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**Thinking Critically About Society:  An Introduction to Sociology Teaching Resource Guide**


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## Chapter 2 Sociological Paradigms

## Learning Outcomes

1.  Sociological Paradigms: students should be able to identify the 4 major sociological paradigms and associate them with sociology's founding figures.
2.  Students should be able to describe the key features of each of the four paradigms.
3.  The Sociological Paradigms and Mills Sociological Imagination:  students should be able to compare and contrast these paradigms in terms of how they describe the social context and how this social context shapes the human experience.

## 1. Sociological Paradigms

A challenge for introductory students encountering classical thinkers like Durkheim, Marx, and Weber for the first time is understanding their contemporary relevance. Backman (1992) describes an assignment for illustrating the impact these thinkers have on contemporary work. Using the *Social Sciences Citation Index*, students are asked to identify contemporary articles drawing on Durkheim, Marx, and Weber and then assess how their ideas are used. While Backman (1992) developed the assignment as part of a junior theory course, it is easily modified for introductory purposes—particularly in terms of illustrating the degree to which contemporary sociology relies on these classical thinkers. The added strength of this assignment is the exposure students are given to developing library skills.

## 2. Key Features of Sociological Paradigms

Hale (1995) describes an assignment in which students are asked to outline and describe one of the central sociological paradigms, develop interview questions that would follow from the assumptions of each paradigm, and then conduct interviews seeking evidence in relation to particular topics discussed in class (i.e: stratification, education). More substantive engagements with particular paradigms

can be found in Lackey (1994) and Holtzman (2005). Lackey (1994) describes an assignment in which students are asked to write sociological short stories, using guidelines derived from the symbolic interactionism paradigm. Holtzman (2005) introduces an active learning exercise for exposing students to the structural functionalist and conflict paradigms (suitable for **large classes**). Students are asked to negotiate, in groups, a work contract between different occupational groups (designers, workers, the government) in a way that does not jeopardize the project. Following Hale (1995), Holtzman (2005) chooses a project somewhat removed from students everyday experiences (a Sumerian irrigation canal) in order to pull students outside their own experiences. As a follow up, students are asked to write a short reaction paper and a longer take home assignment. One of the strengths of Holtzman's (2005) discussion is her reflections on the logistics needed for a large class exercise and a comparison of group responses, afforded by large classes. As students work their way through the four paradigms, they necessarily encounter a number of important themes (history, social change, and the tension between agency and structure). Laz (1996) offers some reflections on using Margret Attwood's dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* as a means of thinking about these themes—along with gender relations and a lesser extent institutions and social control. Laz (1996) asks students to think about the novel in the last two weeks of class by producing essay responses to a series of questions. As part of her discussion Laz (1996) also uses general orienting questions that may be used in **larger classes** where the film (released in 1990) might be more appropriate. The strength of Laz's (1996) discussion is the detail and depth of her commentary about the novel.

## 3. The Sociological Paradigms and Mills Sociological Imagination

The learning goals associated with the final section of this chapter are both summative and synthetic. Students should be able to summarize each of the paradigms as well as link their understanding of these paradigms with the general aim of the sociological imagination. Trepagnier' (2002) concept mapping exercise can be used in group discussion to help students assess how well they understand the paradigms as well as how the paradigms express Mills general sentiment about the relationship between private troubles and public issues. Trapagnier's (2002) discussion is particularly suited for the final section of this chapter because of her specific focus on integrating reflections about Mills' sociological imagination into the mapping exercise. See also Jacobs-Lawson and Hershey (2002). Students might be presented with key concepts (or asked to generate key concepts) relevant to the two questions organizing this section (What is the nature of the social atmosphere? What is the relationship between the human experience and this social atmosphere?) and then be asked to work out how they are related to each other during group discussion.

References

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