The Sociological Imagination is a book written by sociologist C. Wright Mills in 1959. His goal in writing this book was to try to reconcile two different and abstract concepts of social reality – the "individual" and "society." In doing so, Mills challenged the dominant sociological discourse and critiqued some of the most basic terms and definitions.

While Mills' work was not well received at the time as a result of his professional and personal reputation, The Sociological Imagination is still one of the most widely read sociology books today and is a staple of undergraduate sociology courses.

Mills spends the beginning of the book aggressively attacking current (at the time) trends in sociology and then goes on to explain sociology as he sees it: a necessary political and historical profession. He lays the groundwork for an ideal social science in his mind. Without reproducing the entirety of his book, it would be impossible to adequately relate his framework. The most basic and important points here are keeping an eye to history and to agency, and avoiding strict adherence to any one methodology or any one theory. He also urges social scientists to work within the field as a whole rather than specializing heavily in sociology, political science, economics, psychology, etc. Mills imagines the human being as both a creature and an agent of the individual's milieu as well as of history. This is a key concept, which is often overlooked in social science.

The Sociological Imagination As A Concept

In The Sociological Imagination, Mills coined the same famous phrase, which is used throughout sociology today. The sociological imagination is the concept of being able to "think ourselves away" from the familiar routines of our daily lives in order to look at them anew. Mills defined sociological imagination as "the vivid awareness of the relationship between experience and the wider society." It is the ability to see things socially and how they interact and influence each other. To have a sociological imagination, a person must be able to pull away from the situation and think from an alternative point of view.

Example Of Applying The Sociological Imagination

We can apply the concept of the sociological imagination to any behavior. Take the simple act of drinking a cup of coffee for example. We could argue that coffee is not just a drink, but rather it has symbolic value as part of day-to-day social rituals. Often the ritual of drinking coffee is much more important than the act of consuming the coffee itself. For example, two people who meet “to have coffee” together are probably more interested in meeting and chatting than in what they drink. In all societies, eating and drinking are occasions for social interaction and the performance of rituals, which offer a great deal of subject matter for sociological study.

A second dimension to a cup of coffee has to do with its use as a drug. Coffee contains caffeine, which is a drug that has stimulating effects on the brain. For many, this is the reason why they drink coffee. It is interesting sociologically to question why coffee addicts are not considered drug users in Western cultures while they might be in other cultures. Like alcohol, coffee is a socially acceptable drug whereas marijuana is not. In other cultures, however, marijuana use is tolerated, but both coffee and alcohol use are frowned upon.

Still a third dimension to a cup of coffee is tied to social and economic relationships. The growing, packaging, distributing, and marketing of coffee are global enterprises that affect many cultures, social groups, and organizations within those cultures. These things often take place thousands of miles away from the coffee drinker. Many aspects of our lives are now affected by worldwide trading exchanges and communications and studying these global transactions is important to sociologists.

A fourth dimension to a cup of coffee relates to past social and economic development. The coffee relationships currently set in motion were not always there. Like tea, bananas, potatoes, and sugar, coffee only became widely consumed after the nineteenth century. These relationships developed gradually, and might well break down in the future due to change.