels of suicide, and countries that are not very religious have higher levels. But Israel has a relatively low rate of suicide given its low level of religiosity, and India has a relatively high rate of suicide given its high rate of religiosity. How can you explain these unusual cases? Can you use Durkheim's theory? Why or why not?

HIGHLIGHT

Is Sociology Just Common Sense?

Because we all live within society, it is sometimes hard to see how there could be much to learn in sociology. Can't we just use our own experiences to make sense of the social world? Isn't sociology really just common sense? Randall Collins (1992), a famous sociologist, notes that obvious social questions may not have obvious or simple answers. Sociology's greatest strength, he argues, is precisely its potential for penetrating the superficial observation of everyday life and finding the fundamental social processes hidden beneath.

For example, many people wonder what makes a romantic couple compatible. Common sense tells us that "opposites attract." However, it also tells us that "birds of a feather flock together." If both of these axioms are common sense and are based on our life experience, how can we make sense of which idea is the better explanation of compatibility? Much

A research methods icon flags whether a study presented in the text involved a survey, experiment, interview, or participant observation, helping students to readily see how core quantitative and qualitative methods are used by sociologists.

A vibrant four-colour design—featuring an array of photos, maps, tables, and graphs—reflects the vitality of the field and helps students visualize data trends and essential issues and concepts.

PART II

Social Inequality

Photo credit: artur maia de carvalho/Shutterstock

4 Social Inequality and Social Class

Chapter Outline

Introduction
Karl Marx and Social Class
Class Struggles
Reading: "Manifesto of the Communist Party," by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels
Class Consciousness
Max Weber and Social Status
Activity: Social Status Markers
Income Inequality in Canada
Reading: Nickel-and-Dimed: On (Not) Getting by in America, by Barbara Ehrenreich
Poverty
Activity: Creating Low-Income Cut-Offs (LICOs)
Summary
Key Terms
For Further Reading
References

Photo credit: Khuroshvili Ilya/Shutterstock

3 Deviance, Law, and Crime 83

than the rate for non-Aboriginal adults in Canada. This number has continued to grow in the last decade, increasing by 6 per cent in this period (Correctional Services Canada, 2017).

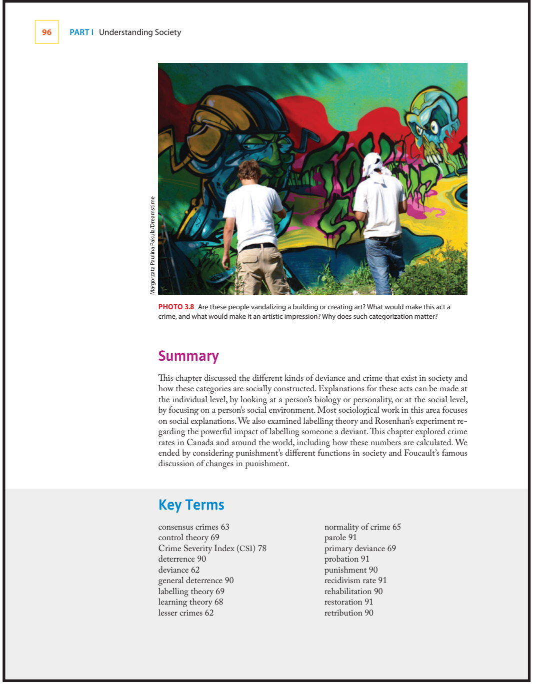
Conflict theorists argue that the higher crime rates in these populations could be the result of low socio-economic status (SES) and lack of education, as well as high rates of victimization, substance abuse, and gang participation in Aboriginal and African-Canadian communities (Latimer and Foss 2004). In this way, the real predictor of engagement in

Calculating Crime Rates ACTIVITY

The Government of Canada and the criminal justice system calculate the crime rate to give us a sense of the amount of types of crimes that occur in Canada. However, official statistics do not necessarily report *actual* rates of crime because not every criminal activity is reported and some activities reported to police are not crimes. Instead, these statistics are collected by using particular methods with particular limitations, constraints, and complications. Go to this book's companion website to access Samuel Perreault's "Police-Reported Crime Statistics in Canada, 2012." Read the article, and then answer the following questions:

1. How is the crime rate calculated? What is good about this traditional crime rate and what is missed?
2. How is the CSI better or worse than the traditional crime rate that Canada has used? (See Statistics Canada's "Section: 1 The Crime Severity Index," available at this book's companion website.)
3. Beyond the traditional crime rate and CSI, what other methods could be used to construct as comprehensive a crime rate as possible?
4. What are the benefits of using **victimization surveys** instead of a traditional crime rate? Why do victimization surveys usually show evidence of higher crime rates than do official statistics?

Helpful pedagogical features, including chapter outlines, lists of key terms, and further readings, enhance student comprehension and offer avenues for learning beyond the classroom.



Małgorzata Paulina Pakuła/Dreamstime

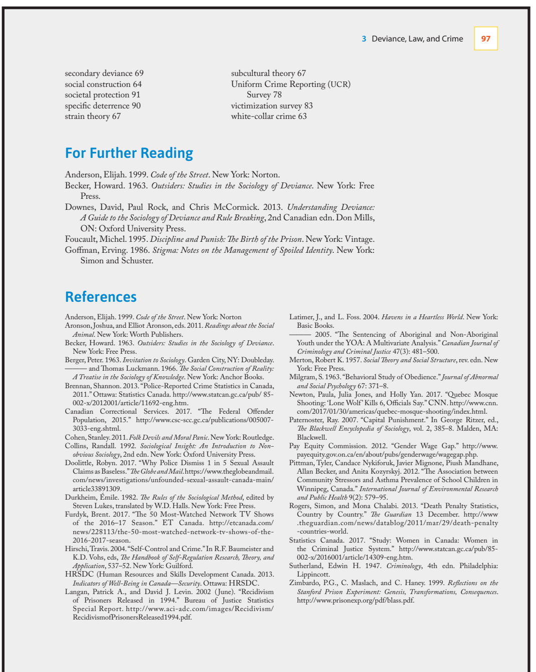
PHOTO 3.8 Are these people vandalizing a building or creating art? What would make this act a crime, and what would make it an artistic impression? Why does such categorization matter?

Summary

This chapter discussed the different kinds of deviance and crime that exist in society and how these categories are socially constructed. Explanations for these acts can be made at the individual level, by looking at a person's biology or personality, or at the social level, by focusing on a person's social environment. Most sociological work in this area focuses on social explanations. We also examined labelling theory and Rosenhan's experiment regarding the powerful impact of labelling someone a deviant. This chapter explored crime rates in Canada and around the world, including how these numbers are calculated. We ended by considering punishment's different functions in society and Foucault's famous discussion of changes in punishment.

Key Terms

consensus crimes 63
control theory 69
Crime Severity Index (CSI) 78
deterrence 90
deviance 62
general deterrence 90
labelling theory 69
learning theory 68
lesser crimes 62
normality of crime 65
parole 91
primary deviance 69
probation 91
punishment 90
recidivism rate 91
rehabilitation 90
restoration 91
retribution 90



secondary deviance 69
social construction 64
societal protection 91
specific deterrence 90
strain theory 67
subcultural theory 67
Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) Survey 78
victimization survey 83
white-collar crime 63

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Resources for Instructors and Students

Imagining Sociology is supported by an outstanding array of additional materials for both instructors and students, all available on the book's Ancillary Resource Centre, at **www.oup.com/he/CorrigallBrown2e**.

- Access tothis collection is free for instructors who have assigned this book for their course. For access, speak to your OUP sales representative, or visit www.oupcanada.com/SocVideos.

For Instructors

- **An instructor's manual** includes learning objectives, chapter overviews, lists of key concepts, sample answers to critical reading questions and activities, discussion topics, and classroom activities.
- **A test generator** allows instructors to sort, edit, import, and distribute hundreds of questions in multiple-choice, short-answer, and true/false format.
- **PowerPoint slides** summarize key points from every chapter and incorporate figures and tables from the text.
- **OUP's sociology streaming video collection** provides easy and immediate access to a variety of videos, both feature-length and curated clips, with an accompanying video guide that includes learning objectives, suggested clips, discussion questions, and assignment suggestions for each video.

- **OUP Canada's sociology streaming video library** Over 20 award-winning feature films and documentaries of various lengths (feature-length, short films, and clips) are available online as streaming video for instructors to either show in the classroom or assign to students to watch at home. An accompanying video guide contains summaries, suggested clips, discussion questions, and related activities so that instructors can easily integrate videos into their course lectures, assignments, and class discussions.

Additional Materials for Students

- **A comprehensive online study-guide** provides chapter summaries, self-assessment quizzes, annotated lists of readings and web resources, as well as other material designed to enhance student learning.
- **A list of relevant web links for in-chapter activities** allows students to easily access online activity components.

Preface

I remember signing up for my first sociology course. I needed one more course to complete my schedule in my first year of university, and a friend suggested that I take sociology. Even though I had never heard of sociology and did not know what it would entail, I took the course. I was forever changed.

That course fundamentally altered the way I think about the world around me. Sociology provided me with a lens to understand our complex society. I learned that while we all have a lifetime of experiences within society, the importance of that society is often hard to understand because we are so immersed in it. Sociology helped me to understand how society as a whole shaped my life and the world around me.

By teaching sociology for many years, I have had the pleasure of helping students to discover their sociological imagination, the key lens we use to understand the connection between individuals and society. It is a delight to see them start to use the theories, ideas, and research in our discipline to help make sense of the world around them. We can use these ideas to answer pressing questions such as "Why is there poverty?" "Why do men and women earn different amounts of money?" "How do race and ethnicity shape our lives?" "How does social change happen?"

This book aims to bring sociology to life. Original readings by the founders of the discipline and today's top sociologists illuminate the concepts and theories in the text. These readings highlight the discipline's roots as well as its current foci and findings. Critical thinking questions, which follow every reading, facilitate further thought and will help you to apply the reading's main concepts. The book also includes highlight boxes, which explore various theories and issues and provide deeper insight into the concepts discussed in each chapter. Key terms are defined in a glossary.

Each chapter also contains activities that will help you to connect the theories and ideas of sociology to your life. For example, what can you learn about socialization by looking at the toys you played with as a child? How can comparing your grandparents' education with your own help you to understand the larger social changes in educational attainment in Canada? What do the curricula of your high-school classes tell you about the values of society and how they are changing? How are protest events depicted in the media, and how does this portrayal shape how you think about protesters?

As the systematic study of human society, sociology covers a lot of ground. This book is divided into four sections. Part I introduces the sociological imagination, the process of socialization, and how we learn to fit into society and develop a sense of identity. Part II focuses on social inequality, a core area of sociology. This section examines social class, social status, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. We also discuss global inequality between countries. Understanding how inequalities between people and countries arise, perpetuate, and can be reduced is fundamental to sociology and is a primary theme of this book. Part III assesses several core institutions of society, including the media, family, education, work, and health. Sociology as a discipline encourages us to understand how individual choices can be structured or limited by larger social forces. Institutions are one such force that can shape the kind of lives we lead and larger patterns of social inequality.

We end the book by examining social change. It is clear that there is much inequality in society and a myriad of social problems in Canada and around the world. In Part IV, we learn about the role of the state, social movements, and other avenues for creating social change. It is certainly possible to make a more equal and just world. In fact, social change is a constant phenomenon that has helped us to address many social problems. The diversity of people in your sociology class is a testament to how society can change and become more equal. However, much more can be done! Learning about social change will conclude this book and, I hope, ignite your sociological imagination.

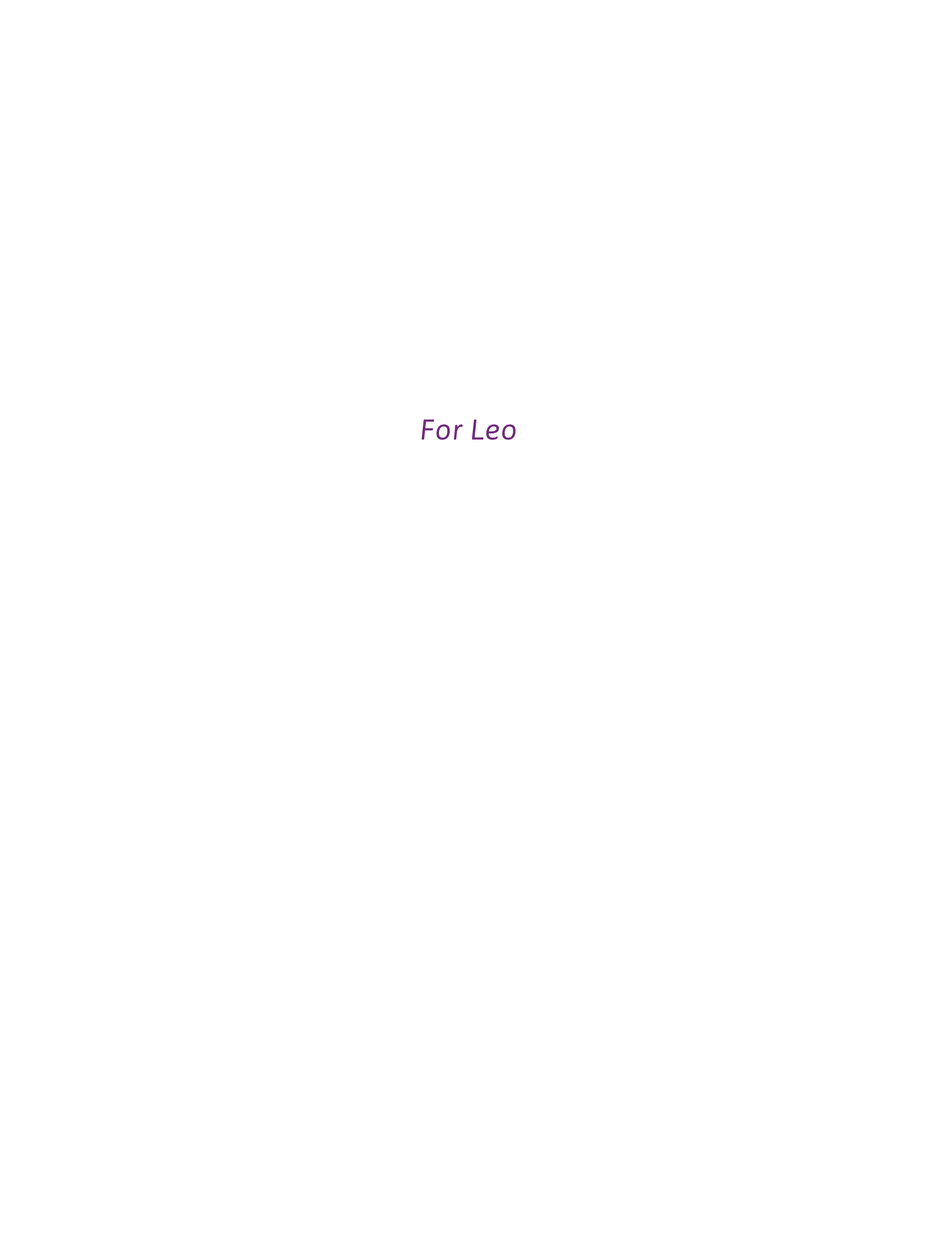
Acknowledgements

My sociological imagination has been shaped by the many wonderful professors who taught me at the University of Victoria, Western University, and the University of California, Irvine. My colleagues at the University of British Columbia have helped me to build on this foundation and deepened my interest and enjoyment of sociology. They have all shaped my understanding of and fascination with the discipline, which I hope to pass on to sociology students.

I am indebted to the wonderful people at Oxford University Press who have helped this project come to fruition. Liz Ferguson, Rhiannon Wong, Dorothy Turnbull, Ian Nussbaum, and Lisa Ball have deftly guided this project through its many stages, and their hard work is much appreciated. This book has also been strengthened by the wonderful work of four students who helped me to make it as accessible and animated as possible. I thank Mabel Ho, Kevin Hennessy, Joseph Jamil, and Paige Lougheed for their invaluable assistance.

Most important, I thank my wonderful husband, Steve Weldon, for his endless support of this project and all my work. I also gratefully acknowledge my parents, Melodie and Hans, for their encouragement and my sister, Sarah, for her inspiration.

This book is dedicated to my son, Leo. He was born into a challenging world but one filled with possibilities. May it become more equal and just as he grows.


For Leo

PART I Understanding Society

Photo credit: Ryoji Iwata/Unsplash

The Sociological Imagination

Chapter Outline

Introduction

The Sociological Imagination

- **Reading:** From *The Sociological Imagination*, by C. Wright Mills
- **Activity:** The History and Biography of Higher Education in Canada

Three Core Foci of Sociology

- Social Inequality
- Social Institutions
- Social Change

Three Core Aims of Sociology

Émile Durkheim and the Study of Suicide

- **Activity:** Suicide in Canada

Research Methods: How Do Sociologists Study Society?

- **Reading:** "Toward a Sociology of the Reconciliation of Conflicting Desires," by Susan O'Donnell and David Perley

Summary

Key Terms

For Further Reading

References

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Introduction

The word ***sociology*** was coined by Auguste Comte, who believed that this new discipline had the potential to bring together all the sciences and to improve society. Comte was, in part, inspired to create this new area of study because he lived in a period of rapid social change (1798–1857). Industry was replacing agricultural ways of life, democracies were emerging from dictatorships, and populations were migrating from the countryside to the cities. Wanting to make sense of this immense social change, Comte sought to understand how society worked and the effect of these larger processes on society and the people living in it.

Before and after Comte, individuals from all disciplines have been interested in explaining how society operates and why it sometimes does not work as well as we think it could. For example, philosophers as far back as Socrates and Plato wondered what makes a good society. But sociology is different in that it studies society in a systematic way. In fact, what defines sociology as a discipline is that it focuses on the systematic study of human society. This definition begs the question, "What is society?"

Society is the largest-scale human group that shares a common geographic territory and common institutions. Societies are not necessarily the same as states. In fact, many states contain a number of different societies. For example, Canada is sometimes thought to contain two distinct societies, with Quebec reflecting a society different from that of the rest of Canada. This idea is reinforced by the existence of many distinct institutions in the province. For example, Quebec's legal system is based on the Napoleonic code, whereas the other provinces and territories use the British system of common law.

Society is based on and requires social interaction among its members. These interactions can occur in a variety of settings and on a number of different levels, such as in neighbourhoods, schools, or workplaces. Such connections are important because they create shared understandings and are the basis of continued cooperation between the members of a society. These interactions also work to socialize newcomers, either those who emigrated from other parts of the world or young people who are learning how to act within our society. Through this socialization, we teach others the written and unwritten rules and values of our society. We also use this interaction among members to monitor and regulate each other, making sure that we all follow the society's rules and expectations.

Interactions within society happen in patterned ways—for example, most people go to the same coffee shop every morning and have the same conversation with the barista. These routines, expectations, and behaviours are established over time so that ongoing cooperation between people is possible (Charon 2012). Imagine if you replied to the barista's question of "How are you?" with a long story about your new sociology course or your indecision about whether to go on another date with someone. He would probably be quite surprised at your unusual behaviour in this situation because the routine is that you simply say, "Fine, thank you." By responding in an unexpected way, you challenge the common expectations of how this social interaction should take place. The fact that most interactions in society are predictable establishes a common set of understandings of how our society works and how we are supposed to behave in it.

Interactions in society are also shaped by culture. **Culture** is a system of behaviour, beliefs, knowledge, practices, values, and materials. Cultures shape how we act and the physical elements of our society. Our culture affects a myriad of elements of our lives, from how we set up cities to how we dress. It is clear from this definition that culture is contested—we certainly don't all agree on how we should act or what we should believe. These distinctions can exist between the dominant culture and subcultures or countercultures.

The **dominant culture** is able to impose its values, beliefs, and behaviours on a given society because of its political and economic power. Think about the "human interest" stories discussed on "The View," "The Social," or "Good Morning America." They tend to be of interest to the people with a lot of money or power: how to decorate a home,

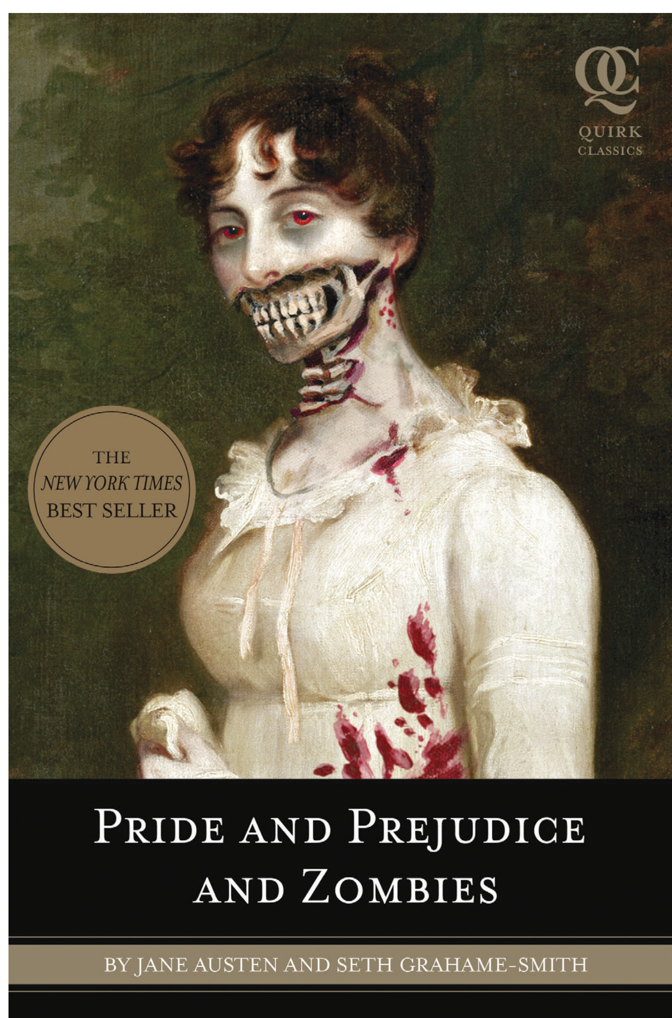


PHOTO 1.1 *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* is an example of the merging of high and popular culture.

what to wear, or which stocks to buy or sell. These stories are based on the values of the dominant culture—that it is important to look attractive and fashionable, own an impressive home, and make a lot of money. There are many people who disagree with these foci in our culture. A **counterculture** is a group that rejects certain elements of the dominant culture. For example, anti-consumerist groups are countercultural. They reject our society's dominant focus on the importance of acquiring and consuming mass amounts of products in order to show our status and worth.

Subcultures also differ from the dominant culture, but they do not necessarily oppose it in the way that countercultures do. For example, minor differences in occupational groups can create subcultures. Lawyers' daily routines, values, and style of dress might differ significantly from those of plumbers. Students involved in fraternities or sororities, those on sports teams, or those in fine arts programs might also be quite different from each other in their behaviours and dress.

Culture is often divided into high and popular culture. When people say that someone is "cultured," they tend to mean that the person participates in **high culture**, the culture of a society's elite. In general, this type of culture may be difficult to appreciate unless one has been taught to enjoy and understand it. **Popular** (or **low**) **culture** is the culture of the majority. In the world of music, opera and classical music are high culture, while rap and pop are popular culture. In literature, classic novels and plays (think Austen or Shakespeare) are high culture; science fiction or romance novels are popular culture (*The Hunger Games*, *Twilight*, or John Green's novels).

Photo 1.1 shows the humorous intersection of high and popular culture. The novel *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* is an obvious play on the high-culture works of Jane Austen and the popular culture interest in zombies. This cultural product juxtaposes the two types of culture to illustrate the disjuncture between them. Austen would certainly be surprised to see her heroines interacting with zombies!

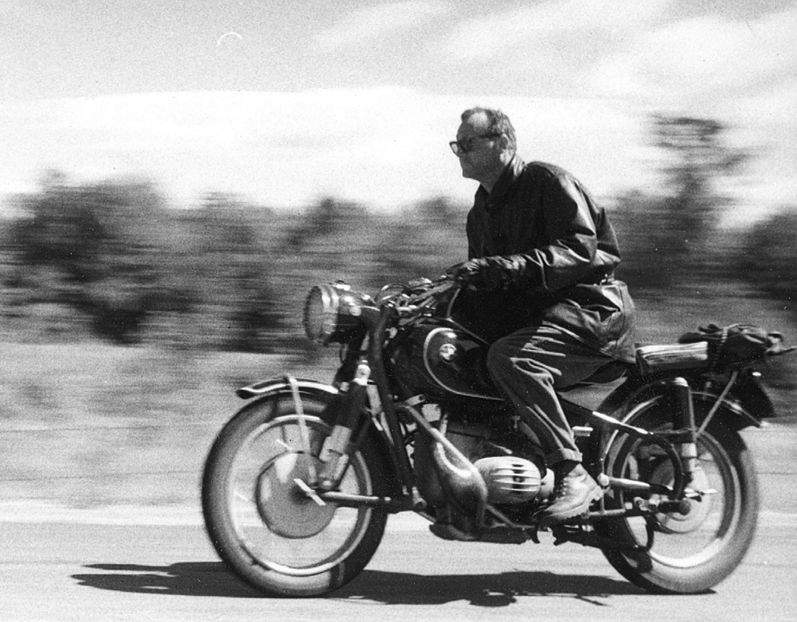
The Sociological Imagination

In Canadian society, most people believe that individuals shape their own destiny. To a certain extent, this is true—we, as individuals, make decisions every day that shape the kind of life we lead. For example, you made decisions about whether to attend university or college, how hard to work in your classes, where to live when attending school, and what type of summer job you want. But, of course, many factors influence these decisions.

Let's examine your decision about a summer job. If your parents are willing and able to help pay for your education, you might not have to work in the summer, or you might choose to take an unpaid internship, which would be impossible if you needed to pay your own tuition. In this way, your individual choice of whether you work and what type of job you get is, to some degree, structured by the wealth and support of your parents. The reason we might be interested in how your individual choices are constrained is that it might shape later outcomes for you. For example, students who have completed an unpaid internship might find it easier to get a good job after graduation because

they will have gained skills and social contacts while working. Students who have wealthy parents (and therefore don't need a summer job) are more likely than other students to have time to do an internship, which can perpetuate inequality in society over time.

This example illustrates how individual choices (sometimes called agency) are structured in society. We have the ability to make decisions, but our choices are often shaped or limited by larger social forces, such as our family, our social class, the economy, the education system, and gender norms. Many sociologists have tried to make sense of this complicated relationship between an individual's agency and society's constraints. Marx famously said that "[people] make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past" (in Tucker 1978, 595).



Estate of C. Wright Mills

PHOTO 1.2 C. Wright Mills, the author of *The Sociological Imagination*, is pictured here on his motorcycle. Using the sociological imagination, we can see how society as a whole can shape our individual experiences and how our own personal biographies are related to larger historical processes.

C. Wright Mills (1959/2000) also tried to tackle these complicated issues with what he called the **sociological imagination**. Mills called on us to try to see the connections between our individual lives and the larger society in which we live. He argued that we can only understand our own lives and biographies if we understand the larger history of our society. Once we make these connections, we will be able to see the relationship between our own **personal troubles** (problems that we face as individuals) and larger **public issues** (social problems that arise in society).

First published in 1959, Mills's *The Sociological Imagination* is one of the most widely read sociology books of all time. The sociological imagination is at the core of sociology. In fact, it is the inspiration for the title of this textbook. The following excerpt, from Chapter 1 of the book, discusses the links between the personal and the public.

READING

From *The Sociological Imagination*

C. Wright Mills

Nowadays men often feel that their private lives are a series of traps. They sense that within their everyday worlds, they cannot overcome their troubles, and in this feeling, they are often quite correct: what ordinary men are directly aware of and what they try to do are bounded by the private orbits in which they live; their visions and their powers are limited to the close-up scenes of job, family, neighbourhood; in other milieux, they move vicariously and remain spectators. And the more aware they become, however vaguely, of ambitions and of threats which transcend their immediate locales, the more trapped they seem to feel.

Underlying this sense of being trapped are seemingly impersonal changes in the very structure of continent-wide societies. The facts of contemporary history are also facts about

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Mills, C. Wright. 1959. *The Sociological Imagination*, 3–24. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

the success and the failure of individual men and women. When a society is industrialized, a peasant becomes a worker; a feudal lord is liquidated or becomes a businessman. When classes rise or fall, a man is employed or unemployed; when the rate of investment goes up or down, a man takes new heart or goes broke. When wars happen, an insurance salesman becomes a rocket launcher; a store clerk, a radar man; a wife lives alone; a child grows up without a father. Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both.

Yet men do not usually define the troubles they endure in terms of historical change and institutional contradiction. The well-being they enjoy, they do not usually impute to the big ups and downs of the societies in which they live. Seldom aware of the intricate connection between the patterns of their own lives and the course of world history, ordinary men do not usually know what this connection means for the kinds of men they are becoming and for the kinds of history-making in which they might take part. They do not possess the quality of mind essential to grasp the interplay of man and society, of biography and history, of self and world. They cannot cope with their personal troubles in such ways as to control the structural transformations that usually lie behind them.

Surely it is no wonder. In what period have so many men been so totally exposed at so fast a pace to such earthquakes of change? That Americans have not known such catastrophic changes as have the men and women of other societies is due to historical facts that are now quickly becoming "merely history." The history that now affects every man is world history. Within this scene and this period, in the course of a single generation, one-sixth of mankind is transformed from all that is feudal and backward into all that is modern, advanced, and fearful. Political colonies are freed; new and less visible forms of imperialism installed. Revolutions occur; men feel the intimate grip of new kinds of authority. Totalitarian societies rise, and are smashed to bits—or succeed fabulously. After two centuries of ascendancy, capitalism is shown up as only one way to make society into an industrial apparatus. After two centuries of hope, even formal democracy is restricted to a quite small portion of mankind. Everywhere in the underdeveloped world, ancient ways of life are broken up and vague expectations become urgent demands. Everywhere in the overdeveloped world, the means of authority and of violence become total in scope and bureaucratic in form. Humanity itself now lies before us, the super-nation at either pole concentrating its most coordinated and massive efforts upon the preparation of World War III.

The very shaping of history now outpaces the ability of men to orient themselves in accordance with cherished values. And which values? Even when they do not panic, men often sense that older ways of feeling and thinking have collapsed and that newer beginnings are ambiguous to the point of moral stasis. Is it any wonder that ordinary men feel they cannot cope with the larger worlds with which they are so suddenly confronted? That they cannot understand the meaning of their epoch for their own lives? That—in defence of selfhood—they become morally insensible, trying to remain altogether private men? Is it any wonder that they come to be possessed by a sense of the trap?

It is not only information that they need—in this Age of Fact, information often dominates their attention and overwhelms their capacities to assimilate it. It is not only the skills of reason that they need—although their struggles to acquire these often exhaust their limited moral energy.

What they need, and what they feel they need, is a quality of mind that will help them to use information and to develop reason in order to achieve lucid summations of what is going on in the world and of what may be happening within themselves. It is this quality, I am going to contend, that journalists and scholars, artists and publics, scientists and editors are coming to expect of what may be called the sociological imagination.

1

The sociological imagination enables its possessor to understand the larger historical scene in terms of its meaning for the inner life and the external career of a variety of individuals. It enables him to take into account how individuals, in the welter of their daily experience, often

become falsely conscious of their social positions. Within that welter, the framework of modern society is sought, and within that framework the psychologies of a variety of men and women are formulated. By such means the personal uneasiness of individuals is focused upon explicit troubles and the indifference of publics is transformed into involvement with public issues.

The first fruit of this imagination—and the first lesson of the social science that embodies it—is the idea that the individual can understand his own experience and gauge his own fate only by locating himself within his period, that he can know his own chances in life only by becoming aware of those of all individuals in his circumstances. In many ways it is a terrible lesson; in many ways a magnificent one. We do not know the limits of man's capacities for supreme effort or willing degradation, for agony or glee, for pleasurable brutality or the sweetness of reason. But in our time we have come to know that the limits of "human nature" are frighteningly broad. We have come to know that every individual lives, from one generation to the next, in some society; that he lives out a biography, and that he lives it out within some historical sequence. By the fact of his living he contributes, however minutely, to the shaping of this society and to the course of its history, even as he is made by society and by its historical push and shove.

The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and its promise. To recognize this task and this promise is the mark of the classic social analyst. . . . And it is the signal of what is best in contemporary studies of man and 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. Whatever the specific problems of the classic social analysts, however limited or however broad the features of social reality they have examined, those who have been imaginatively aware of the promise of their work have consistently asked three sorts of questions:

(1) What is the structure of this particular society as a whole? What are its essential components, and how are they related to one another? How does it differ from other varieties of social order? Within it, what is the meaning of any particular feature for its continuance and for its change?

(2) Where does this society stand in human history? What are the mechanics by which it is changing? What is its place within and its meaning for the development of humanity as a whole? How does any particular feature we are examining affect, and how is it affected by, the historical period in which it moves? And this period—what are its essential features? How does it differ from other periods? What are its characteristic ways of history-making?

(3) What varieties of men and women now prevail in this society and in this period? And what varieties are coming to prevail? In what ways are they selected and formed, liberated and repressed, made sensitive and blunted? What kinds of "human nature" are revealed in the conduct and character we observe in this society in this period? And what is the meaning for "human nature" of each and every feature of the society we are examining?

Whether the point of interest is a great power state or a minor literary mood, a family, a prison, a creed—these are the kinds of questions the best social analysts have asked. They are the intellectual pivots of classic studies of man in society—and they are the questions inevitably raised by any mind possessing the sociological imagination. For that imagination is the capacity to shift from one perspective to another—from the political to the psychological; from examination of a single family to comparative assessment of the national budgets of the world; from the theological school to the military establishment; from considerations of an oil industry to studies of contemporary poetry. It is the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self—and to see the relations between the two. Back of its use there is always the urge to know the social and historical meaning of the individual in the society and in the period in which he has his quality and his being.

That, in brief, is why it is by means of the sociological imagination that men now hope to grasp what is going on in the world, and to understand what is happening in themselves as minute points of the intersections of biography and history within society. In large part, contemporary man's self-conscious view of himself as at least an outsider, if not a permanent stranger, rests upon an absorbed realization of social relativity and of the transformative power of history. The sociological imagination is the most fruitful form of this self-consciousness. By its use men whose mentalities have swept only a series of limited orbits often come to feel as if suddenly awakened in a house with which they had only supposed themselves to be familiar. Correctly or incorrectly, they often come to feel that they can now provide themselves with adequate summations, cohesive assessments, comprehensive orientations. Older decisions that once appeared sound now seem to them products of a mind unaccountably dense. Their capacity for astonishment is made lively again. They acquire a new way of thinking, they experience a transvaluation of values: in a word, by their reflection and by their sensibility, they realize the cultural meaning of the social sciences.

2

Perhaps the most fruitful distinction with which the sociological imagination works is between "the personal troubles of milieu" and "the public issues of social structure." This distinction is an essential tool of the sociological imagination and a feature of all classic work in social science.

Troubles occur within the character of the individual and within the range of his immediate relations with others; they have to do with his self and with those limited areas of social life of which he is directly and personally aware. Accordingly, the statement and the resolution of troubles properly lie within the individual as a biographical entity and within the scope of his immediate milieu—the social setting that is directly open to his personal experience and to some extent his willful activity. A trouble is a private matter: values cherished by an individual are felt by him to be threatened.

Issues have to do with matters that transcend these local environments of the individual and the range of his inner life. They have to do with the organization of many such milieux into the institutions of a historical society as a whole, with the ways in which various milieux overlap and interpenetrate to form the larger structure of social and historical life. An issue is a public matter: some value cherished by publics is felt to be threatened. Often there is a debate about what that value really is and about what it is that really threatens it. This debate is often without focus if only because it is the very nature of an issue, unlike even widespread trouble, that it cannot very well be defined in terms of the immediate and everyday environments of ordinary men. An issue, in fact, often involves a crisis in institutional arrangements, and often too it involves what Marxists call "contradictions" or "antagonisms."

In these terms, consider unemployment. When, in a city of 100,000, only one man is unemployed, that is his personal trouble, and for its relief we properly look to the character of the man, his skills, and his immediate opportunities. But when in a nation of 50 million employees, 15 million men are unemployed, that is an 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, and not merely the personal situation and character of a scatter of individuals.

Consider war. The personal problem of war, when it occurs, may be how to survive it or how to die in it with honour; how to make money out of it; how to climb into the higher safety of the military apparatus; or how to contribute to the war's termination. In short, according to one's values, to find a set of milieux and within it to survive the war or make one's death in it meaningful. But the structural issues of war have to do with its causes; . . . with its

effects upon economic and political, family and religious institutions, with the unorganized irresponsibility of a world of nation-states.

Consider marriage. Inside a marriage a man and a woman may experience personal troubles, but when the divorce rate during the first four years of marriage is 250 out of every 1,000 attempts, this is an indication of a structural issue having to do with the institutions of marriage and the family and other institutions that bear upon them.

Or consider the metropolis—the horrible, beautiful, ugly, magnificent sprawl of the great city. For many upper-class people, the personal solution to "the problem of the city" is to have an apartment with private garage under it in the heart of the city, and 40 miles out, a house by Henry Hill, garden by Garrett Eckbo, on a hundred acres of private land. In these two controlled environments—with a small staff at each end and a private helicopter connection—most people could solve many of the problems of personal milieux caused by the facts of the city. But all this, however splendid, does not solve the public issues that the structural fact of the city poses. What should be done with this wonderful monstrosity? Break it all up into scattered units, combining residence and work? Refurbish it as it stands? Or, after evacuation, dynamite it and build new cities according to new plans in new places? What should those plans be? And who is to decide and to accomplish whatever choice is made? These are structural issues; to confront them and to solve them requires us to consider political and economic issues that affect innumerable milieux.

In so far as an economy is so arranged that slumps occur, the problem of unemployment becomes incapable of personal solution. In so far as war is inherent in the nation-state system and in the uneven industrialization of the world, the ordinary individual in his restricted milieu will be powerless—with or without psychiatric aid—to solve the troubles this system or lack of system imposes upon him. In so far as the family as an institution turns women into darling little slaves and men into their chief providers and unweaned dependents, the problem of a satisfactory marriage remains incapable of purely private solution. In so far as the overdeveloped megalopolis and the overdeveloped automobile are built-in features of the overdeveloped society, the issues of urban living will not be solved by personal ingenuity and private wealth.

What we experience in various and specific milieux, I have noted, is often caused by structural changes. Accordingly, to understand the changes of many personal milieux we are required to look beyond them. And the number and variety of such structural changes increase as the institutions within which we live become more embracing and more intricately connected with one another. To be aware of the idea of social structure and to use it with sensibility is to be capable of tracing such linkages among a great variety of milieux. To be able to do that is to possess the sociological imagination. . . .

CRITICAL READING QUESTIONS

1. What does Mills mean by "neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both"? How could you understand your own life better by knowing more about history? How do individual biographies shape history? Think of a concrete example of this connection between individual biography and larger social history.
2. What do the terms *personal troubles* and *public issues* mean? How could we understand the issues of gender inequality, poverty, and crime as either a personal trouble or a public issue? How does labelling these problems a personal trouble or a public issue shape the kinds of solutions we would propose to solve them?
3. Mills questions the role of the physical and natural sciences in this chapter. He says that in some cases "they have raised more problems . . . than they have solved, and the problems that they have raised lie almost entirely in the area of social not physical affairs" (Mills 1959/2000, 15). How could the problem of climate change illustrate this point? What are the social ways by which we could prevent or ameliorate the effects of climate change?