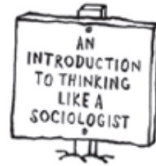


Fourth Edition

You May Ask Yourself



Dalton Conley
NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

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PART I

USING YOUR
SOCIOLOGICAL
IMAGINATION



Thinking like a sociologist means looking at the world around you in a new way. Challenge conventional wisdom and question what most people take for granted.

1 The Sociological Imagination: An Introduction

PARADOX
A SUCCESSFUL SOCIOLOGIST
MAKES THE FAMILIAR STRANGE.



If you want to understand sociology, why don't we start with you. Why are you taking this class and reading this textbook? It's as good a place to start as any—after all, **sociology** is the study of human society, and there is the sociology of sports, of religion, of music, of medicine, even a sociology of sociologists. So why not start, by way of example, with the sociology of an introduction to sociology?

For example, why are you bent over this page? Take a moment to write down the reasons. Maybe you have heard of sociology and want to learn about it. Maybe you are merely following the suggestion of a parent, guidance counselor, or academic advisor. The course syllabus probably indicates that for the first week of class, you are required to read this chapter. So there are at least two good reasons to be reading this introduction to sociology text.

Let's take the first response, "I want to educate myself about sociology." That's a fairly good reason, but may I then ask why you are taking the class rather than simply reading the book on your own? Furthermore, assuming that you're paying tuition, why are you doing so? If you really are here for the education, let me suggest an alternative: Grab one of the course schedules at your college, decide which courses to take, and just show up! Most introductory classes are so large that nobody notices if an extra student attends. If it is a smaller, more advanced seminar, ask the professor if you can audit it. I have never known a faculty member who checks that all class attendees are legitimate students at the college—in fact, we're happy when students *do* show up to class. An auditor, someone who is there for the sake of pure learning, and who won't be grade grubbing or submitting papers to be marked, is pure gold to any professor interested in imparting knowledge for learning's sake.

You know the rest of the drill: Do all the reading (you can usually access the required texts for free at the library), do your homework, and participate in class discussion. About the only thing you won't get at the end of the course is a grade. So give yourself one. As a matter of fact, once you have compiled enough credits and written a senior thesis, award yourself a diploma. Why not? You will probably have received a better education than most students—certainly better than I did in college.

But what are you going to do with a homemade diploma? You are not just here to learn; you wish to obtain an actual college degree. Why exactly do you want a college degree? Students typically answer that they have to get one in order to earn more money. Others may say that they need credentials to get the job they want. And some students are in college because they don't know what else to do. Whatever your answer, the fact that you asked yourself a question about something you may have previously taken for granted is the first step in thinking like a sociologist. "Thinking like a sociologist" means applying analytical tools to something you have always done without much conscious thought—like opening this book or taking this class. It requires you to reconsider your assumptions about society and question what you have taken for granted in order to better understand the world around you. In other words, thinking like a sociologist means *making the familiar strange*.

This chapter introduces you to the sociological approach to the world. Specifically, you will learn about the *sociological imagination*, a term coined by C. Wright Mills. We'll return to the question "Why go to college?" and apply our sociological imaginations to it. You will also learn what a social institution is. The chapter concludes by looking at the sociology of sociology—that is, the history of sociology and where it fits within the social sciences.



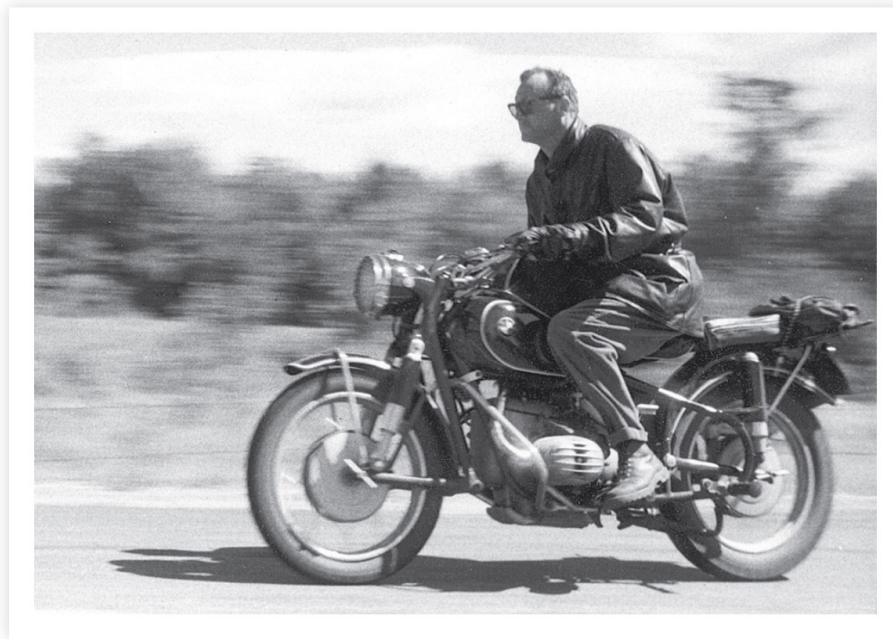
→ The Sociological Imagination

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More than 50 years ago, the sociologist C. Wright Mills argued that in the effort to think critically about the social world around us, we need to use our **sociological imagination**, the ability to see the connections between our personal experience and the larger forces of history. This is just what we are doing when we question this textbook, this course, and college in general. In *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), Mills describes it this way: “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.” The terrible part of the lesson is to make our own lives ordinary—that is, to see our intensely personal, private experience of life as typical of the period and place in which we live. This can also serve as a source of comfort, however, helping us to realize that we are not alone in our experiences, whether they involve our alienation from the increasingly dog-eat-dog capitalism of modern America, the peculiar combination of intimacy and dissociation that we may experience on the Internet, or the ways that nationality or geography affect our life choices. The sociological imagination does not just leave us hanging with these feelings of recognition, however. Mills writes that it also “enables [us] to take into account how individuals, in the welter of their daily experience, often become falsely conscious of their social positions.” The sociological imagination thus allows us to see the veneer of social life for what it is, and to step outside the “trap” of rapid historical change in order to comprehend what is occurring in our world and the social foundations that may be shifting right under our feet. As Mills wrote after World War II, a time of enormous political, social, and technological change, “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.”

Mills offered his readers a way to stop and take stock of their lives in light of all that had happened in the previous decade. Of course, we almost always feel that social change is fairly rapid and continually getting ahead of us. Think of the 1960s or even today, with the rise of the Internet and global terror threats. In retrospect, we consider the 1950s, the decade when Mills wrote his seminal work, to be a relatively placid time, when Americans experienced some relief from the change and strife of World War II and the Great Depression. But Mills believed the profound sense of alienation experienced by many during the postwar period was a result of the change that had immediately preceded it.



Sociologist C. Wright Mills commuting to Columbia University on his motorcycle. How does Mills's concept of the sociological imagination help us make the familiar strange?

Another way to think about the sociological imagination is to ask ourselves what we take to be natural that actually isn't. For example, let's return to the question "Why go to college?" Sociologists and economists have shown that the financial benefits of education—particularly higher education—appear to be increasing. They refer to this as the "returns to schooling." In today's economy, the median (i.e., typical) annual income for a high-school graduate is \$33,176; for those with a bachelor's degree, it is \$54,756 (2011 data; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013a). That \$21,580 annual advantage seems like a good deal, but is it really? Let's shift gears and do a little math.

HOW TO BE A SOCIOLOGIST ACCORDING TO QUENTIN TARANTINO: A SCENE FROM PULP FICTION

Have you ever been to a foreign country, noticed how many little things were different, and wondered why? Have you ever been to a church of a different denomination—or a different religion altogether—from your own? Or have you been a fish out of water in some other way? The only guy attending a social event for women, perhaps? Or the only person from out of state in your dorm? If you have experienced that fish-out-of-water feeling, then you have, however briefly, engaged your sociological imagination. By shifting your social environment enough to be in a position where you are not able to take everything for granted, you are forced to see the connections between particular historical paths taken (and not taken) and how you live your daily life. You may, for instance, wonder why there are bidets in most European bathrooms and not in American ones. Or why people waiting in lines in the Middle East typically stand closer to each other than they do in Europe or America. Or why, in some rural Chinese societies, many generations of a family sleep in the same bed. If you are able to resist your initial impulses toward xenophobia (feelings that may result from the discomfort of facing a different reality), then you are halfway to understanding other people's lifestyles as no more or less sensible than your own. Once you have truly adopted the sociological imagination, you can start questioning the links between your personal experience and the particulars of a given society without ever leaving home.

In the following excerpt of dialogue from Quentin Tarantino's 1994 film *Pulp Fiction*, the character Vincent tells Jules about the "little differences" between life in the United States and life in Europe.

VINCENT: It's the little differences. A lotta the same shit we got here, they got there, but there they're a little different.

JULES: Example?

VINCENT: Well, in Amsterdam, you can buy beer in a movie theater. And I don't mean in a paper cup either. They give you a glass of beer, like in a bar. In Paris, you can buy beer at McDonald's. Also, you know what they call a Quarter Pounder with Cheese in Paris?

JULES: They don't call it a Quarter Pounder with Cheese?

VINCENT: No, they got the metric system there, they wouldn't know what the fuck a Quarter Pounder is.

JULES: What'd they call it?

VINCENT: Royale with Cheese.



Vincent Vega (John Travolta) describes his visit to a McDonald's in Amsterdam to Jules Winnfield (Samuel L. Jackson).

JULES: (repeating) Royale with Cheese. What'd they call a Big Mac?

VINCENT: Big Mac's a Big Mac, but they call it Le Big Mac.

JULES: What do they call a Whopper?

VINCENT: I dunno, I didn't go into a Burger King. But you know what they put on french fries in Holland instead of ketchup?

JULES: What?

VINCENT: Mayonnaise.

JULES: Goddamn!

VINCENT: I seen 'em do it. And I don't mean a little bit on the side of the plate, they fuckin' drown 'em in it.

JULES: Uuccch!

Your job as a sociologist is to get into the mind-set that mayonnaise on french fries, though it might seem disgusting at first, is not strange after all, certainly no more so than ketchup.

What Are the True Costs and Returns of College?

Now that you are thinking like a sociologist, let's compare the true cost of going to college for four years to calling the whole thing off and taking a full-time job right after high school. First, there is the tuition to consider. Let's assume for the sake of argument you are paying \$8,000 per year for tuition and another \$9,000 for fees and room and board. That's a lot less than what most private four-year colleges cost, but about average for in-state tuition at a state school. (Community colleges, by contrast, are usually much cheaper, especially because they tend to be commuter schools whose students live off-campus, but they typically do not offer a four-year bachelor's degree.)

In making the decision to attend college, you are agreeing to pay \$17,000 this year, something like \$17,680 next year, 4 percent more the following year, and another 4 percent on top of that amount in your senior year. The \$17,000 you have to pay right now is what hurts the most, because costs in the future are worth less than expenses today. Money in the future is worth less than money in hand for several reasons. The first is inflation. We all know that money is not what it used to be. In fact, taking into account the standard inflation rate—as measured by the government's Consumer Price Index—it took about \$16 in 2011 to equal the buying power of a single dollar back in 1940 (Sahr, 2010). The second reason that money today is worth more than money tomorrow is that we could invest the money today to make more tomorrow.

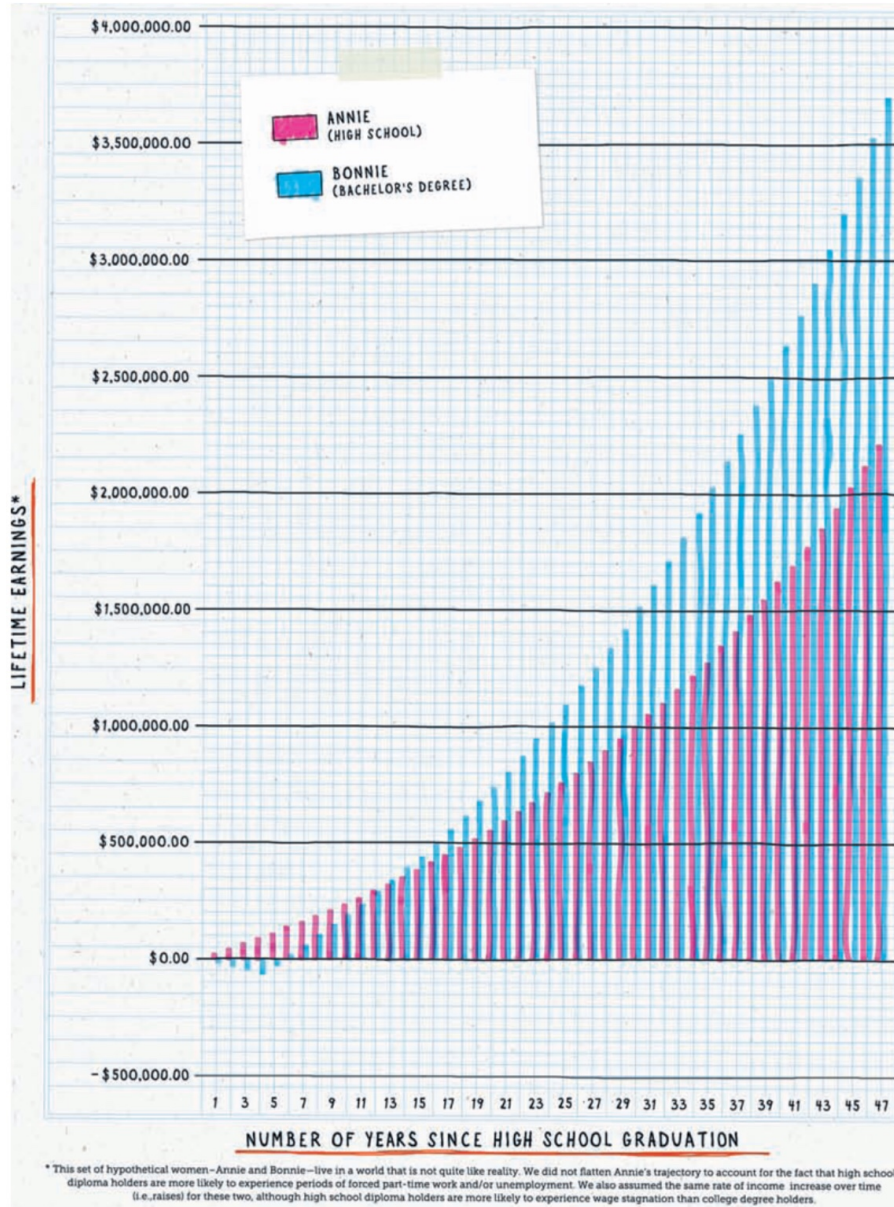
Using a standard formula to adjust for inflation and bring future amounts into current dollars, we can determine that paying out \$17,000 this year and the higher amounts over the next three years is equivalent to paying \$70,023 in one lump sum today; this would be the direct cost of attending college. Indirect costs—so-called opportunity costs—exist as well, such as the costs associated with the amount of time you are devoting to school. Taking into account the typical wage for a high-school graduate, not counting differences by gender, age, or level of experience, we can calculate that if you worked full time instead of going to college, you would make \$33,176 this year. Thus, we find that the present value of the total wages lost over the next four years by choosing full-time school over full-time work is \$132,704. Add these opportunity costs to the direct costs of tuition, and we get \$202,727.

Next we need to calculate the “returns to schooling.” For the sake of simplicity, we will ignore the fact that the differences between high-school graduates and college graduates change over time—given years of experience and the ups and downs of the economy. Instead, we will regard the \$54,756 annual earnings figure for college graduates as fixed and subtract from that amount the \$33,176 earned by the typical high-school graduate, which yields a net difference of \$21,580. But remember, you would not start earning this money for four years. So the real difference is \$21,580 four years from now plus \$21,580 five years from now and so on, until you leave the labor force. Assuming that you attend college for only four years and retire at 65, you will have worked 43 years (high-school grads will be in the work force for 47 years because they get a four-year head start). When we compare your college-degree-holding lifetime earnings to the lifetime earnings of someone who has only a high-school education, we find that with a college degree you will make \$795,236 more than someone who went straight to work after high school (Figure 1.1). (To make matters more straightforward, we are conveniently ignoring the fact that future money is inherently worth less than present money in economic decision making.) On top of this substantial financial return to schooling, one economist found that those with college degrees were happier, healthier, and less likely to get divorced than their high-school-educated peers, even after controlling for income (Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2009).

But wait a minute: How do we know for sure that college really mattered in the equation? Individuals who finish college might earn more because they actually learned something and obtained a degree, or—a big or—they might earn more regardless of the college experience because people who stay in school (1) are innately smarter, (2) know how to work the system, (3) come from wealthier families, (4) can delay gratification, (5) are more efficient at managing their time, or (6) all of the above—take your pick. In other words, Yale graduates might not have needed to go to college to earn higher wages; they might have been successful anyway.

Maybe, then, the success stories of Mark Zuckerberg, Steve Jobs, Lady Gaga, and other college dropouts don't cut against the grain so sharply after all. Maybe they were the savvy ones: Convinced of their ability to make it on their own, thanks to the social cues they received (including the fact that they had been admitted to college), they decided that they wouldn't wait four years to try to achieve success. They opted to just go for it right then and there. College's "value added," they might have concluded, was marginal at best.

Figure 1.1: Returns to Schooling





Two famous college dropouts. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg (left) attended Harvard but dropped out before graduating. John Mackey (right) quit university before founding Whole Foods.

Getting That “Piece of Paper”

Even if college turns out to matter in the end, does it make a difference because of the learning that takes place there or because of our credentialist society that it aids and abets? The answer to this question has enormous implications for what education means in our society. Imagine, for example, a society where people become doctors not by doing well on the SATs, going to college, taking premed courses, acing the MCATs, and then spending more time in the classroom. Instead, the route to becoming a doctor –among the most prestigious and highly paid occupations in our society –starts with emptying bedpans as a nurse’s aide and working your way up through the ranks of registered nurse, apprentice physician, and so forth; finally, after years of on-the-job training, you achieve the title of doctor. Social theorist Randall Collins has proposed just such a medical education system in the controversial *The Credential Society: A Historical Sociology of Education and Stratification* (1979), which argues that the expansion of higher education has merely resulted in a ratcheting up of credentialism and expenditures on formal education rather than reflecting any true societal need for more formal education or opening up opportunity to more people.

If Collins is correct and credentials are what matter most, then isn't there a cheaper, faster way to get them? In fact, all you need are \$29.95 and a little guts, and you can receive a diploma from one of the many online sites that promise either legitimate degrees from nonaccredited colleges or a college diploma from any school of your choosing. Thus, why not save four years and lots of money and obtain your credentials immediately?

Obviously, universities have incentives to prevent such websites from undermining their monopoly on degree-conferring ability. So they rely on a number of other social institutions, ranging from copyright law to the local police force, to enforce this monopoly power. However, I have no knowledge of anyone—employer, school, landlord—ever verifying my educational claims. That is, no one has ever checked to make sure that I attended college or graduate school. They have taken my résumé at face value. (On the other hand, colleges do check that applicants have completed high school.)

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OR DO IT YOURSELF AT HOME: Download 100% customizable templates to create impressive credentials on your own computer!

College-campus bulletin boards are covered with advertisements like this one promoting websites that generate diplomas. Why are these fake diplomas not worth it?

But there are also informal mechanisms by which universities are protected that may be more important than any formal checks. First, there is the university's alumni network. Potential employers rarely call a university's registrar to make sure you graduated, but they will expect you to talk a bit about your college experience. If your interviewer is an alumnus or otherwise familiar with the institution, you might also be expected to talk about what dorm you lived in, reminisce about a particularly dramatic homecoming game, or gripe about an especially unreasonable professor. If you slip up on any of this information, suspicions will grow, and then people might call to check on your graduation status. Perhaps there are some good reasons not to opt for that \$29.95 degree and to pay the costs of college after all.