

CHAPTER 1

THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

Chapter Overview

This chapter begins by introducing students to the important distinction between *society*—the largest human group to share institutions and territory—and *culture*—a system of behaviour, beliefs, knowledge, practices, values, and materials. Students learn about C.W. Wright Mills’s conceptualization of the *sociological imagination*, and that seeing individual troubles as public issues remains at the heart of this conceptualization and sociological research generally.

Sociological research has three core foci: social inequality, social institutions, and social change. These foci are supplemented by the three core aims of sociology: to define general themes in everyday life, to critically determine what constitutes common sense and why, and to look at how individuals are shaped by society and, in turn, shape it.

Students also learn in this chapter about the sociological research undertaken by one of the first sociologists, Émile Durkheim, who systematically studied suicide in European countries. Durkheim noted how different sociology was from philosophy, a popular academic discipline in his day, because it relies on empirical research and because it focused on social facts, or the external social structures, norms, and values that shape the actions of individuals. These social facts proved suicide was not only an individual’s decision as many professionals believe. Suicide patterns are affected by the social context in which they take place.

Finally, in this chapter students learn more about quantitative and qualitative sociology and the research methods of both approaches. Quantitative sociology is based on surveys and experiments, while qualitative sociology is based on interviews and observation.

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, students will be able to

- distinguish the difference between a society and a culture;
- develop their own sociological imagination;
- understand the nature of social inequality and the methods used to study it;
- comprehend the theory of Émile Durkheim and its application in his study of suicide;
- distinguish between independent and dependent variables; and,
- distinguish between quantitative and qualitative sociology, and research methods underlying each.

Lecture Outline

Introduction

- *Sociology*, or studying society in a systematic way, is a term coined by Auguste Comte.
- *Societies* are large-scale human groups sharing common territory and institutions.
- *Cultures* are systems of behaviour, beliefs, knowledge, practices, values and materials.
- Individuals from many different disciplines interested in the study of society.

- Philosophers as far back as Socrates and Plato wondered what makes a good society.
- Sociology differs for it is built on the study of society in a systematic way.
- Societies are not the same as states, as they are built on interactions among its members.
 - Interactions happen in patterned ways through routines, expectations, and behaviours that establish themselves over time and build common meanings.
 - These interactions occur in a variety of settings and levels and are shaped by culture.
- *Dominant culture* is defined as the culture capable of imposing its beliefs and behaviours on individuals because of the economic and political power it wields.
- *Countercultures* differ from the dominant culture and reject it whereas subcultures differ from the dominant culture but don't necessarily oppose it.
- One last cultural distinction to remember: *high culture* is considered the culture of the elite whereas *low culture* is the culture of the majority.

The Sociological Imagination

- The sociological imagination is an idea developed by C. Wright Mills to help individuals see the connections between their lives and larger society.
- He argued we can understand our lives in more depth if we understand the larger history of our society.
- To do so, he advocated illuminating the personal troubles we face as individuals and larger public issues or the social problems that arise in human societies.
- Think about how individual choices are structured in society.
- We make our own decisions, or exercise our own agency, but our agency is shaped or limited by larger social forces.
- These social forces include family, class, gender, race, the economy.

Three Core Foci of Sociology

- Sociology is the systematic study of human societies.
- Almost anything in human societies can be researched within sociology.
- However, most research is done within three primary areas of focus: the study of social inequality, the role of social institutions in society, and the study of social change.
- The first core focus is the study of social inequality, or the gap between the advantaged and disadvantaged.
 - Gaps exist in terms of rights, opportunities, rewards and privileges.
 - Inequality is based on these differential experiences.
- The second core focus is the study of social institutions, of which there are five in Canadian society: the family, education, religion, the economy, and the government.
 - Social institutions are defined as the norms, values, and rules of conduct structuring human interactions.
 - Within this area of focus it is important to remember institutions are not just physical spaces or buildings but human networks too.
 - Research on institutions explores how they maintain the functionality of society, the ways institutions hold society back, and the way institutions facilitate social change in human societies.
 - This research has shown how social institutions are standardized ways of doing things, as actions become regularized, patterned, and reproduced.

- Research into social institutions has also shown how they are contradictory, at times helping society run smoothly, at other times reproducing social inequality within societies, but always potential sites of social change.
- The third core focus of sociological research is the study of social change.
 - They research secularization, for example, or the process of a religion losing its authority over individuals and in social life in general.
 - Sociologists wonder why religion has some of its influence in modern societies.
 - Sociologists in this focus area study religiosity, which is a measure for how religious an individual or society is.
 - Canada's religiosity is on the decline, but religiosity is on the rise in many parts of the world.
 - Religion's changing role in Canadian society is one example of social change sociologists focus on in their research.

Three Core Aims of Sociology

- Sociologists aim to define general themes in everyday life.
- Sociologists aim to critically determine what is familiar or common sense in human societies and why it is that way.
- Finally, sociologists aim to examine how individuals are shaped by society and how, in turn, individuals shape their society.
- Defining general themes in everyday life requires the sociologist to remember people's experiences contain generalizations of how society functions and how people behave.
- The familiarity with our experiences sometimes prevents us from developing a deeper understanding of how society functions.
- Sociologists study people's experiences to come up with ideas about how society functions.
- Sociologists strive to find patterns in people's behaviours.
- When patterns are found, sociologists do research to determine why those patterns exist.
- Through systematic study, sociology can illuminate patterns in society, how they are established, and how they become common sense to those living them.
- Sociologists aim to examine the dual process of how we shape society and how society shapes us.
- The creation of institutions is an example of this process as it is carried out by collectives of human beings who determine how these institutions should function.
- In turn, institutions influence the individuals who created them in terms of how they think and how they act.

Émile Durkheim and the Study of Suicide

- Émile Durkheim was one of the first sociologists.
- Durkheim noted how different sociology was from philosophy, a popular academic discipline in his day, due to its reliance on empirical research.
- Sociology was also unique because it focused on social facts, or the external social structures, norms, and values that shape the actions of individuals.
- Durkheim found that suicide wasn't entirely a matter of the individual's decision to take their own life.
- He determined suicide rates differed by country, by gender, and even by religion.
- The differences in suicide rates could only be explained by considering social facts, or those elements of society beyond the individual's control.

- His study led him to the conclusion that there are four main types of suicide, which differ depending on the degree of integration an individual experiences in a society and the degree of regulation, or the extent of external constraint on individuals.
 - Egoistic suicide occurs in societies with low levels of integration.
 - Altruistic suicide occurs in societies with high levels of integration.
 - Anomic suicide occurs in societies with excessively low regulation.
 - Fatalistic suicide occurs in societies with excessively high regulation.
- Durkheim believed conditions of society are so powerful they influence even the most personal of individual decisions such as suicide.

Research Methods: How Do Sociologists Study Society?

- When thinking about what to analyze, sociologists formulate research questions to guide their decisions.
- Research questions focus on the relationship between *variables*, or things that change.
- *Independent variables* are the variables that potentially affect other variables.
- *Dependent variables* are the variables affected by independent variables.
- Two major types of research comprise the type of work sociologists do.
 - The first is quantitative research, which refers to research on things that can be counted.
 - The second is qualitative research, which refers to research on social processes and tends to focus on a smaller number of things to analyze.
- Quantitative research uses two main types of methods.
 - The first major method utilized in quantitative research is surveying.
 - This involves distributing questionnaires to a large number of people.
 - The purpose is to learn about the characteristics, attitudes, or behaviours of individuals in human societies.
 - The second major method utilized in quantitative research is experiments.
 - With this method, the researcher is interested in understanding how some factor affects individual behaviour.
 - This method involves comparing two groups: an experimental group and a control group.
 - The treatment is given to the experimental group to see how they'll react.
- Qualitative research uses two main types of methods as well.
 - The first major method utilized in qualitative research is interviewing.
 - This involves asking each participant the same set of questions and records their responses.
 - Interviews allow researchers to ask questions that require longer answers and they provide opportunities to ask follow-up questions.
 - The second major method utilized in qualitative research is participant observation, often referred to as ethnography.
 - With this method, the researcher actively engages with a group of individuals to understand their lives and experiences.
 - It requires extensive involvement with the group under study for a long period of time.
- Sociologists use additional research methods in their work.
 - Some use content analysis to study documents such as newspapers, historical letters, or other kinds of texts.
 - Some use focus groups which are like interviews but involve a larger number of people.

Key Terms

Counterculture A group of people who reject parts of the dominant culture.

Culture A system of behaviour, beliefs, knowledge, practices, values, and materials.

Dominant culture The culture capable of imposing its values, beliefs, and behaviours because of its economic and political power.

Secularization The loss of religious authority over the lives of individuals and human societies.

Social inequality The gap between advantaged and disadvantaged people in human society.

Social institutions The norms, values, rules of conduct, and social arrangements that shape social interactions in human societies.

Society The biggest group of human beings who share the same geographic territory and institutions.

Sociological imagination Term coined by C. Wright Mills to highlight the connection between our personal troubles and public issues.

Sociology The systematic study of human society.

Subculture A group of people who differ from the dominant culture without necessarily opposing it.

Variables anything that can take on different values, in other words they can vary or change (p.24).

Visible minorities A Government of Canada term used to define people other than Aboriginal people who are not white in colour or who identify as part of the Caucasian race.

Sample Answers to Critical Reading Questions

Reading: “The Sociological Imagination” by C. Wright Mills (pp. 5–9).

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 and the way it socializes people.**

Mills means that private troubles are inevitably public issues so no matter what you are experiencing on an individual level, if you really want to understand your own life then you should take a closer look at the society around you, its history, and its socialization processes. Students may reflect on the way their school system socialized them and the content that was used to do so. How well do students know the history of residential schools in Canada, for example? If their knowledge is limited, perhaps it is because the Canadian government sought to hide this history from its citizens by downplaying it in schools until residential school survivors and their families broke this silence to educate Canadians and receive some form of justice for the wrongs inflicted in these schools.

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?**

Mills used the terms *personal troubles* and *public issues* in his theory of the sociological imagination. Personal troubles refer to the struggles people have in their individual lives, perhaps with unemployment, violence, or debt. But, of course, these are all public issues because they happen to multiple people in society through the reach of social institutions, culture, and society. We can understand poverty, for example, as a personal trouble as someone may struggle to pay their rent or pay their bills and internalize this struggle, blame themselves for their situation. But as a public issue, poverty may be potentially seen as a problem in government funding, regulation, or legislative oversight. Perhaps the individual is struggling to pay their rent because there are no rent controls preventing landlords from increasing their rent values or converting their properties to short-term rentals. How we label problems determines the level to which we understand them and deal with them. We can either keep blaming individuals for their own personal troubles or we can see all individual troubles as public issues requiring a public response.

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?**

Mills would likely say that the physical and natural sciences have essentially affirmed climate change is happening, but the social response has been lacking from governments and corporations. Mills would wonder why and perhaps locate the answer in the ruling elite, as he often theorized in his work. Does the government and corporate focus on profit-making override concrete steps to ensure the climate is livable for future generations? Mills might wonder if this social block is creating an ever-growing public issue. Preventing or ameliorating the effects of climate change will require all citizens to put pressure on their governments and corporations to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by addressing how our society's thirst for profit is putting the planet at risk.

Reading: “Toward a Sociology of Reconciliation of Conflicting Desires” by Susan O’Donnell and David Perley (pp. 27–31).

1. **What is a damaged-centred approach to studying Indigenous issues in Canada? Why is this approach problematic?**

Damaged-centred research is a type of research carried out by academics about Indigenous peoples with or without their consent or potential connections to Indigenous communities that only analyzes the consequences of poverty, racism, and colonialism in Indigenous communities and not the resistance to these consequences found in every Indigenous community in the country. Without the proper participation of Indigenous peoples in the research process, damaged-centred research risks the internalization by Indigenous peoples of this damaged identity, according to Eve Tuck.

- 2. What is a desire-based approach, as proposed in this article? How might this type of approach help us to understand how different groups of people can come together towards reconciliation?**

A desire-based approach represents a closer integration of Indigenous peoples with the research process so that research focuses on the kind of change necessary to support the realization of desires throughout Indigenous communities. How can research contribute to Indigenous communities regaining control over the realization of their desires for land, self-determination, and healing from the damage done by colonialism in Canada. It is the kind of research that doesn't deny colonialism and the damage it's done, but it doesn't make this damage the sole focus of the research. More inclusive, desire-focused research means bring together people in the research process on more equal footing and for the purpose of the kind of social change capable of laying the groundwork for true reconciliation.

- 3. What is the sociology of reconciliation of conflicting desires? How do the authors suggest that we can all participate in doing this?**

The sociology of reconciliation of conflicting desires is a new approach to research that focuses on capacity building in Indigenous communities, so research is more inclusive and may potentially be taken over by the community one day. The focus of this research is land and how the desire for the lands of Indigenous peoples continues the colonial pattern of dispossessing their lands and leaving Indigenous communities in worse shape politically, economically, spiritually, and culturally. The authors suggest we can all participate in this process if research is collaboratively made more inclusive of Indigenous peoples and offers more control over the research process and inevitably the land.

Sample Answers to Activity Questions

Activity: The History and Biography of Higher Education in Canada (pp. 10–11)

- 1. Begin by tracing the educational attainment of your family. What are your parents' and grandparents' highest levels of education, either in Canada or elsewhere? Compare the educational pathways of the males and females in your family. Do both sides of your family have similar types and amounts of education? Try to explain why the different people in your family (parents and grandparents, male and female, both sides of your family) attained the education that they did.**

Students might tell a story about their parents and grandparents not having the chance to attend higher education or, given that Canada is a country with a strong history of immigration, that they were educated outside the country. When thinking about the gender differences between the males and females in their family they may see that males had more opportunities for higher education in the past, although that is changing as more and more women enroll in post-secondary education. Differential gender experiences with higher education might be the reason why a student's family members might have different experiences with higher education.

- 2. The following figures outline the percentage of males and females enrolled in American and Canadian universities in the 1960s (roughly when your grandparents might have gone**

to university) and in recent years (your generation's university attendance). The second figure shows the male and female rates of attendance over time. Looking at the overall statistics of university enrolment in Canada and the United States, how has the number and type of people attending university changed? What major trends do you observe in the charts? What types of larger historical changes in society have led to these changes in university enrolment? How have larger social processes created these changing patterns?

Looking at the overall statistics for university enrolment by gender shows that women have always been enrolled in greater numbers in Canada than men but since 1991 this difference has increased. This is a bit different from enrolment patterns in the United States where, prior to 1991, men were enrolled in university in greater numbers than women, but after 1991 things have changed and now more women than men are enrolled in universities. How can students explain these trends from a sociological perspective? Primarily, they should consider the role of the feminist movement in creating change and increasing the number of university spaces for women to study. Through a combination of research and activism, leaders of this movement have pressured social institutions such as governments and universities to reconsider their enrolment statistics and take concrete measures through legislation and policy to make them more equal. But they might also want to put these increases in enrolment into broader political and economic perspective in terms of wages, income, and status in the labour market.

- 3. How does knowing the larger historical trends in Canadian society help you to better understand the biographies of your family members? How does knowing your own family's biography help you to better understand the historical trends you observe in the data on Canadian society?**

Familiarizing yourself with larger historical trends will help you connect your personal troubles to the public issues found in these trends. Students might explain how their parents' roles reflect the historical trend in Canada of gender inequality and university enrolment. Do students' families reflect the historical trend of women remaining at home to raise children while the men are entering universities to further their education? Connecting family biographies to historical trends allows for a type of theory building, whereby students can make a connection between their family biographies and broader historical trends like gender inequality in education by explaining their family biography in the context of such a trend.

Activity: Suicide in Canada (pp. 21–22)

- 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?**

Family type and gender may potentially prevent individuals from suicidal tendencies for several reasons. Durkheim believed that one's integration into a larger social body such as a family, for example, might lower an individual's risk of suicide. For Durkheim, suicide was not an individual-level decision solely, as he theorized it was a personal decision strongly influenced by the social context of the individual. As such, he might think about how the social context women experience in Canada affects their suicide rate comparative to men. Perhaps it is the stronger social networks women form as a result of the unequal care work they do in society that allows them to feel more

integrated. When answering this question, students must refer to the context of the statistics in question.

- 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?**

Religiosity seems negatively correlated with suicide rates around the world, meaning that as religiosity rises, suicide rates go down. This would not surprise Durkheim, who found that there was a strong connection between religion and suicide rates, but it wasn't a pure connection as the statistics currently demonstrate. Even though most religious countries experience lower suicide rates, India stands out as a highly religious society with unusually high suicide rates. Durkheim might concede that religion promotes integration and integration promotes lower suicide rates, but whatever religious dynamics exist in India contradict the direction of this connection. Students might suggest that this will require additional research into India's religious context.

- 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?**

Students might reflect on the gender and class dynamics of each country as perhaps influencing religious beliefs in ways that don't occur in other countries with higher religiosity. Students may potentially also use Durkheim's theory, which made room for such an anomaly in the way his research showed different suicide rates in members of the Protestant and Catholic faiths, respectively. He explained the difference by unpacking the different tenets of the Protestant and Catholic faiths to show how integration and regulation of members of both faiths differ depending on the tenets of each.

Additional Class Activities and Discussion Questions

1. Ask students to use Mills's writing on the sociological imagination to put their individual lives in the context of the historical time period within which they exist. How do they see themselves in the unfolding history they have been a part of their entire lives?
2. In groups, ask students to discuss the nature of breaching experiments as developed by Harold Garfinkel. Specifically, ask them to come up with their own breaching experiments, but make sure they understand what the experiment is trying to prove and how it will prove it.
3. Ask students each to write a short essay, no more than two pages, about their thoughts in income inequality. Do they believe society is becoming more or potentially less equal? Remind students to reference material, statistics, and research from Chapter 1 to support their argument.
4. Ask students, in groups, as a class, or individually, to debate the positive and negative aspects of institutions. How is it that institutions can serve a positive function for social change but also a negative function at the same time?
5. Ask students what they think is the most important core aim of sociology and why.

6. Ask students to work in groups to define the three core areas of sociology and then ask them to explain which one they would choose to pursue in future research.
7. Ask students if they think Durkheim's categories for the different types of suicide apply in Canada today? Why or why not? Make sure they explain their answer.
8. Ask students to work in groups to come up with potential research projects. Make sure they explain how the research methods they chose differ for qualitative and quantitative sociology?