

Guide to Sociological Imagination (in the 21st Century)

Years ago, C. Wright Mills wrote a little book titled *The Sociological Imagination*. In Mills' own words, "[t]he 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" (2000, p 5). . . . [Sociological] imagination is the capacity to shift from one {individualized} perspective to another {community/societal} . . . and to see the relations between the two" (emphasis mine, 2000, 7). This course is designed to help you do this by the end of the semester.

Sociology offers us a way to interpret and understand human social behavior through its context. When and where it happens as well as who is involved in the social behavior are all part of the context. Taking history, geography, and other aspects of context into account in understanding human behavior – placing that behavior in its own cultural and sociohistorical context TO understand it is called cultural relativism. Sociology teaches us to **identify causes of human behavior without blaming individuals for 'bad' choices**. Often described as a lens through which we view the world 'as it is', a sociological perspective 'sees' socially constructed elements by bring factors beyond individuals and their personalities into focus. We don't lose the trees with a sociological imagination but we do get to see the forest!

All good studies of humans and society, according to Mills, are responses questions about the three broad social contexts -- micro, meso, and macro; these represent different 'scopes' of sociological research and they overlap and are interrelated; Mills argues that sociology asks questions about these three broad categories of social phenomena:

- the structures of society being examined or meso-level factors including many norms, both formal and informal
- the development of that society over time or macro-level social forces and issues of social change
- the kinds of people that society produces or micro-level characteristics and capacities of individuals and associated socialization experiences and processes

Mills' questions identify WHAT sociologists study in micro, meso, and macro contexts.

Sociology also has three broad paradigms or ways of thinking about WHAT we study. Paradigms are bigger than theories; below each of the major paradigms in sociology is represented by a Central Question:

- **What does it mean?** (Symbolic Interactionism) Meaning is SYMBOLIC and varies dramatically across social roles and social contexts.
- **Who is involved?** (Conflict/Marxism) This question is always about the social roles of the actors involved, normative expectations and patterns of enacting their roles as well as relative power in the positions associated with those roles.
- **(How) Does it work?** (Structural Functionalism) Often, the reason we are interested in social issues is that something DOESN'T work; we find ourselves asking 'in what ways does the structure *function* (or *dysfunction*)'? Sociology identifies outcomes or consequences AND explains how patterns of behavior, social practices and structures produce them.

Below are some examples of how I used my sociological imagination in thinking about teaching / course design.

- What does **doing** course work mean? From the perspective of MY social role as professor, it provides evidence of your learning; I'm obligated by my role as professor at SU to REPORT on your learning (in the form of grades). The University's mission and General Education Program, as well as disciplinary standards, and my own experience (as a student and as a Sociologist) all guide how I fulfill my obligation to the University. Part of that, clearly, is an obligation to YOU; fulfilling that is guided by the above as well as changing cultural expectations and norms regarding 'the college experience' and a deep interest in preparing students for 'life beyond college' as well as commitment to knowledge you can use. This is the context I design course work in/for.
 - What does **doing** course work mean to you?
- Using this course as the social context, the social actors include (at least) you, me, and 'the University'. You and I have VERY different social roles with respect to this course; my role is to GUIDE your **learning**. To be clear about that, my role is guide or perhaps a consultant; I offer advice based on my expertise and experience – and WITH YOUR FEEDBACK – I make adjustments to meet your needs (in terms of the above context). AS a consultant/guide, I cannot GIVE you an education; the course offers experiences that WILL educate you. I do my best to make guidance clear although I also recognize that part of 'an education' IS the challenge of achieving it.
 - Simply put, your role is 'to learn', sociology with respect to this course although it's highly unlikely that

this is the only course you are currently enrolled in OR that your college courses are the only thing you are responsible for. How would you describe your role or roles?

- What other social actors are relevant to the social context of this course? Or to YOUR social context as a student at SU? This is about the OTHER roles you play, as a member of your family, an employee, friend.
- In what ways do those roles SUPPORT or get in the way of your role as an SU student?
- (How) Does it (your learning) work? We'll ask this question in a variety of ways over the semester and many times; for now, let's be clear about the social boundaries of MY role:
 - course materials, and the 'set-up' on the homepage are the basic 'guide' to your learning for the week
 - my interaction with you individually and collectively – as feedback on your work, or in class – as you move through the week GUIDES your learning; your role in this interaction is VITAL to improving your learning.
 - I can't know what your experience is unless you tell me about it (experience is the basis of self-reflexivity); I can't make meaningful changes without clarity about what needs to change and some idea about how such changes would IMPROVE YOUR LEARNING.

Let's take this a bit farther. This course has micro-level components: namely social interaction and identity.

- Social interaction between you and me; between you and course materials; among you as students.
 - **Course materials** and the work you are asked to do with them is **communication from me**.
 - The **work** submitted is **communication from YOU** – often prepared collaboratively, AMONG you.
 - **Class time is communication WITH you** – as a class.
 - **Grades** and particularly comments on your work is **communication WITH you** -- individually.
- Whether I teach, write, research, or find myself doing something else, I AM a sociologist; in addition to which this is my job – being a sociology professor is a core element of my **identity**; YOUR success is part of that.
- You all have other social responsibilities and relationships important to your **identity** which shape and reflect who you are and influence your engagement with your education; I expect you to do your best to AVOID letting those interfere with your goals AND I am banking on success in this course being one of your goals.
- **Being self-reflexive about your social relationships/reality is a major part of doing well in this course.**

The meso-level factors are even MORE complex; sociology is always about peeling back layers of meaning:

- Your families, your communities, your previous schools are all meso-level **social organizations** influenced by the individuals within them as well as the **social institutions** of which they are a part.
- The best part of sociology (for me) is that it provides ways for us to see connections between micro, meso, and macro levels. For example,
 - Any Sociology you are taking with me (micro) represents the discipline (macro) and the department at SU (meso). It also fulfills a General Education Requirement, the Goals of which are important aspects of SU's **identity** as a provider of Liberal Arts education (macro) as well as core to the Fulton School of Liberal Arts (meso).
- As the semester moves along, we'll broaden 'identities' to include characteristics of the Salisbury community – specifically the University but also the city, the Eastern Shore, Maryland, the US, and the world – some of which include age, sex, gender, race, ethnicity, country of origin, and other **demographic** information about the population and sub-populations. And we'll identify and discuss **ascribed statuses** and **achieved statuses** and how folks enact their roles, occupy their statuses, and exercise their agency to socially construct their worlds and the world we live in.

As mentioned above, **social institutions** are part of the macro-level of sociology; consider them **SYSTEMS**. Following up on questions asked above, consider the following:

- **'family'** is a **social institution [familial systems]**; all humans need 'family' to get them from birth to adulthood; in what ways does/has/is your family playing a role in your experience as an SU student?
- The **social institution of education, the education system**, includes, of course, schools themselves and the people within them but also the social organization of and beliefs about 'education'; what are YOUR beliefs about your education? Perhaps more importantly, what are your **VALUES** regarding your experience at SU?
- The **economy [economic system]** is the **system of extraction, production, distribution, consumption and WASTE, to meet societal needs**. A college education is supposed to prepare folks to be productive workers and participate in the economy in ways that benefits 'society' as well as themselves individually. What do you believe you need from your experience at SU that will make you a productive participant in 'the economy'? What is your investment in making sure you get what you need / want from your experience?