Thinking about Sociology

OXFORD

Second Edition | Karen L. Anderson

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A Critical Introduction

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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,
and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of
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

First Edition published in 2012

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication
Anderson, Karen L., author
Thinking about sociology: a critical introduction / Karen
L. Anderson. — Second edition.

Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-19-901482-8 (paperback)

1. Sociology—Textbooks. 2. Sociology—Methodology. I. Title.

HM586.A54 2016 301 C2015-906391-4

Cover image: Lalo de Almeida/Getty Images

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Printed and bound in the United States of America

1 2 3 4 — 19 18 17 16

Contents

6 | Karl Marx and Max Weber 139

7 | The Social-Interactionist Perspective 169

PART IV | Core Concepts 193

8 | Socialization and the Young Child 195

9 | Social Performance and Interaction Rituals 221

10 | Culture 245

11 | Social Structure and Social Agency 269

12 | Social Inequality, Stratification, and Class 295

16 | Deviance and Crime 411

PART VI | New Topics, New Directions 449

17 | Popular, Mass, and Elite Cultures and Mass Media 451

18 | The Internet, Social Media, and Social Networking 481

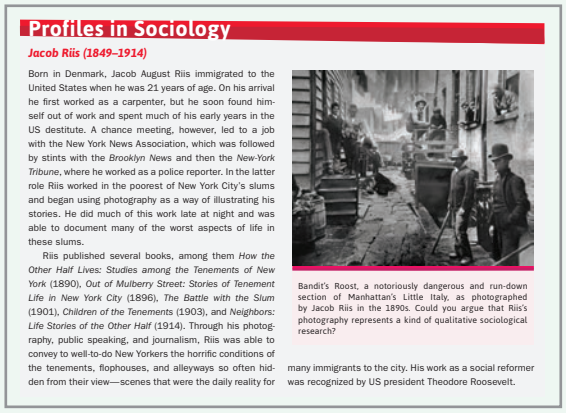
19 | Sociologists and Social Activism 513

Preface

From the Publisher

There is more to society than meets the eye, yet while most people know this, they continue to view the world with a largely uncritical perception of the way things are. Sociologists are committed to delving deeper, applying a sociological imagination to the study of society in order to gain a better understanding of the way that social institutions—such as school, work, and home—affect every individual's life course and life chances.

Thinking About Sociology: A Critical Introduction focuses on developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills in sociology through a lively survey of the core topics, concepts, and applications widely identified by sociologists as being central to an introductory sociology course. The goal is to encourage students to challenge their everyday thinking about the world around them without sacrificing the focus on the issues fundamental to the discipline, including social change, inequalities and power, social institutions, and socialization.



Profiles in Sociology

Jacob Riis (1849–1914)

Born in Denmark, Jacob August Riis immigrated to the United States when he was 21 years of age. On his arrival he first worked as a carpenter, but he soon found himself out of work and spent much of his early years in the US destitute. A chance meeting, however, led to a job with the New York News Association, which was followed by stints with the *Brooklyn News* and then the *New-York Tribune*, where he worked as a police reporter. In the latter role Riis worked in the poorest of New York City's slums and began using photography as a way of illustrating his stories. He did much of this work late at night and was able to document many of the worst aspects of life in these slums.

Riis published several books, among them *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York* (1890), *Out of Mulberry Street: Stories of Tenement Life in New York City* (1896), *The Battle with the Slum* (1901), *Children of the Tenements* (1903), and *Neighbors: Life Stories of the Other Half* (1914). Through his photography, public speaking, and journalism, Riis was able to convey to well-to-do New Yorkers the horrific conditions of the tenements, flophouses, and alleyways so often hidden from their view—scenes that were the daily reality for many immigrants to the city. His work as a social reformer was recognized by US president Theodore Roosevelt.

Bandit's Roost, a notoriously dangerous and run-down section of Manhattan's Little Italy, as photographed by Jacob Riis in the 1890s. Could you argue that Riis's photography represents a kind of qualitative sociological research?

Profiles in Sociology

Claude Henri de Rouvroy, Comte de Saint-Simon (1760–1825)

Born in Paris, into a poor but aristocratic family, Henri de Saint-Simon was by all accounts a wild and uncontrollable youth who spent long portions of his early years imprisoned by his family as a way to control his behaviour. He ran away from home at the age of 19 and later became an officer in the French army. His king, Louis XIV, supported the Americans in their struggle for independence from the British, and Saint-Simon was sent to America to fight in the American Revolution.

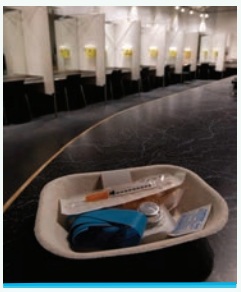
Upon his return to Europe, Saint-Simon tried unsuccessfully to promote canal building schemes in Central America and Europe. When the French Revolution broke out in 1789, Saint-Simon gave it his full support, renounced his title, made revolutionary speeches, proposed reforms, and befriended the peasants. He continued, however, to promote his private affairs, buying up the confiscated lands of aristocrats and the Church at a fraction of their value. He acquired, then lost, a fortune and was confined to a mental asylum for a time.

At first Saint-Simon believed that scientists would become the theologians of the new social order, while industrialists would be the "engineers" who performed the

Studies in Social Research

Initiation into a Local Drug Scene in Vancouver, BC

Our first example of how social interaction shapes the lives of social group members centres on how adolescents become entrenched in a local drug scene. Drug scenes can be described as "distinctive inner-city areas characterized by high concentrations of drug users and drug dealing within a specific geographical area" (Kerr, Fast, Small, & Wood, 2009, p. 1205). A drug scene can be considered a "place" in two ways: it includes both a physical location and specific social processes. Together the environment and the social processes operate to isolate newcomers from the outside world and push them toward full integration into the social world of the drug users who congregate at the drug scene. Not only does the geographical area serve as a base for drug use and procurement, it also serves to "anchor elaborate social and spatial networks, practices associated with the day-to-day realities of securing basic necessities, and wider patterns of income generation activities" (Kerr, et al., 2009, p. 1205).



An injection kit sits ready for the next visitor to the Insite clinic in Vancouver. Does the existence of a safe-injection site in a neighbourhood with one of the country's biggest drug problems effectively normalize the use of drugs (i.e., by "construing" drug use as safe/normal), or does it help stem the problem by providing resources for overcoming substance abuse?

Background

Adolescents who become drug users go through a series of transitional steps that are often shaped by "critical moments," or life events. Ethnographers who study adolescent drug users have learned that initiation into injection drug use is often preceded by a number of critical moments (MacDonald & Marsh, 2002; Mayock, 2005, as cited in Kerr, et al., 2009). At some point in their initiation, the stigma around using injection drugs is replaced by curiosity about using the drugs. This occurs in the context of the individual having frequent exposure to injection drug use in a drug-using milieu, where drug use has been made a non-exceptional, normal event, and where the risk associated with injection drug use has been constructed as being acceptable (Kerr, et al., 2009, 1205).

Thomas Kerr and his colleagues studied how adolescents were initiated into the local, street-based drug scene in two neighbourhoods of Vancouver, known as the Downtown Eastside and the Downtown South—areas known to local residents simply as "down here."

Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, notoriously known as Skid Row (or Skid Road), is well-known for high incidences of poverty and crime, including an illegal drug trade. Downtown South, a residential and entertainment district with both low-income housing and numerous thriving businesses, is a recent entrant to the drug scene, which focuses primarily on crystal methamphetamine sales and use among youth. The drug trade in the Downtown Eastside has existed for decades and concentrates mainly on crack cocaine, cocaine, and heroin sold primarily to adult users (Kerr, et al., 2009).

Methods

Kerr and his colleagues chose a qualitative research strategy and a case study research design, using interviews as their research method to study how youth transition from the status of "weekend warrior" to "street-entrenched" denizen of the local drug scene. The youth they interviewed were deeply involved in the drug scene, their daily lives taken up with the goal of surviving

To that end, *Thinking About Sociology* contains a great deal of both foundational and current content. By pairing classical examples with up-to-date, often Canadian examples—explored in the main text, in social research boxes, and in numerous visual examples presented with thought-provoking captions—this textbook aims to offer students and instructors something different: an introduction to core skills and concepts that challenges them to rethink their own assumptions about their role in society and about the social institutions with which they interact.

This book is designed to give introductory students a useful, compelling, and timely introduction to the study of sociology, with the hope they will come away with an appreciation of the field's pioneering theorists and studies and with a better understanding of the application of

sociological theories in the Canadian context. There have been several updates to this edition, including the following:

- ***A new chapter on deviance and crime.*** A new chapter in Part V covers the core sociological concepts of deviance and crime from a current and Canadian standpoint. Topics covered include the practice of polygamy in Bountiful, BC; the movement toward decriminalization of marijuana in Canada; application of the Safe Streets Act (SSA) in Ontario; violence against Aboriginal women; regional differences in Canadian crime statistics; and the issue of "race" and over-representation in Canadian prisons.
- ***Updated statistics, sources, approaches, visuals, and examples throughout.*** Changes have been made to every chapter, ensuring that all information is as up-to-date and relevant as possible. In particular, new content has been added on the following topics: social determinants of health (in Chapter 2); critical research methods (in Chapter 4); mirror neurons (in Chapter 8); the application of Pierre Bourdieu's theories to modern Canadian culture (in Chapter 12); transgender and transsexual issues (in Chapter 13); institutional (or systemic) racism (in Chapter 15); mass and elite cultures (in Chapter 17); privacy and social networking (in Chapter 18); and public sociology and the use of closed-circuit television (CCTV) surveillance systems in Canadian cities (in Chapter 19).
- ***Reorganized content on gender, sexuality, and inequality.*** The second edition provides more streamlined coverage of these crucial topics, ensuring that students are presented with the material they need to know without becoming overwhelmed.
- ***An expanded marginal glossary.*** The glossary now includes over 50 new terms, in order to further help with student comprehension.

In 2014, Prime Minister Stephen Harper said that the missing and murdered Aboriginal women in Canada were victims of crimes, not a "sociological phenomenon." How are crime and sociology related? How many crimes of a certain type must occur before it makes sense to question underlying structural causes? How do you think the families and community members of the missing and murdered women felt after hearing that statement?

These CCTV cameras on the Parliament buildings in Ottawa are there, ostensibly, for protection. Who do you think these cameras are meant to protect? What are they meant to curtail? Whose definition of *safety* is served by having these cameras in place? Does CCTV surveillance help to mitigate social problems?

Facilitating Student Learning

A textbook must be accurate, current, and comprehensive, but it must also speak to the needs and interests of today's students, providing them with an accessible introduction to the discipline of sociology. In response, numerous features to promote student learning are incorporated throughout the book. They include the following:

- ***Chapter outlines*** allow students and instructors to see how the material within a chapter fits together and relates.
- ***Learning objectives*** at the start of each chapter provide a concise overview of the key concepts to be covered.
- ***Chapter summaries*** at the end of each chapter ensure that understanding of key concepts is complete and help students refresh their recollection of key themes and concepts when reviewing for tests and exams.
- ***Discussion questions*** at the end of each chapter draw out key issues while encouraging readers to draw their own conclusions about sociology.
- A ***running glossary*** of key terms provides definitions in the margin alongside the text where the terms are used. All marginal definitions are compiled—and in many cases expanded—in a comprehensive ***end-of-book glossary*** that serves as a valuable review tool and reference.

1 The Sociological Perspective

Chapter Outline

Learning Objectives

In this chapter you will:

- learn about the common core knowledge base of sociology.
- become familiar with core sociological concepts, including the sociological imagination, the social construction of reality, and society as the product of human social interaction.
- gain insight into sociology as both a subversive and a conservative undertaking.
- understand that sociologists rely on three interconnected skill sets: (1) thinking skills, (2) research skills, and (3) theorizing skills.
- learn about several core topics considered important to sociologists.

Supplements

Today's textbook is no longer a volume that stands on its own—it is but the central element of a complete learning and teaching package. *Thinking About Sociology* is no exception. The book is supported by an outstanding array of ancillary materials for both students and instructors, all available on the companion website: **www.oupcanada.com/Anderson2e**.

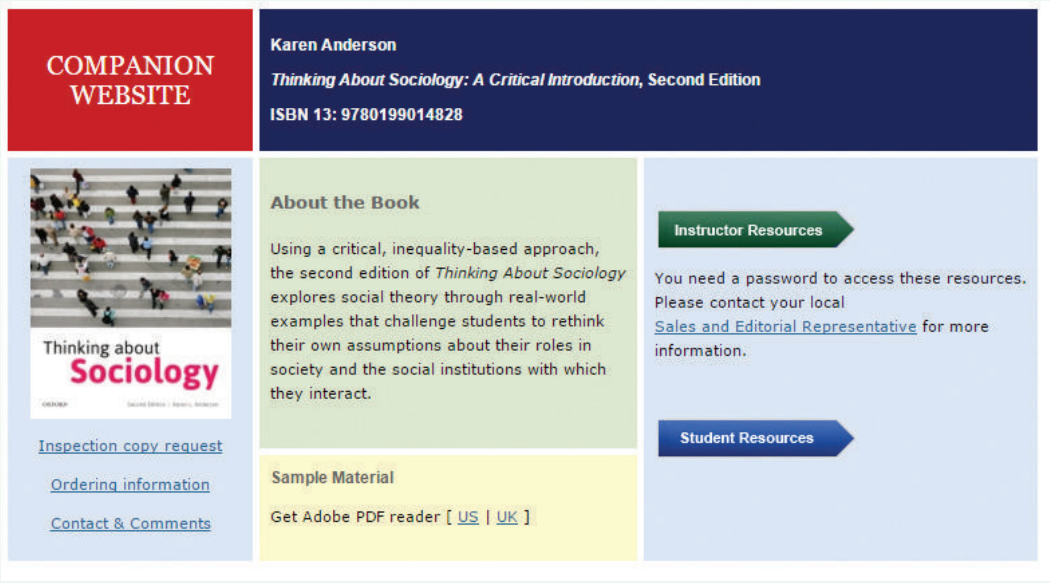
For the Instructor

- An ***instructor's manual*** includes comprehensive outlines of the text's various parts and chapters, and additional questions for encouraging classroom discussion.
- A ***test bank*** offers a comprehensive set of multiple-choice, true/false, short-answer, and essay questions, with suggested answers, for every chapter.
- ***PowerPoint slides***, summarizing key points from each chapter and incorporating figures, tables, and photos from the textbook, are available to adopters of the text.
- The ***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 included.

Instructors should contact their Oxford University Press sales representative for details on these supplements and for login and password information.

For the Student

The ***student study guide*** offers automated self-testing quizzes, annotated links to useful resources, and much more. Go to www.oupcanada.com/Anderson2e and follow the links!



From the Author

Introduction: Thinking Sociology

If we could use just two words to describe the social climate of the past 50 years, they would have to be *change* and *uncertainty*. The past five decades have seen unprecedented growth in the use of new technologies, including computer-based communications, social media, and information processing. "Artificial intelligence," robots, new reproductive technologies—including cloning—and other technological advances no longer surprise us.

The world's political map has changed substantially in this 50-year period as well, with the break-up of the Soviet Union and the demise of many communist states in eastern Europe, the reunification of East and West Germany, the phenomenal growth in China's economic power, and the shakeup of the economies of most Western nations that followed fast on the heels of the American subprime mortgage crisis of 2008. The election of a black American president in that same year, something that few would have dreamed possible even a year earlier, galvanized people around the world.

All of this change and uncertainty might lead us to believe that we are living in unique and turbulent times—times uniquely fraught with danger and uncertainty, times uniquely filled with hope for a better and safer future for ourselves and future generations. But concern about threats from social, economic, political, cultural, and religious crises has been a constant in the life experiences of most people living in industrialized Western societies since at least the end of the eighteenth century.

An Invitation and a Caution

The primary goal of this textbook is to get you thinking as a sociologist. Thinking as a sociologist requires the ability to identify and work through problems that are of interest to sociologists using the techniques of observation, evidence gathering, discussion, analysis, and reporting. Thinking as a sociologist also demands the ability to understand (and think critically about) sociological concepts, principles, theoretical perspectives, and methods of research and their applications.

Learning to think as a sociologist can change how you understand yourself and the world that surrounds you; it can lead you to rethink previously taken-for-granted ways of understanding yourself and your society. It can even help you to become aware of new issues or to consider old issues from a very different perspective.

Ignorance, contrary to the popular saying, is not bliss. The purpose of a liberal education, including the study of sociology, is to become better equipped to deal with troubling questions, such as the following:

- What does it mean to be human?
- How is society possible?
- Why are people unequal in society?
- Why can't everyone be just like us?
- Why is there misery in the world?
- Does the individual really make a difference? (Charon, 2010)

Most people rarely think about these questions; when they do think about them, it is usually in the most casual of manners. We are born into a society with a long history. We are given a rank and multiple roles, told what to do and how to think. As Peter Berger has pointed out in his now classic book *Invitation to Sociology* (1963), the first insight of a sociologist is that things are not what they seem. Social reality, Berger tells us, "turns out to have many layers of meaning. The discovery of each new layer changes the perception of the whole." Berger likens this discovery to experiencing "culture shock," but without having to leave home to discover "the sudden illumination of new and unsuspected facets of human existence in society."

Learning to be a sociologist is not for the complacent or the faint of heart. If you are deeply attached to your taken-for-granted world, if you do not have a curiosity about yourself and others, do not wonder about why you hold the beliefs you do, why you feel more comfortable with one group of people and not another, why there is inequality, discrimination, oppression; if you have never been curious about what goes on in the homes of the people on the other side of town, or the other side of the continent, or the side of the world, then becoming a sociologist is not for you.

A sociologist *is* "interested in looking some distance beyond the commonly accepted or officially defined goals of human actions" (Berger, 1963). She *is* interested in what goes on behind the scenes and in what lurks beyond "official interpretations of society" (Berger, 1963). Sometimes this is uncomfortable. It can be unsettling to realize that those whom you previously regarded as deviant or undesirable are simply different, or that those whom you hate are the "products of social circumstances that should be understood more carefully and objectively." At its best, sociology enables its practitioners to "confront their ideas, actions, and being. We are never the same once we bring sociology into our lives," says Charon (2010, p. 325). "Life is scrutinized. Truth becomes far more tentative."

I invite readers to learn to think as sociologists, and to explore the connections between formal learning, citizenship, and service to your community. In so doing I hope that readers will better understand the challenges they face in life, and be better positioned to confront those challenges. I am convinced that learning to think as a sociologist better equips students to understand, and to shape, history. At the end of this course of study you should be able to:

- apply sociological principles and concepts to your own lives and to understanding the lives of others.
- demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the individual and society.
- show skill in asking relevant sociological questions.
- undertake and evaluate basic sociological research.
- understand how sociological theory is used to explain research findings.
- recognize the importance of historical and cultural contexts.
- look critically at your own taken-for-granted assumptions about the social world.
- subject your own claims and those of others to critical examination.
- better articulate a sense of social responsibility.
- know how to use sociological inquiry and insights to help create a more just society.
- identify and explain the structural impediments preventing some groups in our society from fully participating and sharing equitably in the resources available to other members of the community.

Additionally, you should understand:

- the fundamentals of rigorous scientific inquiry into social phenomena, including the role of evidence and how to evaluate evidence.
- that historical, cultural, environmental, and social processes are both direct and indirect causes of the diversity of human experiences, and of the social inequalities and differences extant in society today (e.g., racism, sexism, poverty).
- how social institutions and cultures produce shared experiences "which can lead people in similar circumstances to develop similar attitudes, values, beliefs and behaviours" (Hironimus-Wendt & Wallace, 2009, p. 76).
- the potential of sociology for addressing, reducing, and/or resolving social inequalities and injustices.

What Do Sociologists Study?

Sociologists study everything from such seemingly individual and personal matters as love, sexual orientation and sexuality, family life and parenting, to large-scale, social-structural issues such as the way in which nation-states govern their citizens and how international financial capital affects globalization. As Berger (1963) writes, nothing is "too sacred" or "too personal," "too distasteful" or "too commonplace" or mundane for sociological investigation.

Sociologists often make a distinction between macro-level and micro-level orientations in their analyses. Micro-level orientations focus on individuals and their interrelations, especially on the face-to-face interactions that occur between individuals in specific social settings. For example, a sociologist with a micro-level orientation might be interested in how racism or prejudice is expressed between two or more social actors. That sociologist might also study how poverty affects the lives of individuals.

By contrast, a sociologist with a macro-level orientation studies and interprets large-scale social phenomena that affect society as a whole. A sociologist interested in macro-level issues might look at the ways in which racism and prejudice are institutionalized in society today. Or the focus might be on the rise and development of capitalism and the effects this form of social organization has had on the creation of a class of impoverished and/or unemployed persons.

Few, if any, sociologists would claim to be expert in all aspects of human social interaction, in all possible settings. Rather, sociologists tend to specialize in one or a few fields of study. A recent undergraduate calendar from a large Ontario university indicates a wide range of fields of study in sociology, including course offerings in the following areas: urban life, education, gender, sexuality and sexual orientation, deviance, the family, ethnicity and race, religion, work and occupations, health and illness, social class, social change, social organization, and social movements. As well, some sociologists specialize in devising theories of society, while others specialize in refining the methods by which social research is carried out. This is by no means a complete list of everything that makes up the discipline of sociology, but it does give some indication of the wide variety of topics that sociologists might study.

All conscious, thinking individuals continually strive to make sense out of the social world in which they live. One of the most difficult challenges faced by any sociologist is how to reconcile her own common-sense and deeply familiar understandings of the world with more formal and often counter-intuitive "scientific" understandings. After all, not only the people sociologists study

but also the sociologist herself perceive, understand, interpret, and explain their own actions and the actions of those around them in ways that are familiar, comfortable, and "natural."

As a member of a given community, a sociologist inevitably attributes commonly understood and taken-for-granted meanings to his own actions and to the actions of others. Yet, as a sociologist, he must be willing to acknowledge the extent to which personal experience is influenced by larger social factors. The sociologist draws on the core knowledge base of sociology in order to achieve a less "me"-focused picture of his own and others' experiences. This is the paradox that Max Weber perceived lying at the heart of sociology. It is a paradox that C. Wright Mills dealt with, too, when he coined the term *sociological imagination*, defined as the ability to transcend common-sense understandings of the world, and to develop instead a deeper comprehension of the relation between the private and the public, the individual and the social.

For any discipline to have a core knowledge base, its practitioners must share a set of core concepts, topics, and skills. Concepts are the "basic building blocks in a discipline" (Wagenaar, 2004, p. 5); they are the expressions that point to "key disciplinary ideas." Topics refer to "broad areas of interest," while skills encompass what practitioners can accomplish with their concepts and topics (Wagenaar, 2004, p. 5).

Many strands make up the discipline of sociology as it is practised today. Given that the topics of interest to sociologists cover almost everything that humans do and the ways in which they organize themselves to do those things, and given that sociologists employ an equally extensive repertoire of concepts, methods, and theories to study those topics, sociology is often portrayed as a discipline still in development, whose practitioners continue to search for a unifying direction and purpose.

The Structure of this Textbook

This textbook introduces readers to the concepts, skills, topics, and tools that make up the core of the discipline of sociology. It shows you how to use those concepts, tools, and skills to gain insights into the everyday world. It offers a range of sociological perspectives on life's challenges that are different from the ones offered by common-sense understandings, and it suggests ways to use those insights in order to better meet life's challenges and to shape history.

Part I, comprising Chapter 1, introduces students to the field of sociology by examining how sociologists view and interpret their world. This chapter introduces the core concepts of the sociological imagination, and the social construction of reality. Part II, comprising chapters 2 through 4, introduces some of the foundational concepts, critical-thinking skills, and research tools that constitute the "core" of the discipline of sociology and that make up the sociological perspective. Chapter 2 takes up critical sociological thinking, while chapters 3 and 4 cover sociological research as an empirical undertaking. Together, the chapters that make up parts I and II provide enough of an introduction to the discipline's core concepts and skills to start you on the road to asking good sociological questions and to thinking as a sociologist.

The chapters that make up Part III present some of the background to sociological thought and introduce the work of the founders of sociology. Chapter 5 introduces the work of the first sociologists, including Comte, Saint-Simon, and Durkheim. In Chapter 6, the work of two of the "founding fathers" of the discipline—Karl Marx and Max Weber—is surveyed. Chapter 7 looks at George Herbert Mead and other early social interactionists. All three chapters incorporate discussions of the work of present-day sociologists to illustrate how the ideas and work of the early founders are used by sociologists today.

The chapters in Part IV take up several additional core concepts, including socialization and social interaction (Chapters 8 and 9), culture (Chapter 10), social structure and social agency (Chapter 11), and social inequality, stratification, and social class (Chapter 12). Chapters 13 through 16, which make up Part V, each deal with a core sociology topic—sex and sexual orientation (Chapter 13), gender difference and inequality (Chapter 14), race and ethnicity in Canada (Chapter 15), and deviance and crime (Chapter 16).

Part VI looks at new and recent areas of sociological inquiry, beginning with popular, mass, and elite cultures and mass media (Chapter 17). Chapter 18 looks at some of the effects the Internet and social media have on human social interaction. Are we becoming more individualized or do social media promote social interaction and cohesion? Chapter 19, on public sociology and activism, closes the text by asking whether a public role for sociologists is advisable and whether sociologists should set themselves a goal of influencing large-scale societal directions.

The message I hope to convey throughout this textbook is that nothing about human behaviour is inevitable and, in the same vein, that the future is emergent and susceptible to change and new directions. I hope that the approach I have taken to introducing sociology will encourage you to become an active participant in your own learning and help you to think as, and become, a sociologist.

Acknowledgements

This book could not have been written without the help of many people, and I would like to thank them here. One person in particular, Gary Woodill, deserves special thanks. Gary read and commented on the manuscript of the first edition. His help and support greatly contributed to the final shape that this book has taken. I am especially grateful to Amy Gordon, developmental editor, who worked with me on the current edition, and I thank her for her steadfast support. I could not have asked for better copy editors than Eric Sinkins (first edition) and Colleen Ste. Marie (second edition) , whose suggestions, comments, and corrections have added so much to the textbook. Eric and Colleen, many, many, thanks—I had a great time working with you. Thanks also go to production manager Steven Hall and the design team at Oxford University Press. The skilled layouts and overall design convey the meaning of the text in a wonderfully clear, understandable way.

The manuscript of this work was reviewed at various stages of its development by a number of my peers across Canada, and I thank those who shared their insights and their constructive criticisms. In particular I would like to thank the following reviewers, whose thoughtful comments and suggestions, together with those of several anonymous reviewers, have helped to make this a much better book:

- Susan Miller, University of Manitoba
- Joseph Galbo, University of New Brunswick
- Alan Brown, Mount St Vincent University
- Sarah Gilliss, New Brunswick Community College
- Sean Ashley, Capilano University
- Dale Ballucci, University of New Brunswick
- Jen Wrye, North Island College

Karen Anderson, September 2015

PART I

The Sociological Perspective and Its Core Knowledge Base

All conscious, thinking individuals strive to make sense of the social world they live in. One of the most difficult challenges for any sociologist is how to reconcile common-sense, deeply familiar understandings of the world with more formal, often counterintuitive, "scientific" understandings. After all, everyone—not just those the sociologist studies but the sociologist herself—perceives, interprets, and explains his or her own actions and the actions of others in ways that are familiar and that seem to be "natural."

As a member of a community, a sociologist inevitably attributes her own and others' actions to commonly understood and taken-for-granted causes. The child next door struggles at school; perhaps he should spend less time hanging out at the playground and more time doing his homework. Yet as a sociologist, she must be willing to acknowledge the extent to which personal experience is influenced by larger social factors. The boy's mother is a single parent who works an evening job; society doesn't provide sufficient resources to help children who don't get help at home with their schoolwork. The sociologist draws on what we call the core knowledge base of sociology in order to achieve a less "me"-focused picture of her own and others' experiences. This is the paradox that the German sociologist Max Weber perceived at the heart of sociology; it is the same one the American sociologist C. Wright Mills addressed when he expounded the "sociological imagination"—the ability to transcend common-sense interpretations of the world to develop a deeper understanding of the relationship between the private and the public, the individual and the social.

For any discipline to have a core knowledge base, its practitioners must share a set of core concepts, topics, and skills. *Concepts* are the discipline's basic building blocks: they are the expressions of what Wagenaar (2004, p. 5) calls "key disciplinary ideas." *Topics* are "broad areas of interest," while *skills* encompass what practitioners can accomplish with their concepts and topics. Becoming a sociologist involves acquiring a new knowledge base, one that is different from the familiar, everyday world view we regularly use.

This introduction to sociology begins with a close look at what constitutes knowledge about the world and how a sociological perspective might be applied to the study of society. The entirety of this book, in fact, is an extended explication of the sociological perspective—that all knowledge is based on unique experiences and invariably reflects some point of view. But the social constructedness of knowledge—the way our understanding of things is shaped by the world around us—is, for the most part, invisible. Few of us recognize that our world view—the way we understand everything we experience in the world—is not "natural" or common to all people. Our own world view makes such good sense to us because everything we see through it appears to be a perfectly reasonable reflection of "the way things really are."

By asking you to learn to think like a sociologist, I hope to provide you with a new way of understanding your own and others' behaviours and with an awareness that the social world you live in, including what you know about all forms of social interaction and social practices, is neither inevitable nor shared by everyone.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1 The Sociological Perspective

Chapter Outline

Learning Objectives

In this chapter you will:

- learn about the common core knowledge base of sociology.
- become familiar with core sociological concepts, including the sociological imagination, the social construction of reality, and society as the product of human social interaction.
- gain insight into sociology as both a subversive and a conservative undertaking.
- understand that sociologists rely on three interconnected skill sets: (1) thinking skills, (2) research skills, and (3) theorizing skills.
- learn about several core topics considered important to sociologists.

Introduction: The Sociological Perspective and Its Core Knowledge Base

core sociological knowledge base

A set of fundamental concepts, skills, and topics, available to all sociologists, that enables sociologists to think differently about the world.

Becoming a sociologist involves learning that the taken-for-granted perspective we use every day to understand the world around us is neither natural nor common to everyone. It also entails adopting a different **core knowledge base** that will equip us to think differently about the world and to better confront challenges. While there is much that separates sociologists in terms of theoretical orientation and research areas of interest, contemporary sociologists share a common core knowledge base.

Core Concepts

Sociological concepts, like the concepts we use on a daily basis and out of which we form our taken-for-granted understandings, draw heavily on the cultural context in which they appear and are used. What sets sociological concepts apart from our everyday, common-sense ones is that they are deliberately constructed as tools to help sociologists reflect on the meaning and significance of the social world in which we live. These concepts act as shorthand descriptors for complex social phenomena or for complex ways of understanding human social behaviour.

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An Indonesian boy sleeps on the street of a Jakarta slum. Can you imagine how your interpretation of this scene using an everyday perspective might differ from your interpretation from a sociological perspective?

Sociology as a discipline is simultaneously conservative *and* potentially subversive. On the one hand, sociologists are concerned with gathering and analyzing data—empirical evidence they draw on to define, describe, and explain or theorize social existence as it is experienced in a given society at a particular point of time. It is the job of sociologists to gather those data as accurately as possible in order to produce a clear and reliable understanding of whatever they study. This is what makes sociology *conservative*.

On the other hand, many sociologists recognize that whatever the members of a given society experience, those experiences (and the way those experiences are interpreted and understood) are *socially constructed*. As such, experiences and understandings are capable of being challenged and changed (or *subverted*). Not only do sociologists study social phenomena in order to gather empirical evidence, many often use that evidence to address and provide solutions to social issues and problems.

Core sociological concepts that we will take up in this and later chapters include the following:

- The social construction of reality
- The sociological imagination
- Social institutions
- Society and social facts
- Social class
- Socialization
- Culture

sociology

A term coined by Comte for the science by which the laws of the social universe could be discovered. It is the study of all human social experience, whether the chance encounter of two human individuals, the outcome of a highly structured social group, or the result of a worldwide social phenomenon. In the broadest sense, sociology is an interpretation of or commentary on the social experiences that sociologists share with members of the wider society.

Core Skills

All sociologists rely on three interconnected skill sets:

- Complex and critical thinking skills
- Research skills
- Theorizing skills

The last of these includes the ability to develop and apply appropriate theories and explain the outcomes of research.

Core Topics

Issues of difference and inequality hold top place among topics considered important to address in an introductory sociology course. The following are among the most significant aspects of difference and inequality that sociologists study:

- Race and ethnicity
- Social class and stratification

- Gender
- Sexuality and sexual orientation
- Popular culture and mass communications
- Social media

The first four items of this list probably won't surprise you; the last two, however, might. Later in this textbook, we will look at the ways sociologists study difference and inequality from these vantage points.

Finally, many sociologists are concerned that students be shown ways in which sociology can offers insights relevant to their own lives. I share their concern that students in the process of becoming sociologists should learn how sociological insights can be applied to help improve their own lives, as well as the lives of others (Schweingruber, 2005; Berger, 1963).

A Core Sociological Concept: The Social Construction of Reality

social construction of reality

A concept introduced by Berger and Luckmann (1966), who argued that human experience—the way we understand "reality"—is shaped by the society in which we live; our experience of reality may therefore be challenged and changed.

One of the core concepts that make up the sociological perspective is the **social construction of reality**. *Reality*, in everyday usage, means "everything that exists." In its most inclusive sense, the term refers to everything that *is*, whether or not it is observable, accessible, or understandable by science, philosophy, theology, or any other system of analysis.

Addressing the questions *What is reality?* and *Where is reality found?* is a complex endeavour, and trying to answer such questions in an all-encompassing way would pull us into philosophical debates that are well beyond the scope of this textbook. Instead, we are going to look at the notion of reality only from the perspective of a sociologist. But to do that, we begin our inquiry into the social construction of reality, rather far from sociology proper, with the northern leopard frog (*Lithobates pipiens*).

In the second half of the last century, the American government—more specifically, the army and navy—put a fair bit of money into funding research on vision and other senses in a variety of non-human species. Among the work funded was research on frog vision. Just how, and what, do frogs see? (For those of you interested in some of the details of this research, I suggest you start with the study of frog perception and cognition by Lettvin, Maturana, McCulloch, and Pitts [1968]). It turns out there is a world of difference between what a frog "sees" and what a human "sees." A frog can visually distinguish

- light from dark;
- up from down (i.e., a horizon);
- small, dark objects that move; and
- larger objects that cast shadows.

Unlike humans, a frog does not see the details of the stationary world around it—it will starve to death if surrounded by flies if the flies don't move. A frog flees its enemies only by leaping toward areas that are darker. A frog can remember something that moves only if

the object stays within his line of vision and he is not distracted.

The visually rich world that is available to sighted humans is simply not there for frogs. The trees, flowers, birds, bulrushes, and lily pads that are "there" for humans are not perceived as being "there" by frogs. For a frog, reality is a product not of what is "out there" but of the extraordinary interaction between the individual frog (with a frog's embodiment, including a frog's eye and a frog's brain) and the "not-frog"—the environment, the external world.

Wirepec/Thinkstock.com

Chances are, this leopard frog wouldn't even see you unless you were moving and cast a shadow. What might your "reality" be like if you shared this frog's perceptual abilities?

Humans are like frogs in that we are biological entities that interact with an environment, and the nature of that interaction is shaped (in part) by our physical embodiment. But we are also not at all like frogs. Human beings cannot exist for long in isolation, in a world that is self-reflexive only. To be a human being means to be oriented to an external world that contains other human beings. In that sense, we can say that there is no such thing as a single reality across all species. Reality is species-specific.

What constitutes reality for us as individual humans is not just the product of our embodiment and the physical environment in which we exist (as it is for a frog); our reality is also a product of the fact that we are social creatures, with a wide variety of socially mediated experiences. So, for humans, reality is an even less immediate thing than it is for the frog. The reality that humans experience is strongly shaped by the social world in which we are raised and live.

One of the clearest statements of this perspective—at least as it can be applied to humans—comes from American sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann. In 1966 the two collaborators published *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. There are two propositions from this text that are important to consider.

Proposition 1: Society Is a Human Product

Berger and Luckmann argue that "society" is very much a product of men (and women) working together. The social environment is not the immediate result of our biological constitutions. To be recognizable as a human being means that we are, first and foremost, social beings. In fact, an existence in a "state of nature," without social influences or contact, is impossible. Human existence is always existence in the context of order, direction, and stability. And that order, direction, and stability, which are social constructs, precede the existence of any given human. We are all born into a society that is itself a product of human activity. Moreover, our biological makeup requires that this be so. A newborn infant, left to his own devices, cannot survive on his own. Unlike the frog, we have no inherent internal mechanisms that would allow each of us to produce, out of our biological resources alone, a stable environment for our individual existence.

Profiles in Sociology

Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann

Peter Berger (b. 1929) and Thomas Luckmann (b. 1927) both emigrated from Austria to the United States following World War II. Both men studied at the New School for Social Research in New York. Berger went on to become professor of sociology and theology at Boston University, while Luckmann taught sociology at the University of Constance in Germany. Both sociologists have focused their research, writing, and teaching on the sociology of knowledge and the sociology of religion. Both men, separately, have written many books examining the sociology of religion and sociological theories. Together, Berger and Luckmann wrote *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), which has become a classic study in sociological thinking. In that text, Berger and Luckmann develop their theory of society as both an objective and a subjective reality. They explain how an individual's understanding of what constitutes day-to-day reality is the product of her interaction with her society. Humans produce new ideas and new social institutions that then become part of the everyday, taken-for-granted reality and are often no longer recognized as human creations; this process is known as *reification*.

Proposition 2: All Human Activity Is Habitualized, and This Habitualization Is the Groundwork for Institutionalization

Humans form social groups, and these groups learn to do certain actions in specific ways. Once a human activity is repeated over and over again it becomes habit—well established, regularized, and adopted widely across groups of social actors. When this happens, patterns of behaviour take on an objective status and become institutionalized (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 70). Social institutions always have a history—they are not created instantaneously. Once established, though, they control human behaviour by setting up predefined patterns of conduct.

Social institutions channel and control our behaviour through a variety of social control mechanisms. For example, most first-year sociology students will come to the first day of classes at their university or college already well versed in how to behave in a classroom. From very early on in their lives, they have learned to take a seat and, unless otherwise instructed, to remain in it during the class period. Students also know that a certain amount of deference and politeness should be paid to the teacher. There are social control mechanisms in place to make sure that students conform (more or less) to these standards of behaviour. In a large lecture hall, for example, professors will resort to a few mild forms of social control if they feel it necessary: they may stop lecturing, look directly at students who might be causing a disruption, and ask them a question. Rarely does a professor invoke the sanction of having disruptive students kicked out of class, or out of the course, in order to maintain control over what is going on in the classroom. So, behaviour in a lecture theatre is not controlled by the actual expulsion of disruptive students—that may never occur. Behaviour is controlled by the institutionalization of education, which gives professors the authority to invoke certain sanctions.

Are you now beginning to see how complex "reality" is for humans? How much "reality" is shaped not only by what humans are as *biological* beings, but also by what we are as *social* beings? It's a lot simpler to be a frog that has no social world with which to contend! As

humans, not only are we confronted with a biological reality, we also have to contend with a social world. On a day-to-day, moment-by-moment basis, the reality we perceive is considered by each of us to be nothing less than the world as it actually is. From our first moments of life we learn how to make sense out of the world we encounter in ways that are consistent with the perceptions of others around us. As children we are taught how things are and how things are done. Most of us never really question this. We simply accept that the "reality" that we are born into and that we experience as we grow up is an "objective reality"—that it is simply the way things are. And why, in the normal course of our lives, should we ever question this? All reality appears to us like the air we breathe: it is just always *there*. But, as Berger and Luckmann remind us, "It is important to keep in mind that the objectivity of the institutional world, however massive it may appear to the individual, is a humanly produced, constructed objectivity" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 48). Berger and Luckmann also point out that humans and their social worlds interact and co-produce each other. As children we are all taught about the social world we live in, and we learn to make that world a part of ourselves. But we also act on that world, and sometimes, in co-operation with others, we alter it significantly.

A Second Core Sociological Concept: The Sociological Imagination

At the beginning of this chapter, I suggested that sociology, as a discipline, was both conservative and radical. Nowhere are these two faces of sociology better represented than in the work of the American sociologist C. Wright Mills, author of another of the core sociological concepts, the **sociological imagination**.

sociological imagination

As defined by C. Wright Mills, an orientation adopted by a sociologist to recognize and understand the connections between individual experience and larger social structures.

In "The Promise," an essay first presented to the American Political Science Association in 1958 and later published as the first chapter of *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), Mills famously writes, "Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both" (Mills, 2000 [1959], p. 3). Mills goes on to point out that for ordinary people, the task of coping with the "larger worlds" they confront requires both "skills of reasoning" and a "quality of mind" to help them to cogently understand what is going on in the world, and how it affects their lives. It is this "quality of mind"—the capacity to relate history to biography, the personally experienced milieu to larger social structures, or one's personal troubles to public issues—that Mills calls "the sociological imagination":

> 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 [sic] 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. (Mills, 2000 [1959], p. 3)

Profiles in Sociology

C. Wright Mills (1916–1962)

By permission of the estate of C. Wright Mills. Photo by Yaroslava Mills.

In the introduction to this textbook I suggested that sociology, as a discipline, is both conservative and radical. Nowhere are these two faces of sociology better represented than in the work of the American sociologist Charles Wright Mills, author of one of three core concepts—the sociological imagination—that together make up the sociological perspective. Mills, who died in 1962 at the age of 43, has been described as "a bundle of paradoxes" by American sociologist and culture historian Todd Gitlin:

> He was a radical disabused of radical traditions, a sociologist disgruntled with the course of sociology, an intellectual frequently skeptical of intellectuals, a defender of popular action as well as a craftsman, a despairing optimist, a vigorous pessimist, and all in all, one of the few contemporaries whose intelligence, verve, passion, scope—and contradictions—seemed alive to most of the main moral and political traps of his time. A philosophically-trained and best-selling sociologist who decided to write pamphlets, a populist who scrambled to find what was salvageable within the Marxist tradition, a loner committed to politics, a man of substance

"The Promise," quite possibly Mills's most famous essay, challenges us to use our sociological imagination to connect our individual, personal biographies with the larger history and structure of the society/community in which we live (Marullo, Moayedi, & Cooke, 2009). This, Mills tells us, is the first "terrible" but "magnificent" lesson of sociology: "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" (Mills, 2000 [1959]). It is the "task and the promise" of the sociological imagination to enable its possessor to "grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society" (Mills, 2000 [1959], p. 6). Developing a sociological imagination also challenges us "to develop ethical, moral, and intellectual skills that we can use to critically understand the complexity of society and reflect on how society has influenced our "personal history" (Hoop, 2009, p. 48).

When, as sociologists, we use our sociological imagination, we do so in the context of constructing an understanding of, or knowledge about, human experiences as seen in a larger context. The sociological imagination helps us to distinguish between, on the one hand, bad circumstances that an individual might experience as a result of poor behaviour or poor choices, and, on the other hand, bad circumstances that result from structural forces that are beyond the individual's control (Hironimus-Wendt & Wallace, 2009, p. 76).

The Great Depression: A Public Issue

Mills suggests that the sociological imagination is particularly useful in times of great social disruption, when the relationship between the individual and society is unsettled.

> acutely cognizant of style, he was not only a guide but an exemplar, prefiguring in his paradoxes some of the tensions of a student movement that was reared on privilege, amid exhausted ideologies yet hell-bent on finding, or forging, the leverage with which to transform America root and branch. (Gitlin, 2000, p. 229)

Mills was born in 1916 in Waco, Texas, the son of an insurance-broker father and a stay-at-home mother. He earned his PhD in sociology in 1941 from the University of Wisconsin and in 1946 took up a teaching post at Columbia, where he was popular with students but clashed frequently with colleagues. He married three times and had a child with each of his wives. Along the way he published many influential studies focusing on social class and its political impact, including *The New Men of Power* (1948), *White Collar* (1951), and *The Power Elite* (1956). *The Sociological Imagination* was published in 1959, a year before Mills travelled to Cuba, where he interviewed Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, and other Latin American revolutionaries. Mills died of a massive heart attack following a trip to Europe in 1962.

Mills's brilliance lay in his understanding that we live in small worlds, whether as children or as adults. Because of this, it is usually difficult to understand the larger social forces affecting us. The more powerful these social forces are, the less equipped we are to comprehend them without some significant extra work—hence the role of the sociological imagination. A champion of egalitarian political principles, Mills saw the sociological imagination as being for everyone, not just the purview of trained sociologists. As a pragmatist, Mills believed that we must all take action to confront both "personal troubles" and "public issues" in order to achieve "the all-around growth of every member of society." (For a short biography of Mills, see http://infed.org/mobi/c-wright-mills-power-craftsmanship-and-private-troubles-and-public-issues.)

A public issue can be said to arise when existing social arrangements "limit the range of choices available to individuals into either a subset of primarily bad choices, or no good choices at all" (Mills, 2000 [1959]). For example, the decade following the 1929 worldwide stock market crash came to be known as the "Great Depression" or the "Dirty Thirties." The crash of 1929 precipitated a chain of events, including the failure of major banking institutions. As prices fell businesses were forced to close, resulting in massive unemployment in cities in Canada. Those who did have jobs saw their wages slashed (see Table 1.1). Farmers on the Prairies were hit hard, too, when the price of wheat collapsed, followed by years of drought. By 1933 about 30 per cent of the Canadian labour force was unemployed, one in five Canadians was dependent on government relief, and thousands of men "rode the rails" in hope of finding a job somewhere (Struthers, 2011). The Great Depression didn't end until 1939, when the outbreak of World War II helped create demand for materials to support the war effort, and provided "employment opportunities" for young men.

Instead of turning to taken-for-granted understandings about job loss and personal responsibility, and therefore blaming themselves for not being able to find work, many people came to understand that their own personal troubles were, in fact, part of a public issue affecting people across the country and not the result of bad choices on their part. Unemployed workers responded by staging numerous strikes and public protests, many of which ended in violent confrontations with police. As a result, even the structure of government in Canada was changed, with the federal government taking on the responsibility of mounting centralized social programs, including such institutions as the Bank of Canada, the Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission (later the CBC), the Canadian Wheat Board

TABLE 1.1 Change in Average Annual per Capita Income, 1928–9 to 1933, by Province

	Average Per Capita Income		
Province	**1928–9**	**1933**	**Decrease (%)**
British Columbia	$594	$314	47
Ontario	549	310	44
Alberta	548	212	61
Saskatchewan	478	135	72
Manitoba	466	240	49
Quebec	391	220	44
Nova Scotia	322	207	36
New Brunswick	292	180	39
Prince Edward Island	278	154	45

Source: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, www.policyalternatives.ca in Stapleton, 2009.

Library and Archives Canada C-029397

This image, circa 1930, depicts The Single Men's Unemployed Association marching to Bathurst Street United Church, Toronto, Ontario. What aspects of citizenship did these men feel they were deprived of as a result of the need to travel around looking for work?

(to guarantee farmers minimum prices for their wheat), and Trans-Canada Airlines (now Air Canada).

Mills argued that sociology should never be some sterile and inconsequential enterprise, detached from the daily experiences of all people. Rather, sociology should be a vital undertaking, one that allows everyone to become engaged in understanding and changing the social world in which he or she lives. In this way, Mills hoped, a critical and sociologically aware populace would be able to transform its society, making it more equitable for all members.

"Reality" and the Sociological Imagination

Mills's concept of a sociological imagination focuses on the interplay between our common social history and the kind of thinking

we must do and awareness we must gain if we are to reveal and transform our socially acquired beliefs, understandings, and behaviours. But just what is required to produce knowledge about the social world we live in using a "sociological imagination"? For most of us, using our imagination seems to contradict everything we have been taught about neutrality, rational thought, and objective, dispassionate observation. In short, the phrase "sociological imagination" seems to be antithetical to good, objective scientific inquiry, the very thing that sociologists claim to be part of the sociological perspective.

To many, rational scientific inquiry and imagination are diametrically opposed. Scientific inquiry produces true knowledge of events and things, while imagination results in fantasy and fiction. While science is an undertaking that produces "real" material benefits, imagination is ethereal and non-concrete.

Now, modern scientific inquiry can hardly be criticized for a lack of results, or for producing useless categories of knowledge. Indeed, modern natural sciences are compelling precisely because they have been able to achieve a certain mastery over nature. In spite of all the recent criticisms of the natural sciences, North Americans and Europeans continue, for the most part, to be enthralled by the promises science holds. The taken-for-granted view of science in North America is that it is a means—the best and only true means—of gaining **objective knowledge** about the world around us. If we wish to produce true knowledge (i.e., objective knowledge as opposed to fiction or fanciful knowledge, or knowledge based on superstitions and misguided beliefs), then we must use scientific methods for collecting and interpreting information.

objective knowledge

Knowledge that is purported to be free of bias.

The proponents of this taken-for-granted understanding of science often refuse to give careful attention to how scientific researchers are actually locked into a specific kind of relationship with whatever it is that they are researching. Their taken-for-granted understanding is that scientists can be objective because they are able to become independent of the very world they are studying. However, what scientists seek to discover is intimately connected to whatever world view and assumptions they bring to their investigation. As many sociologically influenced thinkers have pointed out, objectivity, based on the total separation of observer and observed, is impossible to achieve. "Human beings," says moral philosopher Mary Midgley, "direct their enquiries to things that strike them as important." As humans we ask questions that matter to us. What matters is "what brings things together, what shows a pattern, what tends to make sense of the whole" (1992, p. 65).

Once we realize this, we see that any object of scientific study may actually be viewed from many different perspectives or standpoints. Moreover, the same object can be interpreted through a wide range of **value systems**. When we understand that knowledge is relative rather than absolute, we can also see that knowledge is a set of claims that are socially constructed. What gets presented as "true knowledge" ultimately depends on the researcher and on the social and cultural conditions in which the researcher operates.

value system

A set of beliefs about what is important in life and what kinds of conduct or behaviour are appropriate.

Contributions from Philosophy

The sociological perspective shows us that if we really want to understand how we go about producing knowledge about the world we inhabit, we must pay serious attention

to the metaphors and cultural images that underlie the everyday interpretations of truth and reality available to us in this society (Midgley, 1992). A critical sociological approach to knowledge abandons the search for universal measures of truth or authority. Instead, critical-thinking sociologists look for diverse ways of understanding the same set of events.

The nineteenth-century German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) noted that the subject matter of all the human sciences, including sociology, is "mental objects," which are different from the physical objects that form the subject matter of the natural sciences. Knowledge produced by social scientists is an understanding of the shared meaning given to social behaviour rather than simple observation of social behaviour.

Self-knowledge, Dilthey went on to explain, is acquired through a circuitous route of understanding that is historical and that always refers back to the larger social group of which we are members. Our personal knowledge about life is always shaped by the beliefs and values that emerge out of the social groups to which we belong. Assertions about the passage of life, judgments of value, and rules of conduct—definitions of goals and what is "good"—are all products of social life. Our minds, Dilthey tells us, can understand only what they have created.

The arguments of Mills, Berger and Luckmann, and Dilthey about the relationship of the individual to the social are underscored by the work of many contemporary philosophers. In his analysis of the historical structure of understanding, for example, Hans-Georg Gadamer has shown that we cannot understand things unless we approach them from a point of view that is consistent with our own mental history (1986, pp. 220–34). This means that there is no neutral point from which we can understand things with absolutely no presuppositions to guide our thought.

Gadamer's findings also echo in the work of the German philosopher Edmund Husserl, who has shown that all experience and understanding of experience is developed out of the communal system of meanings that underlies everyday life. Husserl calls the entire communal system of meanings the **lifeworld**. There are significant differences between these taken-for-granted understandings and sociological ones: the former are based on unexamined assumptions about the "lifeworld" and all that it contains, while the latter bring all assumptions forward for examination.

lifeworld

German philosopher Edmund Husserl's term for the entire communal system of meaning that underlies everyday life.

Applying a Sociological Perspective: Three Examples

As we have seen, the sociological perspective upholds the proposition that human interaction is socially based and systematically organized. This proposition is potentially useful to all of us because it supports critical thinking about our own lives and the society we live in, as well as about other societies distinct from our own. But adopting a sociological perspective can be disturbing, as doing so often challenges the beliefs and assumptions that most members of Western society share about themselves and the world they inhabit. These beliefs and assumptions are based on our immediate experiences and are rarely, if ever, reflected upon or reasoned out.

The ancient Greeks called these shared beliefs, customs, and traditions *nomi*, or "laws." These laws constitute the foundational traditions and values of a given society or culture. They may be written or unwritten. They are primal beliefs and understandings shared by the society's members concerning right and wrong. The examples that follow present common-sense, taken-for-granted views on **individualism**, race, warfare, and love and contrast them with views from a sociological perspective. The sociological perspective views these topics as existing in specific historical, social, and cultural contexts that together shape how each specific issue is understood by those who experience it.

individualism

A moral stance that stresses the importance of individual self-reliance and independence.

Example 1: Individualism

For most Westerners, individualism—a moral stance that stresses the importance of individual self-reliance and independence—serves as a kind of lens through which most other beliefs are seen and evaluated. The taken-for-granted belief in individualism operates in much the same way as a mathematical theorem; that is, it acts as a rule that substitutes for direct evidence. Thus, in Western societies, individualism is not a proposition that must be supported by evidence and proofs; it is something most people consider to be self-evidently true. Yet critically motivated research into the concept suggests that this was not always the case. Contrary to everyday understandings, individualism has not always been universally understood as a natural and therefore highly desirable state of human affairs.

When we consider the writings of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century social theorists, such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Niccolò Machiavelli, all of whom contributed to our appreciation of individualism, and we compare their work to that of authors from antiquity, we begin to understand the problematic origins of our modern understandings of this concept. Hobbes, Locke, and Machiavelli were among the first Western writers to argue in favour of individualism. But they did so in explicit opposition to the writings of philosophers of classical antiquity, whose ideas up to that point had dominated Western philosophy.

Today, propositions about individualism that Hobbes, Locke, and Machiavelli all favoured have become part of our everyday frame of reference and no longer appear in need of defence. Thus a concept that was once hotly contested has become part of our everyday belief system. If we take the time to inquire into the history of other examples of our society's most cherished beliefs and understandings, a new and potentially critical standpoint from which to question them emerges. Taking a sociological perspective allows us to think in new ways about the everyday beliefs and understandings that we use to make sense of our lives.

Example 2: Racial Prejudice

Canadians pride themselves on their appreciation of diversity and lack of prejudice against those seen as different. But we do not need to look very far into our history to find examples of commonly held understandings that have led to discriminatory and prejudicial treatment of some ethnic and national groups. Historically, certain segments of the Canadian population were classified as undesirable and thus as unwanted or undeserving outsiders. The treatment of Aboriginal peoples in Canada is a familiar example. Less familiar,

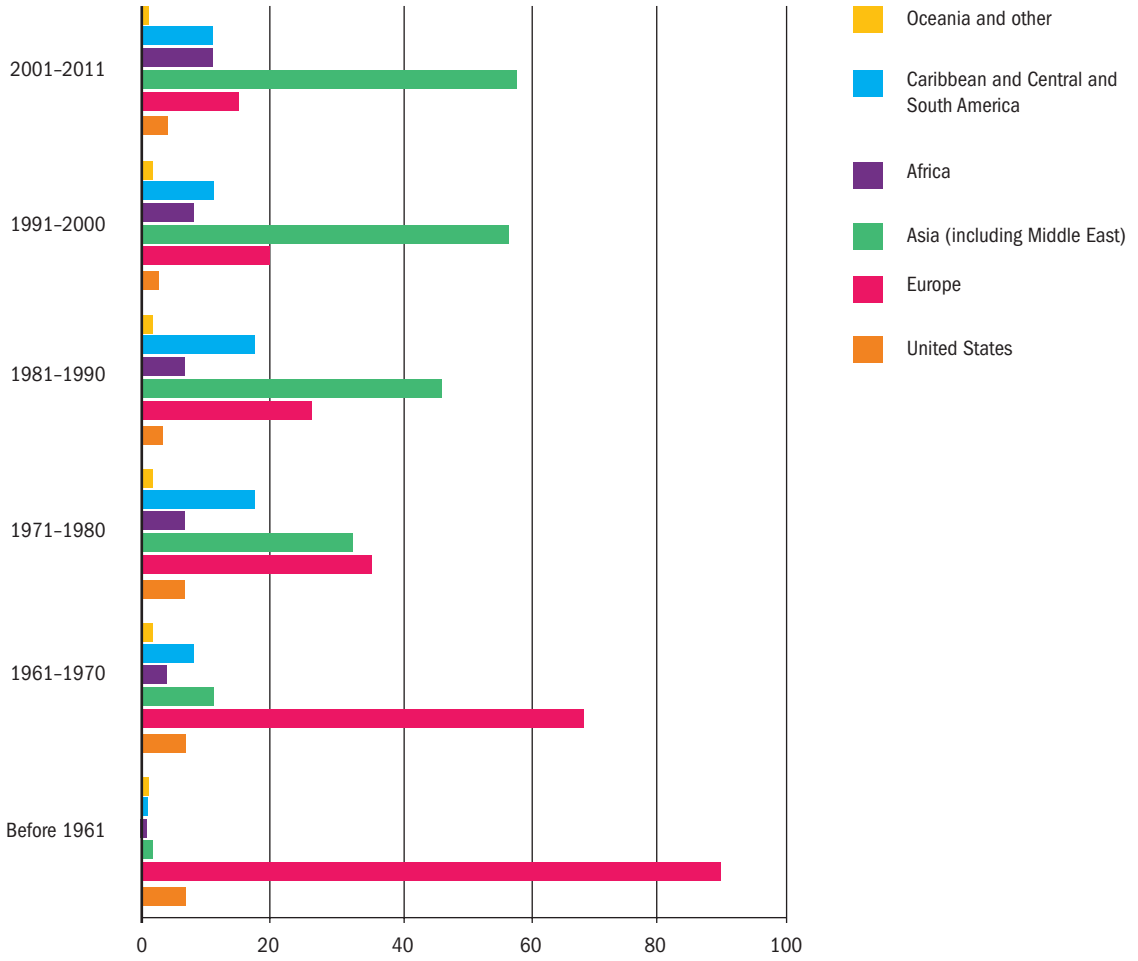

FIGURE 1.1 Place of Birth by Period of Immigration

Source: Adapted from Statistics Canada, Update on Cultural Diversity, *Canadian Social Trends*, 11-008-XIE2003002, Fall 2003, no. 70, September 2003; www.statcan.gc.ca/bsolc/olc-cel/olc-cel?lang=eng&catno=11-008-X. Updated with data from 2011 National Household Survey, 99-010-X2011026.

perhaps, is the example of non-European immigrants to Canada. As Figure 1.1 shows, prior to 1961, Europeans made up over 90 per cent of all immigrants to Canada. This fell to 69 per cent between 1961 and 1970, then to 36 per cent between 1971 and 1980, and to 26 per cent between 1981 and 1990. Between 2001 and 2011, about 15 per cent of those immigrating to Canada were Europeans. Why is the situation today so different from what it was just under a century ago?

During the late nineteenth century, when well over 90 per cent of persons immigrating to Canada were European, the Canadian government also promoted the immigration of a relatively small number of Asian labourers. These men, most of them Chinese, worked on the construction of the transcontinental railway. But the arrival of even a few Chinese-born labourers disturbed many of this country's European-born citizens.

The decision to bring in Chinese workers to build the rail lines in British Columbia was made by Prime Minister John A. Macdonald over the emphatic opposition of the people of that province. To make his decision more acceptable, Macdonald conceded that Chinese

immigrants would reside in British Columbia only temporarily. In the debates of the House of Commons, Macdonald reassured Canadians:

> At any moment when the legislature of Canada chooses, it can shut down the gate and say, No more immigrants shall come here from China and then no more immigrants will come, and those in the country at the time will rapidly disappear. They have not their families with them, and leave nobody behind them, but according to their system, religion or superstition . . . they will not even leave their bones behind them. They are sent back to China either alive or dead; and therefore there is no fear of a permanent degradation of the country by a mongrel race . . . . (Canada, 1883, vol. XIV, p. 905)

Concern about the "non-assimilating race," as these immigrants were called, was widespread among Canadians. In a submission made to the Royal Commission on Chinese Immigration, 1885, members of the Knights of Labour, LA (Local Assembly) 3017 of Nanaimo, wrote a memo in which they maintained that the Chinese labourer, being without ties or family, was therefore "able not only to live but to grow rich on wages far below the lowest minimum on which we can possible exist." The memo went on to declare that the Chinese labourers:

> are thus fitted to become all too dangerous competitors in the labour market, while their docile servility, the natural outcome of centuries of grinding poverty and humble submission to a most oppressive system of government, renders them doubly dangerous as the willing tools whereby grasping and

Members of British Columbia's Sikh community attend the annual Khalsa Day parade in Surrey to celebrate Vaisakhi, or the Sikh new year. Do you think this sort of expression of religious or ethnic minority culture should be celebrated in Canada?

> tyrannical employers grind down all labour to the lowest living point . . . . [T]he Chinese live, generally, in wretched hovels, dark, ill-ventilated, filthy and unwholesome, and crowded together in such numbers as must utterly preclude all ideas of comfort, morality or even decency . . . . (as cited in Meyers, 2004 [1914], p. 307)

When the Great Depression hit in the 1930s, fears about immigrants competing for scarce jobs helped fuel the actions of two Canadian prime ministers, Mackenzie King and R.B. Bennett, who restricted immigration to those with money and of white British or American heritage. As xenophobia spread, some of the non-Caucasian immigrants already in Canada were forcibly deported. Others, such as those of Asian descent living in BC, were denied the vote and were barred from holding certain jobs. Jews were also discriminated against as being undesirable immigrants. During WWII Canada accepted only 4,000 refugees fleeing persecution by Nazis in Germany, compared to the 240,000 accepted by the US and the 85,000 by Great Britain.

It wasn't until the 1960s that the Canadian government relaxed its immigration policies enough to accept non-Caucasian, and/or non-British or American immigrants from areas such as the Caribbean, Latin America, and the Middle East.

Even in the 1990s, sentiments similar to those of the 1930s continued to form part of the taken-for-granted understandings of a number of Canadians. In 1993, a turbaned Sikh was prevented from entering a Royal Canadian Legion hall in Surrey, British Columbia, to attend a commemorative service. The stated reason for refusing to admit the man was that he was wearing a head covering, something that is explicitly prohibited by Legion rules. Legion members are expected to enter Legion premises with bare heads as a way of showing honour to the Queen and to those who have fallen in war. But practising Sikhs, who fought alongside Canadian soldiers in World War II, must wear their turbans as a sign of religious commitment. In the ensuing debate over the refusal to allow turbaned Sikhs to enter Legion premises, some disturbing evidence emerged: Legion members who had voted against allowing their turban-wearing compatriots into the hall had no problem with other members wearing more Westernized headgear, such as baseball caps.

Often, then, unexamined understandings that emerge as racist or prejudicial behaviours are reflections of deeply felt fears and biases harboured by some (or most) members of society against those identified as "others." These "others" might even be members of the same society, as in the case of the Sikh veteran in BC, but are considered to be sufficiently different from, or inferior to, the "real" insiders to warrant differential treatment. Or the "others" might be members of another society (like the Chinese workers brought into Canada to work on the rail lines) who are perceived as undesirable or inferior, or as a threat to the way of life of the "true" or "legitimate" members of the society. Using a sociological perspective allows us to unmask such prejudices.

Example 3: Romantic Love

Some of the most deeply rooted beliefs held by North Americans concern their personal experiences. One such belief is that romantic love is a natural and possibly instinctual part of the human makeup. It is found in all societies, and throughout human history.

But is this the case? Certainly most North Americans and Europeans expect to fall in love at least once in their lives. They also expect to subsequently set up house with their chosen loved one and to find emotional and sexual satisfaction with that person. While most North Americans are privately skeptical that love will last forever, most nevertheless tend to hold strongly to the conviction that falling in love is a natural and universal experience, and that "being in love" is a prerequisite for marriage. Yet the experience of falling in love and the expectations that go with it are not as widespread as most North Americans believe.

In many societies, decisions about when and whom to marry are rarely left up to the individuals involved, who often have very little say in the matter. In countries such as India, where more than 90 per cent of marriages are arranged (Gautam, 2002, cited in Madathil & Benshoff, 2008, p. 222), marriage is considered by many people far too important to be left to the whims of the individual. Romantic love, while it is acknowledged to exist, is considered a temporary infatuation and even a barrier to a happy marriage.

Sociologists have long understood that cultural norms of individualism or collectivism have significant impact on marriage practices. North American culture, with its emphasis on individualism, treats marriage and the family as existing in order to maximize the needs of the individual. Falling in love and selecting a mate is considered a normal developmental task of adolescents and young adults and is highly valued in Western societies. By contrast, in Indian society, as in the majority of world cultures, group identity and cohesiveness are emphasized. As a result, marriages tend to be arranged by family members and are viewed as agreements between two families, and not between two individuals as in North American culture (Madathil & Benshoff, 2008, p. 223; Medora, Larson, Hortacsu, & Dave, 2002, p. 165). How does all this affect marital satisfaction? North Americans, who usually base their marriages on romantic love and free choice of marriage partner, feel strongly that free mate selection is fundamental to marital satisfaction.

American sociologists Jayamala Madathil and James Benshoff (2008) conducted a study comparing marital satisfaction for three groups: Asian Indians in arranged marriages living in India, Asian Indians in arranged marriages living in the United States, and Americans in marriages of choice. They found significant differences when they compared the overall marital satisfaction scores of the three groups. Asian Indians in arranged marriages living in the United States reported higher marital satisfaction than those of the other two groups (Madathil & Benshoff, 2008, p. 228).

Even in Western cultures, however, romantic love has not always been experienced as it is today. Two movements concerning love—courtly love and romanticism—have influenced our present-day practices. According to Ann Swidler (1986), the cultural ideal of courtly love in Western societies can be traced back to the twelfth century. Heralded by the troubadours of the time, this tradition had begun in medieval France, where it was linked to the courage of a knight in his quest for moral heroism and for the love of his chosen lady. The practice of courtly love was complex and focused not on the actual relationship but on a complicated, mutual idealization between two people who rarely had any physical contact with each other. Unlike the Church's conception of love, which it challenged, courtly love promoted the ideal that, under certain highly codified circumstances, sexual love between a man and a woman was well worth striving for. Moreover, sexual love between a man and a woman could be ennobling for both (and not degrading, as the Church insisted).

But the expression of that ideal love was encumbered by an elaborate system of ethical and aesthetic rules connected with ideals of courtesy and courtship, and decidedly *not* with the institution of marriage. It was a widely accepted belief that one could never love a marriage partner. Instead, love was an intense, passionate relationship, a holy unity between one man and one woman who never married and who rarely had any contact. In the ideal situation, a gallant knight performed heroic deeds to win and keep the love of his lady, to whom he rendered years of faithful service. At the same time, this gallant knight was most likely married (as the lady herself usually was), with several children, and had numerous sexual affairs. Although sexual contact between the two was permitted in some parts of Europe, the relationship often went unconsummated, guided by rules of decorum and the pursuit of ideal, not sexual, love (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1992, pp. 38–9).

Around the late eighteenth century a new movement emerged in Europe, called romanticism. With it came an emphasis on the *feeling* of love, as opposed to the correct and decorous behaviour that had characterized courtly love. Sexual love also emerged as a state that all men and women, regardless of class origin, could strive for. According to Singer (1987), romantic love in this period came to mean

> . . . oneness with an alter ego, one's other self, a man or woman who would make up one's deficiencies, respond to one's deepest inclinations, and serve as possibly the only person with whom one could communicate fully. If the world were properly attuned to the value of love, this would be the person one married, establishing a bond that was permanent as well as ecstatically consummatory. The sexual bond would participate in a social order constructed out of loving relationships that united all people to one another and mankind to nature as a whole. (Singer, 1987, p. 4)

But romanticism gave way to a new set of values during the Victorian era. From the second or third decade of the nineteenth century to the early part of the twentieth century, a progressive devaluation of women's worth took place. Men became paid wage workers, and women, confined to the home, were considered weak and in great need of men's protection and economic support. Women were also thought to be of a delicate constitution with minds not quite able to stand up to the rigours of a great deal of education. Women became "the weaker sex"—nurturing, tender, made solely responsible for child-bearing and child-rearing.

The devaluation of women brought extensive changes to the ideals of love. One ideal to emerge was that women were, by virtue of their delicate natures, disinclined toward sex. Their role was to resist sex prior to marriage and then, after marriage, to succumb to their husband's sexual advances. Men, on the other hand, were viewed as being charged with sexual energy. The man's role was to take the lead, to woo his intended, and to persuade her to submit. Hendrick and Hendrick sum up love in the Victorian era:

> It is perhaps difficult for us to imagine today the limits within which couples lived in the Victorian era, with respect to their sexuality and feelings of love they experienced for each other. It appears that in addition to the hardness of life in simply earning a living there was poverty of the spirit in terms of

> people's ability to communicate their most intimate desires and needs to each other . . . . These conditions of the Victorian era, the disjunction between communicating about love and sex and the ongoing natural desires of men and women, set the conditions for the creation of sexual dysfunctions and disorders of love and desire that opened the twentieth century. (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1992, pp. 42–3)

By about 1880, romantic love had become even more romantic; the common view of love was that it was a strong magnet pulling together two people who were "just made for each other." The customs of courtship had become quite formal. Young women and men of "good breeding" (meaning of middle- or upper-class backgrounds) were not to speak to each other until formal introductions had been made (Waller, 1938, 1951). Once that happened, the mother of the young lady was then at liberty to invite the young gentleman to call on her daughter. Later, the young lady herself could extend an invitation (Bailey, 1988). In this era, most courtship took place in the home of the young woman, and sexual restraint was important. In spite of this, sex and marriage were strongly connected, and sexual fulfilment in marriage was the ideal. As well, outside of the genteel parlours of the middle and upper classes, a great deal of sexual behaviour that did not meet the cultural ideals was already happening.

According to American sociologist L.M. Terman, who published his findings in 1938, while 87 per cent of women born before 1890 were virgins at marriage, only 30 per cent of those born after 1910 (and prior to the publication of his study) "waited until marriage." By the first decade of the twentieth century, a "virtuous woman" was one who had had sex only with the man she was going to marry (Cate & Lloyd, 1992, p. 22). By 1920, dating, the

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Is romantic love an old-fashioned concept? Not according to the majority of North Americans. How would you characterize romantic love today? How does that differ from the same concept 50 years ago? What about 500 years ago?

main focus of the present-day North American courtship system, was in place. Dating—the informal, unchaperoned interaction between two people with no specific commitment to each other—followed rules established by local peer groups. The rise of dating has been attributed to a variety of cultural phenomena and events, including the recognition of adolescence as a distinct period in the life cycle, the rise of mass culture, women's emancipation, widespread car ownership, the development of the motion picture industry, and the decline of the community as a means of social control.

Dating, though, meant spending money, and this in turn shifted the locus of power out of the hands of the young woman and her mother and into the hands of the young man himself. With the introduction of dating as the courtship ritual of preference, a young woman (or her mother) could no longer expect to be able to invite a young man to call on her in the family's front parlour (Bailey, 1988). Ideally, dating would lead to a steady relationship between a man and woman, with the woman still expecting to exercise sexual control and the man expected to pay for all expenses. At the same time, romantic love remained the only basis on which to marry. Mate selection, in popular ideology at least, continued to rest on the presence of a mysterious attraction felt between two people destined to spend their lives together.

Although the particulars involved in the rating and dating system of the first half of the twentieth century have changed in the twenty-first, the cultural ideal that love is the most important factor in mate selection continues to be emphasized. Coontz (1988) has pointed out that the importance of love in mate selection even increased over the course of the twentieth century. According to her, "[the] degree of emotional satisfaction . . . demanded from husband–wife . . . relations in the twentieth century would have astounded previous generations" (Coontz, 1988, p. 356).

Today, a large body of popular literature, including a plethora of articles in women's magazines, is devoted to the theme of "finding and keeping a man," often through the use of what might euphemistically be called the "wiles of femininity." As Cate and Lloyd (1992) comment, "The vision of the perfect relationship now emphasizes the importance of balancing togetherness, and individuality, other-orientation and self-fulfilment, and communicating openly while protecting the partner's feelings" (Cate & Lloyd, 1992, p. 31). Meanwhile the still-present threat of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases has caused a rethinking of the free-love ideals promoted by the 1960s' hippie generation. As a result, we are witnessing a strong cultural emphasis on chastity and lifelong monogamous relations between members of a couple who are forever in love with each other.

By using a sociological perspective to trace out the different ways that love in its various courtly and romantic guises was expressed and experienced over the past eight centuries, we can gain an understanding of our own "romantic" experiences today—an understanding that relates personal experiences to historical, social, and cultural events. Instead of being a natural outcome of the human condition, the experience of romantic love appears to be socially constructed. As difficult as it might be to accept, the way we fall in love, the emotions we feel, the people we choose to be the objects of our affection (as well as of our desire and lust)—the very things that make up the most intimate aspects of our personal biographies, even including the ways we choose to express our most intimate feelings—are all understandable as being shaped by our society and culture.

Summary

Becoming a sociologist entails acquiring a core knowledge base that consists of core concepts, skills, and topics that are different from the taken-for-granted perspective used in day-to-day living. Taken together, the elements of this core knowledge base constitute a unique sociological perspective that recognizes that human interaction is socially based and systematically organized. Core sociological concepts are deliberately constructed as tools to help sociologists reflect on the world around them. These concepts refer to complex social phenomena or to ways to approach understanding human social behaviour.

In this chapter I have drawn on the work of C. Wright Mills, Peter Berger, and Thomas Luckmann. Foremost among the core concepts shared by sociologists are the following:

1. *The social construction of reality*. An orientation or way of thinking about the social world and about human behaviour that maintains that the reality experienced by members of any given society is shaped or constructed by human social experiences. Human experiences are social accomplishments.
2. *The sociological imagination*. An orientation or way of thinking about the social world and human behaviour that focuses on the ever-present link between individual experience and larger social structures.
3. *Society as a product of human social interaction*. Society is produced through the social interactions of individuals. As several prominent nineteenth- and twentieth-century German philosophers, including Wilhelm Dilthey, Hans-George Gadamer, and Edmund Husserl have shown, our personal knowledge is always shaped by the beliefs and values that emerge out of the social groups to which we belong.

To become a sociologist you must learn to be a critical thinker who can deal with ambiguity. You must also become both a researcher who is skilled enough to choose wisely among many research designs and methods, and a theoretician capable of devising convincing explanations for research outcomes.

Finally, becoming a sociologist and adopting a sociological perspective can be a challenging undertaking. As a sociologist you will often be called upon to question or even challenge your personal beliefs and assumptions based on your own immediate experiences. I challenge you to keep an open mind as you start out on your journey to becoming a sociologist.

Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean to say that knowledge is "socially constructed" or "sociologically produced"?
2. What skills does critical thinking involve?
3. What are some of the ways that you can apply a "sociological imagination" to help you better understand your everyday life?

4. What value does critical thinking bring to everyday life?
5. If taken-for-granted understandings serve us so well in our daily lives, why would we want to question them or subject them to critical scrutiny?
6. What is individualism? What are some everyday examples of individualism?
7. Are Canadians fundamentally prejudiced and bigoted? Or are they among the least prejudiced people in the world? Explain.
8. How central is the ideal of romantic love to the lives of most Canadians?

PART II

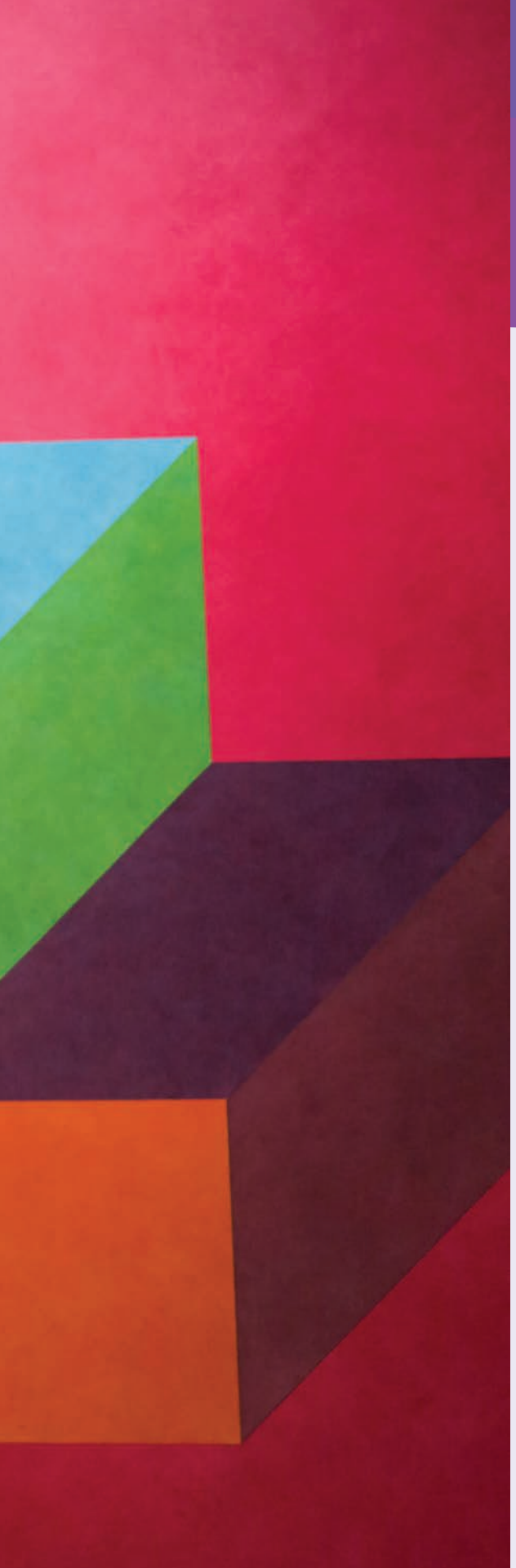
Core Skills: Critical Complex Thinking and Research

The core skills of critical and complex thinking and research are two fundamental components of the sociological knowledge base. Basic assumptions about what we can know and how we can know it separate the taken-for-granted thinkers among us from those who use critical thinking. People who believe that all knowledge comes from authoritative sources usually believe that any solution to a problem comes directly from that authority, too. Taken-for-granted thinkers expect that there is a strong correlation between what they personally believe to be true, what an accepted authority has told them is true, and what is "actually" true. In the minds of taken-for-granted thinkers, most problems can have only one correct solution, one that is ultimately justified by reference to some authority. Their typical line of reasoning is influenced by thoughts like, "It's in the textbook, so it has to be true," or "If the Church says that homosexuality is a sin, it must be so."

Critical thinkers, by contrast, question epistemological assumptions (assumptions about the nature of knowledge, and what constitutes justified belief as opposed to opinion). They recognize that all knowledge is contextual and subjective, that it is filtered through personal perceptions. A critical thinker constructs knowledge on the basis of what appears to be the most reasonable assessment of existing evidence. He or she is willing to re-evaluate conclusions when new evidence, perspectives, or tools of inquiry become available (King & Kitchener, 1994, p. 15).

Research capability is another core skill cultivated by sociologists. There are many ways of "knowing" something: belief or faith, the opinions or pronouncements of experts and leaders, common-sense understandings, and science. Science, as a way of knowing about the world, is based on empirical evidence—that is, on evidence that is gathered, and verified, using our senses. Sociologists generate knowledge about the social world by systematically observing human social behaviour and by recording their observations to be used as evidence, which they then analyze. Sociological research skills include

- the ability to do research using appropriate research methods,
- the ability to use and assess research results, and—importantly—
- the understanding that sociology is a scientific endeavour.



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2 Critical Sociological Thinking

Chapter Outline

Learning Objectives

In this chapter you will:

- learn the difference between critical thinking and everyday or common-sense thinking.
- examine critical thinking in historical perspective.
- learn the characteristics of a critical thinker.
- study examples of critical sociological thinking.
- find out who goes to university and why.
- learn about Canadian multiculturalism and why it is in crisis.

Introduction

critical thinking

Thinking that is purposeful, deliberate, and self-regulatory, and that arrives at judgments based on well-defined criteria and evidence.

Complex **critical thinking** skills make up one of the three core skill sets (alongside research skills and theorizing skills) that all sociologists must acquire. To many introductory sociology students the word *critical* has a negative connotation: to find fault with something or someone. Applied to the task of becoming a sociologist, this taken-for-granted understanding of the word *critical* might lead you to think you should try to find fault with what you are asked to read or what you hear about in lectures. To be critical in this common-sense view means to be harsh or judgmental, to look for all the faults you can find.

But if we look at the history of the English word *critical*, it appears to have two roots in the Greek language: *kriticos*, meaning "discriminating judgment," and *kriterion*, meaning "criterion." Thus, a critical thinker is someone who makes "discriminating judgments with reference to criteria" (Van Gyn, et al., 2006, p. 25). In general, critical thinking skills include skills in "applying, analyzing, and evaluating information" in a way that can be recorded and justified (Ruminski & Hanks, 1995, p. 5). A person engaged in critical thinking will make a judgment only when there is sufficient evidence, will suspend making judgments in the face of insufficient evidence, and will change a judgment when the evidence warrants such an action (Green & Klug, 1990).

Van Gyn and associates (2006) define critical thinking as follows:

> A quality of thinking that is characterized by *self-regulated use of intellectual habits and deliberations* on a challenge situation or task that involves *exploring and generating alternatives, and making evaluative judgements. These judgements are based on criteria*, which *provide justifications* for the conclusion, and are applied to meaning, relational, empirical or value claims. (Van Gyn, et al., 2006, p. 36)

Similarly, The American Philosophical Association (APA) provides this definition:

> Critical thinking is purposeful, self-regulatory judgment which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological, or contextual considerations upon which that judgment is based. (Facione, 1990, p. 3)

Both definitions emphasize self-regulation, deliberation, and arriving at judgments based on well-defined criteria, especially evidence. The skills necessary to arrive at reasoned judgments include interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, and explanation (Keesler, Fermin, & Schneider, 2008, p. 346). A critical thinker must possess the ability to identify value judgments, the predisposition to seek out evidence, and a commitment to fairness. For the most part, those who address the general issue of critical thinking emphasize thought that enables thinkers to "avoid conventional misunderstandings, misleading notions, and literalism" and that encourages thinkers to "challenge conventional suppositions and positions" (Van Gyn, et al., 2006, p. 26).

Critical thinkers are mindful of the ways in which they accept or reject information, and then use that information to support a position. They are aware, too, that the status of knowledge is not constant: with further inquiry, a position taken now may be changed later (Van Gyn, et al., 2006, p. 26).

Critical Thinking in Historical Perspective

In one sense, then, critical thinking is the same for all times and places and across all disciplines. Ancient Greek philosophers, medieval theologians, and contemporary sociological theorists all have examined and challenged the established beliefs of their times. But critical thinking also differs from discipline to discipline, and even from one historical time period to another within a given society. For the ancient Greeks, critical thinking meant actively questioning the everyday, taken-for-granted beliefs that were commonly held by the members of different city-states. To replace these non–critical thinking beliefs, the early Greek philosophers sought out universal truths that were independent of any untested assumptions or opinions. This search for universal truths, they believed, was the highest activity to which any human could aspire. It afforded knowledge-seekers the ultimate answers to questions that were traditionally (but inadequately) answered by everyday beliefs and understandings. Thus, beginning with Aristotle, Greek philosophers looked for universal knowledge of the nature or "essence" of all things. They believed knowledge could be very precise and therefore applicable to all similar cases.

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The School of Athens, by Italian Renaissance painter Raphael. What are some of the situations that demand your critical thinking skills on a day-to-day basis?

Philosophers of the early modern period, in their turn, questioned the authority of the Greek philosophers. In doing so, they cast doubt on a conceptual system that had been used for over 2,000 years. They believed that Aristotle and his followers had based their thinking on erroneous principles and, because of this, had produced uncertain work with no practical results. For seventeenth-century philosophers like René Descartes, reasoning had to produce absolute certainty, which could be achieved only if it was freed from opinion and if thinkers followed a universal method that had no presuppositions as its basis. Descartes was convinced that scientific inquiry was that universal method. While the ancient Greeks had used their critical thinking skills for the philosophical attainment of happiness and the good of all human beings, early modern philosophers strived for ideals of survival and comfort. They restricted themselves to discovering what could be tested by the new scientific method of inquiry (Talaska, 1992, pp. 256–64).

Since the mid-twentieth century, philosophers and social scientists have been able to show that all traditions in philosophy and science are rooted in systems of pre-established and unexamined assumptions. It isn't just our moral and political beliefs and laws but also our scientifically achieved and therefore supposedly "objective" truths that are part of this world view composed of traditional values, beliefs, and ways of thinking. So-called objective scientists think about the world and everything in it, often without examining the basic assumptions and ideas of their particular traditions of thought. Being a scientific thinker does not guarantee that you are also a critical thinker! To be a critical thinker also requires you to challenge established understandings.

Characteristics and Habits of a Critical Thinker

Van Gyn and associates (2006) use the term *habit* for each of the attributes that critical thinkers must, as a matter of course, come to display in their work. Richard Paul (1990), Van Gyn and associates (2006), and others have identified several habits characteristic of a critical thinker today. Among them are the following.

Independence of Mind

A commitment and disposition favourable to autonomous thinking, i.e., thinking for oneself. Most of the beliefs we hold today were acquired when we were very young—when we tended to form beliefs merely because we wanted to believe something or because we were rewarded by significant adults in our lives for doing so. To develop as critical-thinking adults, we must now learn to question what has been presented to us as "the truth." We must learn to judge for ourselves who or what constitutes a legitimate, justified authority, and who or what is not legitimate.

Intellectual Curiosity

The disposition to wonder about the world. Critical thinkers must be curious about the world they live in and want to know more about that world. Where others might simply take

things for granted, a critical thinker is curious and asks questions: How many other ways can we look at this problem or phenomenon? Why do people react this way? What do their reactions mean? Critical thinkers must seek to explain apparent discrepancies in the world, and wonder about how they became who they are and where their own ideas came from. A critical thinker must be perplexed about how we deceive ourselves, and about how we fail to perceive our contradictions and inconsistencies while we seemingly know so much about ourselves. To do this, a critical thinker must be willing to go beyond readily available information, and to seek out other information that will support sustainable judgments.

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Every religion has its own set of values and beliefs that is presented to its members beginning at a very early age. What are the rewards a young child can expect for accepting these values and beliefs? Are there any dangers?

Intellectual Courage

The willingness to evaluate all ideas, beliefs, or viewpoints fairly, and the courage to take a position. Critical thinkers must have the courage to recognize that even their most deeply held convictions and beliefs may be questioned. They also must have the courage to address the possibility that some seemingly absurd or even dangerous ideas may be justified. Often critical thinkers must go against taken-for-granted opinions, although the pressure to conform can sometimes be great, and penalties for not conforming can be severe. Intellectual courage is called for if a critical thinker is to reassess all that he or she has been taught to believe. Forming and holding convictions is important; the danger lies in believing those convictions to be infallible and therefore not submitting those convictions to review and reconsideration. A critical thinker must have the courage to be fair-minded and open-minded—that is, to recognize that familiar views may seem superior when they are not; to be able to consider the merits of other, divergent or conflicting, views of the world; and to be able to change one's position. A critical thinker must have the courage to take a position, even if it is not one that is popular, if it is the most defensible position or if it is the morally right thing to do.

Intellectual Humility

Awareness of the limits of one's knowledge. Critical thinkers must be sensitive to the biases and limitations of their points of view. They should strive for insight into the foundations of their own beliefs. Socrates's well-known admonition "Know thyself" is accompanied by a less familiar one: "I know nothing except the fact of my ignorance." A critical sociological thinker must constantly evaluate his or her own "ignorance." It is much easier to be aware of others' thoughts and ideas than it is to be aware of one's own. A critical thinker directs his or her analytical mind toward self-evaluation in an attempt to understand, and control, his

or her own biases, predispositions, and "triggers to irrationality" (Ruggiero, 1996, p. 26). As Ruggiero notes, self-evaluation

> helps you resist the three major forms of manipulation—the exploitation of gullibility (e.g. people selling you things you don't need); the societal pressure to think, speak, and behave according to the latest fashion; and unrelieved self-congratulation, entertaining only thoughts that flatter and soothe your ego. This last kind is the worst because it deceives you into thinking that your opinions enjoy official status and expecting that others should pay them homage. (Ruggiero, 1996, p. 26)

Intellectual Empathy

Being conscious of the need to put oneself in the place of others in order to understand them. A critical thinker must be able to construct the viewpoints and reasoning of others. A critical thinker is willing to remember the occasions on which he or she was wrong and can imagine the possibility of misunderstanding someone in a current situation. Critical thinkers recognize the tendency in themselves to value those whose views accord with their own while disparaging those who hold contradictory views.

Intellectual Perseverance

The willingness to pursue intellectual insights and truths in spite of difficulties, obstacles, and frustrations. A critical thinker is prepared to struggle with confusion and unsettled questions over a long period of time with a view to achieving a deep understanding or insight. A critical thinker has learned to tolerate ambiguity and complexity and to work with a fairness and open-mindedness to arrive at the best possible understanding. A critical thinker perseveres even when faced with difficult challenges.

Reflexive Disposition

Awareness that one's own approach is fallible. A critical thinker who possesses a reflexive disposition plans ahead for, and monitors, his or her thinking by reflecting on its strengths and weaknesses and by reflecting on the limitations of the judgments he or she arrives at. The possessor of a reflexive disposition is willing to consider both the strengths and the shortcomings of any given way of thinking (his or her own current way of thinking included), and is willing to consider other perspectives, outcomes, and consequences (Van Gyn, et. al., 2006).

Aristotle once wrote, "The unexamined life is not worth living." Perhaps the simplest reason for becoming a critical thinker is to be able to expand one's horizons. Critical thinking also allows one to become actively engaged with life rather than merely reacting to what is presented. Constructing a critical sociological analysis of an event, or social institution, or social practice is a creative undertaking that involves bringing together information from a variety of sources.

Critical Sociological Thinking

While the attributes associated with critical thinking are general enough to apply to all disciplines, critical sociological thinking can be said to have characteristics that are specific to the discipline of sociology (Buechler, 1998; Geertsen, 2003; Grauerholz & Bouma-Holtrop, 2003). Grauerholz and Bouma-Holtrop (2003) suggest that what makes critical sociological thinking unique is that its practitioners possess not only "sociological knowledge and skills" but also "the ability to use this knowledge to reflect upon, question, and judge information while also demonstrating a sensitivity to and an awareness of social and cultural contexts" (2003, p. 485). Many sociologists point to the connection between the practice of critical thinking and the use of the sociological imagination, introduced and defined in the last chapter (Baker, 1981; Bidwell, 1995; Buechler 2008; Green & Klug, 1990; Thompson & Tyagi, 1993, as cited in Grauerholz & Bouma-Holtrop, 2003). Using a sociological imagination allows sociologists to "perceive and understand that their individual life choices, circumstances, and troubles are shaped by larger social forces such as race, gender, social class and social institutions" (Grauerholz & Bouma-Holtrop, 2003, p. 493).

What unique contribution can a sociological perspective bring to the critical thinking exercise?

1. The sociological perspective gives us the best possible perspective on the complexity of social life, its history, and its potential future. It is the best perspective available to us from which to "understand clearly, decide rationally, and act wisely" (Buechler, 2008, p. 219).
2. A sociological perspective requires us to examine and question taken-for-granted understandings. "To be a sociologist is to assume that things are not what they appear to be, that hidden interests are at work, and that claims cannot be taken at face value" (Buechler, 2008, p. 219).
3. Sociology examines relations of domination and exploitation between social groups. Many sociologists who are dedicated to progressive change require both a vision of a better society and the conviction that such a society is attainable (Buechler, 2008, p. 219).

In short, sociology provides a unique perspective on the social world, a perspective that supports the critical thinking enterprise (Buechler, 2008, pp. 320–1). In the previous chapter we considered two of the core concepts making up the sociological perspective. To review:

1. *The social construction of reality*. From Berger and Luckmann (1966) we learned that society is a human product—a social construction—and that the reality we perceive is a reality that is mediated by the society in which we live. Certainly, as individuals we experience that reality in a subjective way—we have intentions, and we act on those intentions. Yet others around us also experience similar intentions, and also act on those intentions. When this happens, as Berger and Luckmann (1966) have shown, social patterns, or social institutions, emerge. These social institutions take on lives of their own, quite independent of the individuals belonging to them. When this happens, it is often difficult to perceive that society is a human product. The institutions

and patterns of social behaviour that inform our decisions are neither "genetically or biologically given, nor are they God-given, naturally occurring, or predestined" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

2. *The sociological imagination.* Seeing society as a social construct means that we cannot make sense of the individual without understanding her in the context of her society. The sociological imagination (Mills, 1959) is a perspective unique to sociology that allows sociologists to make sense of how individual troubles relate to public issues. As Mills (1959, p. 19) has said, "personal troubles" become "public issues" when "both the correct statement of the problem and the range of possible solutions require us to consider the political and economic institutions of the society and not merely the personal situation and character of a scatter of individuals."

In future chapters we will consider additional core insights/concepts that make up the sociological perspective and that contribute to critical sociological thinking. For now, these two core concepts—the social construction of reality and the sociological imagination—provide us with a base from which to apply critical sociological thinking, as the four examples that follow illustrate.

Example 1 of Critical Sociological Thinking: The Socially Constructed Nature of Media Reports about Climate Change in Canada

Human-caused climate change was "discovered" as a public issue in the 1980s. Since then the issue has become increasingly more divisive as it has moved from a topic for scientific discussion to one for everyday popular consumption. Social scientists, such as Hulme (2009) and Swyngedouw (2010), have come to see climate change as "a highly variable idea" and the conflicts over climate change as "a proxy or marker for deeper debates about politics, freedom and responsibility, development and values" (Hulme, 2009; Swyngedouw, 2010, cited in Dugas & Young, 2012). Can it be that something as seemingly objective as the existence of climate change could take on different meanings depending on one's political, religious, and/or cultural perspective?

In Canada language is one of the most significant demarcations of differences in social and cultural life. It is commonly acknowledged that French-speaking and English-speaking Canadians hold different core values and have different perspectives on many aspects of social, political, and cultural life and values. Indeed, sociologists who have studied differences between Canadians living in Quebec and those living in the rest of Canada have confirmed that differences in values, politics, and culture do exist between Quebecers and other Canadians. For example, Adams (2003, pp. 81–9) and Henderson (2004) found Quebecers to be more tolerant, politically progressive, and fulfillment-oriented, and less deferential to authority than other Canadians. Gendron (2007) and Vaillancourt (2010) have found *l'écologisme* to be a significant theme in broader discussions that take place in Quebec around issues of the economy, governance, and equity. Sociologists have also found that while significant political differences exist "among Atlantic, Central, and Western Canadian regions, as well as among urban, suburban, and rural regions" there is a fair bit

of continuity in English-speaking Canada, across all regions, with respect to environmental values (Dugas & Young, 2012).

Canadian sociologists Eric Dugas and Nathan Young (2012) set out to determine if (and in what ways) the issue of climate change is presented differently in English- and French-language newspapers in either print or online formats. They based their analysis on a content analysis of newspaper coverage of climate change across "six English-language newspapers (*The Calgary Herald*, *The Globe and Mail*, *The National Post*, *The New Brunswick Telegraph-Journal*, *The Toronto Star*, and *The Vancouver Sun*), and two French-language dailies (*Le Devoir* and *La Presse*) across a twelve month period (October, 2007 to October, 2008)" (Dugas & Young, p. 27).

Dugas and Young found that Canadian English-language coverage and French-language coverage of climate change "converge and diverge across several dimensions" (2012, p. 27). French-language coverage was more likely than English-language coverage to explicitly mention an ecological issue when covering climate change and to privilege claims about human causation. By contrast, English-language coverage was "open to outright claims of denial of the reality of climate change (appearing in 5% of all items)" (p. 47). Coverage of the denial of the reality of climate change was "completely absent" from all French-language media.

Dugas and Young also found that English-language items were less complex than French-language ones. For example, English-language articles were often entirely based on reporting the findings of university-based experts. French-language media, in contrast, often combined expert scientific knowledge with intersecting themes of morality, politics, and the economy. Unlike the English-language media, the French-language media did not permit the scientific debate to "overwhelm other dimensions of the issue" in that they were "significantly more likely to contain a call for state intervention," or to "criticize existing mitigation attempts as being too weak." Calls to action or criticism of the state's actions were "notably absent from the English media" (Dugas & Young, 2012, pp. 46–9).

As a result of their research Dugas and Young concluded that English- and French-language news agencies deal with the complexities of climate change differently and that this is associated with different environmental cultures and media cultures in English- and French-speaking Canada. Environmentalism has more resonance for francophone Canadians, and French-language journalists reflect this by consistently and exclusively presenting a pro-environmentalist coverage compared to English-language journalists who "are happy to include claims of denial, scientific uncertainty, and pro-business narratives in climate change reporting" (2012, p. 49).

Moreover, there is a clear difference in media cultures in English- and French-speaking Canada. English-speaking journalists are rooted in the Anglo-American tradition and, as such, have been trained that their job is to report on a range of possible stories, from a range of possible perspectives. Journalists trained in the Anglo-American tradition learn to "follow the story wherever it goes in a less critical fashion, even if it leads into suspect terrain." But as Dugas and Young point out, frequently this approach can give credence to ideas that are of "dubious quality and relevance." In contrast the French-language tradition is much less open to diversity and to the compulsion to cover all voices in a debate. This tradition also trains journalists to present more nuanced and complex articles. The result, as Dugas and Young (2012) comment, is that while "the Francophone media are participating

in the kinds of complex and multidimensional conversations about climate change that need to happen," the English media, by contrast, "appear more interested in reporting from the sidelines" (p. 49).

Example 2 of Critical Sociological Thinking: Who Goes to University and Why?

In the last several decades enormous importance has been attributed to post-secondary education both as an economic driver and as a necessary step in improving the life chances of those who manage to achieve post-secondary degrees and certificates (Finnie, Childs, & Wismer, 2011). Most first-year university students believe they are in university as a result of their own efforts. While individual effort is certainly necessary to gain admission to university in Canada, an examination of the characteristics of university students raises questions about what other requirements—and barriers—exist.

Most Canadians, when asked to consider the barriers to a university education apart from the personal effort involved, will think first of economic barriers. Certainly in Canada, as in many other Western countries, the likelihood of attending a university or college is connected to family income. Students from lower-income families have been shown to be less likely to attend university than students from more well-to-do families, as Table 2.1 illustrates. But Table 2.1 also shows that region, parental education, immigrant status, family type, Aboriginal status, and disability status all affect university attendance rates.

These large differences in university attendance rate are of concern to students and their parents, as well as to governments. Common-sense understandings of the reasons behind these gaps often focus on access to credit: youth from economically disadvantaged families do not have the economic resources to attend university and must, therefore, rely on government and bank loans. The prevailing common-sense understanding is that students are often unable to secure enough loan money to cover their costs. Hence, we see far fewer children of poorer parents attending post-secondary institutions. But Table 2.1 suggests that other explanatory variables are also in play.

In 2007 Marc Frenette, an analyst working for the Business and Labour Market Analysis Division of Statistics Canada, published a report in which he set out to account for the large differences in university attendance rates. In 2011 the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario published a report on under-represented populations in post-secondary education in Ontario. The discussion that follows is based largely on these two reports.

Although the common-sense understanding of the attendance gap between children of lower- and higher-income parents focuses on the inability of the former to gain access to sufficient loans to pay for post-secondary education, Frenette was not satisfied with the obvious answer. With the publication of new data, generated from the Youth in Transition Survey (YITS), Cohort A, Frenette was able to link university attendance of 19-year-old Canadians to a "plethora of information on these youth when they were aged 15, including results from standardized tests, high-school marks, feeling control (or mastery) over one's life, self-esteem, parental income, parental education, parental expectations, peer influences, high school attended, and financial constraints, among others" (Frenette, 2007, p. 9).