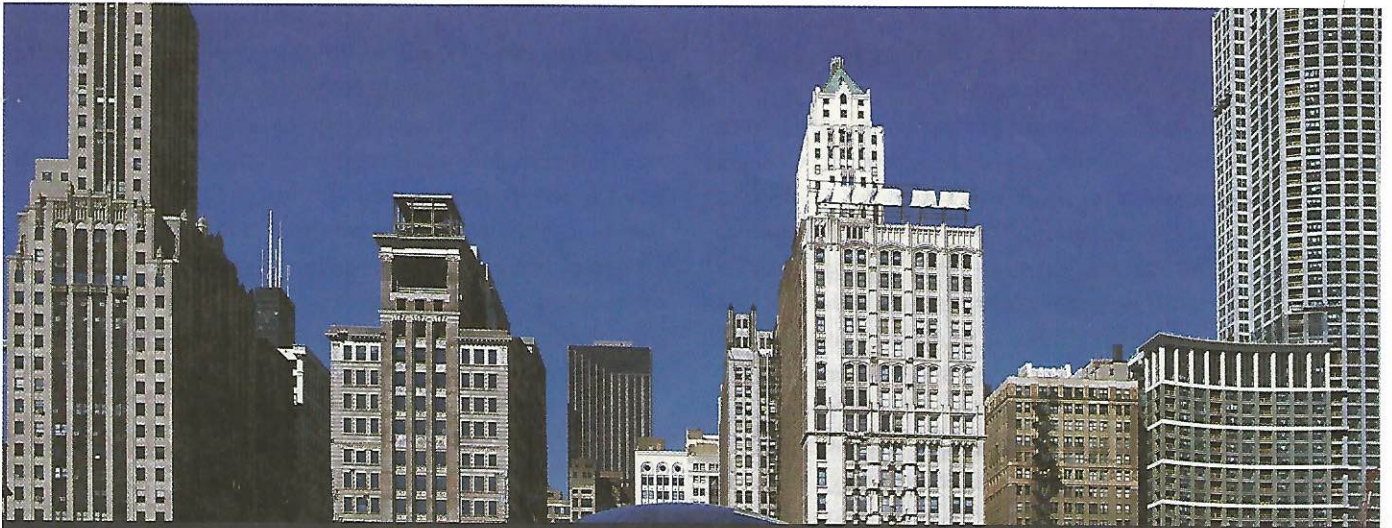




1.1 What Is the Sociological Imagination, and Why Is It Worth Acquiring?

THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

Since its inception, sociology has puzzled over how we are connected to each other and the broader societies in which we live. A **sociological imagination** is the capacity to think systematically about how things we experience as *personal* problems—for example, debt from student loans, competing demands from divorced parents, or an inability to form a rewarding romantic relationship—are really *social* issues that are widely shared by others living in a similar time and social location as us.

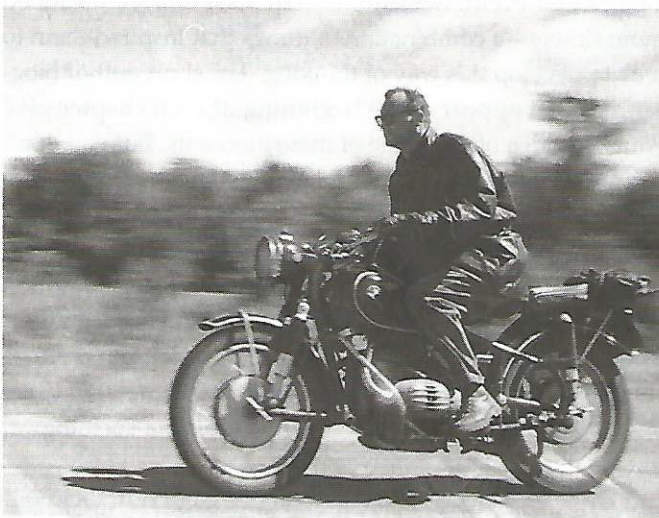
The sociologist C. Wright Mills (1916–1962), who coined the term in 1959, wrote that “the sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society” (Mills 1959:6). To understand the world around us, and to begin

to think in a deep way about how it works and how we might improve it, is to recognize the extent to which our individual lives are strongly shaped by where, when, and to whom we were born and the range of experiences we have had as a child, as an adolescent, and later as an adult. At each stage, we are both individuals and members of a social world. Our opportunities and potentials are always influenced by the inequalities and injustices we encounter, but understanding these requires that we think about them sociologically. In short, the sociological imagination helps us to ask hard questions and seek answers about the social worlds we inhabit. Used wisely, it will also provide tools to navigate those worlds more effectively in pursuit of the goals we have for ourselves.

Looking Through a Sociological Lens

1.1.1 Discuss how a sociological imagination helps to challenge stereotypes. 老李

A sociological imagination challenges some very basic impulses all of us have. To simplify a complex world, we often take for granted that things around us are somehow inevitable or natural. If we have grown up in a social context where marriage is defined as a lifelong commitment between a man and a woman, we might be quick to conclude that such an arrangement was the way that intimate relationships were simply meant to be. But if we look at different societies and over time, we will soon see that marriage is only sometimes a lifetime commitment between a man and a woman. In other contexts, as well as our own society, intimate relationships may be between two men, or two women, or among varying romantic partners. A sociological imagination helps us to understand that a diversity



The sociologist C. Wright Mills coined the phrase “the sociological imagination.”