

## THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

### *Learning Outcomes*

At the end of this chapter you will be able to do the following.

- Define the sociological imagination.
- Apply the sociological imagination to divorce and other topics.
- Define social facts.
- Define and identify personal troubles.
- Define and identify social issues.

### SEEING THE SOCIAL WORLD IN A NEW LIGHT: PERSONAL AND LARGER SOCIAL WORLDS



The average person lives too narrow a life to get a clear understanding of today's complex social world. Our daily lives are spent among friends and family, at work, play, watching TV, and surfing the Internet. No way can one person grasp the big picture from their relatively isolated lives. There's just not enough time or capacity to be exposed to the complexities of a society of 305 million people. There are thousands of communities, millions of interpersonal interactions, billions of Internet information sources, and countless trends that transpire without many

of us even knowing that they exist. What can we do to make sense of it all?

Psychology gave us the understanding of self-esteem; economics gave us the understanding of supply and demand; political science gave us the understanding of polling; and physics gave us Einstein's theory of  $E=MC^2$ . The sociological imagination by Mills provides a framework for understanding our social world that far surpasses any common sense notion we might derive from our limited social experiences. C. Wright Mills (1916-1962) was a contemporary sociologist who brought tremendous insight into the daily lives of society's members. Mills stated: "Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both."<sup>1</sup> The **sociological imagination** is *making the connection between personal challenges and larger social issues*. Mills identified "troubles" (personal challenges) and "issues" (larger social challenges), also known as biography, and history, respectively. Mills' conceptualization of the sociological imagination allows individuals to see the relationships between events in their personal lives, biography, and events in their society, history. In other words, this mindset provides the ability for individuals to realize the relationship between personal experiences and the larger society.

Remember that **social facts** are *social processes rooted in society rather than in the individual*. Émile Durkheim studied the science of social facts in an effort to identify social

correlations and ultimately social laws designed to make sense of how modern societies worked, given that they became increasingly diverse and complex.<sup>2</sup> The national cost of a gallon of gas, the war in the Middle East, the depressed economy, the trend of having too few females in the 18-24 year old singles market, and the ever-increasing demand for plastic surgery are just a few of the social facts at play today. Social facts are typically outside of the control of average people. They occur in the complexities of modern society and impact us, but we rarely find a way to significantly impact them back. This is because, as Mills taught, we live much of our lives on the personal level, while much of society happens at the larger social level. Without a knowledge of the larger social and personal levels of social experience, we live in what Mills called a **false social consciousness** *which is an ignorance of social facts and the larger social picture.*

**Personal troubles** are private problems experienced within the character of the individual and the range of their immediate relation to others. Mills identified the fact that we function in our personal lives as actors and actresses who make choices about our friends, family, groups, work, school, and other issues within our control. We have a degree of influence in the outcome of matters within the personal level. A college student who parties 4 nights out of 7, who rarely attends class, and who never does his homework has a personal trouble that interferes with his odds of success in college. However, when 50% of all college students in the United States never graduate, we label it as being a larger social issue.

Larger **social issues** are those that lie beyond one's personal control and the range of one's inner life. These pertain to society's organizations and processes; further, these are rooted in society rather than in the individual. Nationwide, students come to college as freshmen ill-prepared to understand the rigors of college life. They haven't often been challenged enough in high school to make the necessary adjustments required to succeed as college students. Nationwide, the average teenager text messages, surfs the Net, plays video or online games, hangs out at the mall, watches TV and movies, spends hours each day with friends, and works at least part-time. Where and when would he or she get experience focusing attention on college studies and the rigorous self-discipline required to transition into college credits, a quarter or a semester, study, papers, projects, field trips, group work, or test taking?

In a survey conducted each year by the U.S. Census Bureau, findings suggest that in 2006 about 84 percent of the U.S. population graduated high school.<sup>3</sup> They also found that only 27 percent had a Bachelor's degree.<sup>4</sup> Given the numbers of freshmen students enrolling in college, the percentage with a Bachelor's degree should be closer to 50 percent.

The majority of first year college students drop out because nationwide we are deficient at preparing students for these new challenges, and because students do not feel a sense of belonging to the new institution. In fact, college dropouts are an example of both a larger social issue and a personal trouble. Thousands of studies and millions of dollars have been spent on how to increase a freshman student's odds of success in college (graduating with a 4-year degree). There are millions of dollars of grant monies awarded each year to help retain college students. Interestingly, almost all of the grants are targeted in such a way

that a specific college can create a specific program to help each individual student stay in college and graduate.

The real power of the sociological imagination is found in how we learn to distinguish between the personal and social levels in our own lives. Once we do, we can make personal choices that serve us best, given the larger social forces that we face. In 1991, Ron graduated with his Ph.D. and found himself in a very competitive job market for University professor/researcher positions. With hundreds of job applications out there, he kept finishing second or third and was losing out to 10-year veteran professors who applied for entry-level jobs. Ron looked carefully at the job market, his deep interest in teaching, the struggling economy, and his sense of urgency in obtaining a salary and benefits. He came to the decision to switch his job search focus from university research to college teaching positions. Again the competition was intense. On his 301<sup>st</sup> job application (that's not an exaggeration) he beat out 47 other candidates for his current position. In this case, knowing and seeing the larger social troubles impacted his success or failure in finding a position. Because he used his sociological imagination, Ron was empowered by an understanding of the job market, so was able to best situate himself within it.

### **MAKING SENSE OF DIVORCE USING THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION**



Let's apply the sociological imagination to an issue that many people are concerned about—divorce. Are there larger social and personal factors that will impact your own risk of divorce? Yes. In spite of the fact that 223,000,000 people are married in the U.S., divorce continues to be a very common occurrence.<sup>5</sup> Divorce happens, and since millions of people experienced their own parents' divorce, we are especially concerned

about the success of our own marriage.

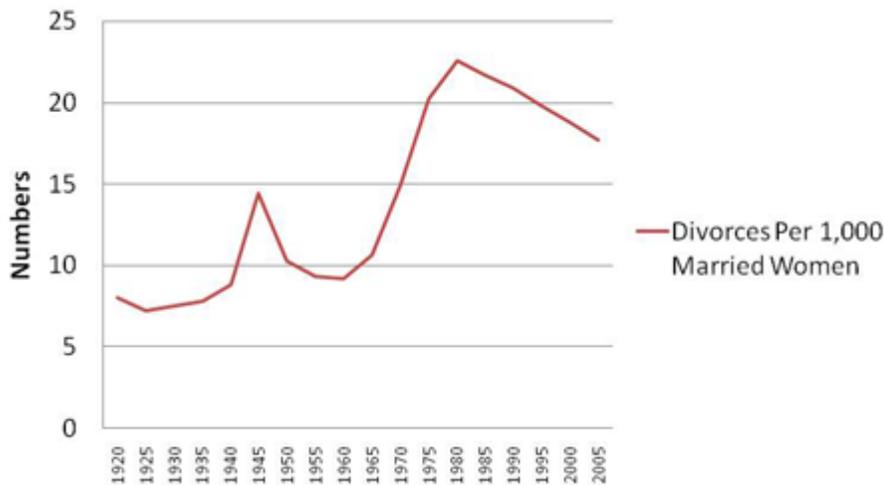
What's in the larger social picture? Estimates for the U.S. are that about 80% of males and about 86% of females will be married before they reach age 44<sup>6</sup> yet so many of us feel tremendous anxiety about marriage. Consider the marriage and divorce rates in Table 1 below. The first thing you notice is that both have been declining since 1990. The second thing you notice is that the ratio of marriages to divorces is consistently two marriages to one divorce (2:1). By the way, the divorce and marriage rates in Table 1 are called "Crude Divorce" and "Crude Marriage" rates because they compare the divorces and marriages to everyone in the population for a given year, even though children and others have virtually no risk of either marrying or divorcing.

Table 1. Comparison of U.S. Marriages/1,000 Persons to Divorces/1,000 Persons 1990, 2000, and 2005.<sup>7</sup>

	1990 Rates	2000 Rates	2005 Rates	3-year Average
US Marriages	9.8/1,000	8.3/1,000	7.5/1,000	8.5/1,000
US Divorces	4.7/1,000	4.1/1,000	3.6/1,000	4.1/1,000
US Ratio of Marriages to Divorces	2:1	2:1	2:1	2:1

Does Sociology provide personal and larger social insight into what we can do to have a good marriage and avoid divorce? Absolutely! But before we discuss these, let's set the record straight: There has never been a 1 in 2 chance of getting divorced in the U.S.<sup>8</sup> Divorce rates peaked in the 1980s and have steadily declined since then (See Figure 1). Even though all married people are at risk of divorcing, most of them won't divorce. Many studies have consistently shown exactly how our personal choices and behaviors can actually minimize our chances of divorce.

Figure 1. United States Historical Data-Divorce Trends 1920-2005.<sup>9</sup>



First, wait to marry until you reach your mid-20s, at the earliest. Teens who marry have the highest risk of divorce.<sup>10</sup> Avoid cohabitation if you plan to marry. While cohabitation is on the rise in the U.S., it is still associated with higher risks of divorce once one is married. Numerous studies have rigorously researched the impact of having cohabited on the odds of marital success.<sup>11</sup> Finish college before you marry. College graduates divorce less than dropouts or high school graduates. Research finds that having gone to college and having an income over \$50,000 decreases the risk of divorce. Those with incomes under \$25,000 have a 50% chance of divorce.<sup>12</sup>

Be aware of the three-strike issue: Strike 1, you are poor; Strike 2, you are a teenager when you marry; and Strike 3, you are pregnant when you marry. This could prove to be a terminal combination of risk factors as far as staying married is concerned. Know which factors you can control that will likely impact your marital success odds. Other scientifically identified divorce risk factors include high personal debt; falling out of love; not proactively maintaining your marital relationship; marrying someone who has little in common with you; infidelity; remaining mentally “on the marriage market...waiting for someone better to come along;” having parents who are divorced; and neither preparing for, nor managing the stresses that come with, raising children.<sup>13</sup>

Often couples on the fringe of divorce later emerge from those states of unhappiness and hopelessness with renewed happiness and hope, by simply enduring the difficult years together. With all of these factors listed above, you can decide how to best situate yourself to deal with the factors. But, as Mills taught, you must consider both personal and larger social issues simultaneously to fully benefit from the sociological imagination. It is true that divorce is still very common in the U.S. Notice the peak was found in the 1980s, and the trend shows a slightly decreased pattern since then.

What are some of the larger social factors that have historically contributed to these patterns of divorce? You’ll notice a brief spike in divorce after World War II. The post-war year, 1946 was a true anomaly as far as rates measuring the family are concerned. It was the highest rate of marriages, highest rate of births (the Baby Boom began in 1946), and the lowest median age at marriage in U.S. history. Divorce rates surged in 1946 as all the soldiers returned home having been changed by the traumas, isolation from their families, and challenges of the war. They were probably less compatible to the wife they left when they went to war. Divorces tend to follow wars where one spouse is deployed into combat (WWI, WWII, Vietnam, Korea, Kuwait, and Iraq).

Other factors influencing this divorce pattern have to do with the economy, marriage market, and other factors. Divorces continue to be high during economic prosperity and often decline during economic hardships. Divorces tend to be higher if there is an abundance of single women in the society, and divorces tend to be more common in urban rather than rural areas; the Western U.S. than in the Eastern; and among the poor, less educated, remarried, less religiously devout, and children of divorce. Please note that recession, war, secularism, and western U.S. cultures don’t cause divorce. Scientists have never identified a cause for divorce, but they have clearly identified risk factors.

Could there be larger social factors pressuring your marriage right now? Yes, but you are probably not enslaved to their forces. They still impact you, and you can follow Mill’s ideas and manage as best you can within your power the consequences of these forces. What can you do about it? Well, if you are single, you’d best situate yourself in terms of marital success by waiting to marry until you are in your 20s; finishing and graduating from college; and taking careful attention to find the right person (especially one with common values to your own). Once married, you should work proactively to nurture your marriage relationship on an ongoing basis, such as finding counseling to help mediate the influence of your parents’ divorce on your current marital relationship. If you are married and things

appear to hit a wall, consider counselling, consulting with other couples, and reading self-help books. Often the insurmountable barriers that couples face in marriage slowly collapse with time and concerted effort.

Divorce is also not the end of the world. Since there are so many divorces, our sociological imagination indicates that individual behaviors are not the only risk factors leading toward divorce. Contemporary society allows for the formation of new forms of family and social bonds. Perhaps some people are not compatible as life partners, but can sustain a relationship for a certain number of years, dissolve their relationship, hopefully amicably, then forge relationships with others.

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<sup>1</sup> Mills, C. W. 1959. *The Sociological Imagination* page ii; Oxford U. Press.

<sup>2</sup> See Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of the Sociological Method*, Edited by Steven Lukes; translated by W.D. Halls. New York: Free Press, 1982, pp. 50-59.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.factfinder.uscensus.gov>; see table R1501 at [http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/GRTTable?\\_bm=y&-geo\\_id=01000US&-\\_box\\_head\\_nbr=R1501&-ds\\_name=ACS\\_2006\\_EST\\_G00\\_-&-format=US-30](http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/GRTTable?_bm=y&-geo_id=01000US&-_box_head_nbr=R1501&-ds_name=ACS_2006_EST_G00_-&-format=US-30).

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.factfinder.uscensus.gov> ; see table R1502 at [http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/GRTTable?\\_bm=y&-geo\\_id=01000US&-\\_box\\_head\\_nbr=R1502&-ds\\_name=ACS\\_2006\\_EST\\_G00\\_-&-redoLog=false&-format=US-30&-mt\\_name=ACS\\_2006\\_EST\\_G00\\_R1501\\_US30](http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/GRTTable?_bm=y&-geo_id=01000US&-_box_head_nbr=R1502&-ds_name=ACS_2006_EST_G00_-&-redoLog=false&-format=US-30&-mt_name=ACS_2006_EST_G00_R1501_US30).

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.Census.gov>.

<sup>6</sup>

<http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0763219.html>

<sup>7</sup> Statistical Abstracts online: Table 121. Marriages and Divorces—Number and Rate by State: 1990 to 2005 Taken from the Internet on 5 June, 2008 from

[http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/cats/births\\_deaths\\_marriages\\_divorces.html](http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/cats/births_deaths_marriages_divorces.html)

<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.Rutgers.edu> the National Marriage Project, 2004 *The State of Our Unions* or Kalman Heller *The Myth of the High Rate of Divorce* taken from Internet 5 June, 2008 from

<http://www.isnare.com/?aid=217950&ca=Marriage>.

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970, Bicentennial Edition, Part 2*; Washington, D.C., 1975 Series B 216-220 *Divorce 1920-1970* and *Statistical Abstracts of the United States 2001* Page 87 Table 117 and 2002 Page 88 Table 111.

<sup>10</sup> See Center for Disease Control *First Marriage Dissolution, Divorce, and Remarriage: United States* taken from Internet 5 July, 2008 from <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/ad/ad323.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> See Lisa Mincieli and Kristin Moore, *The Relationship Context of Births Outside of Marriage: The Rise of Cohabitation*, *Child Trends Research Brief 2007-13* (May 2007); or Matthew D. Bramlett and William D. Mosher, *Cohabitation, Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage in the United States*, *National Center for Health Statistics, Vital and Health Statistics*, 23 (22), 2002; or Larry Bumpass and Hsien-Hen Lu, *Trends in Cohabitation and Implications for Children's Family Contexts in the U. S.*, *Population Studies* 54 (2000): 29-41; or Jay Teachman, *Premarital Sex, Premarital Cohabitation, and the Risk of Subsequent Marital Disruption among Women*, *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 65 (2003): 444-455.

<sup>12</sup> See <http://www.divorce360.com/>

<sup>13</sup> See Glenn, N. 1991 *Recent trends in Marital Success in the U.S.* *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 261-270.