

The Sociological Imagination

How can we make a connection between our personal experiences and what goes on in the larger society? Sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959b) described the process of making this linkage the sociological imagination—the ability to see the relationship between individual experiences and the larger society. This sociological awareness enables us to understand the link between our personal experiences and the social contexts in which they occur. The sociological imagination helps us distinguish between personal troubles and social (or public) issues. *Personal troubles* are private problems that affect individuals and the networks of people with which they regularly associate. As a result, those problems must be solved by individuals within their immediate social settings. For example, one person being unemployed or running up a high credit card debt could be identified as a personal trouble. *Public issues* are problems that affect large numbers of people and often require solutions at the societal level. Widespread unemployment and massive, nationwide consumer debt are examples of public issues. The sociological imagination helps us place seemingly personal troubles, such as losing one's job or overspending on credit cards, into a larger social context, where we can distinguish whether and how personal troubles may be related to public issues.

Overspending as a Personal Trouble

Although individual behavior can contribute to social problems, our individual experiences are largely beyond the individual's control. They are influenced and in some situations determined by the society as a whole—by its historical development and its organization. In everyday life we often blame individuals for “creating” their own problems. If a person sinks into debt due to overspending or credit card abuse, many people consider it to be the result of his or her own personal failings. However, this approach overlooks debt among people who are in low-income brackets, having no way other than debt to gain the basic necessities of life. By contrast, at middle-and upper-income levels, overspending takes on a variety of other meanings. At the individual level, people may accumulate credit cards and spend more than they can afford, thereby affecting all aspects of their lives, including health, family relationships, and employment stability. Sociologist George Ritzer (1999: 29) suggests that people may overspend through a gradual process in which credit cards “lure people into consumption by easy credit and then entice them into still further consumption by offers of ‘payment holidays,’ new cards, and increased credit limits.”

Because of an over-reliance on credit, many Americans now owe more than they can pay back. This couple is signing up for debt consolidation, a somewhat controversial process that may help them avoid bankruptcy. ©



Overspending as a Public Issue

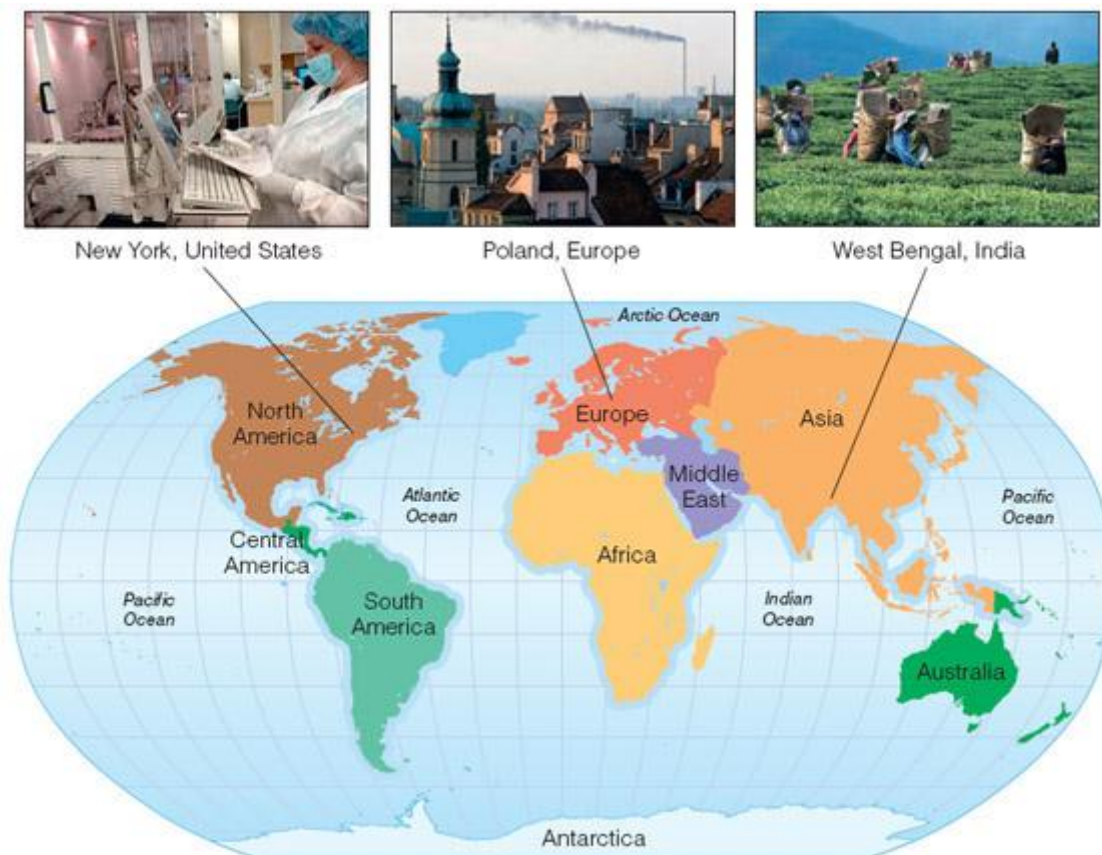
We can use the sociological imagination to look at the problem of overspending and credit card debt as a public issue—a societal problem. For example, Ritzer (1998) suggests that the relationship between credit card debt and the relatively low *savings rate* in the United States constitutes a public issue. Between 2000 and 2010, credit card debt continued to grow rapidly in the United States while savings diminished. Because savings is money that governments, businesses, and individuals can borrow for expansion, a lack of savings may create problems for future economic growth. The rate of bankruptcies in this country is a problem both for financial institutions and the government. As corporations “write off” bad debt from those who declare bankruptcy or simply do not pay their bills, all consumers pay either directly or indirectly for that debt. Finally, poverty is forgotten as a social issue when more-affluent people are having a spending holiday and consuming all, or more than, they can afford to purchase. Some practices of the credit card industry are also a public issue because they harm consumers. Companies may encourage overspending and then substantially increase interest rates and other fees, making it more difficult for consumers to pay off debts. Mills's *The Sociological Imagination* (1959b) is useful for examining issues because it helps integrate microlevel (individual and small-group) troubles with compelling public issues of our day. Recently, his ideas have been applied at the global level as well.

The Importance of a Global Sociological Imagination

Although existing sociological theory and research provide the foundation for sociological thinking, we must reach beyond past studies that have focused primarily on the United States to develop a more comprehensive *global* approach for the future. In the twenty-first century, we face important challenges in a rapidly changing nation and world. The world's **high-income countries** are nations with highly industrialized economies; technologically advanced industrial, administrative, and service occupations; and relatively high levels of national and personal income. Examples include the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and the countries of Western Europe. As compared with other nations of the world, many high-income nations have a high standard of living and a lower death rate due to advances in nutrition and medical technology. However, everyone living in a so-called high-income country does not necessarily have a high income or an outstanding quality of life. Even among middle-income and upper-income people, problems such as personal debt may threaten economic and social stability.

In contrast, **middle-income countries** are nations with industrializing economies, particularly in urban areas, and moderate levels of national and personal income. Examples of middle-income countries include the nations of Eastern Europe and many Latin American countries, where nations such as Brazil and Mexico are industrializing rapidly. **Low-income countries** are primarily agrarian nations with little industrialization and low levels of national and personal income. Examples of low-income countries include many of the nations of Africa and Asia, particularly the People's Republic of China and India, where people typically work the land and are among the poorest in the world. However, generalizations are difficult to make because there are wide differences in income and standards of living within many nations (see Chapter 9, “Global Stratification”).

The global expansion of credit cards and other forms of consumerism, including the proliferation of “big-box” retail establishments such as Wal-Mart, shows the influence of U.S.-based megacorporations on other nations of the world. Consider Wal-Mart, for example. Sam Walton opened his first Wal-Mart store in Rogers, Arkansas, in 1962, and the company's home office was established in Bentonville, Arkansas, in the early 1970s. From a small-scale, regional operation in Arkansas, the Wal-Mart chain has now built a worldwide empire. Although the global expansion of credit cards and Wal-Mart Supercenters has produced benefits for some people, it has also affected the everyday lives of many individuals around the world.



MAP 1.1 THE WORLD'S ECONOMIES IN THE EARLY TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY High-income, middle-income, and low-income countries. Photos: Left, © Syracuse Newspapers/John Berry/The Image Works; center, © Andrew

We will continue to develop our sociological imaginations by examining social life in the United States and other nations. The future of our nation is deeply intertwined with the future of all other nations of the world on economic, political, environmental, and humanitarian levels. Whatever your race/ethnicity, class, sex, or age, are you able to include in your thinking the perspectives of people who are quite different from you in experiences and points of view? Before you answer this question, a few definitions are in order. *Race* is a term used by many people to specify groups of people distinguished by physical characteristics such as skin color; in fact, there are no “pure” racial types, and the concept

of race is considered by most sociologists to be a social construction that people use to justify existing social inequalities. *Ethnicity* refers to the cultural heritage or identity of a group and is based on factors such as language or country of origin. *Class* is the relative location of a person or group within the larger society, based on wealth, power, prestige, or other valued resources. *Sex* refers to the biological and anatomical differences between females and males. By contrast, *gender* refers to the meanings, beliefs, and practices associated with sex differences, referred to as *femininity* and *masculinity*.

Sociology in Our Times.

Diana Kendall.

9th ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2013.

ISBN: 978-1-111-83157-8

Description:

Provides relevant information about sociological thinking and the significance of the interlocking nature of class, race, and gender (and, increasingly, age) in all aspects of social life.