CHAPTER 21

Health Sociology and Your Sociological Imagination

John Germov

Overview

- What does the future hold for the social model of health?
- Is sociology beyond criticism?
- How can you further develop your sociological imagination?

This book has served as an introduction to the key aspects of a social model of health. With the four features of the sociological imagination in mind, we have provided a template for understanding health and illness as social issues. This chapter summarises the main themes of the book in terms of what a social model of health entails. It also provides hints on how to develop your own sociological imagination further so that you continue to apply a second (sociological) opinion in examining and confronting health issues.
Introduction: sociology—the whole truth and nothing but ... ?

Throughout this book we have attempted to provide an overview of key areas of the health sociology field as the basis for you to make an objective evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the research methods, concepts, theories, and proposed solutions to the problems under study. In this attempt we have introduced you to the social model of health as an alternative to the conventional notions of health and illness drawn from biomedical approaches. We have also introduced you to the four features of a sociological imagination as an effective way of understanding and applying a sociological perspective to health issues.

Therefore, it should be no surprise to you that sociology can be controversial. It may even challenge some of your own views. Sociology’s critical approach seeks to challenge orthodox views and official positions. This is what sociological analysis is all about—taking nothing for granted and questioning the status quo—and thus it implies the need for organisational, political, and social change. However, as you’ve experienced through the chapters in this book, this does not mean there is only one way to apply sociology or one sociological solution to health problems. In fact, one of the benefits of sociology is that it regularly holds itself up for analysis of its theories and research findings—sociology itself is not beyond critique.

Despite the benefits of a sociological approach to health and illness, concepts and explanations have changed over time as some theories have been proven to be wrong or biased and new areas of investigation have emerged. Moreover, various authors continue to disagree about which are the most appropriate sociological explanations or solutions to the social and health problems we face.

At this point it is worth returning briefly to the structure-agency debate first introduced in chapter 1. Health sociology provides an alternative perspective to individualistic and biological approaches to health and illness. It advocates a focus on social determinants, social contexts, and social relations as the basis for understanding the complexity of illness-inducing and health-enhancing environments. In making this case, sociologists tend to highlight the structural factors that influence an individual’s experience of health, illness, and health care. While a sociological imagination places individual behaviour, beliefs, and experiences in a social context, it is important to avoid sociological determinism, whereby individuals are viewed as ‘puppets on strings’ and ‘society is to blame’. The potential of people to exert agency at an individual and collective level should not be underestimated or dismissed. The structure-agency debate and sociology in general make us aware of the interdependence of individuals and their social environment. Social structures can be constraining or enabling, but the most important thing of all is that they are human creations—they are produced, reproduced, and changed by our actions or inactions (Giddens 1986). By raising awareness of the social context of health and illness, and by proposing reforms to identified problems, change is possible. Sociology offers this potential.

‘Curiouser and curiouser ...’

The writing of Second Opinion has been underpinned by a desire to communicate the benefits of a sociological perspective per se and spark your intellectual curiosity for future sociological
journeys. The philosopher Socrates is recorded as saying that he was sure of only one thing: that he knew nothing. What he meant was that it is useless to pretend that you always have the answers. In sociology too, it is best to start from the humble position of assuming that there are things you know nothing about—issues you may not have considered. Even though the subject matter of sociology is often familiar, we need to be wary of assuming that we already know all there is to know about the society in which we live. The twentieth-century philosopher Bertrand Russell called this the constant need for ‘constructive doubt’. In other words, we can benefit from adopting that child-like curiosity that always asks ‘why?’ When we ask why something is the way it is, we require an answer. Often what we are really asking is ‘how could it be otherwise?’ In sociology we seek alternative views and possible solutions to the issues under analysis. To help you further develop your sociological imagination, the next section provides some reflective questions and tips for constructing your own sociological theories and solutions.

**Future directions: developing your sociological imagination**

Sociological analysis involves more than simply applying the four features of the sociological imagination template. It is based on an acceptance that some things may contradict and challenge what we believe, even though it is much more comfortable for us to believe that our opinions are right rather than wrong. Adopting a sociological imagination involves questioning our own views and assumptions about the world. Vincent Ruggiero (1996) suggests that one way to do this is by asking yourself the following questions:

1. How do you react to an idea you have never heard of before?
2. How do you react to change? Do you wholeheartedly embrace or resist it?
3. How do you deal with controversy? Do you evaluate each side of an argument, or do you immediately agree with one side?
4. How do you form views on particular issues? Does your view depend on where it came from (for instance from the media, the government, your parents, your favourite celebrities)?
5. How flexible are you about changing your views? When was the last time you changed your opinion about a significant issue? Why did you change your mind?

William Shakespeare wrote, ‘to thine own self be true’, and in many ways these questions ask you to be true to yourself by consciously reflecting on and questioning your beliefs. Keeping these questions in mind will help you to think independently, ask penetrating questions, support what you say with knowledge of the available research findings, and hence reach sound conclusions.

**Developing your own social theories**

Ruggiero (1996) also provides a helpful approach to developing your own social theories or explanations. This entails following three steps to develop a sociological explanation of the issue you are studying:
1 Reflective thinking—this refers to reading, listening, and observing with curiosity so that you can identify issues requiring analysis. Being reflective means that no topic is off-limits or taken for granted. Everything, including every sociological theory and research finding, is open to further investigation. Such investigation starts by asking simple questions such as: Why are things as they are? What relationships exist between the various parts? What alternative views exist? How could things be improved?

2 Creative thinking—this refers to the production of ideas in order to resolve issues. This involves the use, adaptation, or creation of concepts and theories to help explain what you are investigating.

3 Critical thinking—this refers to the evaluation of the concepts and theories that you or others use. For example, do they fit the evidence? Are there any limitations? Do they account for alternative explanations?

Furthermore, Ruggiero (1996) outlines a number of techniques to help analyse theories, two of which are:

- brainstorming the ‘pros’ and ‘cons’ of various explanations and the evidence that you have gathered. The easiest way to start is to divide a page in two, with one section labelled, for example, ‘It is’, and the other ‘It isn’t’.
- deciding on the most appealing explanation and playing the ‘devil’s advocate’. Make a list of all the arguments that are used against your preferred view. Can such arguments be addressed or accommodated? If so, you should state how your preferred explanation stands up to criticisms. If you find that your preferred theory cannot answer all the criticisms, but on balance it remains your preferred explanation, then you still need to acknowledge the deficiencies of the argument that you have adopted.

This last point represents an important consideration: the need to resist adopting an ‘either/or’ position (Ruggiero 1996). It is possible to favour one argument while acknowledging or even accommodating some of the merits of opposing views, which is the case in most sociological theories. We are often presented with ‘either/or’ choices, but such choices tend to oversimplify social life, which is rarely that black and white. It is folly to adopt one position blindly and completely while rejecting all others automatically as being without foundation.

Conclusion

By studying the injustices and inequities of society, by gaining understanding and tolerance, and by promoting social change, sociology can help us to envision and ultimately produce a qualitatively better and healthier life for all. Perhaps Karl Marx summed it up best when he said, ‘[t]he philosophers have only interpreted the world in different ways; the point is to change it’ (Marx 1859/1963, p. 84). In a world where we are constantly bombarded with glib media images and simplistic political slogans, the perspective of sociology provides a sounding board for the critical analysis of health issues. We have endeavoured to make your journey through the sociological landscape as stimulating as possible, but remember: no intellectual
journey is worth taking if you already know what you will find. While it takes effort to scale the peaks of sociology, and even though the terrain may be rocky in patches, it is the journey itself that makes it all worthwhile. So persevere; the new and the unknown are exciting places to visit. Let sociology be your guide, and enjoy the view.

**Discussion and further investigation questions**

1. How can the issue of agency be addressed in the social model of health?
2. Are individuals or society to blame for health inequalities? Focus on one or two examples of health inequality and address the structure-agency debate in your answer.
3. ‘Health and illness are social constructions.’ Discuss.
4. ‘The risk-factor approach displays an individualistic bias and ignores the social determinants of health.’ Discuss.

**Further reading and web resources**

See Appendix 1 for information on key web sites, books, and journals related to health sociology. See Appendix 2 for tips on planning, writing, and referencing health sociology essays.