

The Sociological Imagination

C. Wright Mills, a prominent twentieth century sociologist, developed the concept of the sociological imagination to help the general public understand what it is that sociologists do. He wanted people to understand this for more than mere intellectual curiosity; continuing a long tradition in the discipline, he believed that exercising their sociological imagination could empower people to take control of their lives. Excerpts from Mills' book are widely used in introductory sociology courses to help students understand this basic aspect of the study of sociology.

What is the Sociological Imagination?

Mills states "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." Most people live their lives in relatively small groups. They interact with their families, friends, co-workers, fellow students, neighbors, and so on. Their understanding of the world is heavily conditioned by this context, yet all of these small groups are localized representations of larger patterns in society – what sociologists call *social institutions*. These institutions are complex, historically created social constructions that condition people's existence, constrain their behavior, and open opportunities for individual and social action. We are socialized into a particular institutional context, and thus accept our condition as normal, rarely questioning the underlying logic of our institutional system. For example, students participate in educational institutions, yet rarely ask why our educational institutions are structured the way they are, with teachers lecturing and students taking notes and exams. Who's interests are truly served by this system of instruction?

Mills says "the sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within 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."

Essentially, Mills is making the point that sociology connects an individual's circumstances (biography) with the larger institutional context (history). Possessing the capacity to exercise *your* sociological imagination, to understand how your life is conditioned by social institutions, is empowering. This understanding allows you to take more control of your own life, rather than simply accepting the circumstances that were handed to you.

Using Your Sociological Imagination

Sociologists study social structure (e.g., the roles and statuses built into institutionalized relationships; how society is stratified), social change (e.g., how institutions change over time; how institutions are created) and social action (e.g., how individuals act in social contexts; how individual action constructs institutions). As you study the details of social structure, social change, and social action, ask yourself why our structures are the way they are, and how they got that way. It may help to envision how these structures might be different if our history and conditions were different. For example, would we need to structure our classrooms in the way we do if the U.S. were an agrarian society rather than an industrial society? In what ways would your education be different if teachers were trained in seminaries rather than colleges? How about if teachers were trained in music conservatories? Imagining these alternative scenarios can help you clarify our conditions, and grasp some of the reasons why our institutions are the way they are. Questioning the structural conditions that influence your life is the essence of utilizing your sociological imagination.

Sources

C. Wright Mills. 1959. *The Sociological Imagination*. Grove Press, New York.