One of the things that sets sociologists apart from ordinary people is their concern for the social. In their professional lives, sociologists tend to ignore individual cases and focus on aggregations or groups. For example, Emile Durkheim studied suicide in order to discover what factors contributed to fluctuations in the overall rates of suicide; he had no interest in what might lead particular individuals to take their lives.

Professional sociologists study social facts simply because these are interesting (at least to us). But to the layperson trying to live life in society, social facts may seem irrelevant. Why a society’s crime rate goes up and down seems much less intriguing than why my house was robbed, or why I was mugged on the street. Likewise, the social forces that propel the unemployment rate are not nearly as interesting as the matter of why I am having a difficult time finding a job.

As C. Wright Mills pointed out, however, having a sociological imagination allows us to make connections between individuals and the society in which they live. And, for the student of sociology, the acquisition of this imagination brings with it an enhanced ability to make sense of the behavior of individuals. Recall what Mills stressed as the “first fruit” of the sociological imagination: “the idea that the individual can understand his own experience and gauge his own fate only by locating himself within his period.” It was in this sense that Stephanie Coontz (in the previous reading) brought to bear the sociological concept of “situated social power” to help her understand her own relationships with her teaching assistants, as well as the personal troubles of the woman whose husband did not appreciate her heroic housework.

From the viewpoint of the professional sociologist, the following reading may seem out of place in a sociology reader, because its focus is on an individual and how he responded to his immediate social milieu. But I have included it for the benefit of nonsociologists; written in 1999, it provides an example of how having an understanding of the impact of the social milieu can help us to understand the all-too-often unintelligible behaviors of individuals in our environment.

To get a Ph.D., one has to write something called a dissertation. It’s essentially a research paper, and sometimes a very long research paper. Mine, for example, ended up being two hundred plus pages. I wrote my dissertation on public defenders—those attorneys who are paid by the state to defend people who are accused of crimes but can’t afford to hire their own lawyer. The basic question was this: How can these attorneys defend individuals they know are guilty of crimes, especially if they are terrible crimes? Ultimately, I arrived at my answer by looking not just at the private consciences of the public defenders but also at what Mills would have called their social milieu or surroundings.

I met a number of murderers in the course of my research, but Hernando was my first one and in part because he was my first, he left a large impression on me. But this crime also made a big impression on me because it seemed so bizarre. It never should have happened the way it did. But you can judge for yourself, I will tell you the story as I learned it.

Warning: The first time I heard this story, I remember being shocked. I remember, in fact, feeling nauseous. It’s not because anyone showed me terrible pictures of the crime scene; it’s just because the whole thing seemed so awful. And it seemed so awful because it was awful. But let me to wonder, Should I share this story with college students? Possibly, no one is (or should be) worldly enough to hear about this sort of thing.

The Case

This story takes place in Chicago. The major player in the story is a man named Hernando Washington. At various times, his nicknames included the Reverend and the Donor, because he was president of the youth choir. His other nickname was Prince, because he was so charming and good-looking.

Before I got to the story, let me tell you a bit about the neighborhood in which Hernando lived, or as Mills would put it, his social milieu. It was on the South Side of Chicago. In a song from the 1970s, Jim Croce called the South Side of Chicago “the baddest part of town.” That was an accurate observation. It is the baddest part of town; chances are, if you lived on the South Side, you’d never be able to get a cab driver to take you home at night; some cabs won’t even venture there in the daytime.

The police refer to a murder that involves a man and woman on the South Side as a “South Side divorce.” A great deal of its reputation involves the fact that the South Side of Chicago is heavily populated by people who are poor—mostly African Americans. Perhaps that’s why the police tend to disrespect the people who live there. The police often call murderers that involve African American killers and victims as “Goth Street miscreants.” Police also take much longer to respond to calls on the South Side. The clear message to the people who live there is that they really aren’t a part of the community that the Chicago police are pledged to “serve and to protect.” This, I think, is an important fact.

On April 1, 1978, Hernando “Prince” Washington was arrested and charged with robbery, aggravated kidnapping, rape, and murder. His victim, 29-year-old Sarah Gould, was the wife of a physician and the mother of a small child. Sarah Gould had the great misfortune to be one of the 787 people in Chicago and one of the 20,432 people in the United States who were murdered that year.

When I say that Sarah had the “great misfortune” to be murdered, I mean that: Statistically, she should not have been a murder victim. Nationally, the murder rate for white women in 1978 was 2.8 per 100,000 population. For white men, it was 9.0; for black women, 12.6; and for black men, 58.1. Not only was Sarah white, but she was killed by a stranger. And in 1978, most murder victims were killed by people they knew—friends, lovers, family members, acquaintances, or neighbors. Of all the recorded acts of criminal violence—batteries, assaults, murders—in 1978, less than a third were committed by strangers. This was especially true for women: When the violent act was committed by a stranger, the victim was typically male.

Finally, Sarah Gould was white while Hernando was black. This was one of the more unusual aspects of the case. Most violence, and certainly most murders, involve persons of the same race.
So, the odds were really against Sarah Gould being murdered—however you want to look at it.

That year, April 1, April Fool’s Day, fell on a Saturday. The story actually begins two days earlier. That Thursday afternoon, Hernando went out to do his sister Leah’s favor. She had just bought a car, a used two-year-old Oldsmobile Cutlass, and the dealer had called the day before to tell her it was ready to be picked up. Hernando offered to do this for her, partly because he wanted to drive the car. His sister, who is ten years older than Hernando, said that would be fine as long as Hernando came to pick her up when she was done with work. Leah worked at the post office and got off work ten minutes before midnight.

Hernando picked up the car, but of course he didn’t drive it straight home. Instead, he cruised around his South Side neighborhood for a while. However, he didn’t see any of his friends, so he decided to cruise up to the north part of the city.

For Sarah Gould, that was a fatal decision.

Hernando later said he didn’t have any particular plan, but eventually he admitted that just maybe, in the back of his mind, he thought he might rob someone. But it was nothing definite. He would simply drive around and see what happened.

Once up north, he drove to Northwestern University’s hospital parking lot. He got out of his car and sat on the steps of a nearby building.

ROBBERY AND ABDUCTION

Around 7:30 PM, Hernando saw a woman getting out of a reddish-orange VW Rabbit. He approached her, gun in hand, and demanded her money. Sarah gave him $25, explaining that it was all the money she had, but he grabbed her by the arm, dragged her back to his car, and shoved her inside.

Later, when asked why he did that, he told his lawyers that he’d noticed a bunch of people walking toward them and he didn’t want them to know that he had just robbed this woman. He said he was afraid that she’d scream or run or something.

Once Hernando got Sarah into the car, he was still afraid that she’d somehow make trouble, so he ordered her to take off her slacks and underpants. He threw her clothing underneath her car and then drove off.

In his confession to the police, Hernando had this to say:

She was real excited, you know, asking me not to hurt her and I was constantly telling her I wouldn’t hurt her, that all I want is money. She was sitting in the front seat alongside of me. We drove off, and she asked me, “What are you going to do to me?” and I told her that I would take her away from the area, so I will have a chance, you know, to get away without being caught. He kept assuring her that he would not hurt her.

THE PHONE CALL

After Hernando drove around for several hours, Sarah said that he should let her go because her husband and son would be worried about her. He considered this for a while and then asked her if she’d like to call home. He stopped at a gas station that was closed for the evening but it had a phone booth.

Sarah’s husband, who was indeed worried about her, later told police that she had said something to the effect that she was okay. He asked her, “When are you coming home?” There was a pause, and then he could hear Sarah asking someone when she’d be home. In the background, he heard a male voice saying “an hour.” He then asked, “Where are you?” She asked, “Where are we?” Her husband heard the answer: “You’ll be home in an hour, bitch, come on.”

After the phone call, Hernando told police, I turned from the phone, going around the car and at this time, when I you know, walked around to my car, she broke and ran. I was running after her. I asked her, I said, “Why are you acting like that? I have not hurt you, I told you I will let you go. I just want to make it safe for me as you want it safe for yourself.”

Then, as it was approaching midnight, Hernando pulled the car into a dark alley. He explained to Sarah that he had to go pick someone up and that she couldn’t stay in the front seat of the car while he did this. Perhaps for a moment Sarah thought he was going to let her go, but instead, he forced her into the trunk telling her that if she was quiet, everything would be okay.

At exactly 11:50 PM, Hernando was where he was supposed to be—in the car in front of the main post office. His sister Leah came out and got into the front seat with him. As he drove her home, they talked about the sorts of things that you would expect a brother and sister to talk about—mostly about the new car.

When they got home, Hernando waited in the car until Leah was inside the house. He had always been very concerned about her safety.

A few years earlier, Leah had been raped on her way home from work. Two men grabbed her, dragged her into an alley, stripped off her clothes, and raped her repeatedly. Afterwards, she crawled out of the alley and was referred to see a police officer there. The two officers looked at her, a black woman with her face bleeding and her clothes torn up, and said “Get home by yourself, bitch.” Maybe they didn’t want her to mess up their plan of their patrol car.

Usually, Hernando met his sister after work—but that night he’d had a bike accident and was running late.

Indeed, Hernando’s family had not had a great deal of luck when it came to dealing with the police. A few years earlier, Hernando’s brother James had been at a party when he was shot by one of the neighborhood guys. Some of James’s friends took him to the emergency room, but they were afraid to stay with him because guards always tend to attract attention. They left him in the emergency room, where he died to before the medical staff got to him. "Everyone here" who had shot Hernando’s brother, but for some reason the police didn’t take him into custody. It was at that point that Hernando bought his first gun.

Then Hernando drove a few blocks away, stopped, and let Sarah out of the trunk. She reminded him of his promise to let her go, but he said they’d have to go back and get her clothes, because he didn’t want to let her go until she was fully dressed again. He drove back to the hospital parking lot, but her clothes were gone; by now, the police had them.

When Sarah had driven into that parking lot earlier in the evening, she was on her way to a Lamaze class she was supposed to teach that night. Eventually, her students became worried about her, called her husband, and found out that she wasn’t home. And, of course, he thought she was in class. Next, the class notified hospital security, which investigated and found Sarah’s car in the parking lot. When they saw her keys in the ignition and her pants and underpants under the car, the security officers were naturally concerned. They called her husband, who immediately called the police to file a missing person’s report.

Finding the clothes missing from under the car scared Hernando. Sarah told him that it didn’t matter, that she could go home without them—she was covered enough, she said, by her long raincoat. But he was adamant that he wasn’t going to let her go until he’d found something to wear or, as he put it, until she was “decent” again. He said, “I’ve got to think of somewhere to get you some clothes.”

THE RAPE

By now, it was well past midnight. Hernando thought it was much too late to go to a friend’s
At this point, as they were listening to Hernando tell his story, one of his attorneys asked him, "If you were beginning to be uncomfortable about your situation, why didn't you just let her go, then and there?" Hernando said, "Because the neighborhood I was in wasn't a safe neighborhood for a white woman to be alone in."

Instead of letting her go, he took Sarah to another motel and again raped her. Details about the rape are sketchy because Hernando was a "little shy," as he put it, when it came to talking about "sex." And that's how he referred to the rapes—as sex.

THE MURDER

Early the next morning, Hernando checked out of the motel, drove around for about an hour, and then came to a decision: Clothing or no clothing, it was time to let Sarah go. He parked the car on a residential street, gave her some change, and told her to get on the bus. He said he told her, "All you got to do is walk straight down the street there and get on the bus. Go straight home."

And Sarah, as Hernando always emphasized when he got to this part of the story, Sarah Gould promised him that she would get on the bus and go straight home. And, of course, she promised not to tell the police.

Hernando let Sarah out of the car, and as he drove away, she was walking toward the bus stop. But, as soon as he was out of sight, she changed her course, walked up to a house, and rang the doorbell.

The house belonged to a Chicago firefighter, who was getting ready for work. He opened the door and saw Sarah—messy, dirty, bruised, and distraught. She told him that she needed help; he told her that he would call the police and that she should stay right there on the porch. Then he closed the door and went to phone the police.

Meanwhile, Hernando had begun to wonder whether Sarah had kept her promise and gotten on the bus. So he doubled back to where he had left her. He saw Sarah standing on the porch of that house; he saw the firefighter talking to her; he saw the firefighter close the door.

As Hernando recounted it, he felt betrayed—she had broken her promise to him. He parked and got out of the car. He said that he called out to her. In Hernando's words, here's what happened next:

I called to her and she came down. I took her by the arm and around the corer to the alley.

I said, "What are you doing? All you had to do was get on the bus. You promised that you would get on the bus."

She protested that I was hurting her, that I was going to kill her.

I said, "No. All you had to do was get on the bus."

She screamed, "You are going to kill me!"

I said, "No, you said you was going to get on the bus. All you had to do was get on the bus. Stop screaming. I'm not going to hurt you."

She said, "You are going to kill me."

I said, "I am not going to kill you, shut up, stop screaming."

She said, "You are going to kill me. You are going to kill me."

I said, "I am not going to kill you."

She said, "You are going to kill me. I know you are going to kill me."

So I shot her. Then I shot her again. She fell. I looked at her, then I broke and ran to my car.
Shortly thereafter, the police found Hernando at his parents' home, washing the trunk of his car. At first, he denied everything. Then, when police confronted him with the fact that witnesses had said he had a woman in the trunk of his car, he said it was a prostitute. He varied his story every time the police introduced more information. The police were gullible; they read him his Miranda rights, they offered him food and drink. But they confused him with their questions, and it didn't take too long for Hernando to confess to having robbed, kidnapped, and murdered Sarah.

But when police asked Hernando to sign the confession, he refused, saying that it might make his attorney mad. It didn't matter. That attorney didn't really want to have anything to do with Hernando the murderer, and besides, his parents had no money left to post bail.

Before his trial, his new attorneys—public defenders—persuaded him that his only chance to beat the death penalty was to plead guilty. This was one of those cases that defense attorneys in Chicago, not without a certain amount of irony, call a "dead bang loser case"—one in which "the state has everything but a videotape of the crime." At first, Hernando didn't want to plead guilty; he didn't want his parents to know that he was guilty. But ultimately, in hopes of saving his own life, he did plead guilty.

It didn't work. In January 1980, Hernando was sentenced to death. Finally, on March 25, 1985, after his appeals were exhausted, Hernando was executed by lethal injection.

Hernando's lawyers spend a lot of time trying to find some explanation for what happened. Maybe if they could understand what had been going on in his mind, it would help to save his life. But Hernando couldn't really say. What he kept saying, in essence, was, "What is the big deal? Why is everyone so upset with me?" It was not that, in his mind, Hernando did not understand that robbery, kidnapping, rape, and murder are against the law. The fact that he at first denied doing them helped to prove that. So Hernando was not legally insane—in the sense that he didn't know right from wrong. It was simply that he could not understand why everyone was so worked up about what he had done.

This is difficult for most of us to understand. Why would someone be surprised at getting into really serious trouble for robbing, kidnap-
ing, raping, and murdering another human being? At first, I could not make any sense of Hernando's confusion on this point. But eventually, as my horror receded, I was able to bring some sociological perspective to bear on the whole subject. In other words, I had to call upon my sociological imagination—I had to look for the general in the particular.

Let me begin my explanation with an analogy. Last semester, in my introductory class, two students decided to turn in the same paper. They weren't in the same section, so I guess they thought they could get away with it. Unfortunately for them, in my department the professors discuss the papers because we want to be sure that we are all grading consistently. We noticed that the two students had submitted the same paper, so we called them in and said, "Hey, you cheated. And, as it says in the syllabus, if you cheat, you flunk." At first, in each case, the students denied the accusation. However, when confronted with positive proof (copies of the papers with their names on them), they admitted what they had done. But, they said, our reaction was way out of line. Yes, they had read in the syllabus that getting caught cheating meant flunking the course. But flunking was simply too much punishment. In one case, flunking meant more than getting an F; it meant losing scholarship and loan money. Hernando's reaction was much the same: "Okay, I did this, but you shouldn't punish me; certainly you shouldn't punish me this much."

You may be thinking that my analogy isn't really appropriate, that there is no way to compare students who cheat with people who murder. And, of course, I would not compare the behaviors. What I am comparing is how the individuals thought about their acts, and especially their reactions to the punishment.

Both the murder and the cheating were done in hopes of getting caught; and in neither case did the perpetrators plan on getting caught. Furthermore, when they were caught, each thought the punishment was way out of proportion to the crime. In the case of the students, they argued that the consequences were much too severe, that cheating on a paper wasn't that bad and that losing a scholarship is unfair. In part, too, I think the students were shocked to find that we actually were going to flunk them. I suspect that to the degree they thought about it in advance, they expected to be given another chance, or to receive some lesser punishment. It is possible that they knew of other students who had been caught but not punished for cheating. In any case, their view was that punishment was unfair.

Hernando's reaction was much the same. He acted as if he thought that people were simply too worked up over his deeds. Being sentenced to death was just not acceptable to him. Like our students, he showed no real remorse for what he had done. He was only sorry that he had been caught and had to deal with the consequences.

Again, I suspect that some of you won't like my analogy. Perhaps you can understand why the students might feel that the punishment for cheating was too harsh. But you might wonder how Hernando could think that he should not be given the more serious punishment for what he'd done wrong.

This is where having a sociological imagination becomes helpful. The students felt abused because they did not see cheating as such a horrendous crime. After all, cheating happened all the time, and in any case, it was only a class paper.

The same kind of logic can be used to explain Hernando's reaction. Recall that Hernando had grown up on Chicago's South Side, where, when a husband killed his wife, it was jokingly referred to by police as a "South Side divorce." That sort of attitude from officials teaches people that life is not very valuable. And, as I mentioned previously, Hernando had learned some more personal, and painful, lessons about the low value placed on life. When his sister was raped, the police would not help her; they would not even give her a ride home. Also, when his brother was murdered, no one moved to identify the killer, much less arrest him.

What I did not stress was the degree to which Hernando himself had committed violent acts against others. I did mention that he was out on bail on a rape and kidnapping charge, but in addition, I noted that he had raped at least three other women. No charges were brought in any of these cases—perhaps because they were not reported, for his victims knew there would be little point. These victims also lived on the South Side.

What about the one charge he did have against him? Hernando's parents had mortgaged their home to get him a private lawyer, who told him he would beat the rape charge. Again, Hernando got the same message: His acts had no consequences. As a result of his life experiences, Hernando had learned that human life doesn't count for too much and that it's okay to take what you want. That's why he was so surprised that he was in so much trouble. Let's look at what two psychiatrists had to say about Hernando.

He appeared to mask any signs of strong emotions and stated that "this is typical for me." He gave an example of—oh, he got upset about something and it persisted mostly to himself, he wouldn't reveal it to anyone. He would give the impression that he didn't have any feelings, and that he does not reveal his real emotions ... He shows a recall of dates and times not in synchrony with reality—this,
together with his difficulty with complex problem solving and concept formation—shows impairment, possibly indicative of minimal brain dysfunction. The evaluation of this man indicates that he is suffering from a borderline personality disorder with episodic deterioration in reality testing and thought processes with episodic psychotic thinking. There is the impression of someone who may be seen as withdrawn or aloof, with a superficial intellectual achievement in the use of language which masks a lowered intellectual achievement. There is also the indication of a minimal brain damage, which combined with his psychological profile, would indicate that at times of stress (as existed prior to the commission of the alleged offense) he lacks the ability to plan and to comprehend the consequences of action.

He has at best a fragile purchase on reality. He feels overwhelmed by external stimulation and must constantly narrow his perceptual field in order to manage it. These overstimulating feelings include those of inferiority and paranoia. While he generally stays close to the normal bounds of reality, he does occasionally lapse into abnormally perception and thinking. His capacity to recover from such lapses is the major reason for placing a diagnosis of schizophrenia. In general, his thinking and perception are ideosyncratic. He often does not see what others see. The mode of this distortion is to experience and understand the world in ways that are egocentric and solipsistic. The results of projective testing present a picture of a highly impoverished internal world where fantasy and imagination are often enacted according to the most basic laws of "kill or be killed," or "eat or be eaten."

Note that this second psychiatrist stressed his expert opinion that Hernando did not have much of a grasp of reality. The psychiatrist made that judgment because Hernando persisted in seeing the world as a jungle in which the rule is to kill or be killed. If this psychiatrist had possessed a sociological imagination, he might have realized that Hernando actually had an uncannily accurate grasp of reality. The understanding of his world as one in which the basic law was kill or be killed was no delusion or misunderstanding; that was the way things worked on the South Side of Chicago. The very structure of social life in that part of the city meant that people were vulnerable—without help from the police, they had only themselves to fall back on.

But Hernando, too, lacked a sociological imagination—the ability to see beyond his own immediate social milieu, to understand that there are different rules for different people in places like Chicago. On the South Side, where the population is mostly poor and mostly African American, people don’t have much power to call on “the establishment” to help them, so life is like a jungle. But on the North Side, things are different. When Hernando drove his sister’s car to the North Side of Chicago, he made a fatal error because he drove into a part of the world where life does have value.

On the face of it, we seemingly can never understand what Hernando did. However, it is easier to understand if we use our sociological imagination (as Mills told us to do) and look past Hernando to his social milieu or environment. Then, things begin to make sense.

Don’t get me wrong; I’m not saying that we should excuse Hernando for what he did because of the harsh environment in which he grew up. That’s not the point. And certainly, that’s not the sociological point. The goal of sociology is to understand and make predictable people’s behavior, to explain what can lead people to act as they do.

What’s the benefit of this sort of sociological thinking? What if it were your job to help prevent such crimes? Wouldn’t you want to understand how the social environment affects people so that you could, if possible, make changes in that environment? Wouldn’t you want to have a sociological imagination?

Question:

1. After I tell them about Hernando, students frequently ask me: “Why didn’t Sarah Gould escape? She seemed to have so many chances, why didn’t she take advantage of them?” Because I never had an opportunity to speak with Sarah, I will never know the answers for sure, but like my students, I can’t help but wonder about it.

The sociologist Max Weber introduced sociologists to the concept of verstehens—that’s a German term meaning “empathic understanding.” According to Weber, one way better to understand human behavior is to use empathy to put ourselves in their places to determine what they were thinking and feeling about their situations. With this concept in mind, why do you think Sarah didn’t try to escape from Hernando himself; his attorneys, family, friends, and psychiatrists; and Sarah Gould’s family and friends. Who would you want to interview? What questions would you ask?

2. Assume that you are a sociologist who is presented with the opportunity to act as an investigator for Hernando’s defense team. In that role, you have the opportunity to ask questions of everyone involved in the case—Hernando himself; his attorneys, family, friends, and psychiatrists; and Sarah Gould’s family and friends. Who would you want to interview? What questions would you ask?

3. Suppose you are the mayor of Chicago and you’ve just read all the facts of Hernando’s murder of Sarah Gould. In a memo to your chief of police, what suggestions might you make to improve the structure of the city’s law enforcement to help prevent this sort of crime from happening again?