

## The Sociological Imagination: An Integrated Presentation of Sociology In Introductory Courses

By

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This paper presents a teaching model that allows for an integrated presentation of sociology to students and allows students to grasp the promise of a sociological imagination. As Figure 1 illustrates, the model contains five major analytical components: place, time, social structure, culture, and social and personal issues.<sup>1</sup> Importantly, rather than an empirical representation of social reality, the model presented here is simply a heuristic teaching device aimed at facilitating students' understanding of how (some) sociologists organize and use sociological knowledge. This technique is consistent with Mills' idea that given the complexity of social life "the social scientist seeks to understand the human variety in an orderly way" by using a particular viewpoint (Mills 1959, p. 133).

The model is organized around some of the main sociological concepts and topics included in introductory textbooks. Pedagogically, I use the model to integrate the chapters on culture, socialization, society and social structure (Thompson and Hickey 1996). In order to make the model meaningful to the students, I raise two questions: "What do sociologists look at?" and "How do some sociologists perceive social relations?" Despite their broad scope and the potential for oversimplification, I have found these questions and the model examined in this paper useful for presenting sociology to my students. To simplify my presentation of the model to the students, I summarize and discuss it according to the following propositions.

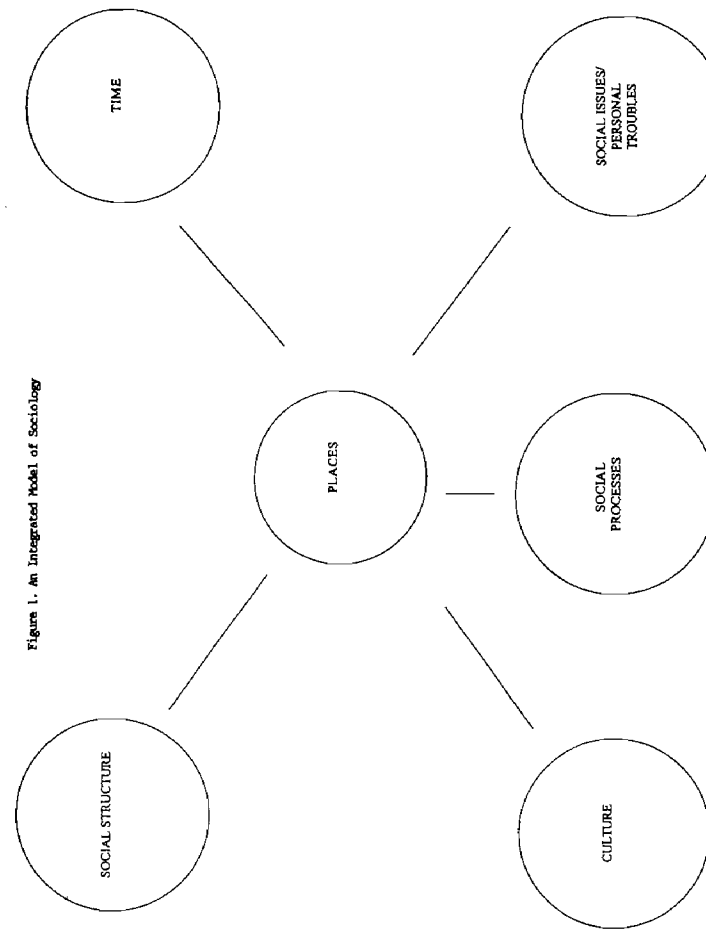


Figure 1. An Integrated Model of Sociology

- 1) Social interaction is located behavior. (Place)
- 2) Social interaction is affected by its duration, simultaneity, and succession. (Time)
- 3) Social interaction is a more or less organized pattern of social relationships based on the social positions people occupy in society (Social Structure)
- 4) Social interaction is characterized by patterns of behavior that are intentionally or unintentionally aimed at maintaining or transforming particular patterns of social relationships. (Social Processes)
- 5) Social interaction is learned behavior that is historically produced, reproduced and transformed. (Culture)
- 6) Social interaction has intended and unintended social and personal consequences (Social Issues and Personal Troubles).

In my experience, regardless of their theoretical/pedagogical orientations most introductory textbooks implicitly or explicitly embody these concepts.

The paper begins with a critical discussion of the main conceptual components of the model. Next, I apply the model to one of the assigned readings in my introductory course. Finally, I discuss some of the limitations of the model.

#### THE MODEL DEFINED

##### PLACE

There is a consensus among sociologists that social behavior is spatially located behavior. The concept of place comprises the general physical and social area within which and through which social interaction takes place. For the purpose of the model, I emphasize groups, organizations, institutions, and society as the main social places. Discussion on place in introductory textbooks tend to focus on the micro level of analysis particularly in terms of "frame of

interaction," "personal space," "public space," and "physical space" (e.g., Macionis 1995; Schaefer and Lamm 1995; Stockard 1997). For instance, according to Macionis (1995 p. 164) personal space "refers to the surrounding area in which an individual makes some claim to privacy." Despite its narrow and individualistic scope, this notion of space could also be applied to the macro level of analysis by making reference to societies, groups, organizations, and institutions as socially created places in which and through which individuals interact to maintain or transform their social and cultural positions. Sociologically, the concept of place defines the "set of norms that indicate what behaviors are appropriate and what roles you should play" (Stockard 1997, p. 107).

##### TIME

Along with place, the concept of time has long been recognized as central to our understanding of social interaction. In some introductory textbooks the concept of time is applied to the succession of historical events (Ferrante 1995; Stockard 1997) and the rationalization of life (Macionis 1996). Other textbooks provide a relatively substantive analysis of the concept by describing cultural, social, and phenomenological definitions of time (Giddens 1991; Newman 1995; Robertson 1987). Regardless of the focus of concern, time is a social and historical construction whose definition and manifestation varies from one society to other. Sociologically, the issue of time is crucial in the sense that the outcome of social relations is to some extent affected by the duration, simultaneity, and succession of those relationships (Dossey 1982, p.24). Moreover, time is a contested terrain in which "powerful people have the ability to control the . . . length, and nature of interactions" (Newman 1995 p. 316). The control of

time by the powerful reinforces their sense of importance and domination through mechanisms such as "appointments" and "waiting lists." Giddens' presentation of time points to the practical importance of considering time as a variable for study of the allocation and distribution of resources and space, and in dealing with urban and community organization (Giddens 1991). Given the voluminous amount of information on the issue of time it is imperative that we introduce students to its sociological dimension and implications.

### SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The concept of social structure is often defined as a more or less stable pattern of social relations based on the position(s) of individuals in society and their respective expectations of behavior (i.e., statuses and roles). These social structural positions are defined in terms of ascribed statuses (e.g., age, race, ethnicity, gender) and achieved statuses (e.g., education, income, occupation).

### SOCIAL PROCESS

Following Nisbet and Perrin (1977, p. 266) "process" refers to the "operation of a social structure - the action or activity within [the social structure]." In general, social processes express the dominant characteristic(s) defining social interaction. As Hewitt (1984, p. 6) puts it, the "processual view of society is the examination of how individuals (singly and collectively) concretely behave." Among other things, social process reflects patterns of interaction such as conflict, cooperation, consensus, competition, conformity, group thinking, and socialization. Some areas of concern here are (1) the extent to which these processes affect the development of personality and the potential for individual and collective action, and (2) the extent to which social processes help maintain

or transform the social structure within and between different social units (Hewitt 1984).

### CULTURE

The concept of culture is central to sociological analysis in part because it provides an understanding of social continuities and discontinuities. Pedagogically, however, this is one of the most difficult concepts to teach in introductory courses. There is a tendency among introductory textbooks to make the "exotic-anthropological" aspects of other societies the standard analytical tool in the exploration of cultural issues. In order to attract the attention of students, publishers often include a range of pictures depicting cultural diversity (e.g., people from China selecting a puppy for dinner, Hindu funerals, dressing codes among Arabs, and body decoration among members of different tribes). In other instances, publishers aim at creating a comparative presentation of culture by portraying people from other societies (typically underdeveloped societies) curiously manipulating or observing technologically advanced articles. Needless to say, this mode of representation of cultural practices perpetuates (1) a simplistic view of culture, (2) stereotypical views of other cultures, and (3) a dichotomous view of culture (us v. them). In his cross cultural analysis of homosexuality, Gilbert H. Herdt (1981, p. 328) warns us about the limitations of such a narrow perspective by arguing that "it takes too little cognizance of the feedback effect of individual experience on symbolic systems, or [it assumes] that humans are passive recipients of cultural traditions." Ignored in many textbooks is a serious analysis of the politics of culture and other related concepts at different levels (e.g., groups, institutions, organizations, and society).

Hence, a critical examination of culture poses important sociological questions regarding the use of

symbols and language to (re)create and explain social reality, and for an examination of the non-material aspect of social conflict. Similarly, it provides for the examination of cultural conflicts and contradictions within and between institutions, societies, groups and organizations. This, of course, is aimed at transcending the reductionist view of culture which emphasizes traditional anthropological aspects of social behavior.

#### PERSONAL TROUBLES AND SOCIAL ISSUES

These two concepts formed the basic framework of Mills' idea of the sociological imagination (1959). Reacting against what he perceived as the fast paced "catastrophic changes" of the 1950s, Mills suggests that

what people need, and what they feel they need, is a quality of mind that will help them use information and to develop reason in order to achieve lucid summations of what is going on in the world [social issues] and what may be happening within themselves [personal troubles] (1959, p. 5).

In other words, according to Mills there is an expectation or demand by the public for the sociological imagination. The main assumption is that people are eager to understand their "personal troubles" (being unemployed, getting divorced) within the larger structural context of "social issues" (unemployment rates, divorce rate). Despite their limitations, Mills' insights still are of great value for sociology, particularly when applied to the analysis of structural changes within and between societies and their social and personal impact.<sup>3</sup> Giddens' interpretation encapsulates this notion by proposing that the sociological imagination allows people to break free from the immediacy of personal circumstances and to look at different interrelated and

dynamic aspects of society (1991, p. 18). Analytically, the central concern here is not so much with personal troubles and private life experiences as it is with social issues and the structural, cultural, and global forces behind them. This, of course, demands a set of assumptions on how is society organized and how it operates. Implicitly or explicitly, these assumptions are embedded in the way mainstream introductory textbooks are thematically organized.

#### APPLICATION

The application phase should be based on reading or video material adequate for introductory courses. In my experience, qualitative studies are more suitable for this type of exercise. Needless to say, regardless of the type of material used the instructor must test the assigned reading material to assure that it reflects the main components of the model. It also important for the instructor to guide the students during the first exercise through demonstration and/or small group discussion.

I have found John Van Maanen's (1992) article "Observation on the Making of Policemen" an excellent tool to illustrate the integration of sociological knowledge. Briefly, using police training as the research topic and based on participant observation the author of the article illustrates the concept of culture at the institutional and organizational levels, and describes the socialization process that takes place within a particular police academy. To facilitate my presentation and class discussion of the article, I distribute copies of the original diagram to the students. What follows is a description of each conceptual component as they emerged from the analysis of the article. Figure 2 summarizes the findings.

*Places.* I start class discussion by reminding students about the first proposition which states that social interaction is situated behavior, that is, it is carried out in a particular place(s). Based on this premise, I ask the students to identify the different places in which the making of a police officer take place. It does not take long for students to identify "the police department," "the police academy," and the "patrol car" as the main social places. I lead the discussion by asking about the significance of each place in the formation of new police officers. Interestingly, based on the reading material (or personal experience) most students realize that what a police officer learns or the way he/she behaves at the police academy is not necessarily compatible with what they informally learn and do during the practical training inside the patrol car or through other officers in the police department. Before getting into a discussion about the norms and values guiding police behavior within each place I ask students to consider the issue of time.

*Time.* I begin the discussion of time by suggesting to the class that the concept of time can be measured in terms of a sequence of events leading to the "making" a police officer. In this case, some students have no difficulty realizing that as in many other jobs police candidates must go through a series of stages described in the article as "screening," "waiting," "training," and "apprenticeship." The last stage is achieved when the new recruit has adopted his new identity as a police officer ("I am a Cop!"). They also realize, that progressively, each period is marked by "endless hours discussing nuances and implications of war stories" (Van Maanen 1973, p. 94). From here, I proceed to consider the social structure involved in the interaction between the police officers.

*Social Structure.* This part of the exercise is more descriptive than analytical. I remind the students that social behavior is more or less stable behavior, and that it is influenced by people's position (status) within social places. In this case, the achieved status of the police recruit as "newcomer" places him/her at the bottom of the social structure within the police institution. I ask the students to consider the implications of this structural position for the newcomers and the other officers. Before long, students bring the ideas (orally or written) that "the newcomer has less power," that the "field training officers and the veteran officers seem to always be in charge." Next, I ask the student about the possibility that newcomers in the future will be able to change these patterns of social relations. Significantly, in one of my courses a student commented that eventually the "newcomer" will become part of the police, and that he/she will do the same to other newcomers. At this point, I introduce the concept of "institutional culture" by explaining that this type of behavior based on the location of people within the social structure of institution becomes part of the police culture and that it will be transmitted from one generation of police officers to the next generation.

*Processes.* To illustrate the concept of processes, I raise the question of the significance of the social behavior taking place among the police officers and their duration. The students' answers, although not always phrased in sociological terms, convey the notion of socialization through comments such as "the old police officers are teaching the new recruits how to be a police officer," "they want the new recruit to be like them," and that "new recruits must learn the real nature of the job." Given these answers and following the reading, I address the question of how does the new recruit cope with the fact that his/her

expectation of the job (as adventurous) does not always match the reality of the job (red tape, paperwork). To answer this question, I make reference to a portion of the reading material in which the author explains how the newcomers "adapt" themselves to the bureaucratic nature of the job by learning "complacency" and "by staying out of trouble." Sociologically, I translate these ideas as processes of "adaptation" and "consensus building." I also mention to the students that the fact that the newcomers are getting used to the reality of the job, is indicative of their location within the social structure of the police and the influence of the institutionalized police culture.

*Culture.* In dealing with the issue of culture I stress the identification of those values, norms, and expressions that make police officers a distinct group or a professional subculture. The discussion here centers around values and norms such as "neatness," "internal solidarity among police officers," and "complacency." In the area of language, students have little or no difficulty identifying and defining terms forming the police jargon. More importantly, the students are able to identify how sexist, racist, and homophobic language tend to permeate the police culture. Having identified these cultural aspects, we discuss the institutional importance of these values and norms. Based on my experience teaching criminal justice courses, I mention that they provide for integration, sense of belonging and respect among police officers. They also serve the functional or dysfunctional purpose of setting police officers culturally apart from the rest of society, and of shaping the police perception of their position in society (us v. them).

*Social Issues and Personal Problems.* Finally, I direct students' attention to Mills' idea that it is sociologically important for people to realize the connection between social issues and personal problems. Following this idea, I ask the student to think in terms of the relationship between the personal troubles facing the newcomer and the social/institutional context in which they take place. This approach fits well with the reading material because they are explicitly addressed in the article. At the personal level, police officers in general and newcomers in particular constantly face job frustration, occupational stress, and family-work conflicts. Regarding the social dimension of these "personal" troubles, I ask students to consider the tension between the newcomer's perception of police work as "adventurous" and of themselves as "crime fighters," and the actual bureaucratic aspect of police work (paperwork). At this point, I make reference to those studies which provide statistical and empirical support to the reality of police work as a highly bureaucratic and service-oriented profession.

#### THE MODEL EVALUATED

After years of frustration trying to provide a holistic view of sociology to my students I have developed a model that provides for an integrated presentation of sociology and sociological analysis in introductory courses. Despite the fact that some of my students find the model "difficult to understand," the majority realized that, as one of the students commented, "sociology [is] complex." Given the fact that some students have difficulty reading sociological articles from professional journals, recently during my lecture on deviance, I adapted the model to a video on female prisons. Following the model, I asked the students to think about examples from the video that would illustrate each of the main elements of the

model. After showing the video, I organized the class into small groups and asked them to collectively complete a form containing the model. Judging by my reading of the completed forms and my observation and evaluation of each group performance, this exercise proved to be successful in helping students organize and discuss their sociological observations regarding the prison society.

As mentioned earlier, thus, the model could be criticized as being too simplistic. As we know, the terms employed in the model are theoretically, ideologically and conceptually complex in their meanings and interpretations. Despite this fact, if properly used in the classroom, the model could make a significant contribution in introducing students to thinking sociologically. Overall, it could be pedagogically helpful for those who take seriously the promise of sociology in helping students develop a "sociological imagination."

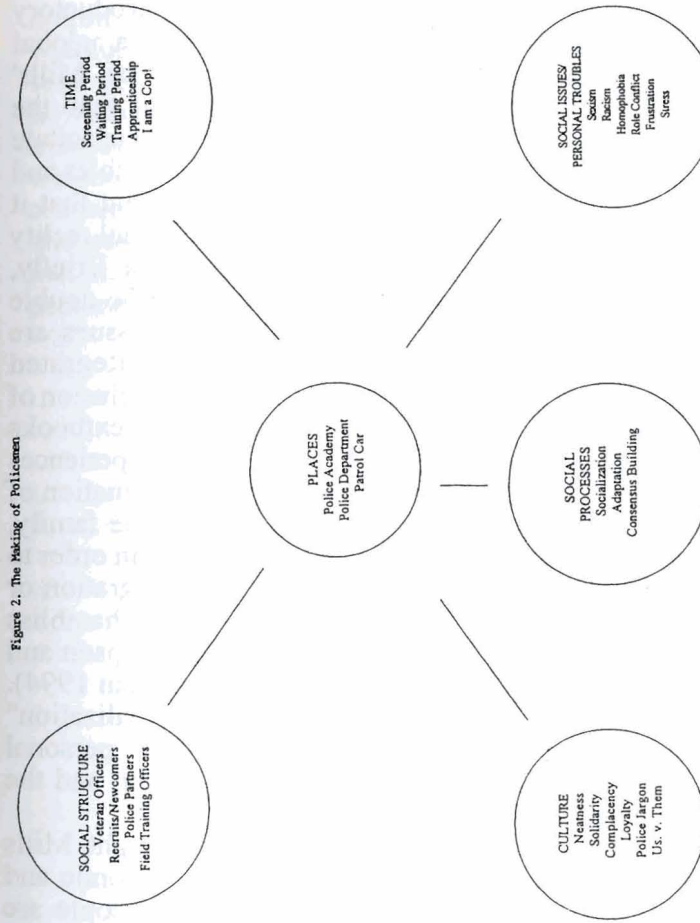


Figure 2. The Making of Policemen



## NOTES

1. It has become fashionable among introductory sociology textbook writers to include a global approach as a complementary aspect of Mills' sociological imagination. The claim is that the sociological imagination will not only capacitate students to distinguish between personal troubles and social issues at the local-national levels, but that it will also prepare them to perceive their social reality within the context of international relations. Briefly, the concept of globalization emphasizes the double movement whereby some problems and issues are internationally and interregionally integrated (Menendez-Carrion 1995). Typically, the inclusion of the global perspective in introductory textbooks emphasizes the link between our personal experiences as consumers and workers, and the transformation of United States social institutions such as the family, politics, economy, education, and religion in order to meet the systemic demands of global integration or interdependence (see Appelbaum and Chambliss 1995; Neubeck and Glassberg 1996; Thompson and Hickey 1996; Kammeyer, Ritzer and Yetman 1994). Pedagogically, I discuss the issue of "globalization" within the context of social issues and personal troubles such as the erosion of state power, and the exportation of jobs to other countries.

2. Resembling Marxist and Weberian thought, Mills assumed that regardless, the stage of economic and social development, all over the world people are feeling trapped into a world they cannot fully comprehend. On the one hand, people in "underdeveloped" societies are confronted with the breakdown of ancient ways of life brought about by the challenges of industrialization and urbanization. On the other hand, those living in "overdeveloped" societies are trapped between the forces of authoritarian regimes and bureaucratic control (Mills 1959, p. 4).

3. Critically, given American individualism, Mills' notion of the sociological imagination simply is wishful thinking; a reflection perhaps of Mills' activist view of sociologists. It would be accurate to say that nowadays the development of the sociological imagination, particularly among students, is not a welcome promise, as Mills envisioned, but an academic and political challenge. For the purpose of this paper, there is no need to assume that people, including students, need or wish to understand their personal experiences within a social historical context.



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