Sociological Imagination

Sociological imagination - The ability of understanding the intersection of one's own biography and other biographies with history and the present social structure you find yourself and others in. In essence, it is understanding the private in public terms. C. Wright Mills, The Sociological Imagination.

In other words...
Mills captures the essential lesson of sociology…

• To truly understand people’s behavior, we must look beyond those individuals to the larger social contexts in which they live.

• Individuals make choices, but their choices are constrained by social, historical, cultural, political and economic factors.

• Most important, people frequently do not even realize the extent to which their lives are affected by things that are external to them and outside their control.

• The main point is, if we are to understand people’s behavior, we must take into account these individual factors!

Sociological Imagination

• A different perspective
• Difference between personal troubles and public issues
• Different Solutions
• Freedom to see the world in a new way
• Can be Frightening—makes you uncomfortable “things are not what they seem”
How do we define reality?
What is real?
Who shapes our reality?

Sociology & Skepticism

“Our capacity for self deception has no known limit”

• Skepticism is not:
  • Cynicism (no hope, sarcastic, or negative)
  • Rigid Refusal to believe in anything

• Skepticism is:
  • Thoughtful
  • Technique to evaluate ideas, programs and behaviors
  • Practice of Critical Thinking
  • An inquiry into logic, evidence and soundness of claims
Personal Troubles: occur at the individual level

Public Issues: Transcend the individual. An issue is a public matter when some value cherished by public is felt to be threatened.

Person Troubles to Public Issues

Personal trouble vs. Public issue:
- Credit Debt (one person has debt)
- Average American has around $9,000 in C.C. debt

Latent (hidden/unintended) Function
- Traps people into minimum payments

Manifest (obvious/intended) Functions
- Gives people buying power
Film: Maxed Out

• **Synopsis:** *Maxed Out* takes viewers on a journey deep inside the American style of debt, where things seem fine as long as the minimum monthly payment arrives on time. With coverage from small American towns all the way to the White House, the film shows how the modern financial industry really works, explains the true definition of “preferred customer,” and tells us why the poor are getting poorer while the rich keep getting richer.

• **Directions.** Watch the video closely, and answer the following questions. Try to make connections between *The Sociological Imagination*, the reading in the textbook, the lecture, and the film. Questions are likely to appear on the next exam.

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Applying the Sociological Imagination:

**Case Study: Eating Disorders**

- 18 year old woman
- College student, educated
- Dancer and lifeguard
- Bulimic
How might this be a personal trouble?

- Personal choice/decision
- Biography
- Low self-esteem

How is this public issue?

- Lookism/emphasis on appearance/body type
- Is there a pattern of eating disorders in the US?
- Are there public values being threatened
- What is the structure of society that might cause eating disorders?
- How has society changed over time?
- What kind of America is being created in this moment?
- Are there social forces that cause us to have disordered eating?
Pattern of Eating Disorders

- Eating disorders have reached epidemic levels in America: all segments of society, young and old, rich and poor, all minorities, including African American and Latino
- Seven million women
- One million men
- General Pattern suggests something greater than the person

Who is to Blame?

- Individual—make choices
- Psychological and medical problems
- People suffer from addictions
- Government
- Could encourage positive self-esteem, diverse body types
- Fashion Industry
- Fashion Magazines
- Movies
- Models
- American Culture
- Ideals of beauty
Eating disorders as a Public Issue?

• Doesn’t mean individuals are not also responsible
• Individuals do have agency and choices
• Choices can be limited

In Summary…

Sociological Imagination
Private. Vs. Public

Personal Trouble vs. Public Issue
Latent and Manifest Functions